

The Sunni Insurgency in Iraq

This analysis is not my own but that of a friend and colleague. I fully subscribe to his conclusions. Pat Lang "

It is difficult to find any reasonable analysis of the likely size of the Sunni Arab Insurgency in Iraq, so I decided to try to piece one together using what I consider to be good background information on the insurgency. I took a reasonably good write-up on the insurgency from the Wikipedia website and modified it with my own insights, to include a basic analysis on the size of the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq. I hope someone finds this useful - if for nothing more than to initiate informed debate. The result follows:

The Sunni Insurgency In Iraq

Background

The insurgency in Iraq began shortly after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq and increased during the occupation. The multinational forces are sometimes referred to as "foreign occupation forces." Originally, the insurgents targeted the coalition force (a majority of whom are from the United States and the United Kingdom) and the government formed under the occupation. The insurgency has grown during the period between the invasion of Iraq and the establishment of a new Iraqi government. It has continued during the transitional reconstruction of Iraq as the new Iraqi government has developed.

Composition

Diverse groups have been drawn into the ranks of Iraq's insurgency, with little in common beyond a commitment to attack US forces or their perceived allies. The insurgency has no single spokesman, nor any shared long-term aim. Where some groups, for instance, are fighting for a Sunni Muslim caliphate, others foresee a Shia theocracy for Iraq. The incentives driving individual insurgents are equally disparate - from religious zeal to economic gain, nationalist fervor and anger at the loss of income or loved ones to the conflict.

The Iraqi insurgency is composed of at least a dozen major guerilla organizations and perhaps as many as 40 distinct groups. Terrorist groups are Iraqi insurgents who actively target civilian populations, in an attempt to communicate their political messages through violent means. These groups, both insurgents and terrorists, are subdivided into countless smaller cells. Due to its clandestine nature, the exact composition of the Iraqi insurgency is difficult to determine. It is often divided by analysts into several main ideological strands, some of which are believed to overlap:

- Ba'athists, the armed supporters of Saddam Hussein;
- Nationalists, mostly Sunni Muslims (but also likely includes secular Shi'a members), who fight for Iraqi independence;
- Sunni Muslims who fight to regain the power they held under previous regimes;
- Sunni Islamists, the indigenous armed followers of the Salafi movement;
- Foreign Islamist fighters, largely driven by the similar Sunni Wahabi doctrine, as well as the remnants of Ansar al-Islam;
- Criminal insurgents who are fighting simply for money; and
- Nonviolent resistance groups and political parties.

The Militant followers of Shi'a Islamist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, once active members in the insurgency, are supposedly not taking part in the overall violence at this time (September 2005).

Ba'athists

The Ba'athists include former Ba'ath Party officials, the Fedayeen Saddam, and some former agents of the Iraqi intelligence elements and security services, such as the Mukhabarat and the Special Security Organization. Their goal, at least before the capture of Saddam Hussein, was the restoration of the former Ba'athist regime to power. The pre-war organization of the Ba'ath Party and its militias as a cellular structure aided the continued pro-Saddam insurgency after the fall of Baghdad, and Iraqi intelligence operatives may have developed a plan for guerrilla war following the toppling of Saddam Hussein from power. Following Saddam's capture, the rhetoric of the Ba'athist insurgents gradually shifted to become either nationalist or Islamist, with the goal of restoring the Ba'ath Party to power as it once was seemingly out of reach. Many former Ba'athists have adopted an Islamist façade in order to attract more credibility within the country, and perhaps support from outside Iraq. Others, especially following the January 2005 elections, became more interested in political pursuits.

Many Ba'athist organizations, such as the Fedayeen Saddam, have a violent past. Saddam used this particular group as a way to silence his political opponents into submission through fear. One such terror campaign reportedly involved members of the Fedayeen Saddam systematically beheading women of family members who opposed the regime.

Sunni Muslims

The so-called *Nationalists* from the Sunni Arab regions are drawn from former members of the Iraqi military as well as other Sunnis. Their reasons for opposing the coalition vary between a rejection of the foreign presence as a matter of principle to the failure of the multinational forces to fully restore public services and to quickly restore complete sovereignty. Some Iraqis who have had relatives killed by coalition soldiers may also be involved in the insurgency. Most likely, the majority of the low-level members of the indigenous Sunni insurgency (such as foot soldiers) fall under this broad category. Some of those insurgents pursue the restoration of the power previously held by the Sunni minority in Iraq, who controlled all previous Iraqi regimes.

Many Muslim terrorist groups are Sunni extremists. One group, Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna, led by the notorious Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had encouraged and committed terrorist acts on civilian populations. Some atrocities include suicide bombing, and the beheading of civilians.

Sunni Islamists

The Sunni Islamists are composed of Iraqis belonging to the Salafi branch of Sunni Islam, which advocates a return to the pure Islam of the time of the Prophet Mohammed and opposes any foreign non-Muslim influence. The beliefs of Salafi Islam are roughly similar to the Wahabi sect of nearby Saudi Arabia (of which Osama bin Laden is a member), one difference being that Salafis in Iraq do not usually condone intolerance towards the Shi'a. Hard-line clerics and remaining underground cells of the Muslim Brotherhood in Iraq have helped provide support for the indigenous militant Islamist movement. Emerging as the most public face of this faction of the Iraqi insurgency, and the most influential of the hard-line Salafi clerics, is the founder of the ultra-conservative Association of Muslim Scholars, Sheikh Hareth al-Dhari.

Foreign Fighters

These are non-Iraqi Muslims, mostly Arabs from neighboring countries, who have entered Iraq, primarily through the porous desert borders of Syria and Saudi Arabia, to assist the Iraqi insurgency. Many of these fighters are Wahabi fundamentalists who see

Iraq as the new "field of jihad" in the battle against U.S. forces. It is generally believed that most are freelance fighters, but a few members of Al-Qaida and the related group Ansar al-Islam, members of whom are suspected of infiltrating into the Sunni areas of Iraq through the mountainous northeastern border with Iran, may be involved. The U.S. and its allies point to Jordanian-born Al-Qaida leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as the key player in this group. Zarqawi is believed to be the head of an insurgent group called Al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad ("Monotheism and Holy War"), which according to U.S. military estimates numbers in the low hundreds.

The extent of Zarqawi's influence is a source of controversy. The U.S. government describes him as the single most dangerous and capable insurgent operative working against the U.S.-led coalition and its Iraqi allies, responsible for a large number of major attacks. There are signs that an increasing rift is developing between supporters of al-Zarqawi, including both foreign guerrillas and some Iraqis who have adopted a hard-line Wahabi philosophy, and the nationalists and more moderate religious elements of the insurgency. The main source of the divide is over the suicide bombings that have inflicted heavy Iraqi civilian casualties, along with disagreements about whether to cooperate with the Shi'a and their insurgency. However, the publicity given to Zarqawi has ensured that he has become an iconic figure to various Sunni Islamist groups, regardless of the actual scope of his influence, by much the same process that has made Osama bin Ladin a symbol of the causes of various Islamist groups following the events of September 11th, 2001.

Usage of the term "foreign fighters" has received criticism as being US-centric because taken literally, the term would encompass coalition forces. Zarqawi himself has taken to taunting the American occupiers about the irony of the term: "Who is the foreigner, O cross worshippers? You are the ones who came to the land of the Muslims from your distant corrupt land." (Communiqué of 10 May 2005). Zarqawi's group has since announced the formation of the Ansar platoon, a squad of Iraqi suicide bombers, which an AP writer called "an apparent bid to deflect criticism that most suicide bombers in Iraq are foreigners."

While it is not known how many of those resisting the U.S. occupation in Iraq are not Iraqi, it is generally agreed that foreign fighters make up a small percentage of the insurgency. Major General Joseph Taluto, head of the 42nd Infantry Division, said that "99.9 per cent" of captured insurgents are Iraqi. This estimate is bolstered by the Pentagon's own figures; in an analysis of over 1,000 insurgents captured in Fallujah, U.S. Ground Commander General George Casey found only 15 non-Iraqis. Additionally, as a result of the occupation, foreign Islamists seem to be increasingly tolerated and even welcomed by Iraqis. Terrorism expert Jessica Stern writes that "in the run-up to the war, most Iraqis viewed the foreign volunteers who were rushing in to fight against America as troublemakers, and Saddam Hussein's forces reportedly killed many of them. Today, according to Mr. Alani, these foreigners are increasingly welcomed by the public, especially in the former Baathist strongholds north of Baghdad."

There are many other historical guerrilla wars in which foreign fighters played an important role. It should be noted that many of the US-backed guerrillas fighting the Soviet-backed government and Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s were not Afghans--many were Arab Islamists recruited outside Afghanistan. Foreign fighters continued to play a role in Afghanistan's subsequent civil wars, many fighting on the side

of the Taliban. At the time of the collapse of Taliban rule, anger against these foreign fighters was especially intense.

Non-Violent Groups

Apart from the armed insurgency, there are important non-violent groups that resist the foreign occupation through other means. The *National Foundation Congress* set up by Sheikh Jawad al-Khalisi includes a broad range of religious, ethnic, and political currents united by their opposition to the occupation. Although it does not reject armed insurgency, which it regards as any nation's right, it favors non-violent politics and criticizes the formation of militias. It opposes institutions designed to implement American plans, such as the Iyad Allawi government and the U.S.-organized national conference designed as the antecedent to a parliament. Although the CPA enforced a 1987 law banning unions in public enterprises, trade unions such as the *Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions* (IFTU) and Iraq's *Union of the Unemployed* have also mounted effective anti-occupation opposition.

Trades unions have, however, themselves been subject to attacks from the insurgency. Hadi Saleh of the IFTU was assassinated under circumstances that pointed to a Ba'athist insurgency group on the 3rd of January 2005. No trades unions support the armed insurgency.

Another union federation, the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) opposes the occupation and calls for immediate withdrawal but was neutral on participation in the election. Whereas the GUOE wants all foreign troops out immediately, both the IFTU and the Workers Councils call for replacement of US and British forces with neutral forces from the UN, the Arab League and other nations as a transition. Many unions see the war as having two dimensions: military and economic. The GUOE has won strikes against both the Governing Council for pay raises and against Halliburton over the use of foreign workers.

Analysis and polls

A great deal of attention has been focused on how much support the guerrillas have among the Iraqi population and on winning hearts and minds. It appears as though the Iraqi insurgency retains a degree of popular support in the Sunni Triangle, especially in cities like Fallujah. The tribal nature of the area and its concepts of pride and revenge, the prestige many received from the former regime, and civilian casualties resulting from intense coalition counter-insurgency operations have resulted in the opposition of many Sunni Arabs to the occupation.

Polls indicate that the greatest support for the insurgency is in al-Anbar province, a vast area extending from the Syrian border to the western outskirts of Baghdad. This is for a number of reasons; many residents received employment and opportunities from the former regime, the area has a history of strong tribalism and suspicion of outsiders, it is religiously conservative, and it has seen civilian casualties from coalition counter-insurgency operations.

Some observers, such as political scientist Wamidh Nadhmi, believe that the major division in Iraq is not between religious/ethnic groups nor between the general population and violent groups, but between those who collaborate with the foreign occupation and those who resist it.

Outside the Sunni Triangle and in the Shiite and Kurdish areas, violence is largely eschewed. Many, however, especially in the Shiite community, although supportive of

the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, are very unhappy with the occupation. Farther north in the Kurdish areas, there is a great deal of pro-American sentiment and an almost unanimous distaste for anti-coalition violence. The situation is more complicated in the Shiite regions. Support for violent insurgency is notably less enthusiastic in the Shiite than the Sunni community since the Shiites, like the Kurds, saw persecution under the Ba'ath regime and from the Sunnis. Shiites have also been influenced by a moderate clerical establishment under Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that has advocated a political solution. However, Muqtada al-Sadr (a radical Shiite cleric who has advocated violent insurgency) has drawn support from a portion of the Shiite community, mainly young and unemployed men in urban areas. Sadr's support varies region by region; while likely drawing under 10% support in Najaf (a stronghold of the clerical establishment which was occupied by Sadr's militia and has been the scene of some of the heaviest fighting), some polls have indicated Sadr's support among the Shiites of Baghdad may be as high as 50%. This support did not translate into direct electoral winnings for Sadr supporters during the January 2005 elections, however.

Spontaneous peaceful protests have appeared in Shiite areas against the occupation. The Shiite intellectuals and the upper classes, as well as the inhabitants of rural regions in the south and followers of more moderate clerics such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, tend to cooperate with the coalition and the Iraqi interim government and participate in peaceful protest instead of violence. Sistani's political pressure is largely credited with enabling the elections of January 2005.

Many Shiites and Kurds suffered heavy persecution under the rule of Saddam Hussein's regime, which may cause a reluctance to use violence against Coalition forces. This is in contrast to the more radical Muqtada al-Sadr, who draws his support from the lower classes, the uneducated, and the Shiite urban population. Both united, however, on the United Iraqi Alliance ticket that brought in the largest share of the votes in the January 2005 elections.

A series of several polls have been conducted to ascertain the position of the Iraqi public further on the insurgency and the Coalition occupation. All of the polls seem to consistently find the following:

- A large minority, if not a majority, of Sunni Arabs consider armed attacks on U.S. forces legitimate and justified resistance.
- The greatest support for resistance is in al-Anbar province.
- The majority of Iraqis disapprove of the presence of coalition forces.
- A majority of both Sunnis and Shiites want an end to the occupation as soon as possible, although Sunnis are opposed to the occupation in somewhat greater margins.

Polls conducted in June 2005 suggest even more anti-occupation sentiment; most alarming to American policymakers is rising support for the insurgency. According to the *Boston Globe* (10 June 2005): "a recent internal poll conducted for the US-led coalition found that nearly 45 percent of the population supported the insurgent attacks, making accurate intelligence difficult to obtain. Only 15 percent of those polled said they strongly supported the US-led coalition." Demands for U.S. withdrawal have also been signed on by one third of Iraq's Parliament.

Scope and Size of the Insurgency

The most intense Sunni insurgent activity takes place in the cities and countryside along the Euphrates River from the Syrian border town of al-Qaim through Ramadi and

Fallujah to Baghdad, as well as along the Tigris river from Baghdad north to Tikrit. Heavy guerilla activity also takes place around the cities of Mosul and Tal Afar in the north, as well as the "Triangle of Death" south of Baghdad, which includes the cities of Iskandariya, Mahmudiya, Latifiya, and Yusufiya. Lesser activity takes place in several other areas of the country. The insurgency is believed to maintain a key supply line stretching from Syria through al-Qaim and along the Euphrates to Baghdad and central Iraq, the Iraqi equivalent of the Ho Chi Minh trail. A second "ratline" (the U.S. term) runs from the Syrian border through Tal Afar to Mosul.

Although estimates of the total number of Iraqi guerrillas varies by group and fluctuates under changing political climate, the latest U.S. assessments put the present number at between 12,000 and 20,000 hardcore fighters, along with numerous supporters and facilitators throughout the Sunni Arab community. At various points U.S. forces provided estimates on the number of fighters in specific regions. A few are provided here (although these numbers almost certainly have fluctuated):

- Fallujah (mid-2004): 2,000-5,000 (since a November 2004 operation, the Fallujah insurgency has since been destroyed or dispersed)
- Samarra (December 2003): 2,000
- Baquba (June 2004): 1,000.
- Baghdad (December 2003): 1,000 (this number may have increased by a significant amount)

However, there is little agreement on the numbers involved. Estimates vary from 30,000 to some 200,000 fighters - a figure cited by Iraqi intelligence in 2005 – with foreign “jihadi” forces estimated at no more than 3,000 – 5,000 – but their profile is high. Based on the frequency and dispersion of daily insurgent attacks against multinational forces and Iraqis, the insurgency seems to be closer to the Iraqi intelligence estimate of 200,000 of hardcore fighters, rather than the U.S. estimate of 20,000. An analysis of the makeup of the overall Sunni Arab population in Iraq also bears this out. For example, the Sunni Arab population in Iraq is estimated to be 20% of the overall population of approximately 26 million which is 5.2 million Iraqis. Within that population there are a number of core organizations that likely supply most hardcore insurgents – as well as the structure. These are the Ba’ath Party – 2,000,000 members, with 50,000 hardcore senior members, the Fedayeen Saddam – estimated at 50,000 – 100,000 core members, the disbanded intelligence and security services – 150,000 – 200,000 members, and the disbanded Iraq military – 350,000 members with an estimated 175,000 Sunni Arab mid- to senior-ranking officers and Republican Guard members. While the vast majority of the hardcore members of these organizations are Sunni Arab, there are certainly a sizeable minority of Shi’a Arab members, some of whom are part of the current insurgency.

Based on the known ideological commitment and alienation of core Ba’ath Party, Fedayeen Saddam, and Intelligence and Security Service members, it seems reasonable that 30% of the members of these organizations comprise hardcore insurgents:

50,000 Hardcore Ba’ath Members x .30	=	15,000
75,000 Fedayeen Saddam Members x .30	=	22,500
175,000 Intel & Security Service Members x .30	=	52,500
175,000 Mid- to Sr- Sunni Army & RG Members x .30	=	52,500
Sub-Total	=	142,500
Add to this an estimated 4,000 foreign “jihadis”	=	4,000

Sub-Total = 146,500

If you add to this sub-total a very conservative estimate that 3% of the remaining Sunni Arab population in Iraq have become hardcore members of the insurgency participating in insurgent attacks, you have:

5,000,000 Remaining Sunni Arabs in Iraq x .03 = 150,000
Total =

296,500

This represents a considerably larger hardcore insurgent membership than the U.S. is willing to admit – and is probably a major factor in its inability to defeat the insurgency. Based on historical precedent, you can then apply a factor of ten to roughly identify the size of active and passive supporters of the insurgency. In this case, the figure is approximately 2,965,000.

These numbers seem to make sense given the fact that guerilla forces control most of the cities and towns of al-Anbar province, with U.S. troop numbers in the area (less than 20,000) too small to contest them and with negligible Iraqi security force presence. Ramadi, the capital of the province, is under guerilla control with the exception of about half a dozen small forts operated by U.S. Marines. Al-Qaim, the first stop on an insurgent infiltration route from Syria, also is under rebel control. Fallujah, once the heart of the insurgency and formerly under rebel control, has since been largely leveled and is under a permanent lockdown by U.S. forces.

Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, is still one of the most contested regions of the country. Insurgents maintain a campaign of terror over much of the city's population and many Sunni neighborhoods such as Adhamiya are largely under their control. Suicide attacks and car bombs are near daily occurrences in Baghdad. The road from Baghdad to the city airport is the most dangerous in the country, if not the world. Iraqi security and police forces have also been significantly built up in the capital and, despite being constantly targeted, have enjoyed some successes such as the pacification of Haifa Street. Insurgents are also vigorously contesting control of the ethnically diverse northern city of Mosul, with much of the city, especially the western Arab half, slipping in and out of their control.

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