

In the Wake of the Iraqi Elections: Political and Security Implications

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Brief Analysis

The surprisingly high turnout in the Iraqi elections is a positive development, but it is only one milestone in the road ahead. Beyond the elections, reconciliation becomes the fundamental issue. Sunni Arabs, who represent the overwhelming majority of insurgents, are demographically and politically isolated. As they have long been politically dominant in Iraq, it is hard for them to reconcile themselves to the new situation, and they are quite willing to use violence in a bid to restore the old political balance.

There are two strands of insurgent activity within the greater Iraqi resistance. The first consists of Sunni Arabs (insurgents and others) who can be drawn into the upcoming political process as a legitimate way to seek (or reclaim) power. Some of these are drawn from previous regime elements, although there is no apparent desire to reinstate Baathism. The second is of the ilk of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and other al-Qaeda elements. No amount of effort at reconciliation will draw them into the political process; religiously motivated jihadists want to reestablish a caliphate. In these cases, a military solution is the only one that remains. Many people are straddling both camps, so it remains unclear if insurgents would treat political power as a substitute or supplement to violence.

In order to expedite reconciliation and create a feasible government, a political solution must include encouraging Sunnis to be part of the new Iraq. The recent Palestinian elections serve as a positive example of how participation in elections can reap political benefits. Meanwhile, those engaged in violent conduct ought to be marginalized.

Military solutions to insurgent activity still remain a practical option—which stirs up the controversial issue of civil war. The term “civil war” is used loosely here because the Sunni population represents only around 20 percent of Iraq, and perhaps only 1 percent are involved in violent activities. Conflict with 1 percent of the population simply

does not constitute civil war. If a significant number of Sunni Arabs refuse to participate in peaceful politics, Iraq could be faced with a slow, drawn-out saga of civil strife, but that is not really a civil war. Such civil strife is obviously not the desired outcome, but if it became necessary it could have result in a sort of equilibrium. The worst case for Iraq is not such strife but instead a partition of Iraq into several countries. A divided Iraq would be a failure for the policy goals the U.S. government has set and a destabilizing factor for Iraqis and the region.

JEFFREY WHITE

The recent parliamentary elections served as a referendum of sorts on the insurgency. While the insurgents hoped to intimidate and discourage voters, the elections surpassed expectations, and competition is now a component of Iraqi political life. The elections will advance the politicization of Sunnis by forcing them to choose sides—the new political process or the resistance. Major political competition in Iraq will have the positive outcome of forcing Sunnis to display a discernible political strategy. On the other hand, the elections demonstrated the development and success of an insurgency that remains a significant problem, even after a democratic process; the dedicated resistance will remain unaffected by the elections.

Prior to the elections, Iraq saw a formidable insurgency with increasing coordination and cooperation between groups that were well financed by old regime money, contributions from outside sources, extortion, and other types of crime. Attacks were sophisticated and complex, employing a variety of weapons systems. They often surged from 60 to 200 per day, and were not random but specifically counter-collaboration, counter-election, counter-coalition, counter-mobility, counter-reconstruction, or counter-stability. Above all, the insurgents were successful in creating a conscious resistance community.

The number of attacks peaked on election day, with a steady increase leading up to it. Due to suppressive efforts by coalition forces, the insurgency was held at bay in most areas. After the election, Iraq quickly saw the return of insurgent activity to preelection patterns. It is expected that counter-collaboration attacks will be on the rise and intimidation tactics will continue.

Another hurdle will be forming ethnically integrated security forces; if recruitment is sectarian, counterinsurgency efforts will be diminished and perceived as civil war. The challenge in this case would be to prevent civil strife from turning into a campaign against Sunnis. Armed and violent elements will need to be eradicated to create a viable state; the daunting task is finding a way to do so without destroying a minority population.

While it seems contradictory to draw rebellious and formerly oppressive elements back into the political scene, it is imperative to do so. Iraq cannot have a viable government when 20 percent of the population is in rebellion. The strategy should be to reach out to all parties, secure economic assets, and fight the insurgents as hard as possible.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

The security environment and political landscape in Iraq in 2005 will be characterized by long, drawn-out political processes prone to deadlock and procrastination, alongside pragmatic consensus and coalition building by the political mainstream. This does not, however, leave the violent fringe with spare time: 2005 will see competition for the soul of the Sunni population, ultimately pitting the violent Sunni fringe against the political Sunni elements.

Federalism and federalist rhetoric will soon reemerge in Iraq. Federalism is usually seen as a way to weaken the central government, but in Iraq it will be considered a path to unification. In 2004 there were many clashes during the creation of the interim constitution in northern Iraq, where there is a mix of Sunni, Kurd, Shiite, and Turkmen populations. These can be expected to continue during the second round of constitution drafting. The pressing question here is whether Iraqi security forces will be able to handle such clashes; if not, multinational forces may still be required.

According to insurgency theory, if the profile of multinational forces decreases through reduced presence and restationing outside of city centers, and if Iraqi self-governance increases, then the counteroccupation themes of the resistance will lose relevance. In such a case, stronger sectarian and ethnic themes would replace the counteroccupation rhetoric. Sunni insurgents would attempt to portray themselves as the genuine protectors of the Sunni nation, especially in places with diverse populations.

Insurgency theory also maintains that there will first be an urban insurrection and then peasant-based guerilla warfare. Yet, the minority status of the Sunnis may well prevent them from drawing on this model. Instead, a vanguard-based insurgency is likely to appear from the Salafist elements of the resistance. In this model, a myth of insurgency is fashioned to awaken sympathy. The best, and only successful, historical example of such a tactic comes from Cuba. Under this model, the vanguard members would begin targeting unsupportive members of their own constituency.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Brooke Neuman. ❖

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