

OUT OF THE TUNNEL AND INTO THE LIGHT: A Strategy for Exiting Iraq in 500 Days

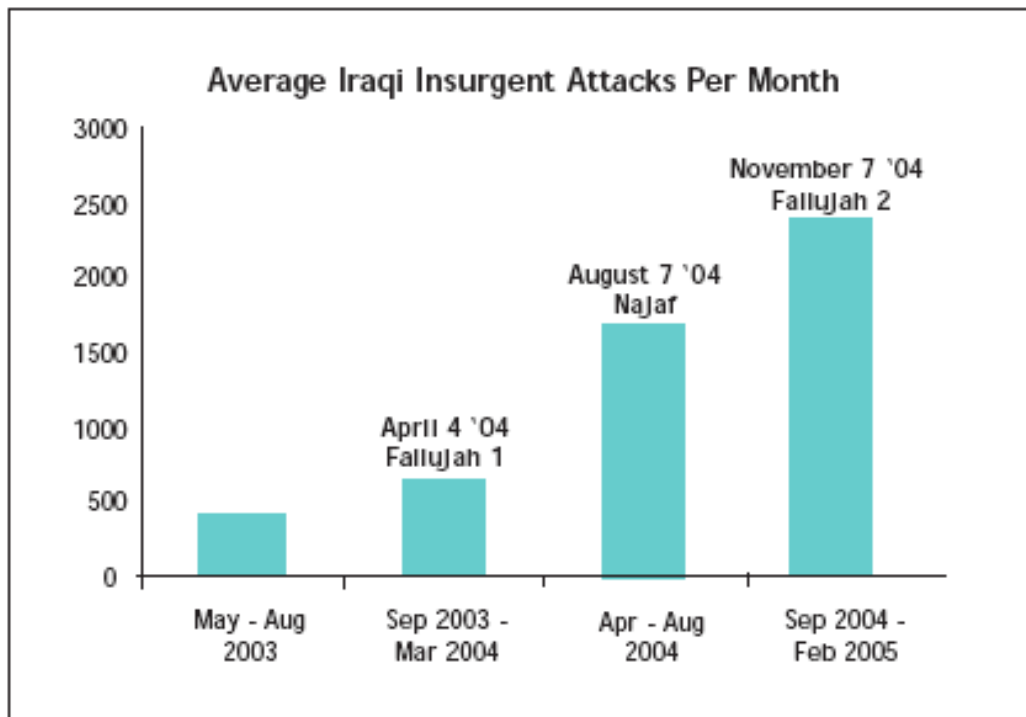
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Occupation and insurgency: a self-fueling dynamic

The occupation has bogged down in problems of its own creation. It is today less about rolling back Iraqi military power, dislodging a tyrant, or building a stable democracy than it is about fighting an insurgency energized principally by the occupation.

The role of the occupation and its practices in driving the insurgency are evident if we look at the growth dynamics of the insurgency, and specifically at the change in the number of anti-coalition attacks per month. The growth trend falls into four distinct phases beginning with the end of major combat operations in May 2003. [See graph below.]



The beginning of each phase (after the first) is marked by a major counter-insurgent offensive on the part of the Coalition. The paradoxical effect of these offensives seems to be a rise in insurgent activity to a new level, a higher plateau that does not subsequently recede. What we are witnessing is a process by which the occupation and its practices drive more people and resources into insurgent activity and organizations. This trend accords with shifts in public opinion: both the occupation and the occupiers have grown less popular as time goes by.

No military solution worth contemplating

The growth dynamic of the insurgency should convince us that there is no primarily military solution to the insurgency, neither at our hands nor at those of the Iraqis, at least none we should be willing to contemplate.

Our experience in Mosul suggests the scale of the problem. Back in November 2003, a brigade commander from the 101st airborne estimated that the city harbored only 300 fighters. He thought his 5,000 troops could bring these insurgents under control. His estimate of insurgent strength was probably wrong. But even had it been right, Mosul has a population somewhat smaller than that of Northern Ireland, where approximately 400 IRA fighters were sufficient to tie down 32,000 British security personnel for 25 years. Furthermore, Mosul represents only 6 percent of the Iraqi population.

Setting aside the goal of outright victory, what about the possibility of achieving by military means a minimally acceptable equilibrium between insurgency and peace, which would at least allow us to get the Iraqi polity and economy out of intensive care? This might be possible, but not at the scale currently contemplated. It approximately describes what the British accomplished in Northern Ireland with a friendly “force-to-population” ratio that was more than three times as great as the one currently prevailing in Iraq.

If we want to pursue the path of suppressing the insurgency, a first step would be to increase US force levels in Iraq to 200,000, as originally suggested by former Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki. We might maintain this level for two years and then gradually draw it down over 3 years to a long-term presence of 70,000 US troops. Sixty months from now we would settle into a US presence of 70,000 troops in Iraq for at least a decade. During those initial sixty months, we would strive to suppress the insurgency and bring the entire planned Iraqi security force up to high quality. Of course, a great deal of blood and treasure (both Iraqi and American) would have to be expended to make this approach work, if indeed it can. And should it work, we would risk some disconcerting, inadvertent effects. Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia have had some success with suppressing terrorist and insurgent movement. But their success drove their problems elsewhere: out into the broader world, to the detriment of other countries, including the United States. We paid a price for their success in 1993 and again on September 11, 2001.

The implication for Iraqi force development is that we will not soon see an Iraqi security force that is able on its own to contain, never mind beat, the Iraqi insurgency, given its present scope and intensity. Secretary Rumsfeld is correct in suggesting that we must try both to “raise the bridge” and “lower the tide:” that is, improve the capabilities of Iraqi security forces, while curbing those of the insurgency. His mistake is in thinking that we can lower the insurgent tide principally by force of arms.

Withdrawal is not enough

It is the occupation, more than anything else that lends mass appeal and coherence to the Iraqi insurgency, which would otherwise be a much weaker amalgam of disparate groups and individuals. This implies that ending the occupation will help disintegrate the insurgency, in the precise sense of that term: break apart, partially dissolve, but not entirely extinguish.

One reason that terrorist activity would not simply cease with withdrawal is that dedicated Baath restorationists play a part in the insurgency as do committed foreign extremists, and US withdrawal will not deter them from their ends. All that ending the occupation can do is strip away much of the net in which they operate, deflate the local ad hoc insurgency, and stem broader, popular support for violent action. What will remain are the true diehards. Iraq will still face an internal security problem, albeit on a lower scale.

This last point argues against any precipitous withdrawal of US forces. As a practical matter, we could withdraw most of our assets within a few months, if we wanted to. But we should not, because it would leave the Iraqi

government facing a set of immediate security challenges that it could not handle.

Other concerns about withdrawal focus on the potential for civil strife, even civil war, or state fragmentation after US forces leave. These potentials are real. Clearly different communities in Iraq feel differently about the postwar order and their relative position within it. The situation demands a renewed and more dramatic political offensive aiming to draw in alienated communities and constituencies, the Sunni and Turkomen communities as well as former Baathists and former military personnel. In this effort, it is vital to reach out with the idea of a “new deal” to those local centers of influence (tribal councils and mosques) that have sway over popular and insurgent opinion in disaffected communities.

A strategy for resolving the Iraq impasse: essential elements

1. End the occupation

The United States should declare that it seeks no long-term military position in Iraq and is disinclined to establish one, even if asked. Moreover, the United States should declare that it aims to withdraw in discernible steps all but a handful of its Iraq-deployed troops by no later than July 1, 2006. An initial modest step of withdrawal (15,000 troops) should occur immediately. Finally, the Multinational Force and the Iraqi government should suspend large-scale offensive action while pursuing a political resolution.

2. Political measures can draw in disaffected communities and elements

Blanket sanctions against former members of the Baath Party should end, excepting those charged with criminal activity. Likewise, sanctions prohibiting selected militia members and leaders from holding public office should be lifted, except with regard to individuals indicted for criminal activity.

Punitive action should focus on those most responsible for the crimes of the Hussein regime and on those responsible for major postwar attacks on civilians, a set defined to involve several hundred, but not thousands of individuals. Beyond this, a general amnesty should be offered to former regime elements and to insurgents. In the case of influential leaders, this amnesty should imply a *quid pro quo* of cooperation in advancing the peacemaking and stabilization process.

Iraq needs to adopt a system of representative government that better addresses the concerns of minority communities regarding majority domination - and do so in way that does not add impetus to state fragmentation.

A first step would be to tie all or most assembly seats to local districts, as is the case in the United States. The current system makes the power of localities contingent on voter turnout. Contingent representation is something that rightfully concerns minority communities.

As a further confidence-building measure, a portion of assembly seats might be divided equally among the three main confessional and ethnic communities in Iraq and then distributed to their majority provinces according to population - in effect, making some provinces somewhat “more equal” than others (much as Mississippi is “more equal” than New York in the United States).

Alternatively, or additionally, each of the three members of the Presidency Council might be directly elected by different regions of the country, corresponding roughly to the distribution of ethnic groups.

Taken together, these political measures should relax much of the overt rejectionist sentiment in the Sunni community.

3. Iraqi security force development

The Coalition needs to dedicate 18,000 personnel to the task of training and exercising Iraqi security personnel during the next sixteen months, not 8,000-10,000 as currently planned. And it needs to ensure that Iraqi units are fully equipped with upgraded equipment and adequate facilities.

This level of commitment should permit an increase in security forces to the level of 225,000 by June 2006, with more than half of them equaling the quality of the best 30,000 today.

The Iraqi government and the coalition need to redouble their efforts to draw former Hussein-era military personnel into training and reorientation programs, including the many thousands of influential personnel with former ranks of colonel and above. Where feasible, entire units might be reconstituted, including units of the Republican Guard. This would draw these personnel and units into a positive process and make them more readily available for screened recruitment into the active forces.

4. Monitoring of Iraqi military potentials

Until Iraq stabilizes and settles into a pattern of peaceful relations with its neighbors, the United States and others will continue to be concerned about its military potentials and will want some reassurance. However, as an alternative to a long-term large-scale military presence in the country, we should favor the development of a Military Monitoring Regime under UN auspices. This would require the Iraqi government to forswear weapons of mass destruction and support for terrorist activity, agree to limit the size and capabilities of Iraq's armed forces, and permit unfettered access to its military sites by a multinational corps of UN monitors. A reasonable term for the monitoring regime would be five years or less, as the Security Council sees fit. A highly effective monitoring corps might comprise 500 personnel and could be accompanied by a multinational security detail comprising 6,500 troops.

5. Regional confidence- and security-building measures

The last component of this proposal focuses on creating a regional environment more conducive to Iraqi stability. A Group of Contact States should be formed under UN auspices, comprising all of Iraq's neighbors as well as those states participating in the multinational force. This group would function as a forum for discussing and addressing security concerns related to postwar Iraq. The explicit basis for the group would be an understanding that:

- a. All members have legitimate security concerns regarding the future of Iraq;
- b. Participants in the multinational force and training mission will not use Iraq as a base for military operations outside of Iraq or outside the scope of UN mandated mission;
- c. None will seek a permanent military position inside the country apart from standard training missions, military

assistance programs, or military-diplomatic missions; and

d. All members will pledge not to impede the stabilization process, but instead to do their utmost to advance it.

6. Withdrawal time line

The measures outlined above should allow within six months a reduction in US forces in Iraq to 110,000. Pegged to cycles in the training of Iraqi forces, subsequent reductions would bring US forces down to 80,000 troops in Month Ten and down to 50,000 troops in Month Fourteen. After sixteen months, there would be only 2,000 US troops left in Iraq to participate in multinational military training and monitoring missions, commanded by NATO and under a three-year UN mandate. Outside Iraq, but very nearby, the United States might continue to maintain for the foreseeable future 25,000 ground troops and the equivalent of one tactical air wing, as well as capacities for rapid force expansion. Among other purposes, these forces might serve in a rapid reaction role, should they be needed.

Carl Conetta is co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives, a member with EPS of the Security Policy Working Group. This article is extracted from comments he made during the panel session, "Home By Christmas? Strategies for Near-term Exit from Iraq." The panel session was held February 22, 2005 in Washington, DC. Other participants included James K. Galbraith, EPS Chair of the Board of Directors [see page 5]; David Cortright of the Fourth Freedom Forum, and Charles Pena of the Cato Institute. The session was broadcast live on C-SPAN 1 and is available at their website: <http://www.c-span.org>.

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