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Defeating the Insurgency in Iraq

By [Paul Hughes](#)

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On May 16, 2005, the U.S. Institute of Peace hosted a [briefing on Capitol Hill](#) on the subject of "Defeating the Insurgency in Iraq" with panelists Ambassador Samir Sumaidaie, the Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations, Amatzia Baram of the University of Haifa and former Institute Senior Fellow, Elisabeth Kvitashvili of USAID and TX Hammes of the U.S. Marine Corps. [Daniel Serwer](#) of the Institute moderated the discussion.

The session presented informed thought and opinion on Iraq's current insurgency and its underlying issues and marked the release of the Institute's latest special report, "[Who are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq](#)" by Amatzia Baram.

The Issues: What's Really Behind the Insurgency?

The panelists agreed that this insurgency, certainly one of the most complex and challenging ever faced by the United States, presents no single coherent enemy against which the United States can mass its superior military strength and defeat. Generally characterized more by their heterogeneity than their homogeneity, the insurgency's various components principally fight for their own unique reasons, united only in their hatred of the American-led occupation. In general, they seek to create an enduring crisis between the interim Iraqi Government and the Iraqi people in the hopes that outside support for the government will wane, forcing the withdrawal of foreign forces. To achieve this goal, each of the insurgency's various factions employs different tactics towards this common goal.

Former Ba'athists who are fighting against the interim government based their tactics on a decree that Saddam Hussein issued in 1975, according to Baram. In his decree, Saddam declared that Iraq would cease to exist if the Ba'athist Party were to ever lose power. In such an event, the state of Iraq would have to be destroyed in order to bring back the Ba'athist Party – and those Ba'athists fighting today are seeking to destroy the country by attacking innocent Iraqis and their security forces in their attempt to regain power.

Disaffected Sunnis fearing that they have lost their economic wealth are seeking a return to the old order in an attempt to regain their political power and sense of cultural honor. Faced with a bleak future, the speakers noted that this faction finds itself allying with other factions of the insurgency when they share some tactical goal; however, in the long run, they lack a political agenda around which the majority of Iraqis would rally and restore the minority Sunnis back in power.

Foreign fighters motivated by fundamentalist religious zeal have a penchant for violence that dwarfs that of the other factions. Interpreting the loss of innocent Muslim blood as justified in order to avoid the disruption of their jihad, these "jihadists" seek to restore the Caliphate of the 10th Century, a goal similar to that of the now-deposed Taliban in Afghanistan. Their goal is to create civil war between the Sunni and Shi'a sects in Iraq so that they can restore the Caliphate or die trying, said Baram.

Finally, the foot soldiers of the insurgency are drawn from the vast numbers of common criminals in Iraq. In emptying his prisons in December 2002, Saddam created a willing pool of manpower with which to

terrorize the citizens of Iraq when paid to do so by the Ba'athist resistance. Panelists noted that the havoc and uncertainty that now characterize daily life in Iraq is intended to drive a wedge between Iraqi citizens and their new-born democratic government in an effort to force a general demand by the people for a strong-man to take the reins of power, regardless of the potential loss of new-found civil liberties.

Two other factors must figure in to the understanding of this insurgency – tribalism and religion. Baram pointed out, secular/ideological, tribal, and moderate Islamist concerns are not necessarily exclusive and can at times be mutually reinforcing. While Americans can generally understand the impact of the Ba'ath Party and its politics, many have difficulty in appreciating the role that tribal interests, values and norms play in Iraq. Religion became a dominant feature of Iraq as citizens, especially young men, realized the Ba'ath Party had lost its ideological underpinnings and they turned to a fundamentalist understanding of Islam.

In response to the insurgents, both the Shi'a and Kurdish communities have continued to rally around their new national leaders and have apparently refused to engage in sectarian revenge. As some panel members pointed out, reaching out to the Sunnis in an attempt to bring them into the political process has yielded few positive results primarily because the majority of Sunnis remain perched on the fence, afraid of reprisals from any of the insurgent groups if they appear supportive of the interim government.

Dealing with the Insurgency

In the face of a thriving insurgency, context is important because it will define the response. Insurgencies are the most complex and political of all forms of war because the civilian population with all of its needs is the prize for both the insurgents and the counter-insurgents. The host government in the role as the counter-insurgent faces many challenges, according to panelists, because it is responsible for the welfare, prosperity and security of its society. The insurgents, on the other hand, have no responsibility other than to violently demonstrate the inability of the government to care for its citizens.

Iraqis in general are not pleased with the presence of foreign forces in their country. For the government to gain the support of its citizens and retain the necessarily vital capabilities of the Multinational Forces (MNF) fighting the insurgents, the interim government of Iraq should enter into discussions and conclude as quickly as possible a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States and its coalition partners argued Ambassador Sumaidaie. Such an agreement will provide for better protection of Iraqis, more effective coordination between the Iraqi security forces and the MNF, and the strengthening of Iraqi sovereignty.

Some pundits have observed that civil wars are never started by a majority of citizens but only by a minority of them. Active minorities exist in Iraq's population. Obviously, the Sunni minority comprises a portion of the insurgency while minorities in both the Shi'a and Kurdish camps exist and pursue their own goals. Both the interim government of Iraq and the MNF must work to retain the active loyalty of those minority groups now supporting the new Iraq and work to create new minorities that will also support them, said Hammes.

For example, the reconstruction and long-term development programs of USAID and other like-minded organizations can do much to tackle the wide-ranging troubles of post-Saddam Iraq and thus create new minorities of support. Kvitashvili argued that, taken in the aggregate these minorities eventually will create a new majority of support for a democratic Iraq and reduce the base of support for the various insurgent groups.

Despite the best effort to enlist Iraqi hearts and minds to support their new country, the panelists pointed out either side can lose the support of its respective group of supporters. Support from the people will always remain conditional and be based on the ability of the interim government to fulfill its moral and legal contract with its citizens. Sustaining successful activities is crucial to the long-term goals of the interim government. Whether the sustainment is in the form of a reinvigorated oil industry, schools,

clinics, roads, empowered voters, free press, or new liberties, these must be sustained through a patient, systematic process.

Closely linked to this need for sustained aid, said Sumaidaie, is the need to recognize that the anticipated success of the new Iraq will depend as much on resources as it will on the intensity of the nation-building effort. The insurgents certainly realize this need; their ongoing campaign of car bomb attacks and ambushes are aimed at derailing any progress in rebuilding Iraq. Attacks against both the oil and electricity infrastructures are designed to cripple Iraq's revenues and place the burden of funding the war on its allies.

Lessons of Insurgency

Iraq's insurgency possesses unique and complex aspects but the speakers noted that it also reveals lessons that are common to all insurgencies. History has demonstrated that successful counter-insurgencies must understand and capitalize on the following lessons:

- The support of the population is as necessary for the counter-insurgent as it is for the insurgent.
- Support for either side is gained through an active minority within the civilian population.
- Support from the population is conditional.
- Intensity of efforts and availability of resources are vital to success.

Iraq is no different, the panelists agreed. A comprehensive and committed strategy by Iraq and its allies that involves short-term security and long-term development of Iraq's society is needed to secure Iraq's future.

Related Resources:

[Defeating the Insurgency in Iraq](#)

[Who Are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq](#)

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Paul Hughes](#), Program Officer in the [Peace and Stability Operations](#) program at the Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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