War in Iraq:

Looking Forward, Looking Back

by Michael Eisenstadt **(/experts/michael-eisenstadt)** , Jeffrey White **(/experts/jeffrey-white)**

Sep 22, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.

Jeffrey White (/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.

Brief Analysis

On September 14, 2004, Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White addressed a Washington Institute Special Policy Forum held in celebration of their forthcoming Institute anthology Operation Iraqi Freedom and the New Iraq: Insights and Forecasts **(templateC04.php?CID=64)** (edited by Michael Knights). Mr. Eisenstadt is a senior fellow at the Institute, specializing in military and security affairs. His publications on Iraq include the 2003 Institute monograph U.S. Policy in Post-Saddam Iraq: Lessons from the British Experience. **(templateC04.php?CID=138)** Mr. White is an associate of the Institute and former head of the Office for Middle East/Africa Regional Military Assessments at the Defense Intelligence Agency. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

Surprise in war is inevitable. It is impossible to anticipate all enemy actions or the impact of the social and political forces unleashed by war. To succeed, one must be able to rapidly adjust one's plans when their underlying assumptions are proven wrong. In this regard, the U.S. performance in Iraq has been found wanting. The war brought surprises in four areas:

The insurgency. The Sunni insurgency resulted from the way the war was fought by both sides: U.S. forces brought about the rapid collapse of the regime without instilling a sense of defeat among its members, while many members of the regime's security forces survived the war because, whenever possible, they relied on paramilitary forces drawn from the dregs of Iraqi society to do the fighting for them. Moreover, the U.S. failure to realize that the fall of Baghdad did not end the war enabled the resistance to organize itself and stay one step ahead of coalition forces. The United States must prevent further entrenchment of the resistance and stamp out the miniature "republics of fear" that have emerged in the Sunni Triangle and deterred many residents from embracing the Iraqi Interim Government. It must be remembered, however, that successful counterinsurgency campaigns often take years to

bear results. The question is whether the U.S. presence will become politically untenable before Iraqi political and security structures are in place.

The nature of Iraqi society. The assumption that Iraqis were largely secular proved wrong. Due to official encouragement of religion during the 1990s and the impact of sanctions and coalition policies, religion is playing a larger role in public life than ever before in modern Iraq. Iran is also playing a more significant role in Iraq than generally anticipated due to its open borders with its neighbor, the influx of Iranian pilgrims to Shiite holy sites, the return of Iraqi expatriates who had spent several decades living in Iran, and Shiite factional politics, all of which create a congenial environment for Iran. Finally, the Iraqi public is more anti-American than expected due to perceived past betrayals by the United States as well as the aforementioned impact of sanctions and U.S. policy.

The functioning of the U.S. government. Although several studies have highlighted the problematic functioning of the intelligence community prior to the war, the lack of effectiveness demonstrated by large portions of the U.S. government during and after Operation Iraqi Freedom indicates systemic problems in the formulation and implementation of policy, on both the civilian and military sides. For instance, the government often neglected to make effective use of available expertise, failed to build on previous efforts (postwar planning was conducted, successively, by U.S. Central Command, Combined Joint Task Force IV, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, and the Coalition Provisional Authority, with little continuity of effort), and had to relearn forgotten lessons regarding counterinsurgency warfare and postconflict societies (lessons that it was slow to implement once relearned).

Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The failure to find WMD in Iraq should prompt a reassessment of how proliferators view such weapons. In the case of Iraq, the assumption was that WMD were essential to the survival of Saddam Hussein's regime, and that he would therefore not give them up -- in fact, that he would use them if the regime was in danger. The fact that Iraq did not produce WMD in the run-up to the war (and apparently did not even try to do so) should prompt a reassessment of the widespread assumption that proliferators view WMD as central to deterrence and war-fighting. Iraq raises the possibility that this might not always be the case.

JEFFREY WHITE

The insurgency in Iraq is the primary problem facing the coalition and the Iraqi government; everything else is secondary. The story of the Sunni resistance is one of increasing capability for the insurgents and increasing danger for its opponents. The resistance exceeds the capacity of the new Iraqi security forces, which are both unreliable and infiltrated. Sunni resistance actions have grown in number, scope, sophistication, and lethality. Coalition and Iraqi authorities have lost control to insurgents in such places as Falluja, Ramadi, and Samara, opening up whole zones of resistance that extend across multiple cities (e.g., Mosul to Tal Afar; Mahmudiya to Latifiya; Samara to Baquba).

Sunni resistance has expanded in part due to the way the war was conducted, to the limited number of coalition troops, and to the underestimation of the insurgent threat (highlighted by the failure to resolve the April 2004 crisis in Falluja, which resulted in the loss of the city to insurgents). The growth of the insurgency calls into question the possibility of holding elections across the Sunni region (or, if they are held, the legitimacy of their results).

Estimates of the number of resistance fighters range between 10,000 and 20,000. If one includes individuals indirectly involved in resistance activity, the number is near 100,000. The bulk of the resistance consists of Sunni Islamists, foreign jihadis, criminals, tribal elements, Sunni Arab nationalists, and, most important, elements of the old regime. These insurgents have been able to recoup losses and regroup when necessary. Coordinated actions locally and regionally along with sustained fighting indicate that they have increased their organizational capacity. Moreover, Sunni resistance has altered U.S. military deployments, forced an accelerated political process, chased out international organizations such as the UN, and eviscerated the development of the Iraqi government and its

security forces. In light of these and other factors, four possible scenarios could arise. First, Iraqi politics could evolve with a violent edge, but also a measure of political and economic progress and central authority. Second, the insurgency could become embedded in Sunni areas and continue fighting a protracted war against the government. Third, a situation could emerge (e.g., civil war) in which the government is forced to fight for its very survival (perhaps against reestablished figures from the old regime), with the outcome uncertain. Fourth, the resistance could make a bid for power either through direct violence, through political means backed by violence, or through infiltration of the government and political process over time.

In any case, the Sunni insurgency will continue to pit itself against coalition forces and the Iraqi government. Therefore, the coalition must commit itself to developing a campaign to deal with the resistance. In particular, the United States must deploy more troops. It must also try to co-opt the Sunni opposition and force their violent elements underground, despite their fundamental hostility toward the new government. To be sure, coalition and Iraqi authorities have shown signs of acknowledging the scope of the problem, including the shifting of funds from reconstruction to security, the use of military action to restore control in some areas that had been lost to the insurgents, and an increasing emphasis on the build-up of Iraqi security forces.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Max Sicherman.

Policy #902

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)