Predicting the Shape of Iraq’s Next Sunni Insurgencies

By Michael Knights

All politics and security is local in Iraq. Therefore, the analytical framework for predicting the shape and intensity of Iraq’s next Sunni insurgencies should also be based on the unique characteristics of each part of Iraq. The Islamic State and other insurgents are bouncing back strongest and quickest in the areas where the security forces are either not strong enough or not politically flexible enough to activate the population as a source of resistance against insurgents.

New insurgent attacks by the Islamic State were springing up in Mosul before the ashes were even cold from the climax of the liberation battle in June 2017. With the Islamic State holding just one square mile of western Mosul, the group marked the start of the Eid religious festival by launching a wave of suicide-vest and car-bomb attacks in liberated east Mosul on June 23-24. As their last inner city defensive pocket was crumbling, Islamic State forces at the edges of the city launched a 40-man raid into the Tanak and Yarmuk districts on the outer western edge of Mosul city on June 26, panicking citizens into leaving the ostensibly liberated area.

These incidents, and others like them, underline the manner in which Islamic State fighters have transitioned fairly smoothly and quickly from open occupation of territory back to the terrorism and insurgency tactics that they utilized prior to 2014. All eyes are now on how the Islamic State and other Sunni militants in Iraq will adapt to the loss of terrain, but there is no need to guess. A great deal of evidence is already available in the areas that have been liberated since 2014, a theme that this author and Alexander Mello developed in an October 2016 article in this publication on threat trends in Diyala province. This piece proposes an analytical framework for assessing the future strength and shape of Iraq’s Sunni insurgencies and will draw some lessons from the pre-2014 era.

Assumptions about Sunni Insurgencies in Iraq

Nearly a decade after the surge of U.S. forces in Iraq¹ and the Sunni “Awakening,”² there is still no consensus view on the factors that led to the steep reduction in Sunni insurgent attacks between 2006 and 2008.³ This article proposes three factors that the author has observed to be significant in determining the level of Sunni insurgent activity in different provinces and districts within Iraq.⁴ In particular, this piece will focus on the factors that strengthened or constrained the growth of the Islamic State and former Baathist insurgents⁵ after the U.S. withdrawal from Sunni areas between 2009 and 2011. This focus is appropriate for a forward-looking assessment because it appears likely that U.S. and coalition forces will not have a large presence on the ground and will only provide future support “by, with and through” the Iraqi government forces.

In this author’s experience, the most important factor in the intensification of Sunni insurgency in Iraq during and after the U.S. withdrawal was the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the Iraqi security forces (ISP).⁶ Effectiveness is a sum of the unit’s leadership, experience and training, its manpower levels relative to the tasks set for it, its logistical and mobility capabilities relative to the terrain it must operate across, plus “enablers” such as intelligence and air support. It can be strongly argued that a lack of basic effectiveness and capacity in the security forces opened the door to the Islamic State more than any other single factor.

When the Islamic State and its predecessor organizations gained ascendency in the Sunni majority districts of Iraq between 2012 and 2014, they largely did so by incrementally demonstrating to the population that the security forces could not or would not protect the people.⁷ In particular, the government failed to protect the Sunni tribal leaders and fighters who had supported the Awakening.⁸ Some Sunni citizens may have been receptive to the Islamic State’s promise of a renewed order and justice in the face of growing Sunni nationalism and Estado Islamismo.⁹

As an obvious caveat, this attribution of causality is an opinion, albeit one formed by more than a decade of monitoring security in Iraq on a daily basis and the systematic accessing and warehousing of on-the-ground SIGACT (Significant Action) data by the author. As noted above, the exact causality of increases and decreases in insurgent activity is still being actively debated.

For example, there may be resurgence in former Baathist and nationalist groups like Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN). See Michael Knights, “The JRTN Movement and Iraq’s Next Insurgency,” CTC Sentinel 4:7 (2011).

This is the phrase used by coalition leaders to describe the supporting role of Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) forces in the current war against the Islamic State in Iraq. See “Operation Inherent Resolve - Targeted Operations to Defeat ISIS,” U.S. Department of Defense, available at https://www.defense.gov/OIR/

Since 2010, the author has built a body of work arguing that the regrowth of the Islamic State in Iraq has been primarily driven by the Islamic State’s superior operational and tactical proficiency at local level compared to the ISF. See 2010-2014 entries at http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/knights-michael. These themes are drawn together in Michael Knights, “The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq,” Testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2013, and in Michael Knights, “The Future of Iraq’s Armed Forces,” Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2016, available at https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/The-future.pdf.

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State's ideology and vision, and others may have been invigorated and intrigued by its ability to displace the Iraqi government. But it can be strongly argued that many Iraqi Sunnis passively or actively supported the Islamic State occupation because, lacking the protection of the government, they had little choice, unless they wished to surrender their homes and livelihoods and become refugees.

Munqith al-Dagher, one of Iraq’s most credible pollsters, has performed some of the most thoughtful work on why Sunni communities actively or passively supported the Islamic State, and he tends to stress Sunni fears surrounding security and justice. See Munqith al-Dagher, “How Iraqi Sunnis really feel about the Islamic State,” Washington Post, March 24, 2015.

A second potential driver or restrainer on the regrowth of Sunni insurgency in Iraq is the support (or lack thereof) of the population for militant resistance activities. This does not refer to “Sunni
disenfranchisement\textsuperscript{f} in a generic sense as a major driver for year-on-year intensification of insurgency, such as occurred in 2012-2014. The Islamic State was close to defeat in 2008 at a time when there were no national or constitutional reforms regarding the role of the Baath party, no amnesty law for former Baathists, no mass amnesties of Sunni prisoners, and no major amendment of arrest and detention practices by the government.\textsuperscript{g} That being said, it is important to highlight some Sunni community-related factors that seem to have demonstrable impact on insurgency. The demographic balance in each part of Iraq shapes whether local Sunnis feel more or less secure. In some areas, they are demographically dominant and lead local governance and policing; in others, they are clearly a subordinate minority; and in some areas, the ethno-sectarian balance in unclear or shifting, fostering extreme identity politics within local government and security forces. Tangible local grievances\textsuperscript{h} and leadership choices can be powerful drivers and restrainers of Sunni participation in insurgency. Local Sunni leadership can drive their communities toward or away from militancy.

A final determinant of the local level of Sunni insurgency is arguably the proximity of ungoverned spaces\textsuperscript{i} that are beyond the control of the Iraqi government, particularly battle zones where military munitions can be readily sourced. The civil war in Syria is clearly the biggest concern in this regard, and it can be viewed as a major causal factor in the intensification of insurgency in Iraq since 2012.\textsuperscript{j} Areas of the Iran-Iraq border also provide a degree of sanctuary for al-Qa’ida and Islamic State affiliates\textsuperscript{k} operating in eastern Iraqi districts like Halabja, Khanaqin, and Balad Ruz. Domestic areas are also of concern. The internal ungoverned space between the Tigris and Diyala rivers (including the Hawija area, the Hamrin Mountains, and the Jallam desert) is a massive area of challenging terrain. The western deserts bordering Syria in Anbar and Ninawa, plus swatches of the Iran-Iraq border northeast of Baghdad, are also large and difficult to police.

These three factors—ISF effectiveness, local Sunni support for insurgency, and access to insurgent sanctuaries—will vary greatly across the provinces and districts of Iraq. In general terms, Iraq can be broken into three “micro-climates” in terms of their attractiveness as a setting for Sunni insurgent activities.

### Strategic Terrorism Versus the Shi`a and Kurdish Domination Zones

In sizeable parts of Iraq, there is very little prospect of even a weak Sunni insurgency due to demographic and geographic realities. This might be termed “the domination zone”\textsuperscript{l} as since the intense sectarian purging of 2006-2007, Sunni communities have learned to live under Shi`a or Kurdish domination within this zone.

In Baghdad city and most of the areas south of the capital (totaing 40 of Iraq's 102 districts), the Sunnis are a demographic minority, the control of Shi`a- and Kurdish domination is significant, and the areas are often distant enough from ungoverned spaces (inside Iraq and in Syria) that Sunni insurgents would be forced to mount long-distance “reach attacks”\textsuperscript{m} on the Shi`a heartlands. In June 2014, the Islamic State advance ran out of steam as soon as the domination zone was reached at the outskirts of Baghdad.\textsuperscript{n} Large Sunni populations in Baghdad did not rise up to support the Islamic State. The rapid muster of the Hashd al-Sha‘abi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF)\textsuperscript{o} was strong proof of the ultimate stability of the Shi`a domination zone.

There is also a Kurdish domination zone in which it is ethnic (rather than sectarian) polarity that matters, spanning 36 of Iraq's 102 districts. Though the Iraqi Kurds are mostly Sunni (and do include some adherents to salafi jihadism), their political parties and intelligence agencies maintain tight control of their demographic domination zone. A hard border—complete with ditches, berms, fences, and checkpoints—separates much of the Kurdistan Region from Arab Sunni-majority areas.\textsuperscript{p} (Areas where the Kurdish Region blends into Arab Sunni-majority areas are much less secure and will be dealt with in subsequent sections.) U.S. airstrikes steadied the Kurds when their capital, Erbil, was attacked in August 2014. But it is improbable that the Islamic State could have seized or held majority-Kurdish areas in the Kurdistan Region, and the ethnic frontline was indeed successfully defended for the most part.\textsuperscript{q}

Sunni insurgents such as the Islamic State can only damage the “home bases” of perceived enemies such as the Shi`a and the Kurds through strategic terrorist attacks. In the past, the Islamic State and its forerunners have invested significant assets into launching such attacks on Baghdad, the Shi`a shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, the southern Shi`a cities, and the Kurdistan Region using suicide-vest bombers, suicide-vehicle bombers, other large or well-placed explosive devices, or teams of attackers to storm key

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\textsuperscript{f} “Sunni disenfranchisement” is not a literal phrase because under Saddam the Sunnis had no appreciable democratic rights and now they are fully entitled to vote. Instead, the phrase tends to be a catch-all for Sunni complaints about civil equality at a national level, relating to issues such as an easing of de-Baathification statutes, judicial reforms that would disproportionately aid Sunnis, and constitutional and legal amendments intended to reassure the Sunnis that Iraq will remain an administratively centralized Arab republic. For a summary of the main issues, see “Make or Break: Iraq’s Sunnis and the State,” International Crisis Group, 2013, and Kirk Sowell, “Iraq’s Second Sunni Insurgency,” Current Trends in Islamist Ideology 17 (2014).

\textsuperscript{g} Here the author refers to very concrete local grievances, for example, systematic harassment, extortion, and detention of local Sunnis at checkpoints by ISF units recruited from outside the area. To give a Mosul-specific example, Shi`a- and Kurdish security forces prevented Moslawis from holding wedding motorcades during Shi`a mourning periods, despite Mosul having almost no Shi`a citizens. Author interview, Rasha Al Aqeedi, Moslawi analyst, August 2016.

\textsuperscript{h} Sunni provincial-level leaders in Iraq played a major role in driving their populations toward armed militancy against the state in 2012-2014, especially in Mosul and Hawija. See Adel Kamal, “The Government and Military Fall out of Love in Mosul,” Niqash, March 2, 2011, and also Inside Iraqi Politics, no. 52, January 3, 2013, p. 3, and Inside Iraqi Politics, no. 65, July 20, 2013, p. 8. Across a range of editions in 2012–2013, the Inside Iraqi Politics team documented and tracked the tight relationship between the Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (JRTN) movement and the Free Iraq Intifada protest group, which was eventually publicized by both parties.

\textsuperscript{i} In Anbar, the Sunni tribal leadership executed a very sudden pivot from anti-government protests in late December 2013 to close cooperation with the ISF in January 2014 as soon as the Islamic State’s predecessor group tried to take over Ramadi. See Michael Knights, “ISIL’s Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor,” CTC Sentinel 7:5 (2014): p. 9.

\textsuperscript{j} This phrase reflects that perception that many Sunnis may hold of the relative strength of Shi`a and Kurdish forces versus Sunni residents.

\textsuperscript{k} This denotes attacks that demonstrate “reach” of the Islamic State and other Sunni insurgents deep into the Shi`a south.

\textsuperscript{l} The Peshmerga did surrender ground in Sinjar, the Ninawa Plains, and in Jakula.
buildings. Such “spectaculars,” executed with grinding intensity, assisted the Islamic State in rebuilding its status in 2011-2014. Regular bombings within the Shia or Kurdish heartlands tend to sharpen sectarian and ethnic tensions, which can be exploited by groups like the Islamic State. In the aftermath of battlefield defeats, it is a good bet that the Islamic State and splinter groups or reactivating or rebranded Sunni insurgent groups may use strategic terrorism to build or rebuild their brands.

According to the author’s Iraq incident dataset, the Islamic State is already sending four to five mass-casualty attacks into Baghdad each month, a level that roughly matches the incidence rate in 2011, when the Islamic State, in its previous form, was at its lowest ebb. This is likely to change in the next year as the Islamic State is less distracted with the defense of territory. Initially, suicide vests will likely be preferred due to their ease of transit. Car bombs have become less frequently used because vehicle bomb manufacturing and storage facilities in Fallujah were lost, and so then were replacement facilities north of Baghdad. In Tarmiyah, linked to Diyala and the internal ungoverned space, Islamic State bomb-making sites were also disrupted by active ISF operations. Long-distance vehicle bombs were then sent from the Syrian border district of al-Qaim in the last three months of 2016, but this practice seems to have been abandoned and may become even more difficult later in 2017 or in early 2018 when the ISF is expected to move to liberate al-Qaim. For the Kurds, the opposite situation is unfolding; the risk of inbound mass-casualty attacks is again increasing as the frontline

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m Baghdad, Hillah, Karbala, Najaf, Amarah, Nasiriyah, and Basra are the main suicide targets in southern Iraq. For a recent example, see “Two suicide car bombs explode on highway near oilfields in southern Iraq,” Associated Press, May 19, 2017. Erbil and Sulaymaniyah are the key targets in Kurdistan. For the most recent successful attack, see Isabel Coles, “Car bomb kills three outside U.S. consulate in Iraq’s Kurdish capital,” Reuters, April 18, 2015.

n All incident data is drawn from the author’s geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset. The dataset brings together declassified coalition SIGACT data plus private security company and open-source SIGACT data used to supplement and extend the dataset as coalition incident collection degraded in 2009-2011 and was absent in 2012-2014. New data since 2014 has been added to the dataset to bring it up to date (as of the end of June 2017).

o In April-June 2011, the Islamic State undertook 12 mass-casualty attacks in Baghdad city versus 13 in April-June 2017. At the height of the Baghdad bombing campaign, the Islamic State mounted 62 attacks in April-June 2013. All figures drawn from author’s SIGACT dataset.
with Mosul is demilitarized and reopened to commercial traffic.\(^{21}\)

The key warning sign when it comes to the security of Baghdad is whether there is any effort to regenerate Islamic State bomb-making factories inside Baghdad city and its adjacent rural districts. An intriguing case presented itself on June 26, 2017, when a major explosives cache was intercepted inbound to southeastern Baghdad.\(^{22}\) The cache included 44 explosive filler sets for suicide vests.\(^{23}\) As in 2012-2013 when the Islamic State began its escalating pattern of Baghdad attacks, insurgents may boost their operational tempo by mounting non-suicide (i.e., remote- or timer-detonated) vehicle bombings and backpack or bag bombings in public spaces.\(^{4}\) Islamic State cells in Kurdistan appear to have prepared for this option also as a means of maximizing the number of attacks each cell can make.\(^{4}\)

**Weak Insurgency in the Partnership Zone**

A second set of Iraq districts comprise what might be called “the partnership zone.” In these areas, the Sunnis make up a clear demographic majority and the Sunni communities appear less sensitive to ethno-sectarian threats. This may be because they are physically distant from Baghdad (and/or the Kurdish zone) and thus Sunnis are somewhat left alone by Baghdad (and Erbil) to run local affairs.\(^{1}\) In the partnership zone, it is more likely that local Sunnis attain command of local police and paramilitary forces, and it may be easier for the U.S.-led coalition to sustain its training, logistical, intelligence, and aerial support to Iraqi forces because of the limited presence of Shi’a militia forces operating under the PMF umbrella. All of these factors improve the likelihood that insurgency can be held at or reduced to a low level.

At present the partnership zone is limited to Anbar province, where Baghdad has traditionally adopted a relatively hands-off approach to local governance and policing. A Sunni-only province,\(^{1}\) Anbar has a unique track record in fighting the Islamic state and its forerunners, providing successful templates of partnership between U.S. and Sunni tribal fighters from 2005 onward.\(^{24}\) U.S. forces currently based at Al-Asad airbase, 110 miles from Baghdad, have been able to provide strong support to Sunni tribal resistance forces.\(^{8}\)

The oil refining center of Haditha was successfully defended from the Islamic State by tribes and ISF throughout the post-2014 war,\(^{25}\) contrasting with the fall of cities much closer to Baghdad such as Ramadi and Fallujah. Since the Islamic State’s seizure of Fallujah in January 2014, Sunni tribes from Anbar have generally cooperated well with the security forces, for example, resisting the Islamic State takeover of Ramadi for 15 months before finally succumbing to an intense assault involving as many as 30 car bombs in March 2015.\(^{26}\)

Despite some encouraging indicators, there are many reasons to be concerned about a potential resurgent Islamic State campaign in Anbar. The proximity of Syria and the difficulty of securing the border mean that military-grade high-explosives, anti-tank weapons, large armored vehicle bombs, and other heavy weapons may continue to be available to Anbar insurgents as long as the Syrian civil war continues. Furthermore, though the Islamic State still geographically controls some parts of Anbar (mainly al-Qaim district), the Islamic State transitioned a year ago to insurgent operations in the liberated parts of the province. Thus, observers can already view some of the strengths and weaknesses of an Islamic State-led insurgency in Anbar.

The Islamic State is currently only able to mount a hit-and-run rural insurgency in Anbar. The high plateau of the western desert (an ungoverned space between liberated Rutba and al-Qaim) is used as a launchpad for an average of seven explosive incidents per month against nearby Rutba,\(^{27}\) where non-local and predominately Shi’a PMF have deployed to control the road to Syria—a vital link in a potential Iran-Iraq-Syria logistical corridor.\(^{28}\) The tactics are straight out of 2012: effective roadside bombs capable of defeating Hummer armor; attempts to overrun PMF and military checkpoints; mortar and drone attacks on static sites; and fake vehicle checkpoints to ambush and massacre PMF convoys.\(^{29}\) In April-June 2017, 27 Iraqi troops were reported killed and 40 wounded in such attacks,\(^{30}\) a demoralizing tally for the units in this one small corner of the war.

The Islamic State is a lot less confident in the cities of Anbar, probably because they were broadly rejected by the people and were militarily defeated in these places just a year ago. The Islamic State

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\(^{p}\) Mosul’s reconstruction and reopened markets have resulted in hundreds of trucks crossing the Kurdistan-Mosul frontline each day since November 2016. These vehicles receive only a rudimentary visual check.

\(^{q}\) This option allows the same cell to undertake repeated attacks and even to “seed” multiple delayed-action targets in a single day. In 2012-2013, the Islamic State rebuilt its bombing series in Baghdad and southern cities with numerous vehicle-carried IEDs and bag bombings. Author’s SIGACT dataset.

\(^{r}\) Cells of Salafi Kurdish “homegrown” attackers in Erbil (in 2015) and Sulaymaniyah (in 2017) have focused on developing pipe-bomb, radio-control IEDs in order to strike multiple soft targets (such as markets). Author’s SIGACT database.

\(^{s}\) The Shi’a leadership in Baghdad has historically been quite parochial in its focus on security operations in Baghdad and southern Iraq, neglecting Anbar and Ninawa security for extended periods.

\(^{t}\) Though there has not been an ethnic census in Anbar since Saddam Hussein’s time, it is fair to surmise from general reporting, author visits, and election results that there are no sizeable non-Sunni population groups in Anbar.


\(^{v}\) The author uses the phrase “explosive events” to describe IED detonations, including vehicle bombs, suicide vests, grenades, rocket-propelled grenades, recoilless rifles, improvised rocket launchers, guided missiles, newly laid mines, and indirect fire from rockets and mortars. Events on major battlefield locations (such as airstrikes, artillery strikes, car bombings, and so on) are excluded by geographic filtering to ensure only incidents in “liberated areas” are counted. The author has deliberately excluded “unknown explosions,” “finds” and “found/cleared” data on car bomb, suicide-vests IED finds, and caches in order to maintain the highest-fidelity incident data possible. Explosions are the category of incidents most likely to be detected whether intelligence and media reporting is strong or weak and the least likely category to be faked or exaggerated (as is often the case with cache finds reported by the ISF). Explosive events in the Sunni majority areas have been manually reviewed and screened by the author to exclude criminal uses of explosives. (Of note, this article does not consider explosive events inside Baghdad city, where it is almost impossible to differentiate criminal or vendetta uses of explosive devices versus smaller insurgent attacks).
At present, there is a mild honeymoon effect—a situation where two forces have not yet carried out many urban attacks. In April-June 2017, the Islamic State carried out an average of 11 explosive incidents per month in Ramadi, nine per month in Hit, and seven per month in Fallujah. The predominance of explosive events over shootings—such as 146 explosions versus 36 shootings in April-June 2017—indicates that the insurgency in liberated parts of Anbar is not yet confident enough to really reach into the cities, perform target prioritization and "pattern of life" profiling on key tribal and security leaders, and mount regular "quality" attacks against them. The Islamic State’s current campaign in Anbar is characterized by distant harassment, collective punishment, and haphazard targeting, with 57% of small bombings apparently striking average civilians (families in cars, bystanders passing an IED in a trash can) rather than military targets. In April-June 2017, there were more non-battlefield explosive events than in the equivalent period of 2013, but there were a third as many shootings this year compared to April-June 2013. This is significant because the most frightening aspects of the Islamic State’s remorseless intimidation of Sunni communities in Iraq in 2013 was the increase of precisely targeted attacks—the close-quarter assassination or lethal under-vehicle bomb that killed exactly the right tribal figure to intimidate far larger populations into submission. This has not returned yet as a significant tactic, but Iraq observers should keep a close watch for the resurgence of systematic ‘quality’ attacks against Sunni local leaders in Anbar and elsewhere.

The Colonization Zone

A final set of areas, spanning 24 of Iraq’s 102 districts, can be termed the “colonization zone” because Sunni-majority communities in this swath experience the greatest fear of displacement and ethno-sectarian discrimination by either Shi’a or Kurdish forces. At present, there is a mild honeymoon effect, whereby Sunnis have welcomed liberation by predominately Shi’a forces because they are in deep shock at the Islamic State’s violent excesses and are frustrated by Sunni leadership failures, and by intra-communal Sunni betrayals. This honeymoon may pass in the coming year or two if the Shi’a and Kurds fail to develop partnerships with Sunni communities. In this context, allegations of human rights violations (e.g., summary executions) during the Mosul battle and by Federal Police during the broader campaign could prove particularly injurious to community relations.

From a local Sunni perspective, the Shi’a colonization zone historically includes the cross-sectarian areas of Baghdad’s rural outskirts (the Baghdad belts), southern Salah al-Din province, much of Diyala province, the Shi’a Turkmen pocket of Tal Afar, and rural parts of Tuz Khurmatu district in northern Salah al-Din. In these areas, local Sunnis make up the demographic majority or a large plurality, but the ISF have historically been Shi’a-dominated. The replacement of Iraqi military forces with outsider PMF forces since 2014 has sharpened this dynamic. The Sunni perception of a Shi’a colonization zone has also broadened geographically because Shi’a PMF now control areas that Shi’a militias were much less interested in before 2014, such as the deserts west of Mosul, the Ninawa Plains, Sharqat, Beiji and adjacent oilfields, the Beiji to Haditha pipeline, Tikrit, Dour, Taza Khurmatu, Sadiyah and Jalula, Jurf-as-Sakr, Ruba’, and the Walid border crossing with Syria. In many of these areas, Sunni displaced persons are only allowed to return to liberated sites if they agree to PMF preconditions, including compensation and provision of military manpower to serve under PMF leadership.

From a local Sunni perspective, the Kurdish colonization zone established since 2003 includes multi-ethnic but Kurdish-dominated areas such as Zummar, Kirkuk city, and northern Diyala areas (for example, Jabbarah, Qara Tapa, Sadiyah, and Jalula). Though Mosul is not physically controlled by the Kurds, the outsized Kurdish influence within the Ninawa provincial council (due to a lack of a cohesive Arab bloc) continues to stoke Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen fears of Kurdish domination. To this historic list are now added three new Sunni areas under expanded Kurdish control since 2014—Dibis district (including many of Kirkuk’s largest oilfields),

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w The author uses the phrase “shootings” to describe events in his SIGACT dataset such as small arms fire, precision small arms fire, close quarter assassination, and “complex” attack types that do not include explosive devices. “Murder” events have been excluded and the shootings have been manually reviewed and screened by the author to rule out events that appear to be criminal rather than insurgent. The result is still somewhat subjective, but a valid attempt has been made to create statistics that reflect (as accurately as possible) insurgent use of gunfire.

x The Islamic State does occasionally kill off-duty ISF senior officers and get suicide bombers inside security force and tribal headquarters, but such incidents are not happening more than once every month at the current time.

y By “quality attacks,” the author means attacks that are effective in overcoming defensive measures to strike protected targets. This is a means of differentiating a high-quality, close-quarter assassination from an inaccurate spray of drive-by gunfire, for example.

z Such as rocket and mortar attacks, and unattended IEDs.

aa The Islamic State has begun monthly attacks on electricity pylons in the Haditha to Ramadi corridor, seemingly as a punitive measure against the population. (Similar efforts are mounted in Diyala and Salah al-Din). Author’s SIGACT dataset.

ab Again, this phrase reflects the perspective of Sunni populations toward outside forces.


ad It is no coincidence that these were the most violent parts of Arab Iraq prior to 2014.

ae In particular, unit command appointments became concentrated in the hands of Shi’a political appointees and fighters seconded from the Islamist militias to the security forces. See Knights, “The Future of Iraq’s Armed Forces,” p. 41.

af The PMF includes many units drawn from local communities who are employed within their own communities (e.g., Sunni tribesmen from Anbar or Salah al-Din used to liberate their own districts). These PMF tend to answer to the local ISF chain of command and enjoy local legitimacy. Problems typically arise when the PMF are brought from outside the area, including use of southern Shi’a-led by Iranian-backed commanders to garrison northern Sunni areas.

ag This has been evident in places like Yethrib, Muqdadiyah, and Tikrit. See “Diyala Governor Splits Sunnis to Defeat Impeachment Bid,” Inside Iraqi Politics 134 (2016).

ah It is again no coincidence that these were the most violent parts of the federal Iraq/Kurdistan disputed boundary prior to 2014.

ai These are Bai Hassan and Avana oilfields.
Rabiya sub-district in northern Sinjar,⁴⁹ and the Zarga farmlands southwest of Tuz Khurmatu city.

Special attention should be focused on the Dibis district, where there is a growing local insurgency that is partly supported by the adjacent Islamic State pocket at Hawija but that appears to be at least partly organic to the area and its Sunni farming communities. Dibis includes large numbers of Sunni villages that were built on top of demolished Kurdish farms by the Baath regime. When such villages were liberated from the Islamic State, Kurdish forces took the opportunity of leveling them in order to prevent the return of displaced Sunni inhabitants. The result has been an escalating local Sunni insurgency. In April-June 2017, there were an average of 15 explosive events per month (mainly oil and electricity infrastructure attacks) in the 25-by-10-mile Dibis district versus an average of two per month in the same period in 2013. The Islamic State has been undertaking ‘quality’ attacks in the area; for example, one Islamic State cell penetrated more than 10 miles into the Kurdish domination zone in Dibis to specifically execute a village headmen (mukhtar) as well as religious and police leaders within a Sunni hamlet.⁴⁰

It is also worth looking at three parts of the Shi’a colonization zone for indicators of the intensity and shape of future Sunni insurgencies in Iraq. The first is Diyala province, where Alex Mello and this author explored the evolution of Islamic State insurgency in 2015-2016 in a recent article for this publication.⁴¹ (Diyala is a thoroughly mixed Sunni-Shi’a province where a slender Sunni majority is under the firm control of the Ba’dar organization,⁴² an Iranian-backed political party and the main bloc within the Shi’a PMF.) Without reiterating all the background points in that study, it is important to underline that Diyala is presently suffering a more intense insurgency than at any time since al-Qa’ida in Iraq’s heyday in the province in 2007-2008.⁴³ In April-June 2017, there were more explosive events (169) than there were in the equivalent period of 2013 (118).⁴⁴ Small-arms fire attacks and other direct engagements are now occurring at nearly double the frequency of 2013 (70 attacks in April-June 2017 versus 43 in April-June 2013).⁴⁵ What observers are seeing in Diyala is a full-fledged Islamic State-led insurgency that draws on support from the adjacent ungoverned space of the Islamic State pocket north of the Diyala River (in the Hamrin Mountains, Jallam desert, and Hawija). The insurgency has attained a steady, consistent operational tempo of roadside IED attacks, mortar strikes and raids on PMF outposts, and attacks on electrical and pipeline infrastructure.⁴⁶ In Diyala, the Islamic State is already engaged in the kind of intimate violence that was seen across northern Iraq in 2013: granular, high-quality targeting of Sunni leaders and tribes working alongside the PMF.⁴⁷

Adjacent Salah al-Din province seems to be one step behind Diyala, perhaps because the Islamic State has been conducting an insurgency in Salah al-Din for 18 months rather than nearly 30 months in Diyala.⁴⁸ It is worth looking back at the transformation that the Sunni insurgents made in 2009-2013 in Salah al-Din to get a sense of the potential for violence within the province. In 2009, Salah al-Din was still in the grip of a machine-like insurgency; roadside bombing crews pumped out IED attacks on the coalition main supply route up the Tigris River Valley, and indirect fire cells kept up a rote pattern of rocket and mortar attacks on U.S. bases.⁴⁹ Just over 90 explosive events were carried out each month with cold-blooded, assembly-line regularity. But by 2013, the ingrained pattern had shifted. Roughly 90 explosive events were still delivered each month but against Sunni opponents, Shi’a, and local police forces, not against the long-departed coalition transport columns and logistics. From 2011 to 2013, the amount of small-arms fire in Salah al-Din increased from an average of six attacks per month to 36 attacks per month.⁵⁰ The Islamic State very effectively reshaped the ingrained nature of the local insurgency within just two years after the U.S. departure.

Today’s insurgency in Salah al-Din does not have to make the same radical reorientation as it did in 2009-13 to sustain itself, and it is gradually recovering. The number of explosive events each month averaged 48 in April-June 2017 versus 77 in April-June 2013.⁵¹ As in Anbar, most attacks harass rather than kill; Salah al-Din witnesses very large numbers of mortar attacks, regular roadside IED attacks, and efforts to target and overrun static checkpoints and bases.⁵² The ungoverned space of the Hamrin Mountains, Jallam desert, and Hawija provides a base from which to resource, plan, and launch attacks. The passivity of ISF and PMF units has allowed the Islamic State to mount a surprising number of well-conceived raids of sufficient scale to overrun large villages and penetrate security force headquarters.⁵³ As in Anbar, however, the Islamic State is not yet engaging in intimate targeting within Salah al-Din’s Sunni communities to change the local balance of power. At present, insurgents overwhelmingly target fielded ISF and PMF units using explosive devices, with very little targeting of civilians and almost no surgical assassinations of Sunni leaders.⁵⁴

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⁴⁹ Rabia, an Arab majority tribal district, was controlled by Iraqi army forces until 2013, lost to the Islamic State in 2014, and liberated and occupied by the Kurdish Peshmerga since November 2014.

⁵⁰ Local insurgents have repeatedly bombed power pylons, transformer yards, and the Iranian gas pipeline supplying Mansouriyah power station with fuel. Author’s SIGACT dataset.

⁵¹ The Islamic State has operated inside Sunni villages, striking at the homes of local sheikhs and hitting the protective security details of key Sunni political and security leaders. Author’s SIGACT dataset.

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“Diyala is presently suffering a more intense insurgency than at any time since al-Qa’ida in Iraq’s heyday in the province in 2007-2008.”
A clear increase in violence is occurring in the Baghdad belts, and this is disconcerting because the cross-sectarian rural districts around the capital had been relatively secure for most of the period since the U.S. surge and Iraqi Awakening in 2007-2008. The Baghdad belts were the launchpad for Sunni militancy in the capital in the worst months of the insurgency, but these areas never seemed to be integrated fully into the Islamic State’s resurgence after 2012, possibly due to the disproportionate concentration of ISF and later Shi’a militia forces around the Iraqi capital. Now there seems to be a determined effort by the Islamic State to return to the Baghdad belts. Explosive events are now higher than 2013, with 151 explosive events in April-July 2017 versus 123 in the same period in 2013. Shooting incidents are on par—51 in April-July 2017 versus 57 in the same period in 2013. The Baghdad belts are suffering a coordinated campaign of anti-civilian bombings that appears intended to stoke sectarian tensions. In April-July 2017, the Islamic State and other Sunni insurgents appear to have launched at least 88 local bombings against shops and fish markets. These occurred in all the quadrants of the belts: Taji and Tarmiyah to the north; Nahrawan and Jisr Diyala to the east; Mada’in and Yusifiya to the south; and Abu Ghraib to the west. Forty-four civilians were killed and 290 wounded in the attacks. The stoking of sectarian tensions with large numbers of micro-bombings and shootings could be an effective tactic, particularly if PMF and ISF units retaliate against Sunni civilians and so should be monitored closely.

**Implications for Counterinsurgents**

The analysis above indicates that the Islamic State in Iraq is not a movement in disarray at the loss of its territorial holdings; rather, it has moved on. The Islamic State’s current insurgent operations in Iraq have reset at the 2013 level, as opposed to the movement’s nadir in 2011. Thus, the liberation of the cities has only turned back the clock to one of the most dangerous moments in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq’s history. The battles fought since 2014 have given Iraq and its allies a second chance to try again to kill off the Islamic State insurgency, but success in this venture is not assured. Iraq’s government and its international partners need to achieve results in three areas to reduce the chance of a new wave of strong Sunni insurgencies in Iraq.

First, the ISF need to be both stronger and smarter at counterinsurgency. Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) needs to continue and evolve its training, equipping, advising, and assisting of the ISF. Having supported Iraqi forces in fighting conventional battles, the focus of training ought to now switch back to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. The ISF, PMF, and Kurdish Peshmerga today are woefully deficient in most of the practical requirements of counterinsurgency. Avoidable casualties from mortars, rockets, roadside bombs, and shootings are suffered by the security forces because of a simple lack of force protection. Troops are moving in unarmored vehicles; convoy security and route clearance procedures are absent; medical services are almost nonexistent; and outposts are not sufficiently fortified.

International advice, training, and engineering support can help rectify these shortfalls. There are strong arguments for the coalition to also play a role in blunting Islamic State strategic terrorist attacks against Baghdad, other Shi’a cities, and the Kurdistan Region. Such attacks always hold the potential to create game-changing anti-Sunni and anti-Arab backlash that could collectively punish Sunni civilians and ultimately benefit Sunni militants.

The philosophy and tactics of counterinsurgency also need to be adopted by the ISF, PMF, and Kurdish forces. Too often, such forces fail to protect the Sunni population and allow themselves to become alienated from local people. The above analysis suggests that a basic problem in Iraq today is that too many districts lie within the colonization zone, and too few are within the partnership zone. At present, liberated Sunni communities are too numbed to develop resentment toward outsider ISF and PMF units, but in a short period of months or years, the insurgents will begin to exploit any divisions between the people and the security forces. The next generation of Sunni insurgents might not appear to be led by the Islamic State, either because they are genuinely new homegrown groups or because they are rebranded Islamic State cells. In addition to slow-burn national reconciliation initiatives, the Iraqi and Kurdish governments would be well advised to intensify local security partnerships (with locally recruited and commanded Sunni Arab forces) to prevent an incremental comeback by insurgents. Open-ended garrisoning by predominately Shi’a non-local PMF creates ideal conditions for militant resurgence. If the PMF are to remain a part of the security environment in Sunni Iraq, for the sake of Iraq’s future they need to be predominately Sunni PMF operating on a separate chain of command from Iranian-backed PMF leaders such as U.S.-designated terrorist and PMF deputy commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Lastly, insurgent sanctuaries in ungoverned spaces must be minimized. Staunching the connection between Iraq and the civil war in Syria is an obvious but difficult task that will require specialized train-and-equip programs for the ISF. Coordination with security forces on the Syrian side of the border would ideally be tight, whether they are friendly toward the Iraqi government, the coalition, or both or neither. At least as importantly, Iraq needs to focus on its domestic insurgent sanctuaries. Embedded advisor and intelligence cells will be needed for multiple years to keep up the tempo of counterinsurgency operations in Anbar, Salah al-Din, and the Baghdad belts. Though the dominance of Iranian-backed Shi’a militias has precluded CJTF-OIR presence in Diyala so far, this is the province where the ISF needs the most support. In both Diyala and

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*a* The rural districts bordering Baghdad but not within the city limits (amanat) include places like Taji, Mushahada, Tarmiyah, Husseiniyah, Rashidiyah, Nahrawan, Salman Pak, Suwayrah, Arab Jabour, Yusufiyah, Latifiyah, Iskandariyah, and Abu Ghraib.

aq These impressions were formed from a synthesis of the author’s dataset and review of many hundreds of images of ISF, PMF, and Kurdish troops moving and operating.
Salah al-Din, the prevalence of non-local Shi`a militia garrisons coincided with the strong and near-immediate bounce-back of the insurgency to 2013 levels. Iraq and the coalition have been clearing outward toward the north and the west, but in the coming year Iraq must turn inward to remove the internal ungoverned spaces in Hawija, Hamrin, Jallam, Anbar, and eastern Diyala. This will mean learning how to rewire command and control of operations to allow the ISF, PMF, Kurds, and CJTF-OIR to work together in a shared battlespace.

**Analytical Challenges**

Analysts trying to track and predict the insurgent landscape in Iraq can draw many lessons from the period during which the Islamic State recovered its potency in 2010-2014. The first and most important lesson is the need to go to extraordinary lengths to maintain reasonably good security incident datasets. Such metrics help analysts spot trends, but as importantly, they make it possible to convince leaders that changes are occurring. The difficulty is that good-quality attack metrics are even harder to acquire now than they were in the 2009-2011 period, when coalition forces were last leaving Iraq. Today’s Iraq is even less open to media reporting on security incidents than the Iraq of 2011-2014, with today’s reporters constrained in their movement and reporting across swathes of Salah al-Din and Anbar, plus all of Diyala province. Local commanders may downplay or overlook security challenges in their areas of operation depending on their situation. This places maximum stress on inventive modes of data collection. All diplomatic, coalition, private security, and open-source analysts need to cooperate and exchange information as freely as possible. Mining of social media data and geolocation of imagery is particularly important, but efforts should also be made to support the work of Iraqi journalists and civil society activists who can directly access the rich on-the-ground data that allows analysts to understand, for example, whether a shooting is a criminal drive-by versus a carefully planned intimidation attack on a key sheikh.

A second analytical lesson relates to the issue of the qualitative detail of security incidents. As noted earlier, the Islamic State was often at its most dangerous when its attacks were the quietest. In 2012, the author commented on this theme, which is worth reproducing here:

“The fastest-growing class of violence comprises the ‘intimidation and murder’ categories, including close-quarters shootings, under-vehicle bombs, fatal stabbings, punitive demolition of property, and the kidnap of children. These are the categories of violence that are least noticed and least often counted by the Iraqi press or by foreign government agencies, yet they may be the most vital indicators of where Iraq is headed. Fewer people may be dying each month, but they are increasingly the right people—in other words, illustrative violence against community leaders that has broad impact within communities and helps insurgents regain freedom of movement. This high-impact, low-visibility violence typifies the insurgency of today and tomorrow in Iraq. If we don’t count such incidents, then of course Iraq will appear more stable.”

To avoid being set up for a further surprise, analysts of insurgency in Iraq should not only recognize that incident metrics are only ever an incomplete sample, but should also look beyond quantitative trends to spot qualitative shifts that may be of far greater consequence.

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