

# Assessing the Iraqi Insurgency (Part I):

## Problems and Approaches

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

**T**wo years after the beginning of the war in Iraq, much uncertainty and confusion remain regarding the status and direction of the insurgency. This fact has hindered clear discourse about progress, or the lack thereof, in Iraq. For example, much public attention has focused on the number of remaining insurgents, with figures as widely divergent as 3,500 and 200,000 cited by U.S. and Iraqi officials who should have a reasonable idea of the true situation. In light of such disparity, analysis of the insurgency may benefit from a more methodical approach.

### The Assessment Challenge

Precision in language is intimately connected to precision in thought, and agreement on definitions and measures is critical to objective assessment of the insurgency. Such assessment cannot be effective if emotional or politically inspired language is employed (e.g., labeling all insurgents “anti-Iraqi forces”). Unless concepts are clearly defined and understood, fruitful discussion of the insurgency becomes difficult, if not impossible.

One such conceptual requirement is determining whether the violence in Iraq should be viewed as resistance, as an insurgency, as terrorism, or as a combination of all three. Resistance has been defined as “armed opposition to an occupying power.” Surely much of what has occurred in Iraq falls into this category, despite the fact that the terms “resistance” and “occupation” were banned within some elements of U.S. government. Failure to recognize resistance for what it was, and is, has at times impeded the coalition’s political and military response. Insurgency has been defined as “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.” The first vestige of an Iraqi government was the Iraqi Governing Council, formed in July 2003. Anticoalition and antigovernment violence escalated in summer 2003, sparking a short, public debate between the secretary of defense and the head of U.S. Central Command over whether the coalition was facing former regime dead-enders or an insurgency. Terrorism emerged in Iraq around this same time, with classical terrorist-style attacks beginning in August 2003. Terrorism has been defined as the unlawful or threatened use of violence against civilians or noncombatant individuals in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives. It seems evident by now that what is occurring in Iraq is a composite insurgency, consisting of resistance to occupation, insurgency against the emerging Iraqi

government, and terrorism against elements of the Iraqi population. When the term “insurgency” is used throughout this paper, it refers to all three phenomena.

There are many different roles for individuals involved in the insurgency, from core leadership to logistical support. Hence, when estimating the size of the insurgency, one should explicitly define what constitutes an insurgent. An insurgent could be usefully defined as one who is involved in purposeful violent action against the coalition, the Iraqi government, or the Iraqi people. “Involved” means participation in the process that produces a violent action. “Purposeful” means action that is goal oriented, while “action” itself means tangible activity, not just thoughts or feelings deemed sympathetic to the insurgency. Just as there are many different roles for insurgents to play, there are different levels at which they can participate, from onetime actor to hardcore fighter. When one is discussing the insurgency, these levels need to be explicitly addressed. Another problem is the frequent conflation of two different phenomena—the Sunni-based insurgency and Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr’s episodically violent opposition—which prevents accurate assessment of either.

### Dimensions of the Insurgency

Insurgencies are nonlinear, dynamic, and adaptive, often generating surprises. In the face of this complexity, a multidimensional assessment is called for, one that allows dynamic updating on several levels, including the following:

**Structure.** The insurgency comprises multiple entities; its overall structure—whether hierarchical, network, cellular, or a combination—is unclear. Similarly, the existence of military wings and affiliated political groups, the relative proportion of support and operational activities, and the structural relationship between local and regional elements are all key areas of uncertainty.

**Processes and functions.** These include military, political, economic, and social operations—the “production” of the insurgency—as well as “maintenance” functions such as direction, recruitment, and training. The amount of resources, including people, that the insurgency puts into these functions can be usefully measured.

**Numerical strength.** Numbers suggest the insurgency’s capacity for producing violent incidents as well as its level of popular support, its ability to recruit, and the relative effectiveness of counterinsurgency measures. Estimates of insurgent strength should rest on explicit definitions of who is an insurgent and an understanding of the dynamic nature of insurgent “membership.”

**Activity or incident levels.** Even ignoring the problems associated with data collection on incidents, incident rates are only a simple measure. The insurgency acts along several broad lines of operation (counter-coalition, counter-collaboration, etc.), and shifts in emphasis among these lines suggest changes in insurgent strategy. In addition, incidents are qualitatively different both in terms of the effects they produce and the organization and resources required to mount them. A single rocket-propelled grenade fired at a U.S. vehicle is qualitatively different from a coordinated assault on an Iraqi police station, but each is counted as an “incident” under current definitions.

**Rhythms.** February and March 2005 witnessed relatively low levels of insurgent activity, but so did February and March 2004. Is this a cyclical pattern, or have counterinsurgency operations and the political process affected the insurgency in some important way? Official statements suggesting that current levels of activity represent some sort of “tipping point” or “tipping period” should be viewed with caution.

### Effectiveness of the Insurgency

For all its activity, what does the insurgency accomplish? How effective is it? Coalition forces killed in action (KIA) is one measure often used to address this question. Given the growth of the Iraqi Security Forces, however, Iraqi KIA may be a more important measure of insurgent effectiveness. In addition, other, more complex measures could be

used. For example, the insurgency appears to be highly effective at influencing Sunnis, given its measurable success in preventing a significant Sunni turnout in the January elections. Indeed, insurgencies are traditionally considered battles for the hearts and minds of the affected population, in this case Sunnis. There are several methods, some nontraditional, of assessing the extent to which insurgency, as a motivating concept, has penetrated Sunni society and the Sunni mind. Important questions include: To what extent does the insurgency enjoy popular support? Which structures of Sunni society has the insurgency penetrated, and to what depth? Which structures does it control, and what proportion of Sunni society does this represent? How deeply has the concept of insurgency penetrated the minds of Sunnis, and how impervious has this made them to messages of democracy, freedom, and political transformation?

Adaptability. How does the insurgency actually adapt to changes in its environment, and how resilient is it? In particular, how does it deal with attrition? One senior U.S. commander asserted that coalition forces killed or captured 15,000 insurgents in 2004. Yet, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency recently stated that 12,000-20,000 insurgents are currently active. If both of these assertions are true, what processes have allowed the insurgency to maintain the status quo in terms of manpower and operational tempo in the face of sustained coalition counterinsurgency operations and ongoing political transformation?

## Conclusion

Many of the insurgency's most important facets can be assessed, defined, measured, and, at least probabilistically, quantified. Indeed, multiple measures are required to assess its full scope. Such rigorous assessment can help resolve the often-dissimilar judgments of experts, or at least firmly establish the basis of their disagreement.

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