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# The Iraqi insurgency

## Getting some perspective

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It seems that debate around the 'post-war' war in Iraq is destined to follow the same path as the 2003 Gulf War itself, namely full of myths, misrepresentations, half truths and wishful thinking on both sides of the debate. And as per usual the truth lies invariably in between. Those opposed to US action are quick to use words like 'Vietnam' and 'quagmire' to describe the US's current difficulties in Iraq while those supportive of the US effort point out the inevitable growing pains associated with the creation of democracy such as occurred in Germany and Japan post-WWII.

So how serious is the Iraqi resistance to US occupation? It's certainly not Vietnam. Even if the US continues to lose one soldier a day it would take 158 years to reach the same number of soldiers killed in Vietnam. And it's not post WWII Germany either. Ordinary Germans were exposed to six years of intense war, they were bombed day and night so that by 1945 they were sick and tired of war not to mention that their army

was comprehensively beaten. Neither factor applies to Iraq. In fact the Iraqi army wasn't defeated it simply disappeared. In any event the Soviet threat constantly served to remind the Germans that they needed the Americans. And no matter what people might say, the modern threat of terrorism is nowhere near as serious as the post-WWII Soviet threat or the threat of nuclear war that was characteristic of the Cold War. So simply put, the insurgency in Iraq is a lot more serious than the US admits publicly and far less serious than the doomsayers would have you believe. And the next 12–18 months will be the most telling for both sides.

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It will take at least that long to initially and effectively train the appropriate numbers of Iraqi security forces to take over responsibility

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for domestic security of Iraq. No counter-insurgency campaign has been won in the past without the active involvement of indigenous forces. That’s also the timeframe within which the Iraqi resistance may end up running out of ammunition and supplies with which to conduct their attacks on the US. One advantage the US has at the moment is that the Iraqi resistance has no external or neighbouring country from which to plan and conduct operations and receive supplies. If the US doesn’t get a handle on the guerrilla



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resistance in the next few years, countries like Syria, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia might be encouraged to initiate or increase the level of support they give to particular surrogate groups to protect their own interests in a future Iraq.

So over the next 12–18 months the US has to be patient and persevere in its ongoing military campaign. It has to be far more focussed on the ‘devil in the detail’ in rebuilding Iraq rather than just grand visions. But it also has to be willing and prepared to accept far more military casualties and not overreact either politically or militarily to the continued attacks. Unfortunately that’s going to be a big ask going into a US Presidential campaign. Because during those 12–18 months the attention of the Administration

is increasingly going to be on domestic issues at a time when it needs to be firmly focussed on winning the war in Iraq. So what happens in those 12–18 months?

The major problem the US currently faces is that it has no idea who or what it’s facing. US Administration officials have identified the Iraqi resistance at different times as comprising foreign terrorists, regime loyalists, criminals or combinations of all three. That might be right for now but there is a greater risk that the resistance will begin to develop into a pro-Iraq, anti-American nationalist resistance that has nothing to do with Saddam, Al Qaeda or the Iraqi mafia. Some US intelligence estimates place the current resistance at about 5,000–10,000 personnel. Given the scale of attacks witnessed so far that figure could be fairly accurate. But most pre-war estimates placed the Republican Guard at 60–80,000 troops, the Special Republican Guard at 12–15,000 troops and various internal security forces at some 100–150,000 personnel. And that doesn’t include the Fedayeen guerrillas. We still don’t know what happened to most of these troops during the war. So that makes for one hell of a recruiting base if the resistance gains momentum. At the moment the Iraqi resistance isn’t coordinated on a national basis, though there is some evidence of a degree of coordination of activities at a local or even regional level. Again that may change if the resistance is allowed to gain momentum. But ultimately the US military simply don’t know who they’re fighting or how many there are. And until they find out what they’re up against there are very real limits to how successful the US can be. So that puts an even higher premium on getting better intelligence rather than just adding more combat troops.

Which brings us to the often-posed question of whether the US has enough troops to do the job in Iraq. The US currently has some 140,000 troops in Iraq with an additional 20,000 from other

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nations (11,000 of those are British). Is that enough? Probably not but it’s debatable whether any more troops would really get the job done any better.

Requirements for counterinsurgency campaigns are generally measured on how many troops you need per head of population you’re trying to secure. In Northern Ireland the British had some 32,000 troops and police in a total population of over 1.6 million. And they still had difficulty controlling that situation. If translated into Iraq that would mean the US requires a force of 400,000 troops and police to secure the Iraqi population. So while the US probably doesn’t have enough troops—it could usefully use another 20-25,000—even doubling their military presence isn’t likely to have much of an impact, other than to present the Iraqis with far more targets to attack.

That being said the point shouldn’t be lost on anyone that while the attacks on coalition forces have mostly occurred in central Iraq, the UK is sufficiently concerned about its security in the relatively peaceful south that it’s boosting its military presence there by some 1200 personnel.

So what options does the Iraqi resistance have? On events to date the insurgents simply can’t win militarily while the US is in control of Iraq, no matter how many bombs they let off or US soldiers they kill. But they can win politically if they take a more long-term approach. And to do so they need to maintain their authority, presence and capabilities until the US hands over authority to an Iraqi government and draws down its military presence in Iraq.

That means they’ll need to continue attacks on US military personnel, for propaganda purposes if nothing else. Sooner or later the intensity of those attacks will increase. A repeat of the 1982 Beirut Barracks or 1996 Khobar Towers bombing that would cause hundreds of casualties among US personnel would have an enormous impact on US opinion. But the Iraqi resistance also needs to create suspicion and animosity between the US military and the Iraqi

people. Provoking the US into overreaction and heavy-handed responses to attacks on its soldiers would certainly help their cause.

Attacks on civil and economic infrastructure within Iraq and on the UN and other aid organisations are a must. Targeting Iraqis that are cooperating with the US are likely to increase, if only to get rid of the opposition for the time when the US leaves Iraq to Iraqis. The Iraqi Governing Council is an attractive target. But they also need to broaden the geographic nature of the resistance beyond the Sunni triangle in central Iraq. Already attacks in the north and south are beginning to escalate. Encouraging a civil war in Iraq will be helpful, not least because they know the US will ultimately be blamed, as its responsible for providing security within Iraq. The US can’t afford to allow the various ethnic and religious groups within Iraq to take responsibility for ensuring their own security through the formal institutionalisation of their own individual militia groups. Because that’s the first step towards realising a 1970s Lebanon scenario for Iraq or indeed Afghanistan as it is today.

But even if the attacks remain primarily focussed in Sunni central Iraq doesn’t make it any less of a problem as the US now suggests. Many insurgencies in the past have been primarily concentrated in certain parts of a country. Iraq had to deal with a Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq for some 40 years, the fact that it only occurred in the north didn’t detract from its seriousness overall. It may not have directly threatened Saddam’s rule but it was still a serious problem.

Other options include targeting the smaller nations assisting the US such as the Poles, Ukrainians and El Salvadorans. They’ll want to test the staying power of the East Europeans and Central Americans in the face of continued attacks and casualties. And sooner or later they’ll have to start hitting the US civil administration in Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by Paul Bremer. Finally they’ll need to start infiltrating—if they haven’t

already—the new Iraqi police, military and security services the US is currently trying to set up.

If Iraq is to have any chance to become a relatively stable, prosperous and democratic country then the US has to deal with the current insurgency before they hand over substantive power and authority to a new Iraqi administration. After that point the short term issue will be which Iraqis the US will hand authority over to. In the medium to longer term the question will remain the degree to which the US Administration is willing to accept whatever government the Iraqis ultimately choose.

But just containing the insurgency until that point so as to save American lives on the ground in Iraq simply won't do. Containment seems to be the policy the US has been adopting in Afghanistan to date. Yet some two years after the fall of the Taliban a sense of disaffection and disillusionment is allowing elements of the Taliban to regroup and regain support, particularly in the Pashtun areas of southern Afghanistan. The US can't afford for that to happen in Iraq. Because

if the US does that then Iraq is likely to go down the path of so many US-friendly regimes in South East Asia, Africa and the Middle East during the Cold War. Namely, continued instability, civil war and totalitarian government.

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Unfortunately, based on current trends and political reality being what it is—and despite the rhetoric of the US Administration—the US is more likely to cut its losses over the next few years and pull out of Iraq prematurely. Rushing the Iraqis into self-government and ensuring their own security before they are ready and able to do so just makes it more likely that the US will return to square one. The US simply cannot afford to recreate the very circumstances that led them to invasion, war and regime change in Iraq in the first place.

#### About the Author

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