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The Bleeding of Iraq and the Rising Insurgency

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The 17-month-old guerrilla insurgency is getting stronger, sophisticated and more widespread by the day and appears to be reaching a new level of intensity.



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Things are not going well in Iraq. The government handover of power has neither moved the country closer to peaceful democracy nor improved a volatile security situation that has turned Iraq into a living hell. Suicide bombings and attacks against Iraqi officials and civilians, coalition forces, foreigners, and the infrastructure continue unabated. The 17-month-old guerrilla insurgency is getting stronger, sophisticated and more widespread by the day and appears to be reaching a new level of intensity. According to American military commanders, U.S. soldiers and their allies were attacked an average of 87 times each day in August, the highest such figure since American and British forces toppled the Baathist regime. One official noted that attacks on American forces rose to 2,700 in August, from 700 in March. Senior American policymakers, including defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, and national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, warn of more bad news to come and that violence would intensify as elections scheduled for January 2005 approach.

A classified national estimate prepared for President Bush in late July spelled out a very gloomy future for Iraq – the worst case being developments that could lead to civil war. Indeed, Iraq appears to be descending into civil strife. Iraqis are killing Iraqis in large numbers - as are Allied forces.

Thousands of Iraqis had been killed and injured since the nominal transfer of sovereignty at the end of June. Since the onset of the war, human rights organizations place overall Iraqi deaths between 10,000 and 30,000. U.S. military

deaths in the Iraq campaign surpassed the 1,000 mark (as of last count 1,017), and U.S. troops have suffered over five thousand injuries. In August, 64 American soldiers were killed compared with 43 in June before the installment of the new Iraqi government. Furthermore, insurgents have discovered that kidnapping and executing foreigners can serve as powerful strategic weapons in their campaign to isolate Americans in Iraq and dissuade other nations from sending troops and personnel into the country. They have succeeded in terrorizing foreigners and slowing down and impeding reconstruction projects.

UNDERSTANDING THE INSURGENCY

These large casualty figures clearly indicate that the war is still raging in Iraq and does not show signs of receding. By keeping the military pressure on the new interim government headed by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and by exposing its weakness and dependency on the Americans, insurgents aim to drive a wedge between it and ordinary Iraqis and derail the U.S.-led political agenda, particularly the forthcoming elections.

Ordinary Iraqis are keeping a close eye on the interim government to see if it can secure the peace and provide jobs, which are in critically short supply. Security and employment, not democracy rhetoric or the public exhibition of Saddam Hussein and his thugs in the courtroom, are uppermost on Iraqis' minds. Iraqis tell visitors they are terrified to walk the

streets and be caught in a firefight between insurgents and American troops, or to let their daughters and wives leave home alone lest they get kidnapped. They are consumed by fear and feelings of vulnerability, being at the mercy of menacing forces beyond their control.

It is on this psychological level - sowing fear - which the armed resistance has proved to be effective in influencing Iraqis' views and actions since American and British forces deposed Hussein and his government 17 months ago. Indeed, the question of security has emerged as the most important factor influencing Iraqis' attitudes towards their new government. The more security the interim authority provides to its citizens, the more legitimacy it will garner in their eyes.

But the early signs are discouraging. Although Iraqi security forces now exceed 200,000, they have a long way to go to gain the professional training needed to be effective and responsive to a legitimate central authority. Although American spokesmen often talk of "multilateral forces" involved in anti-insurgency operations, most of the fighting is carried out by U.S. troops without the help of Iraqi security forces. Independent observers have also reported several alarming incidents in which Iraqi security forces fired on and killed scores of unarmed protesters.

The Allawi government is also facing a persistent, entrenched insurgency that has grown deep roots within the Sunni Arab community and among a critical Shiite segment as well. In Sunni areas, *al-muqawama* (the resistance) is proudly celebrated for inflicting heavy blows on the American "occupiers" and their local "traitors." In the battle for the hearts and minds of particularly Sunni Iraqis, *al-muqawama* has proved to be more potent than American firepower and has gained momentum and prestige.

American and Iraqi officials must not mislead themselves by portraying the violent struggle in Iraq as the work of foreign fighters, Al Qaeda affiliates, criminals, terrorists, and hardened pro-Hussein supporters. Their portrayal of the armed insurgency as a terrorist phenomenon underestimates the gravity of the Sunni revolt and the widening and deepening of

dissatisfaction among Iraqis in general. There is clearly more to the insurgency than this official version, which reduces everything to simplistic single causes and useful political sloganeering. According to Iraqi observers, activists and academics that closely follow the armed insurgency, although foreign Islamist fighters under the command of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian militant suspected in the deadliest attacks in Iraq, play a vital role in the insurgency, homegrown Iraqi Islamists, nationalists, and dissatisfied ordinary young men predominate. They estimate the number of foreign fighters to be in the hundreds, while indigenous Iraqi resistance can mobilize tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of *ansar* (supporters).

A consensus exists among Iraqi observers who closely follow the insurgency that homegrown Islamist insurgents, not foreign fighters, exercise effective control over important parts of central Iraq or much of the Anbar and Salahaddin provinces that include cities like Falluja, Baquba, Ramadi, Samarra, Tal Afar, and other towns - all in the so-called Sunni Triangle. They, along with hardliners in the clergy, are imposing strict interpretations of Islamic laws on the land. They have blown up liquor stores and beat up individuals they consider to be morally lax. There are also early indications that guerrillas in the various cities and towns are trying to merge with one another and join ranks. For example, the guerrillas in Samarra - the Mujahedeen Shura (Council of Holy Warriors) - issued a declaration saying they had agreed to merge with their counterparts Mujahedeen Shura in Falluja. This development would represent a significant strategic escalation of the armed resistance because American commanders have long viewed the insurgency as composed of disparate groups across the country and lacking a unified chain of command.

Although American troops could regain control of these cities by using overwhelming force, the political and human costs would be devastating. The Sunni community, which already feels estranged and excluded from the nascent political process, could rise up en masse against the Americans. A frontal assault by American power on its main cities would also likely

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This essay is based on extensive interviews with Iraqi opinion makers, activists, and researchers.

cause tens of thousands of casualties and far reaching political ramifications that transcend Iraq's borders.

Resistance is not just limited to Sunni Arabs. Widespread dissent among radical Shiite groups also exists, although it has not turned into a full-scale uprising. Despite the fragile truce reached between American authorities and the al-Mahdi Army of the fiery Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr in the holy Shiite cities of Karbala, Najaf and Kufa in the south, fighting persists between them in Baghdad's sprawling al-Sadr City slum. Ironically, one of the main conditions set by mainstream Shiite leaders, who brokered the peace agreements between al-Sadr and the Americans, was for the latter to pull back and keep their distance from the sacred shrines of Ali and Hussein. The calls are also rising for the Americans to pull out of more areas, notably al-Sadr City – the main social base of Sadr.

All these calls testify to the hostile mood of Iraqis toward what they perceive as the aggressive tactics by U.S. troops. Dexter Filkins of The New York Times captured this volatile sentiment:

Where Iraqis once tolerated American soldiers as a source of stability in their neighborhood, they increasingly see them as a cause of the violence. Take out the Americans, the Iraqis say, and you take out the problem. Leave us alone, and we will sort out our own problems.

In the eyes of many Iraqis, the United States has become part of the problem, not the solution. Insurgents have partially succeeded in fueling Iraqis' resentment against the U.S.-led occupation. Their effective and brutal attacks forced the Americans' hand and led the latter to use disproportionate force which alienated Iraqi public opinion further. In a way, the Americans have already lost the struggle for the hearts and minds of Iraqis and are seen as a menace to social harmony and peace by the population.

American military presence appears to have become a hindrance and liability to the success of the Iraqi political project. Military dominance no longer serves a useful political goal and may have lost any legitimizing function. This new reality

requires a critical rethinking of American strategy in Iraq which has mostly relied on the preponderant use of force at the expense of diplomatic and political cards. It also goes against the conventional wisdom in Washington that more American troops are needed to stabilize the war-torn country. The United States must set a specific, early date for the exit of its troops from Iraq to convince Iraqis and the world community of its benign intentions. This alternative could shift the internal dynamics of the conflict in Iraq and the attitudes of the world community.

TENSIONS WITHIN THE INSURGENCY

There are signs pointing to rising tensions between Iraqi nationalists and mainstream Islamists, on the one hand, and Zarqawi's network of Tawhid and Jihad (Unity and Struggle), on the other, over tactics like attacking Iraqi civilians and policemen, the infrastructure, and kidnapping foreigners. Arab Islamists also possess a more ambitious agenda. As one of their leaders, who is based in Falluja - "the capital of the Islamist resistance against the Americans" – told Kamal al-Taweel, a specialist on Arab Islamists for Al Hayat newspaper, "we are fighting in Iraq but our sights are fixated on other places like Jerusalem..." Zarqawi's goal, confided this Islamist, is to establish an Islamic government in Baghdad and to get rid of Allawi and to expel the Americans from Iraq. But Iraq is just a first step on the road to toppling the neighboring secular regimes: "How can we liberate Jerusalem without possessing a base from which to move forward? Liberating Jerusalem and neighboring countries cannot be achieved without establishing an Islamic government [in Iraq] which will serve as a forward base for *al-shabab* [the vanguard]."

Iraq appears to have become a recruiting tool, if not a recruiting ground, for militant Jihadi causes. It is slowly and gradually replacing Afghanistan as a forward base for the new Jihad. Today the largest concentration of active Jihadists exists in Iraq, not in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Chechnya, thanks to the American invasion and occupation of the country. Rhetoric aside, the U.S.-led invasion has *transformed* Iraq into "the central front of the War on Terror."

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Yes, there are inherent differences between mainstream Iraqi Islamists and militant Islamists of Zarqawi's variety. Although these differences are bound to pit the two allies against one another in the future, for now they seem to be united by their hatred of the "American occupiers" and their Iraqi "collaborators." Thus it would be misleading to jump to unwarranted conclusions and to exaggerate the extent of differences among the insurgents. For example, recently, Zarqawi's men and Iraqi Islamists joined ranks and collaborated in carrying out attacks. According to interviews with leaders of the insurgents, Zarqawi's network of Tawhid and Jihad includes several thousand fighters composed of Iraqis and Arabs. At least in the short term, all Iraqi and foreign insurgents subscribe to a common strategy - discrediting the pro-U.S. Allawi government and expelling American troops from Iraq.

In particular, Iraqi clerics give public voice to this common goal shared by the insurgents. In their mosque sermons, they often dismiss the new government as a pawn of the American occupation and call for its replacement with a more legitimate authority. One of the country's leading Sunni organizations, the Sunni Clerics Association, boycotted the selection of the National Council, which was supposed to serve as a de facto parliament. Some of its members have dismissed the scheduled elections as a "fake."

Homegrown radical Islamists appear to have taken ownership of the armed insurgency. But Iraqi society as a whole has become more Islamized as a direct result of the social turmoil and upheaval wrought by the American-led invasion and occupation. The longer the turmoil continues, the more marginalized secular forces will be. The balance of power among Iraqi social classes has shifted dramatically in the Islamists' favor within the Sunni and Shiite communities as well. The Iraqi social structure, which used to be the least Islamic in the Arab world, is gradually being Islamized from within and more and more resembles its Arab neighbors. Ironically, Islamists, not secularists or liberals, appear to be the main beneficiaries of the destruction of the nationalist Baathist regime. Iraq is a classic case of the law of unintended consequences. President Bush

could be well remembered as a catalyst for the new "Islamic Republic of Iraq."

The Islamization of the resistance does not bode well for Iraq's new interim government which will likely face a prolonged, costly war unless the sociopolitical conditions fueling the insurgency are seriously addressed. Unfortunately, the frantic efforts by Iraqi officials to find ways and means to quell the violence that has wrecked the country and that threatens their very political survival fall far short from what is required. Dr. Allawi has relied more on force and arms-twisting than on a genuine process of persuasion and inclusion. He has not convinced Iraqis of his independence of his American patrons and that he is a genuine Iraqi patriot. His governing methods are deeply authoritarian and divisive and do not take into account the deep ethnic and religious divisions that exist among Iraqi communities.

A case in point includes the unveiling of a sweeping law that gives the Allawi government the authority to declare a state of emergency anywhere it sees fit. Another decree restored the death penalty suspended by the former U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council. Plans to announce a general amnesty for insurgents who lay down their weapons were shelved because of opposition by American authorities. The result was to fold Allawi's much vaunted scheme to wean away Iraqi fighters, "who call themselves the resistance," from those "hard-core criminals" like Zarqawi.

As disturbing is Allawi's aggressive and dangerous treatment of dissenters. Contrary to his pronouncements, Allawi has not invested time or resources in trying to co-opt dissenters. According to members of the country's leading Sunni organizations, the Sunni Clerics Association, Allawi has not bothered to meet with them, let alone try to integrate them into the new political space. If Allawi does not meet with these clerics who give public voice to Iraqi insurgents, how will he tame the spiraling insurgency or secure the peace?

Allawi's treatment of the Shiite radical Sadr, who shoulders a big responsibility for sending his loyalists into a direct and costly confrontation against the Americans, shows the extent of his brinkmanship. The received wisdom is that Sadr's commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict is shaky at

best and that he has shown little interest in taking part in the nascent political order that the Americans are trying to construct in Baghdad.

But Sadr and his senior aides pin the blame squarely on Allawi for backing out of two peace deals struck by his negotiators, who were led by his national security adviser, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, in the last two months. With the fighting raging in al-Sadr City and Najaf, Dr. Rubaie announced that he had struck deals with Sadr only to see Dr. Allawi renounce them. Allawi has just dismissed Rubaie, a Shiite political leader who is close to the prominent cleric Ayatollah Sistani.

What is going on? Why did Allawi reject a peace deal that would expose Sadr and possibly end his estrangement by bringing him to the fold? Allawi's aides tell foreign journalists that the prime minister appeared to be motivated by disappointment at Sadr's rising popularity among poor Shiites. Allawi and his Shiite allies, say his aides, would prefer that Sadr be eliminated from the Iraqi scene. More than one source corroborated this account and stressed that Allawi's intention is to "kill or capture" Sadr, in hopes of striking a death blow to his increasingly popular movement: "He wants to humiliate Muktada... He needs a victory."

Regardless of what one thinks of Sadr, an immature, reckless politician

Sistani, the most powerful religious figure in Iraq, felt the need to warn Allawi against over reliance on force. He called on the interim government to "stop the showers of blood and to use wisdom in dealing with the deteriorating situation without resorting to violence."

Privately, Iraqis, who fully support the interim government, say they possess little confidence in its ability to secure the peace and tame the insurgency. Unfortunately, most have decided to sit on the fence rather than join the fight for the future of their country. Fewer and fewer Iraqis are supplying coalition forces with intelligence about the resistance. If intelligence is essential to defeating the insurgency, this new development does not portend well for the interim government and its desire to pacify the country. It is likely that for now the security situation will continue to deteriorate.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

The challenge is to proceed with the difficult tasks of reconstruction, while enduring brutal and costly attacks. Taming the insurgency will ultimately depend on the ability of the new government to expedite the process of sociopolitical reconstruction and fully legitimize the political

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whose messianic rhetoric resonates with many poor disfranchised Shiites, it would be disastrous to kill him and deepen the alienation and rage felt by his poor loyalists. Many of his followers could go underground and embark on a campaign of suicide bombings that would destabilize Iraq further. Is this the way to build up the new, democratic Iraq? Is Allawi reverting to the old ways and shades of authoritarian Iraq? An Iraqi politician bluntly told Western journalists that Allawi "appeared to be reverting to his roots as a former member of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, where political dissent was often silenced with the gun."

Surely, for a caretaker prime minister, who is supposed to proceed with caution, Allawi is acting like an entrenched strongman with no intention of retiring soon. Iraq does not need another dictator. It already had more than its share of autocrats who promised heaven but delivered dust, bleeding the country dry and bringing ruin in their wake. At this critical and existential juncture of its history, Iraq desperately requires a unifier with vision, wisdom, and tolerance of dissent - who reassures the warring communities that they all have a place and a stake in the new Iraq. The key to success and peaceful co-existence is full integration and inclusion, not exclusion and elimination, of all, I stress all, social and religious segments.

process. Winning the hearts and minds of dissatisfied Sunnis and Shiites cannot be accomplished by paying lip service to the rhetoric of reconstruction and democracy. Reconciliation must be fully embraced and all Iraqis must be given a stake in their country's future. Inclusion and reconciliation, not exclusion and retribution, are the keys to tackling the mistrust, suspicion, and fear felt by many Iraqis and to beginning the process of healing. Providing jobs to angry young men is more effective in gaining their trust than all the speeches about the wonders of the new order being constructed in Baghdad.

The caretaker government is a work in progress. To gain public legitimacy, it must deliver on its promises - showing independence from its American patrons, holding free elections in January to gain legitimacy, working hard to reconcile various communities, rebuilding and democratizing Iraqi institutions, particularly the security services, and setting a specific date for the withdrawal of American military forces. There is no assurance of success but the costs of inaction are nightmarish for Iraq, its neighbors, and American security.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent and nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems in the United States through education, research, training, and policy analysis. ISPU provides cutting-edge analysis and policy solutions through publications, public events, media commentary, and community outreach. Major areas of focus include domestic politics, social policy, the economy, health, education, the environment, and foreign policy. Since our inception in 2002, ISPU's research has worked to increase understanding of key public policy issues and how they impact various communities in the United States.

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