



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Study Acceptance Date: August 2024
Study Sequence No. 12

Iraq 2003–11

Executive Summary

After the Persian Gulf War ended in 1991, international attention focused on Iraq and the possibility of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) production there. Iraq's noncompliance with UN-sanctioned inspectors and the September 11 attacks led President George W. Bush to issue an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein to leave the country. Despite mixed international support, the United States, Britain, and other countries (such as Australia and Poland) sent troops into Iraq from Kuwait and launched an invasion with the goal of toppling Hussein's government, creating what became known as "the coalition."¹ By early May 2003, coalition forces had defeated the Iraqi army, and Hussein was in hiding, leaving America and other coalition members in charge of the country. In January 2004, the search for weapons of mass destruction ceased, as none of the alleged stockpiles were found. By late 2003, it was apparent that many different insurgent groups were active in key regions such as Baghdad and Fallujah.²

Already by 2003, the coalition in Iraq faced an insurgency. From late 2003 to 2006, several insurgent groups employed guerrilla tactics, prompting responses from coalition members in a series of escalating operations. Insurgency was not limited to pro-Hussein factions but included Sunni and Shia militias. Military engagements for control of Iraqi territory increased as insurgents gained a foothold, leading to costly battles, such as the Second Battle of Fallujah.³ Following the setup of the more democratic government with parliamentary elections and American support in 2005, insurgent violence increased. The period from 2006 to 2008 was characterized by insurgency against the government and American forces and by internecine violence, as Shia, Sunni, and other tribal elements fought each other.⁴ After 2008, peace remained elusive as militias and insurgent groups reduced much of Iraq to anarchy and the United States increased its troop presence. President Barack Obama took office in January 2009, and the United States began to draw down its forces on February 1, 2009, with combat brigades leaving by August 2010 and additional forces staying to support the Iraqi government until December 2011.⁵

One of the challenges of using Iraq as a case study is that there were more than 50 active insurgent groups from 2003 to 2011. Some were anti-government, but others, like the Anbar Salvation Council, eventually allied with the United States against other militant organizations.⁶ Multiple factions and groups within each insurgent element operated independently or collaborated at any one time.⁷ Added to this is the complication of a resurgence of insurgent activity post-2011, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which started operating in western Iraq in 2013.⁸ Although outside the purview of this case study, these insurgents still affect the outcome of the 2003–11 conflict in Iraq.

The Five Factors model identifies the primary causes of government defeat against one insurgent movement in a country. Post-US invasion Iraq is unique in the number of evolving insurgent groups and alliances. Anti-government insurgent groups can be broadly grouped in secular organizations,

such as the Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (Naqshabandi Army) or religious insurgent groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq, though this oversimplifies the splintered nature of the groups.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Personal identity in Iraq is a mix of religion, ethnicity, and tribal affiliations. The largest schism is created by which school of Islam a person identifies with. Much of the insurgency and conflict in Iraq is due to sectarian differences, specifically the Sunni-Shia divide.⁹ In 2001, 51 percent of Iraqi Muslims said they were Shia, and 42 percent identified as Sunni. Other minority religions, including the Alawites and Christians, comprise the balance. Ethnic differences also play a major role. Scholars estimate that 75 to 80 percent of Iraqis are Arab and 15 to 20 percent are Kurdish.¹⁰ Intertribal conflicts and feuds also create fault lines in Iraqi society. These schisms played a large part in the conflict in Iraq and the dysfunction of the Iraqi government.¹¹

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population

No. The perception of government legitimacy in Iraq is also heavily dominated by sectarian divides, primarily among the three main groups: the Sunni, the Shia, and the Kurds. Although the interim government set up by the United States post-2003 sought to incorporate all three groups into a single government, the efforts failed, leading to issues surrounding government legitimacy.¹² The Shia in Iraq comprise approximately 51 percent of the population, and Sunni Muslims in Iraq make up about 42 percent.¹³ The remaining 7 percent of Iraqis follow other religions, including Alawism, Christianity (of several confessions), Yezidism, and Zoroastrianism. Thus, the American-backed Iraqi government during this conflict did not possess legitimacy from 85 percent of the population. Kurds in Iraq comprise between 15 and 20 percent of the population and place their personal identities in their ethnicity.¹⁴ (Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, though small numbers follow the Naqshabandi and Qadiriyya Sufi orders or practice Shia Islam, and a significant minority adhere to Alawism and Yezidism.)

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No. Insurgency was prevalent in most of Iraq, and more than 15 percent of the population directly experienced conflict. For example, heavy fighting in the city of Baghdad alone exposed 19 percent of the population to insurgent violence and recruitment.¹⁵

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. Considering this question for each of the two example insurgent groups, we see that all the major players in each category of insurgency had access to some kind of external sanctuary that benefited them militarily: al-Qaeda in Iraq was started in 2003 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had ties to Osama bin Laden and the larger al-Qaeda organization.¹⁶ Operating under the name Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad, al-Qaeda in Iraq used "indiscriminate violence" in an effort to establish a Sunni government and traditional Islamic ways.¹⁷ Al-Qaeda in Iraq enjoyed the benefit of safe havens in Syria, where its members recruited and consolidated their strength.¹⁸ Additionally, al-Qaeda in Iraq benefited from being part of a transnational organization as an affiliate of al-Qaeda.¹⁹

Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri formed the Naqshabandi Army in 2006 after Hussein’s death. This secular organization has Baathist affiliations and sought the reestablishment of a former Baathist-like government.²⁰ Although fairly small, the Naqshabandi Army was responsible for funding many cells and organizing attacks throughout Iraq. The group effectively consolidated splintered insurgency groups under the common goal of ousting the American-led coalition.²¹ The Baath diaspora provided resources such as funding and intelligence from former Baathists in Jordan, Syria, and Yemen for the Naqshabandi Army.²² Although there was no evidence of the Naqshabandi Army physically utilizing sanctuary in other countries during the 2003–11 period, the existence of these contacts and sympathizers, especially in Syria, provided the option had the organization needed it.

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

No. The existing Iraqi army was disbanded by the American-led coalition. Subsequently, the coalition attempted to create a new the Iraqi army and civilian police force.²³ These Iraqi security forces failed and did more harm than good augmenting US personnel for general policing and counterinsurgency.²⁴ The 40,000-man Iraqi army created by the coalition at a cost of \$100 billion disintegrated in less than an hour in 2014 when attacked by ISIS forces.

Outcome

Government failure. Although after the US drawdown in 2011 the Iraqi government remained nominally in charge, the outcome of the 2003 to 2011 conflict has been the de facto disintegration of the Iraqi state. The Kurdish region is autonomous, and the Shia-dominated territory is effectively under the control of Iranian militias. The government that the US coalition attempted to establish faced significant challenges with corruption, failing institutions, questions surrounding legitimacy, and the rising insurgency.²⁵ Political instability allowed insurgency groups to consolidate—such as al-Qaeda in Iraq, which became the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). These groups benefited from the neighboring Syrian Civil War through weapons smuggling and continued instability in Iraq and the surrounding region, which allowed them to gain territorial control and popular support.²⁶ For all practical purposes, Iraq is a failed state today.

IRAQ 2003–11	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	NO

Endnotes

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