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Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003–2006)

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

Background

The United States is in the fifth year of trying to combat an insurgency that began when it invaded and occupied Iraq. The conflict in Iraq involves a mixture of armed groups whose motivations vary, but three of these groups are united at the *transactional* level by a simple, common theme: The occupation of Iraq by foreign forces is bad. Some insurgents are fighting for political power inside post-Saddam Iraq. Others are motivated by sectarian (e.g., Sunni versus Shia) agendas. A particularly violent minority see the struggle as part of a larger global jihad, or religious struggle, against what they perceive as the strategic encroachment of the enemies of Islam. However, for a fourth group, criminals and/or opportunists, the war has been anything but "bad": It has immensely increased their prospects—if, for most, only in the short term.

Americans tend to see the Vietnam War as an analog to the Iraq War. However, while Vietnam had internal divisions, those divisions did not appear to be as fierce as those among the Sunni Arabs, Shi'ite Arabs, and Kurds in Iraq. Insurgents in South Vietnam were supported by North Vietnam and were eventually supplanted by regular North Vietnamese forces. Ultimately, the war ended with an invasion by North Vietnam. Despite these fundamental differences, U.S. forces might at least have profited from the experience in counterinsurgency (COIN) gained from fighting the Viet Cong, but this experience was largely forgotten, except by the Army's Special Forces units. Though the Vietnam and Iraq experiences are different on the surface, an

unfortunate similarity between them is the difficulty the United States has in recognizing the nature of the problem and developing an effective political-military-economic solution, choosing instead to resort to technology for an effort that requires closely synchronized operational art and innovative strategies. The U.S. failure to contain the rising level of disorder in Iraq, as well as subsequent policy and military mistakes, helped create the environment in which an insurgency took hold and a civil war unfolded.

Although insurgency remains a fundamental problem, the conflict in Iraq is more complicated than simply a revolt against the Iraqi government. That government is so ineffective that the conflict more nearly resembles a many-sided struggle for power amid the ruins of the Ba'athist state. Broadly speaking, three major groups are involved at the core of the insurgency: Sunni Arabs, who have long dominated Iraq and will not accept an inferior position; Shi'ite Arabs, who are trying to assert a new primacy; and Kurds, whose primary allegiance appears to be to a new Kurdistan. Sunni Arabs are organized along a complex array of neighborhood affiliation, armed groups, tribes, and families, depending on the locale. Shi'ite Arabs are split into several competing factions with different agendas. Though the Kurds appear to be the most unified group, even they are split into two parties that fought each other in the recent past. Were insurgency the only challenge, U.S. and Iraqi government forces might at least contain the violence, but the multiple challenges of separatists, insurgents, extremists, militias, and criminals threaten to destroy the country at any moment. Violence in Iraq currently involves all of these elements:

- **Separatists and sectarianism.** Separatism and sectarianism compound Iraq's problems and appear to be increasing. For the most part, Kurds do not regard themselves as Iraqis first; they stay within Iraq as a matter of convenience and to wield political influence. Their leadership shows a wavering commitment to a unified pluralistic government. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) publicly advocates autonomous regions and envisions a large Shi'ite-dominated region in southern Iraq. In contrast, Sunni leadership has little interest in creating an autono-

mous Sunni region, if only because that region would not contain lucrative and well-maintained oil fields. However, the extremist Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq has notionally announced the creation of a new Islamic state encompassing Sunni-inhabited areas.

- **Insurgents.** The insurgency springs from a sectarian and ethnic divide, i.e., Sunni Arab opposition to an Iraqi government dominated by Shi'ite Arabs and Kurds and a manifestation of opposition to U.S. forces. Countering this insurgency is the most urgent mission in Iraq, because success would allow the Iraqi government to concentrate on other serious non–security-related problems. To succeed, the Iraqi government must be perceived as impartial and able to protect all of its citizens. Creating such a perception is extremely difficult amid escalating sectarian violence, especially when government ministries are involved with sectarian militias and the government's partner is a foreign occupier that has largely resisted persistent pleas to protect the local population.

- **Violent extremists.** Extremists gravitate to the conflict for various reasons. Insurgency fits into a vision of protecting Muslim countries against foreign domination. On a personal level, it offers an outlet for resentment and a chance to attain personal redemption. In addition, many terrorist leaders are Salafist (fundamentalist) Sunnis, who deliberately incite sectarian violence by attacking Shi'ite civilians, attempting to justify their existence as shock troops, propagandists, and, in the early going, "organizers" supplementing local insurgent forces.

- **Shi'ite Arab militias.** Many Shi'ite Arabs depend upon militias more than upon Iraqi government forces for security. The militia leaders exert strong influence within the government, which refuses to curb their activities. The Badr Organization was created during the Iran-Iraq War, while the much larger Mahdi Army emerged during the U.S. occupation. U.S. security training missions focused on Iraqi Army development at the expense of monitoring growing infiltration of Iraqi police forces by these militias. The Mahdi Army combines security functions with social services, much like Hezbollah in Lebanon, thus becoming a quasi-

state within a state. It appears to be linked with Shi'ite death squads that abduct, torture, and kill Sunni Arabs in the Baghdad area.
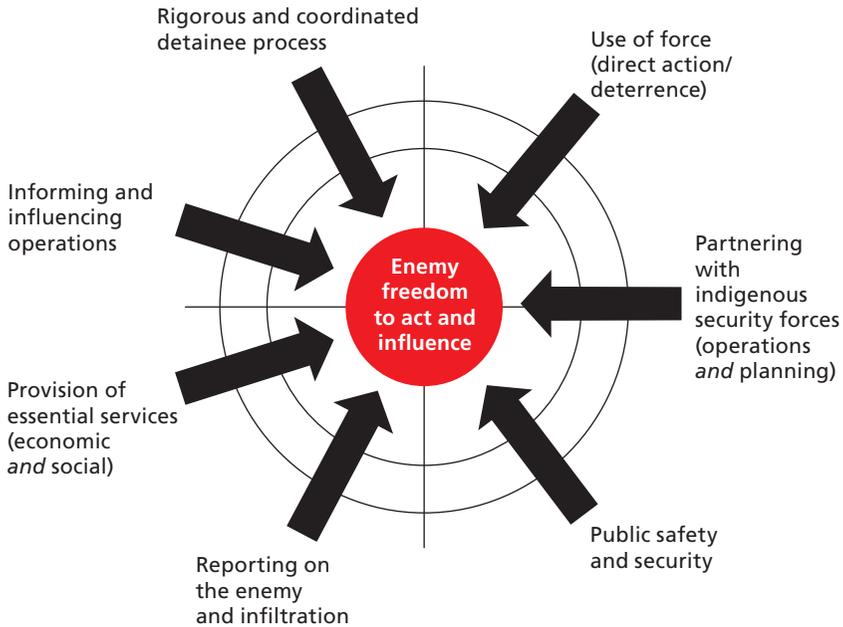
- **Criminals.** Criminality continues to plague the country, and criminals hire out their services to enemies of the Iraqi government. Although few crime statistics are kept, it appears that many Iraqis consider criminality to be the greatest threat in their daily lives. The lack of organic tools and mechanisms among its chief partner, the U.S. military, to combat crime and the Iraqi government's inability to do so diminish the Iraqi government's legitimacy and its appeal for allegiance among its constituents—the Iraqi people.

The Goal and Art of Counterinsurgency

The primary goal of COIN is to protect the population in order to obtain its tacit and active support in putting down the insurgency and thereby gain its allegiance. Until recently, this key tenet of COIN has been overlooked in Iraq. Until early 2007, the U.S. COIN effort in Iraq neglected the protection of the people, a policy oversight that adversely affected the overall effort to rebuild the nation. Until and unless there are sustained and meaningful signs of will and commitment on the part of the counterinsurgents, the allegiance of a besieged populace to a government they are somewhat detached from will remain problematic. Signs of increasing allegiance would include willingness to risk providing information on insurgents, participation in civic life, holding public office, serving as police, and fighting as soldiers.

The art of COIN is achieving synergy and balance among various *simultaneous* civilian and military efforts or lines of operation (see Figure S.1) and continually reassessing the *right* indicators—not just those that are politically expedient—to determine whether current strategies are adequate. The need to continually reassess COIN strategy and tactics implies that military and civilian leaders must be willing and able to *fearlessly* and *thoroughly* call policies and practices that are not working to the attention of senior decisionmakers.

Figure S.1
Illustrative Lines of Operation

Rigorous and coordinated
detainee process

Use of force
(direct action/
deterrence)

Informing and
influencing
operations

**Enemy
freedom
to act and
influence**

Partnering
with
indigenous
security forces
(operations
and planning)

Provision of
essential services
(economic
and social)

Reporting on
the enemy
and infiltration

Public safety
and security

RAND *MG595/3-S.1*

Because COIN requires the harmonious use of civilian and military means, unity of effort is the *sine qua non* for success. Unity of effort implies that all relevant entities, military and civilian, are subject to common control in pursuit of the same strategy.

Recommendations

The United States needs to improve its ability to develop strategy and to modify it as events unfold. Strategy implies a vision of how to attain high-level policy objectives employing U.S. resources and those of its allies. It also implies reflection upon strategies that adversaries might develop and how to counter them—*counteranalysis*. Strategy should be developed at the highest level of government, by the President, his closest advisors, and his Cabinet officials, with advice from the Director of

National Intelligence and regional experts, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and unified commanders. The unified commanders should link the strategic level of war with the operational level at which campaign planning is accomplished.

To successfully prosecute COIN in Iraq, the United States needs a comprehensive strategy, including a framework that carefully addresses and assesses various lines of operations and considers tradeoffs between the effects emanating from them. The efforts required for success are mutually reinforcing, implying that they must all be made simultaneously, though the appropriate weight of effort may vary over time and location. Counterinsurgency is a political-military effort that requires both good governance and military action. It follows that the entire U.S. government should conduct that effort. The following recommendations would assist it in developing capabilities to conduct COIN:

- Focus on security of the population as the critical measure of effectiveness. For too long, this was not a priority in Iraq. Exceptional efforts must be taken to remove primary threats to the civilian populace. In Iraq, senior military commanders focused almost all efforts on roadside bombs and their impact on U.S. forces, rather than the suicide-bomber problem and its terrible impact on the safety of civilians, which became increasingly evident in the summer of 2004 (see Figure S.2).
- Allow Army Special Forces to focus on training and operating together with their indigenous counterparts. Command arrangements should assure that Special Forces harmonize with the overall effort, while allowing scope for initiative. In addition, the Army should conduct training and exercises prior to deployment to educate conventional-force commanders in special operations, especially those involving *unconventional* warfare—practiced surprisingly little in Iraq.
- Develop a planning process that embraces all departments of the U.S. government and is on the same battle rhythm as troops in the field. In the context of a national strategy, an office with directive authority should assign responsibilities to the various departments, assess their plans to discharge these responsibilities, request

Figure S.2
Iraqi Civilian and Police Deaths, by Cause
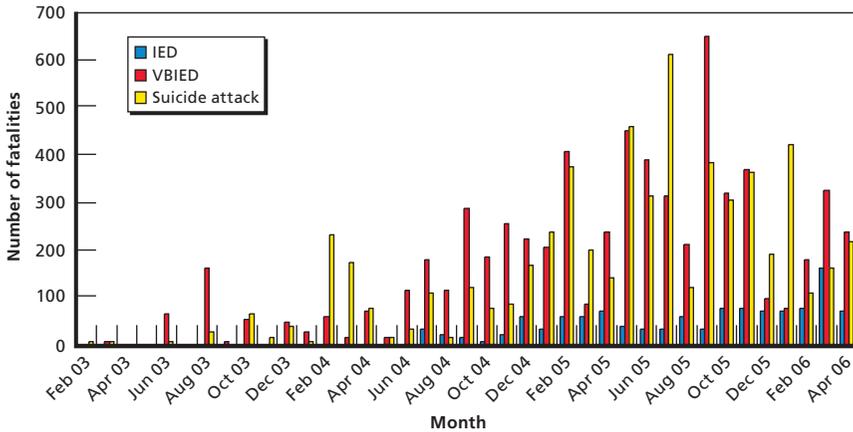
SOURCE: Data compiled by merging IraqBodyCount.org database and RAND-
Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) Terrorism Incident
database. As of October 1, 2007: http://www.iraqbodycount.org and
http://www.tkb.org.
NOTE: IED = improvised explosive device; VBIED = vehicle-borne improvised
explosive device.
RAND *MG595/3-S.2*

changes as appropriate, and promulgate a political-military plan.
This plan should have enough operational detail to serve as an
initial basis for execution of a COIN campaign.

- Quickly develop a coherent and balanced COIN strategy. In Iraq,
  the United States did not have a clear COIN strategy or plan for
  more than three years. Senior military commanders and planners
  must establish an adequate mechanism with which to constantly
  assess performance in COIN operations. Senior military com-
  manders must adapt/adjust/modify strategy and tactics to meet
  the ever-changing demands of those operations. Commanders
  must closely monitor changing trends on the battlefield. In Iraq,
  senior military commanders have been slow to understand and
  adapt to the change in the enemy's strategy and tactics.
- Assure unity of effort at the country level and provincial levels,
  encompassing all activities of the U.S. government, civilian and
  military. At the country level, there should be one individual with

authority to direct all aspects of the U.S. effort. In Iraq, inter-agency tensions have hampered the COIN effort.

- Put the interagency process in Washington on a wartime foot-ing to conduct any COIN operations requiring large-scale U.S. forces. This process should support the person appointed by the President to prosecute the campaign within the parameters of the national strategy. The process should be structured and operated to fulfill requests quickly and effectively.

- Prepare to support governance in the host nation following the disintegration or collapse of a regime. Ideally, the civilian depart-ments and agencies of the U.S. government should be prepared to provide advisors and technical personnel at short notice. Alterna-tively, the U.S. Army's civil affairs units could be expanded and resourced to fulfill this requirement.

- Prepare to fund the establishment of a government within the country, the development of its military, and its reconstruction. Funding mechanisms should assure that funds may be moved flexibly across accounts, expended quickly in response to local contingencies, and monitored effectively by a robust, deployable accounting system.

- Make COIN a primary mission for U.S. military forces, on the same level as large-scale force-on-force combat operations. Mili-tary forces should train and exercise to be able to interact with civilian populations and insurgents in complex and ambiguous situations. Joint and service doctrine should treat COIN as a dis-tinct type of political-military operation requiring far closer inte-gration with civilian efforts than would be necessary for large-scale force-on-force combat operations.

- Revise personnel policies to assure retention of skilled person-nel in the host country in positions that demand close personal interaction with the indigenous population. Develop legislation to enhance the quality and length of service of U.S. civilian per-sonnel in the country—in effect, a civilian counterpart to the Goldwater-Nichols reform.

- Prepare U.S. conventional military units to partner with corre-sponding units of indigenous forces. Partnership should imply

continuous association on and off the battlefield, not simply combined operations. It should imply that U.S. military units adapt flexibly to conditions and mentor their counterparts in ways appropriate to their culture and their skill levels.

- Ensure that senior military commanders continuously reexamine the allocation of existing resources (both men and materiel) and that procurement priorities are in line with changing threats on the battlefield.

- Prepare to conduct police work abroad and build foreign police forces on a large scale. The Department of Defense (DoD) or another agency in close coordination with DoD should prepare to introduce large police forces rapidly into areas where governmental authority has deteriorated or collapsed. These police forces should be trained to partner with local police forces at every level, from street patrols to administration at the ministerial level. In Iraq, traditional U.S. military police units were deployed to aid in the COIN effort, but they were trained only in basic skills such as patrolling.

- Refine the ability of brigade-sized formations to conduct joint and combined COIN operations autonomously. These formations should have all the required capabilities, including human-intelligence teams, surveillance systems, translators, and engineer assets. They should be able to obtain intelligence support directly from national assets.

- Develop survivable daylight air platforms with gunship-like characteristics, i.e., comparable to those of the current AC-130 aircraft, to support COIN operations. These characteristics should include long endurance, fine-grained sensing under all light conditions, precise engagement with ordnance suitable for point targets, and robust communications with terminal-attack controllers. These daylight platforms should be survivable against low- and mid-level air-defense weapons.

- Develop the ability to collect intelligence against insurgencies and share it with coalition partners and indigenous forces. Devote special attention to collection of human intelligence, including linguistic skills, interrogation techniques, and devel-

opment of informant networks. Establish procedures and means to share intelligence rapidly with non-U.S. recipients at various levels of initial classification, without compromise of sources and methods.