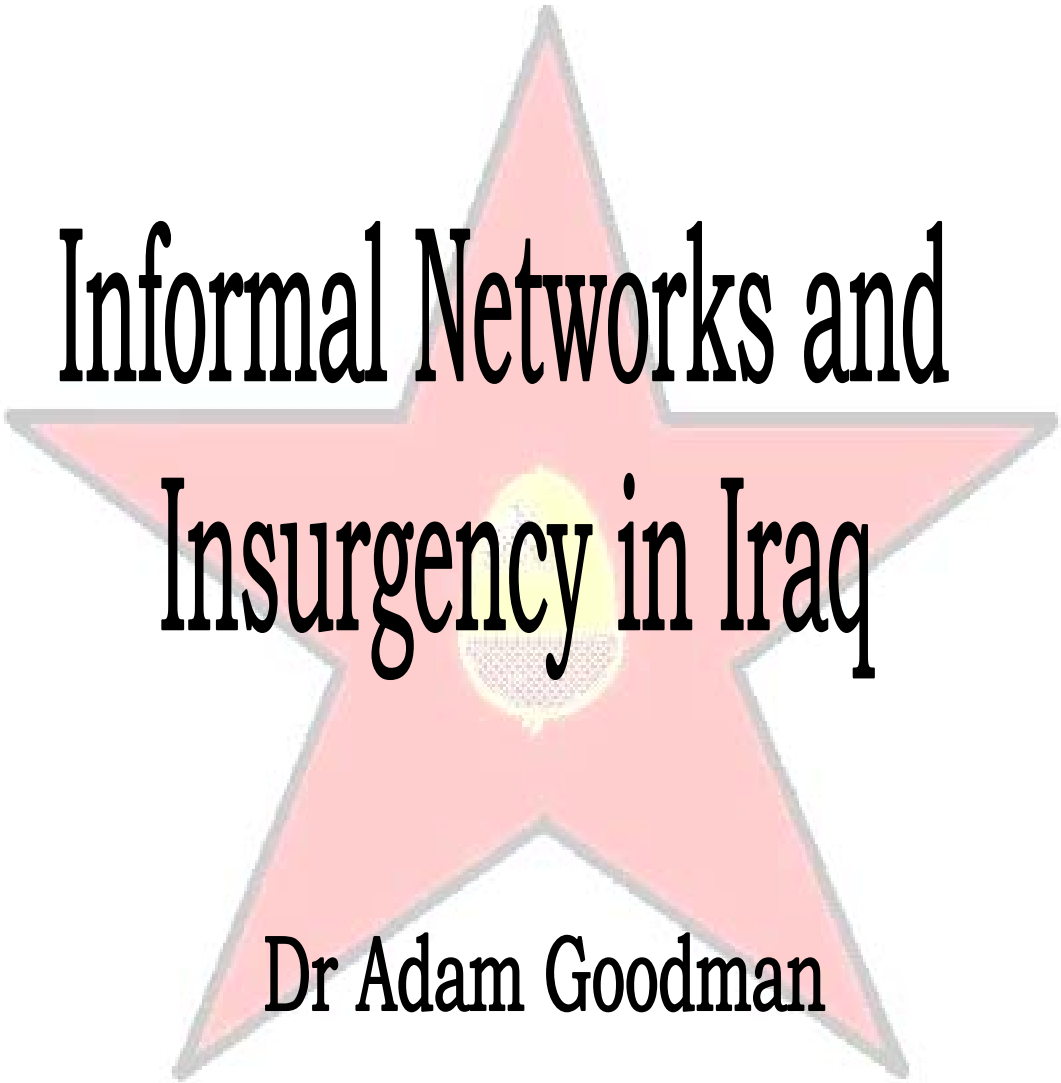
Advanced Research and Assessment Group

Middle East Series **08/11**



Informal Networks and Insurgency in Iraq

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April 2008

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Key Points

* Informal networks are present at all levels in Iraq and they also exert their influence internationally.

* Stopping the activities of various militias would not put an end to the activity of informal networks in the country. Informal political and religious networks are deeply embedded within the fabric of Iraqi society.

* Despite the influence of sectarianism on Iraqi politics, various informal networks have employed sectarianism as a means of furthering their political and policy interests. Therefore, it is extremely unlikely that even drastic solutions such as partitioning the country will bring the insurgency to an end. Cross-sectarian political alliances and intra-sectarian conflicts indicate that politics takes precedence over ideology.

* The influence of informal political and religious networks has prevented the nascent Iraqi state from defining a concept of national interest in a way that is acceptable to even the groups participating in the political process. At the same time, cross-sectarian alliances aimed at preserving a unitary state have failed to agree on anything other than maintaining the unity of the state.

* The Iraqi insurgency symbolizes the beginning of the era of post-international politics which is characterized by global wars for creating political spaces rather than wars for territory and the national interest. The era of post-international politics will be turbulent because informal networks often try to create their own spheres of authority which transcend national boundaries.

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Informal Networks and Insurgency in Iraq

Dr Adam Goodman

The Iraq war has arguably been the most network-centric of all wars. All the Iraqi groups involved in the Iraq war have been highly networked and established ties with external actors in pursuit of their aims. More than anything, the war in Iraq has been one for political space. Thus traditional counter-insurgency policies have proved to be counter-productive. The US military has been criticized for its over-reliance on firepower and ignoring counter-insurgency techniques such as turning guerrillas or cutting off external assistance to the insurgents.[1] Above all, as in the case of Vietnam, US officials have been criticized for fighting the wrong war.[2] The evidence indicates that the US has been dealing with the network-centric character of the war as an operational, or at best a tactical matter rather than a strategic one. Worse still, a number of studies on insurgencies have compared insurgencies which have occurred during vastly different eras to one another, thereby ignoring the specific characteristics of the present international system.[3] Perhaps the main reason for this has been the failure to read the threat matrix in the region correctly.[4] Above all, the Iraq war is a microcosm that reflects the bifurcated nature of modern world politics. In his path-breaking studies of world politics in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, James Rosenau argued that world politics had entered an era of turbulence and would be divided between the state-centric and multi-centric worlds. Neither world was likely to prevail over the other and this was one of the main reasons why turbulence was likely to be the defining feature of the new era. One of the main characteristics of the multi-centric world was the advent of sub-groupism.[5] In Iraq sub-groupism can be seen in the behaviour of various Shii and Sunni militias which are fighting one another despite their sectarian affinities.

A thorough examination of the role of informal network in the Iraqi insurgency is beyond the scope of this paper, where the main argument is that co-opting or disrupting informal networks is part and parcel of formulating a strategy for a new era. This is not just true of Iran or Iraq, but of the entire international system. Informal networks have always existed in world politics and they will continue to exist. However, some informal networks are now important sub-state actors whose behaviour can have consequences at the grand strategic level. Thus despite its focus on Shii and Sunni groups in Iraqi politics, this paper emphasizes that sectarianism has not been the guiding principle driving the strategies of many of these groups in Iraq, including those which have openly embraced it as their declaratory policy. Rather, sectarianism has been a weapon used to further these groups' strategic and policy interests. In that sense sectarianism has served primarily as a weapon of asymmetric political warfare in Iraqi politics.

Saddam Hussein and the origins of the network-centric Islamist crisis

Some observers of the Iraqi insurgency have argued that jihadi salafism grew in Iraq in the 1990s due to the country's defeat in the Kuwait war and the imposition of sanctions on the Saddam Hussein regime.[6] However, the evidence suggests that the

Informal Networks and Insurgency in Iraq
Advanced Research and Assessment Group
ISBN 978-1-905962-43-3
April 2008

Ba'athist-Islamist nexus was set in place during the Kuwait crisis of 1990-1. Saddam Hussein relied increasingly on Islamist organizations to ensure his political survival, and sought to expand his regime's ties with various Islamist organizations in the Middle East and South Asia.[7] Hussein's goal was to instigate an Islamist-inspired turmoil throughout the region in anticipation of an allied attack to liberate Kuwait. One of his most important gains was to turn many of the chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood, which until then had been supported by Saudi Arabia, against that country.[8]

Hussein also approached Iran with the offer of a peace treaty. His approach led to a major policy debate in Iran where the then radicals, including Ayatollah Khomeini's son Ahmad, and former revolutionary prosecutor Sadeq Khalkhali, called for supporting Iraq despite the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war which had drained the resources of their country. Significantly, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned of a jihad in the event of an allied attack on Iraq, indicating that he was sympathetic to the views of the radicals. However, the then President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani managed to persuade Khamenei to refrain from calling for a jihad against the US. As a result, Iranian policy was aimed at maintaining the country's neutrality while taking advantage of Hussein's confrontation with the US to improve Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia in anticipation of a greater role for Iran in the post-conflict period.[9]

Hussein's policy also led to political turmoil in Pakistan, where his predicament was also seen as Pakistan's likely predicament by some Islamist groups.[10] Moreover, the chief of staff of the Pakistani military, Mirza Aslam Beg, believed that henceforward Muslim nations had to concentrate their efforts on developing nuclear weapons to deter the US from attacking them. Aslam Beg had already offered nuclear technology to Iran without informing the then Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.[11] During operation Desert Shield an Aslam Beg intermediary offered a nuclear weapon to Iraq.[12] Aslam Beg's argument reflected the growing nexus between Islamism and WMD as sources of deterring the US. In that respect, his activities were indicative of the new realpolitik paradigm in the region. For the Pakistani state, Islamism and WMD technology were components of a national strategy aimed at gaining policy leverage vis-à-vis India and increasing Pakistan's influence in South Asia. Thus despite the secular nature of his regime, Saddam Hussein's appeal to pan-Islamist sentiment reverberated across the Muslim world. These dynamics would resurface following the regime's collapse in 2003.

Sunni informal networks and the insurgency

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, the goals of the insurgency were clearly defined for the Sunni insurgent groups. They all sought to expel the coalition from Iraq. Indeed, there was a significant degree of cross-fertilization between various Sunni organizations from the beginning of the insurgency. Some groups have been taking credit for the same operations, while others have formed umbrella organizations in pursuit of their objectives. In the early phase of the insurgency, one of the most important reasons for this convergence was the existence of the Ba'athist-Salafist nexus which formed a key component of the regime's stay-behind networks.[13] The first two Ba'athist organizations involved in the insurgency were Ba'athists in the Leaders of the Resistance and Liberation, and Muhammad's Army. A number of Ba'athist insurgent networks that emerged in the immediate post-war period had Islamist names. Three of the main Ba'athist groups were Muhammad's Army, the Mujahidin Central Command and General Command of the Mujahidin of the Armed Forces.[14] Other groups such as the Islamic Army in Iraq and the

Mujahidin Army in Iraq have also used Islamist discourse to explain their motives. The Ba'athists who played a leading role in the insurgency included Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri; Saddam Hussein's half-brother Ibrahim Hasan al-Tikriti; Muhammad Yunis al-Ahmad (a Ba'athist regional commander) and Major-General Rashid Muhammad.[15] However, by 2004 the dynamics of the insurgency had been transformed by a number of developments: (i) the emergence of a sectarian Sunni insurgency led by Al-Qa'idah in Iraq under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi with appeals to Sunnis across the Islamic world to join it, (ii) the emergence of Shii insurgent groups, particularly the Mahdi Army led by Muqtada al-Sadr, (iii) Iranian covert intervention in the affairs of Iraq and the dispute between the Shii groups (such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, then called the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) that sought to take over the nascent Iraqi state from within and those such as the Mahdi Army which sought to lead a Shii Islamic revolution through fighting the coalition, (iv) the dispute over the nature of the Iraqi state, particularly over the issues of federalism and different kinds of Islamism. These developments introduced altogether new dynamics which increasingly transformed the Sunni-Ba'athist led insurgency into a multifaceted insurgency involving dozens of different informal networks with conflicting agendas.[16] A detailed examination of all such networks is well beyond the scope of this paper and requires a study in its own right. This paper will merely focus on some of the fault-lines of the insurgency and the role of informal networks in creating them.

Perhaps the most significant fault-line is the conflicting visions of Sunni insurgent groups. From the beginning, Al-Qa'idah sought to use Iraq as a platform to export its brand of Islamist extremism to the rest of the Middle East. However, the formation of Al-Qa'idah in Iraq was the result of an initial dispute over the choice of strategy within Al-Qa'idah. The bin Laden-Ayman al-Zawahiri group within Al-Qa'idah emphasized pan-Islamist goals and focused on fighting the US, which it described as the "far enemy". The aim of this group was to delegitimize and prepare the ground for overthrowing the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt by provoking the US to intervene militarily in the Middle East. The assumption behind this strategy was that US military intervention would provoke the masses because it would demonstrate those governments' lack of religious and political legitimacy.[17]

The Abu Musab al-Zarqawi group, the Tawhid and Jihad, however, pursued an altogether different strategy prior to the Iraq war. They focused their attention on fighting Israel and "the near enemies" which they saw as the government of Jordan.[18] The Zarqawi network was recruited primarily from fighters from Zarqa and Salt in Jordan. Moreover, many members of the Zarqawi network had been in Afghanistan, particularly Herat. There is little evidence of Zarqawi's sectarian tendencies prior to the Iraq war, though according to evidence from his associate Shadi Abdullah, Zarqawi's organization had a relationship with Iran prior to the Iraq war.[19] Zarqawi himself had stayed in Iran after fleeing Afghanistan in 2001. He was temporarily imprisoned by the Iranian authorities, who reportedly refused to extradite him to his native Jordan because he was in possession of a Syrian passport.[20]

Zarqawi's situation also raises the question of the Iranian regime's relationship with Al-Qa'idah. In the 1990s, Iran maintained contacts with Al-Qa'idah via two separate channels, the then Hezbollah security chief, Imad Mughniyah, who was killed in Damascus in February 2008, and the Sudanese strongman Hasan al-Turabi. Significantly, Mughniyah did not consider sectarian differences to be a barrier to cooperation with Al-Qa'idah. He had contacts with Al-Qa'idah and bin Laden going to back to the early 1990s when bin Laden was in Sudan.[21] Given Mughniyah's close relationship with Iran, particularly in his capacity as security adviser to

Ayatollah Khamenei, this means that the Iranian regime was also manipulating Al-Qa'idah. The 9/11 commission report as well as testimony by captured members of Al-Qa'idah indicate that the Iranian regime had a relationship with Al-Qa'idah. In the post 9/11 period, Iran continued its attempts to manipulate a large number of Al-Qa'idah members, including such high-ranking figures as Ayman al-Zawahiri and Saif al-Adl; bin Laden's son Saad reportedly ended up on Iranian territory.[22] However, this does not mean that Iran was acting as a unitary actor. Nor does it mean that Al-Qa'idah was acting at the behest of the Iranian regime. Evidence suggests that elements in the Iranian regime had contacts at the tactical level with Al-Qa'idah members because they both had an interest in opposing the US. The case of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi demonstrates that such cooperation never went beyond the tactical level. In fact, by 2004 Iran and Al-Qa'idah were pursuing vastly different regional strategies.

Zarqawi seems to have adopted Sunni sectarianism as the ideology of his group in order to recruit Sunnis and mobilize them in support of his strategy of destroying the Iraqi state.[23] His group sought the bin Laden-Zawahiri group's assistance probably because in the aftermath of the fall of the Taleban, the pan-Islamists in Al-Qa'idah were searching for a territorial base to ensconce themselves. In fact, Zawahiri had declared that Al-Qa'idah needed such a base to promote its ideology.[24] Moreover, the Zarqawi group relied upon Syria as a transit point and a source of logistical supply.[25] Syrian policy towards Zarqawi, the main enemy of Iran's main ally the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, was a salient example of differences between Iran and Syria over Iraq. Although after 9/11 Syria had initially cooperated with the Bush administration against Al-Qa'idah. President Bashar al-Asad changed Syrian policy reportedly because of the Bush administration's talk of regime change.[26]

The Iraqi Sunni groups' focus on expelling "the occupiers" from Iraq masked the vast differences between them over ideology, strategy and, above all, the future orientation of Iraq. The process of de-Ba'athification accelerated the formation of Sunni umbrella organizations and political coalitions. The most important component of Al-Qa'idah-Iraq's strategy was the destruction of the Iraqi state, a process which was accelerated as a result of Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) governor Paul Bremer's decision to set in motion the de-Ba'athification process.[27] The strategy of attacking the fledgling state apparatus was closely intertwined with the organization's sectarian strategy, which was aimed at eliminating Shii groups which sought to build up and take over the state apparatus.[28] In 2005 Zarqawi set up the Umar Brigades to fight against the Mahdi Army and other Shii groups.[29]

In effect, Al-Qa'idah-Iraq sought to place the coalition on the horns of a dilemma: govern the country directly through the barrel of a gun or withdraw your forces. Al-Qa'idah in Iraq began moving into Diyala in 2006 after losing its sanctuaries in Anbar province.[30] An extremist umbrella group set up by al-Qaida declared Baquba as the capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq.[31] US forces and volunteer groups have since been systematically pushing them out of Diyala.[32]

In retrospect, it is surprising how long it took the coalition to seek to take advantage of disputes among the Sunni insurgent groups. The main fault-line was between Al-Qa'idah in Iraq and Sunni religious/nationalist insurgent groups such as the 1920s Revolution Brigades, whose very name suggested that it saw itself as primarily a nationalist group. Sunni clerics connected with the Association of Muslim Scholars formed the Brigades in June or July 2003. These clerics had links to mosques associated with the Committee for Preaching, Guidance and Religious Rulings led by Shaykh Mahdi al-Sumaydi.[33] Increasingly, Al-Qa'idah in Iraq was seen by such religious/nationalist groups as a foreign entity which was

endangering the very existence of Iraq as a country. The Brigades had opposed the political process from the very beginning of the insurgency.[34] Al-Qa'idah Iraq's pan-Islamist agenda fractured the ranks of the Sunni insurgents. Sunni religious/nationalist insurgent groups also included the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Mujahidin Army in Iraq, and the Salah al-Din al-Ayubi Brigades of the Islamic Front for Iraqi Resistance.[35]

Zarqawi's pursuit of a sectarian strategy sharply divided the ranks of jihadist organizations not just in Iraq but also in the rest of the Middle East. A major turning-point was the decision by Zarqawi's mentor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi to sharply criticize him in interviews with Al-Jazeera and Arabic-language newspapers.[36] Maqdisi warned Zarqawi that "the American occupiers", not Shiis and Kurds were the enemy and urged him not to concentrate all his efforts on carrying out suicide bombings, making it clear that the Iraqis knew best what was good for their country.[37] Maqdisi's opposition to Zarqawi was extremely significant in view of his position in the jihadi-Salafist networks and his close relationship with such figures as Abu Qatada, who reportedly played an important role in expanding Zarqawi's European networks.[38]

Despite the fact that Zarqawi responded to Maqdisi by criticizing him and claiming that jihad in Iraq was "an obligatory act",[39] by 2006 it was clear that Zarqawi's actions had made Al-Qa'idah in Iraq unpopular among the most prominent leaders of the religious/nationalist insurgent groups. For example, on 28 May 2006, the Fatwa Council of Al-Rashidin Army issued a statement saying that attacks on Shii civilians were not part of "the jihad" in Iraq.[40] Moreover, the Islamic Army in Iraq made clear that it opposed Al-Qa'idah-Iraq's view of Shiis as heretics. It confined its criticism of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq to its paramilitary wing, the Badr Corps.[41] However, it is imperative to note that despite their vastly different strategies, both Al-Qa'idah Iraq and its Sunni opponents sought to gain transnational influence by exploiting the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Undoubtedly, the division in the ranks of Sunni insurgents has led to Al-Qa'idah's increasing isolation in Iraq. Initially, this led Al-Qa'idah leaders to pursue even more extremist policies. After Zarqawi was killed documents were discovered indicating that Al-Qa'idah was planning to launch false flag attacks to embroil the US with Iran.[42] Moreover, Zarqawi's successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, called on nuclear scientists to join the ranks of Al-Qa'idah Iraq. Since prior to his declaration Al-Qa'idah Iraq had not shown much interest in the tactical or battlefield use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, some observers speculated that the declaration applied to areas outside Iraq.[43] Such a strategy had already been recommended by Mostafa Setmariam Nasar (aka Abu Musab al-Suri). Nasar had sharply criticized bin Laden's strategy on various occasions and had been particularly critical of Al-Qa'idah's policy towards the Taleban.[44] However, despite his at times close relationship with Zarqawi, which included trips to Iran and Afghanistan, there is little evidence that they agreed on strategy.[45]

Al-Qa'idah-Iraq also sought to derail any agreement between the government and Sunni insurgents. For example, Al-Qa'idah has resorted to assassinating sheikhs and tribal leaders associated with the Sunni groups opposing Al-Qa'idah in Anbar,[46] though the backlash against Al-Qa'idah's tactics led its leaders to re-examine their approach for fear of alienating the population even further.[47] However, it is important to note that the Anbar model has not been successfully exported to all the areas experiencing insurgent violence. In February 2008, as the coalition was preparing for a protracted fight with Al-Qa'idah in Mosul, the Awakening Councils were conspicuous by their absence there.[48] Worse still, the disagreements among

the various Sunni factions in Anbar jeopardized the victories of the Awakening Councils.[49]

The failure of secular-Islamist alliances to preserve the unitary state

In analysing the extremely complex Iraqi political scene, it is important to point out at the outset that the formation of larger political groupings for electioneering or other political purposes should not be confused with political loyalties to factions or organizations. A case in point is former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's attempt to negotiate an agreement with Muqtada al-Sadr for the purpose of maintaining Iraq as a unitary state. Allawi's Iraqi National Accord has been active in trying to promote the vision of a still united Iraq. In pursuit of that objective Allawi has also entered into negotiations with Sunni insurgents.[50] Allawi seems to have been operating on the assumption that opposition to a federal Iraq would provide a basis for further negotiations[51] and also aimed to exploit Iraqi nationalism for the sake of political reconciliation.

That Sadr and the Sunni insurgents were prepared to hold talks with Allawi demonstrates the degree to which realpolitik rather than religious feelings determined the behaviour of those involved in the insurgency. Under Allawi's government, billions of dollars disappeared from the Iraqi Defence Ministry: Allawi himself admitted that a substantial sum of money had left the country. Moreover, many Iraqis believed that the CIA had contributed to Allawi's election campaign in 2005. He also had close relations with Jordan and Saudi Arabia.[52]

The main obstacle to Allawi's efforts has been support for federalism and sectarianism among Shii groups and militias. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has been criticized for being too soft on Shii militias. Reportedly, after operations aimed at removing the Mahdi Army from Baghdad, Maliki ordered that military commanders involved in cracking down on the Mahdi Army be removed.[53] Maliki had to tread a fine line between his allies in the Mahdi Army and the US. As a result, he often vacillated between different policy positions, projecting an image of an unreliable prime minister. Maliki's dilemma was perhaps best captured in a memorandum written by US National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley which argued that despite his talk of wanting to establish good relations with Kurds and Sunnis, the Iraqi prime minister's actions had "suggested a campaign to consolidate Shi'ite power in Baghdad". Hadley argued that Maliki had to re-define the basis of his power.[54] Maliki did try to modify his power base, thereby contributing to the intensification of centrifugal tendencies in the Iraqi state, particularly in Kurdistan.[55] But Maliki's actions made it difficult for the US to ensure that all the factions would be represented.

Allawi's Iraq-first solution to resolving the insurgency was predicated on the assumption that neither Sadr nor the Iraqi Accordance Front, one of the strongest mainly Sunni political groupings in the country, was interested in breaking up Iraq or allowing it to degenerate into a state of total anarchy. Hence Allawi was attacking the opponent's strategy rather than its battlefield tactics. A strategy focused on attacking individual insurgent organizations is rather like a fire-brigade approach. It will merely deal with superficial aspects of the insurgency and fail to eliminate or restructure the fault-lines which sustain the insurgency's momentum.[56] Allawi's approach, on the other hand, was strategic and was aimed at addressing some of the key issues which have given rise to the insurgency.

In the Shii camp, his key objective seemed to be to bring Sadr and the anti-al-Qa'idah Sunni insurgents into a de facto coalition to destroy Al-Qa'idah. However, his strategy caused severe problems for the Maliki government because it was undermining the very basis of the coalition behind the government. Maliki's Dawah Party and Sadr could work together in a coalition as long as they both opposed the federalization of Iraq. However, in 2007 Maliki began to move towards a federal solution to Iraqi insurgency by working closely with the Kurds. Maliki has taken steps to change the demographic balance by providing financial assistance to Arabs who wish to leave Kurdistan. The migration is a critical factor in ensuring that the demographic balance will favour the Kurds when there is a referendum on the future status of Kirkuk. Maliki's dependence on the Kurdish members of his government was so great that when they threatened to walk out, he had to make concessions to them over Kirkuk for fear that the collapse of his government would prevent the implementation of the counter-insurgency plan for Baghdad.[57]

Thus Maliki moved closer to the Supreme Islamic Council's policy position and he has maintained his relations with the two main Kurdish groups. Maliki has also managed to make a deal with the Sunni Iraqi Accordance Front and is still hopeful about forming a new, smaller (22 seat) and primarily technocratic cabinet. However, Maliki's government remains a coalition of four networks which themselves consist of a number of other informal networks or factions groups: the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Dawah Party, the Kurdistan Alliance and the Iraqi Accordance Front. Presumably the cabinet will represent the coalition that actually runs Iraq, apparently without much reference to parliament. The Iraqi Accordance Front withdrew from the government in summer 2007. The pledge to release thousands of detained Iraqis (a majority of them Sunni) met a key demand of the Front,[58] and its return will enable Maliki to regain his majority in parliament.

Sadr, however, is still vehemently opposed to the federalization of Iraq which he sees as a prelude to the partition of the country. That is precisely what brought Allawi and Sadr into negotiations. By late December 2007, and in the aftermath of Turkish attacks against northern Iraq and the announcement that the referendum on Kirkuk would be delayed, the Maliki government was reconsidering its position on Kirkuk. The government feared that if it allowed the Kurds to have their way on the issues of oil revenues and Kirkuk other regions of Iraq would be tempted to follow suit.[59] The driving force of the insurgency is thus the opposing strategies of various insurgent groups rather than sectarianism or religious affiliations per se. Had sectarianism been the key issue, Allawi and Sadr or Sadr and the Association of Muslim Scholars would never have been prepared to enter into talks with one another.

However, Ayman al-Zawahiri's statement accusing Iran of "stabbing" Al-Qa'idah "in the back" and accusing the general-secretary of Hezbollah, Shaykh Hasan Nasrallah, of pursuing narrow "sectarian" objectives,[60] makes clear that sectarianism is still a tool of warfare and is an indication of continuing support for Al-Qa'idah in Iraq. However, increasingly this sectarian approach is being opposed by former Sunni insurgent groups, such as the various awakening councils, which see the Al-Qa'idah strategy as destructive. The key issue in the relationship between Al-Qa'idah and Sunni groups is likely to remain the conflict between pan-Islamism and nationalism.

Shii groups and regional affiliations

The dynamics driving forward the intra-Sunni conflict have also been replicated in the Shii domain. However, in this case, the situation is far more complex in the sense that all of the actors involved in the conflict have managed to develop transnational connections.

Muqtada al-Sadr has emerged as one of the most powerful militia leaders in Iraq. Initially Sadr capitalized on his father's reputation as a religious leader to establish himself as a Shii leader. His lack of credentials and relative youth led many experts to question his judgment and radical pronouncements as being the product of his lack of experience. However, Sadr has demonstrated that he is a wily political operator and does not have any compunction about relying on external actors to further his political aims, namely the Islamization of the Iraqi political system. In that respect, Sadr is not much different from his father, who while preaching the virtues of Islamic rule and the guardianship of the supreme jurisconsult, was not averse to tacitly relying on Saddam Hussein for his political survival. In fact, Saddam Hussein may have acquiesced in Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr's emergence as a Shii leader as a means of checking the growing influence of Iranian-backed political groups in the aftermath of the 1990-1 Kuwait war.[61] Sadr represented the viewpoints and interests of Shii migrants from the provinces. Such migrants had little confidence in traditional centres of Shii learning such as the Najaf Theological Seminary which they saw as being under Iranian influence.[62] Moreover, Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr repeatedly emphasized his Iraqi credentials and was not considered an ally of Iran. However, his growing independence from the Ba'athist regime was almost certainly the cause of his assassination in 1999.

Muqtada al-Sadr's career trajectory has been somewhat different. He initially sought to establish himself as the representative of Grand Ayatollah Kadhim al-Ha'iri in Iraq, since his lack of political and religious experience meant that he needed a powerful patron to justify his political activism. At the same time, Ha'iri was safely situated in Iran, where he had been living since the early 1970s, and could therefore not scrutinize Sadr's activities too closely. Ha'iri also saw Sadr as a transitional figure who could prepare the ground for his own return to Iraq.[63]

Sadr's most important goal was to undermine his political rivals as well as the CPA. Sadr formed his own alternative cabinet in a gesture of defiance.[64] He was later charged with ordering the assassination of Majid al-Kho'i, the son of Grand Ayatollah Abolqasem al-Kho'i who was suspected of having arrived in Iraq with a CIA contingent and of being subsidized by the US.[65] Moreover, Sadr expressed his vehement opposition to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, whom he sought to remove from the political scene and who was castigated by Sadr's supporters for his Iranian origins.[66] After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Sadr's supporters laid siege to Sistani's house[67] and sought to compel Sistani to leave Iraq.[68] Sistani had called on the Shii population of Iraq not to oppose the coalition.[69] Sadr sharply criticized Sistani for his quietism and political passivity.[70]

Sistani had also opposed Iranian supreme leader Khamenei's interpretation of the concept of the guardianship of the supreme jurisconsult. Unlike Khamenei's supporters who contended that the supreme jurisconsult received his authority from God, Sistani argued that his position was dependent upon his standing in society.[71]

Ha'iri's close association with Khamenei and his envoy Sadr's opposition to Sistani raises questions about Khamenei's motives and suggest that initially Khamenei

supported Sadr's efforts to undermine Sistani's position.[72] Moreover, after the fall of Saddam Hussein there was disagreement between Sadr and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), led by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, over the question of establishing an Islamic government in Iraq. During the initial allied occupation of Iraq, some members of SCIRI made contradictory statements about whether they wanted an Islamic government to be established in the country. The disagreement between Sadr and SCIRI over this question also undoubtedly reflected broader disagreements at the highest echelons of the Iranian regime.[73] In the run-up to the Iraq war, Iranian policy was riddled with contradictions. Khamenei and his radical allies saw the Iraq war as an opportunity to mount a regional opposition to the US. The government of President Khatami, however, sought to enter into a dialogue with the US on the questions of Iraq and Afghanistan and pursued a policy of selective cooperation with the US as a means of persuading it to acquiesce in Iran's nuclear policy. As a result of the tug-of war, Iranian policy towards Iraq was reduced to the lowest common denominator and Iran adopted a policy of "active neutrality" in the conflict.[74]

After the removal of Saddam Hussein, fearful of an American attack, Iranian leaders sent various conciliatory messages to the Bush administration. However, the administration did not show any interest.[75] During this period, SCIRI was conscious of being publicly identified with the Iranian regime and it avoided making any references to the establishment of an Iranian-style Islamist state in Iraq. Although the Council pledged to the US that it would disarm its militia, the Badr Corps, some members did not disarm.[76] The assassination of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim did not change the organization's policy, which aimed at capturing the nascent state apparatus emerging under the CPA. At the same time, the Council took advantage of the insurgency in the country to strengthen its militia and use it to take over the fledgling state apparatus. If anything, this process accelerated after the restoration of official sovereignty in Iraq. The network around former Interior Minister Bayan Jabr Sulaq was repeatedly accused of supporting death squad operations against the council's opponents and of fomenting sectarianism in the country.[77]

However, it is important to note that a number of factors enabled the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq to move into a central strategic position in Shii politics. Firstly, the confrontation between Sadr and the coalition in Najaf led to Sistani's mediation and to a major improvement of relations between Sistani and Sadr.[78] Secondly, the confrontation led the Iranian regime under Ayatollah Khamenei to adopt a policy of working with Sistani and the Supreme Council at the strategic level while co-opting Sadr at the tactical level to put military pressure on the coalition. The most salient example of this was Sadr's declaration that the Mahdi Army represented the military wing of Sistani's political organization.[79] It is also likely that the Supreme Council's militia sought to drive a wedge between Sadr and Sunni insurgent groups by covertly supporting the activities of Abu Derra, described by some observers as "the Shii Zarqawi". Abu Derra, who is reportedly married to the sister of Hadi al-Ameri, the commander of the Badr Corps, has been involved in massacres of Sunnis, including in Baghdad. Abu Derra's blood ties to al-Ameri raise questions about his reported loyalty to Muqtada al-Sadr.[80] This interpretation is reinforced by statements by members of the Mahdi Army that Iran has been supporting phantom Mahdi Army groups. For example, in an interview with the International Crisis Group, a Mahdi Army commander said:

> *"I am pretty sure that thousands of so-called Mahdi Army fighters in fact are not working for the Mahdi Army. We hear about many such fighters training in Iran. I can't deny this. But you can be sure that most of those fighters do not*

> *belong to the Mahdi Army. Our Najaf office is very careful about dealing with Iranians because we do not understand why Iran is so interested in financing and training the Mahdi Army, and we cannot predict how its policy will evolve."*[81]

According to some members one reason why the Mahdi Army decided to halt its operations after the surge was to prevent Iran from exploiting it.[82] Other reports, however, indicate that Mahdi Army members have been boasting about receiving sophisticated explosive devices and street-combat training in Iran. They have also said that Iran compensated them for carrying out attacks on US convoys.[83]

What is clear is that the Iranian regime has had a very complex relationship with the Mahdi Army. It does not see the Mahdi Army as a disciplined military force such as Hezbollah, but it does see it as a force which is capable of damaging US interests in Iraq. For example, according to one US officer, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has concluded that the Badr Corps will only attack the Sunnis but not the Americans, and that even if it did attempt to fight US forces "it wouldn't last a single round". Therefore, he said, the Corps decided to provide assistance to the Mahdi Army for retaliatory attacks against US interests in Iraq in the event of military strikes against Iranian territory.[84] This explanation is consistent with the statements made by Muqtada al-Sadr during his visit to Iran in January 2006. Sadr held talks with the then secretary to Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani and Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki. Sadr spoke to reporters after his talks, declaring that the Mahdi Army would attack anyone who attacked Iran, Syria or Saudi Arabia.[85]

If anything, Sadr's dependence on Iran grew after the surge began. Moreover, Sadr has also consolidated his organization's relations with the Lebanese Hezbollah. The general-secretary of Hezbollah, Hasan Nasrallah, held Israel responsible for killing Hezbollah's security chief Imad Mughniyah, and threatened to wage an "open war" against Israel.[86] Sadr sent his condolences to Hezbollah and announced a three-day period of mourning for Mughniyah.[87]

The Mahdi Army also fears that the US would seek to apply against it the same strategy it implemented against Al-Qa'idah Iraq, namely supporting Shii militias opposed to it.[88] In fact, the US is already implementing this strategy. However, in the case of Iraqi Shii politics, this is likely to have exactly the opposite effect to that in the Sunni arena. In the case of Sunni organizations, the US has been supporting religious/nationalist groups which oppose a pan-Islamist agenda and which see Al-Qa'idah as a foreign entity. In the case of Shii groups, however, the US has been supporting the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the most militarily and politically powerful of all the pan-Islamist Shii groups.

Sadr has also been competing with Fadhila Party which was an offshoot of the original Sadrist movement led by his father and which had great influence in Basra.[89]

Yet another challenge to the position of the Mahdi Army, and one which is closely intertwined with the formation of breakaway factions, is the emergence of the extremist cult-like groups such as the Soldiers of Heaven, who have been involved in a number of major clashes already.[90] During Ashura (period of mourning for the third Shii Imam, Imam Husayn) in January 2007, more than 260 Soldiers of Heaven members were killed in clashes with Iraqi security forces after officials reportedly uncovered a plot by the group to attack the holy city of Najaf and kill Shii religious leaders. According to Ahmad al-Fatlawi, a member of the Najaf Security Committee, 400-500 Soldiers of Heaven were arrested during the battle and

subsequent investigation, and as many people were killed. However, some observers of Iraqi politics have contended that the crackdown was instituted by the government to undermine tribal and religious opposition to the government and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.[91]

Despite the Iraqi government's claims that the Soldiers of Heaven did not have many members (according to the deputy governor of Najaf, the organization had 1,000 members while government spokesman al-Dabbagh claimed that the group had only 331) and was virtually eliminated as a result of the operations carried out following the 2007 clashes, arrests of its members have continued. Between February and December 2007, more than 2,200 people were arrested by Iraqi security forces for their alleged connection to the Soldiers of Heaven. The arrests were made in Najaf, Karbala, Qadisiyah, Maysan and Babil. In a trial in September 2007 that included 458 defendants from the group, 10 members were sentenced to death and 54 defendants were acquitted. The rest received sentences from 15 years to life imprisonment. Various reports say lawyers appointed to defend the accused were not given the case files until the day before the trial and were not allowed to meet their clients before the trial.[92] In January 2008, at least 50 people were killed in Basra and Nasiriyah after suspected members of the Soldiers of Heaven attacked Shii worshippers and security forces.[93]

In the medium to long run, such groups will challenge not only the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, but also Muqtada al-Sadr's authority at the grass roots level and among the poor Shiis where support for Sadr is at its strongest. Paradoxically, the surge and the formation of groups such as the Soldiers of Heaven is likely to strengthen the position of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and by extension, that of the Iranian regime. In effect, the surge will prepare the ground for a sectarian solution to the conflict in Iraq, but on terms which will be favourable to Iran.

The Supreme Islamic Council and the containment of Iran

The surge was based on the assumption that Muqtada al-Sadr was either an agent of Iran or was being influenced by it. The Iranian regime has reportedly agreed to restrain him in return for a dialogue with the US. However, the current US policy of trying to work with the Supreme Islamic Council, which is Iran's main instrument for influencing Iraqi politics, is based on the fallacious assumption that the council can be induced to turn against Iran. Some neo-conservative observers seemed to believe that the French-educated Adel Abd al-Mahdi, the main author of the Council's plan for a federal Iraq,[94] would lead his group in a different direction from Iran while helping the US defeat Sadr.[95] However there has been very little evidence in support of this assumption. Instead, the Council will seek to harness US strategy for its own, as well as the Iranian regime's purpose, namely gaining tacit US acquiescence in Iran's predominance in southern and central Iraq as part of a federal arrangement for Iraq and as part of a bargain which will enable Iran to maintain a nuclear weapons capability.

Moreover, despite the surge, Gulf Cooperation Council states remain deeply concerned about the Iranian nuclear programme and Iranian influence in Iraq. They have decided to make concessions to Iran and invited President Ahmadinezhad to address their meeting.[96] Their approach, in effect, links a number of different issues, particularly the nuclear issue and Persian Gulf security, to one another,

thereby making it enormously difficult for the US to resolve each of them separately.

In the long run, it is likely that Shii networks such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq will serve as a means of generating geostrategic effect for Iran. Indeed, the case of the Council is a salient example of how geostrategic effect can be generated from the lower network level to the grand strategic level. Thus it is not at all surprising that Iranians should welcome the deal between Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim and Muqtada al-Sadr because it is aimed at preventing a split in the ranks of the Shii community and enables the Iranian regime to use its relations with those groups as a form of leverage to compel GCC states to realign their foreign policies and to negotiate with the US from a position of strength.

Given these considerations, particularly the imbalance between US counter-proliferation policy designed to weaken Iran and US counter-insurgency policy which is based on cooperation with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and dialogue with Iran, the key question will then be the containment of Iranian nuclear capability.[97] Thus a strategy based on working with the Supreme Islamic Council can, at best, be one based on the policy of containing rather than modifying or overthrowing the Iranian regime. It is unlikely in the extreme that the US or the coalition will be able to persuade the Council to turn against Iran or to use its militia to destroy the Iranian terrorist infrastructure in Iraq.

Iran has more than enough resources to ensure the evisceration of containment. The experience of the UK and US with Iraq in the 1990s should lead us to be wary of scenarios based on containment: the Iranian regime is much more resourceful and adroit than Saddam Hussein's. Containment cannot be maintained over an extended period. At best, it will only buy time for the US to recoup its losses and improve the battlefield situation in Iraq. The surge strategy has focused on short-term battlefield victories and is sacrificing strategic success for the sake of battlefield stability. So far, the strategy has been a political failure on both levels. Even on the battlefield, it has weakened the central government, undermining its legitimacy and making Sadr dependent on Iran. Despite the fact that some proponents of the strategy understand that Sadr has strong support at the grass roots level, they seem to believe that such support can be reduced through the use of military force.[98] However, such a strategy is likely to intensify opposition to the US in the region. It will either substantially strengthen Al-Qa'idah by removing one of the main barriers to the expansion of Al-Qa'idah in Iraq, namely Muqtada al-Sadr, or it will drive Sadr completely into the Iranian camp, enabling the Iranian leadership to carve itself out a sphere of influence within the framework of a strategic bargain with the US.

The case of Basra provides a salient example of the relationship between the tactical and grand strategic levels of network-centric politics and the way in which informal networks are involved at both levels. Basra's oil resources[99] and strategic location are both vital to Iranian regional strategy. Basra is also the scene of intense rivalry between Muqtada al-Sadr and his opponents. It is also absolutely vital to the viability of a Shii federal state of the sort the Supreme Islamic Council wants to create. The issue of Basra is also closely intertwined with factional rivalry within the Maliki government. Maliki belongs to the same faction in Da'wah as former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari and this faction opposes federalism. However, Maliki's efforts to cooperate with the US after the surge has also fractured the alliance with Sadr, who is also opposed to federalism. Thus the Baghdad-centric focus of the surge strategy has fractured the alliance between opponents of federalism.[100]

At the same time, the surge has also contributed to the ascendancy of the main allies of the Iranian regime, particularly the Supreme Islamic Council. Prior to the surge the Mahdi Army sought to dominate Baghdad and was gaining ground in mixed neighbourhoods, having also infiltrated the security forces and the police. Reportedly, the Iraqi Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani had close ties to the Mahdi Army.[101] It is highly unlikely that the US will be able to drive a wedge between the Iranian regime and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. Thus the future of the Iraqi state is closely intertwined with the future of US-Iranian relationship. An accommodation with the informal network around Adel Abd al-Mahdi will have vastly different implications from one with Dawah factions which are opposed to federalism.

Maliki has been prepared to abandon his ideology for the sake of personal political survival. He has tried to restructure his government and his power base and the Kurds have been the main beneficiary of his efforts. At the same time, he remains opposed to a US accommodation with Sunni insurgent groups fighting Al-Qa'idah. Thus Maliki's decision to put personal political survival above everything else has also complicated America's strategic choices.

It is in this context that the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq's repeated calls for a dialogue between the US and Iran must be analysed. Within the framework of such a dialogue the council can best protect its own interests, most notably the creation of a federal Iraq.[102] At the same time, the council has been reluctant to overtly support an Iranian-style theocracy in Iraq. The key issue of strategic importance to the council remains the take-over of the Iraqi state through institutional capacity-building and establishing a strategic dialogue with the US.[103] Thus it has been the chief beneficiary of the surge. The council's success also exemplifies the incoherence of America's regional strategy, most notably its objective of limiting Iran's regional influence. This strategy is markedly different from that of Muqtada al-Sadr whose main preoccupation has been the presence of coalition troops on Iraqi territory. These divergent visions, as well as the rivalries between the two groups, exploded in August 2007 when the Mahdi Army fired rocket-propelled grenades and rifles into a crowd of thousands of religious pilgrims, killing 50 people and wounding hundreds of others. According to several US officials it was at that point that the Iranian regime made a decision to rein in the Mahdi Army.[104]

The fact remains that Sadr and the Supreme Islamic Council have markedly different visions for the future of Iraq and it is unlikely that attempts at reconciliation will bring them closer on fundamental issues. Despite Sadr's modus vivendi with both Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, many Mahdi Army members remain hostile to both Sistani and Hakim.[105] Although, the Islamic Supreme Council has toned down its pro-federalist rhetoric,[106] federalism remains a key issue in Iraqi politics.[107] The creation of a federal zone will mean that a pro-Iranian Shii federal state will gain control of a vast portion of Iraq's oil. Given the close relationship between the Supreme Islamic Council and the Iranian state, it does not take a leap of imagination to assume that a federal Shii state will have a close strategic relationship with an increasingly assertive Iran, possibly including some sort of economic integration between southern Iraq and Iran. Thus there is a close relationship between geostrategic and geo-economic factors in southern Iraq and this relationship can be influenced by informal networks such as the Islamic Council, the Mahdi Army and the Fadhila Party.

One of the key issues which will determine Iraq's future geostrategic orientation will be the issue of succession to Grand Ayatollah Sistani as the leading Shii source of

emulation. Since taking over as Iran's supreme leader in 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei has been using his powers of patronage to establish his authority as the supreme guide for all Shii Muslims. Significantly, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq supported Khamenei's bid for the guardianship of all Shiis in 1994.[108] Grand Ayatollah Sistani is the richest of all Shii sources of emulation and his assets have been estimated to be $3 billion. Therefore, in comparison with other Shii sources of emulation, he can afford to pay high salaries to his students. However, Ayatollah Khamenei has been using state revenues to further his political objectives and as a result he can afford to pay the highest salaries to his students.[109] He has aimed at politicizing the issue of theological leadership if only because of his own weak theological position. Moreover, according to some accounts, Khamenei has also been dependent on the current head of Iranian Judiciary and former spokesman for the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi, for the consolidation of his position as a theologian.[110] Hence the issue of succession to Sistani is closely intertwined with Khamenei's efforts to gain control of informal clerical networks.

Moreover, given the increasingly prominent role of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq in the political side of US counter-insurgency operations, one can see that there is a clear imbalance between US counter-proliferation policy towards Iran, which is aimed at weakening the Iranian state apparatus, and US counter-insurgency operations in Iraq which tacitly recognize the preponderant role of the Iranian regime in Iraq. One can deduce that unless the US succeeds in driving a wedge between the Iranian regime and the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq - an unlikely eventuality - the long-term effect of US counter-insurgency operations will be Khamenei's increasing consolidation of control over informal clerical networks in the world of Shii Islam. Hence US counter-insurgency efforts in Iraq are undermining the US' regional counter-proliferation policy.

An Iraq-first solution: Interfering with Al-Qa'idah's OODA Loop?

One of the key issues in the debate about network-centric warfare has been the disruption of the enemy's so-called OODA (observation, orientation, decision, action) loop.[111] So far, most network solutions to the Iraq war have focused on disrupting the loop between the decision and action levels. As a result, the coalition has been mainly focused on gaining battlefield victories. The assumption driving the strategy forward seems to be that disrupting the networks at that level will have an attrition effect and that the insurgents will either be eliminated or change their strategy. This assumption has proven to be wrong because the insurgents' politics reflect the cleavages within Iraqi society. Thus battlefield victory will not eliminate the causes of the insurgency. Moreover, the surge strategy has enabled the informal networks involved in the insurgency, particularly Al-Qa'idah Iraq and the Mahdi Army, to exploit the coalition's military strategy to further their own strategic agendas. In effect, they are using the surge as a force multiplier in their efforts. Hence the effect of disrupting their OODA loop between decision and action has been to intensify the insurgency at the political level and in key regions outside Baghdad.

On the whole, there are only two other choices: (i) accepting strategic defeat and changing US grand strategy, which is what most critics of the administration's approach are recommending or (ii) attacking the insurgents' OODA loop between observation and orientation. This was pursued by former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and Sunni insurgents opposing Al-Qa'idah; it is basically aimed at waging an ideological war against Al-Qa'idah, changing its members' perceptions of their

environment and, ultimately, their loyalty to their organization. This is the sine qua non of prevailing in conflicts at the sub-national level.[112]

Attacking Al-Qa'idah at the level between observation and orientation has been absolutely critical to the success of the coalition's effort as far as the Sunni aspect of the insurgency is concerned. This is a classic example of cognitive information warfare and it is aimed at disorienting the enemy at the ideological level. The key to its success has been the abandonment of the totalitarian framework for the analysis of Islamist groups and the focus on concrete policies and strategies of Sunni insurgent groups.

Ultimately, the main challenge facing the surge strategy is the process of competitive adaptation[113] which insurgent organizations have undergone several times during the course of the Iraq conflict, indicating that strategic issues take precedence over other factors such as sectarianism or battlefield tactics. Competitive adaptation occurs in the observation and orientation sections of the OODA loop. Hence counter-insurgency and information operations must focus on targeting insurgent groups' ability to adapt competitively. In the case of the Iraqi insurgency, this process also takes different forms for different groups because of vast differences over the choice of policy. The key issue remains the control or destruction of the fledgling state apparatus. Al-Qa'idah-Iraq remains committed to the destruction of the Iraqi state, whereas both the Supreme Islamic Council and the Muqtada al-Sadr group seek to take over the state. However, there are still serious differences between the Mahdi Army and the Council over the nature of that state.

No analysis of the Iraqi insurgency will be meaningful without taking account of the various groups' definition of victory.[114] It is in this context that one should analyse the process of competitive adaptation. A group's decision to change its strategy in order to survive is also an indicator of the emerging political fault-lines in a polity. In August 2007 Muqtada al-Sadr called on his followers to put down their weapons for six months, and took up religious studies to become an ayatollah,[115] an indication of his awareness that his lack of religious seniority had undermined his efforts to lead the Shii community in Iraq.[116] The Mahdi army has suffered several set-backs, the most important of which was the formation of break-away factions.[117] The main objective of Sadr's policy towards the US seems to have been to guarantee his own security and to ensure that the US would not attack the Mahdi army, while doing nothing to prevent the US from attacking the break-away factions.[118] It is too early to say whether Sadr's retreat to Iran - ostensibly to study theology in Qom[119] – will lead to his complete dependence on the Iranian regime. Despite his call for a cease-fire there have been periodic violations of various cease-fire accords by the Mahdi Army, indicating that the Mahdi Army is unlikely to become a solely political group in the near future.[120]

The conflict in northern Iraq

Northern Iraq is just as deeply affected by the presence of informal networks as the rest of Iraq. Indeed, over the years, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have been functioning as informal networks with their own militias. A number of Islamist networks have also been operating in northern Iraq. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has been described as the fore-runner of all the Islamist political networks and groups in Iraq,[121] it is imperative to note that there are vast differences over policy and strategy among such groups. For

example, the Islamic Party, which is an Iraqi offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, has been cooperating with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and has, therefore, overcome the sectarian barrier to cooperation between Shii and Sunni Muslims.[122] Others, however, have chosen the sectarian path because their leaders sought to bring about the collapse of the Iraqi state and saw sectarianism as the most effective means of doing so. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established a relationship with Ansar al-Islam and Ansar al-Sunnah in pursuit of his strategy of turning Iraq into a platform for exporting jihad to other Middle Eastern states.[123] What is particularly noteworthy, however, is the relationship between such informal networks and the fledgling Iraqi state apparatus. The fact that the Iraqi president and foreign minister are Iraqi Kurds is indicative of the transformation of Iraqi politics. Moreover, increasingly Prime Minister al-Maliki has sought to consolidate his government's relations with the Kurds in order to counter the activities of the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr who left his government in protest at its policy towards the US.

A number of issues are likely to ensure that the behaviour and policies of informal networks, particularly PUK and KDP, will be closely intertwined with larger geostrategic and economic issues which are rapidly transforming the regional landscape. The first is the perception that Iraqi Kurdistan is preparing the ground for an independent state by signing economic, particularly oil agreements with foreign companies.[124] Secondly, Turkish leaders believe that northern Iraq has become a haven for the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) which is using northern Iraq not to just launch attacks against Turkey but also to instigate secessionist activities in southeastern Turkey.[125] Tensions have been rising between the Kurdish region and Turkey over this issue. It is believed that as many as 3,000 PKK fighters live in northern Iraq.[126] Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Masud Barzani have sought to establish links between northern Iraq and Turkey and at meetings with Turkish officials they have reportedly said that they see the PKK's presence as a threat.[127] However, the issue remains highly controversial in view of contradictory reports on Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's position on the extradition of PKK members in Iraq. According to a Turkish official, Talabani stated he would not exclude the possibility. However, Talabani's office issued a statement saying that PKK leaders were not living in Iraqi Kurdish cities but with a thousand of their fighters in the inaccessible Qandil mountains. He added that extraditing them would be contrary to the Iraqi constitution, as well as to "Iraqi ethics and international norms".[128]

Turkish President Recep Teyyip Erdogan has sharply criticized the European Union for refusing to do more to crack down on PKK activities.[129] The PKK issue has also caused tensions in Turkey's relations with the US. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has declared the PKK to be the US and Turkey's "common enemy" and has stated that Kurdish president Masud Barzani has promised to distance his administration from the PKK. But Turkish leaders found Rice's assurances unconvincing,[130] and launched attacks against northern Iraq. Turkey may have discussed its moves against the PKK with Iranian President Ahmadinezhad,[131] thereby indicating that it profoundly disagrees with the Bush administration's perceptions of regional threats at least where its own interests are at stake. Increasingly, the US is being compelled to change its strategic priorities in reaction to the realignment of the foreign policies of some of its closest regional allies, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.[132] Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan has sharply criticized the US for seeking to impose further sanctions on Iran, contending that it was inadvertently strengthening Iran throughout the Middle East.[133]

Pradoxically, from an electoral point of view, Erdogan's party has a lot more at stake in northern Iraq than its secularist opponents. It is trying to redefine the basis of Kurdish politics and is hopeful that recent amendments to the constitution, making

the president electable by the people for a five-year term, will consolidate the party's position. For that reason, the PKK challenge has occurred at the worst possible time for Erdogan. Moreover, Turkey has been tacitly encouraging the re-emergence of Turkish Hezbollah as a counter-weight to PKK in southeastern Turkey.[134]

Within the Iranian state, there seems to be tacit consensus that Shii federalism is the way forward in Iraq. However, the key issue for Iran is whether Shi'is form a federal region before or after the Kurds. If a federal Kurdish government is formed before a Shi'i one, then the Shi'is will be able to cite the Kurds' decision as justification for forming their own. Moreover, Iran will then have a pretext for cooperating with Turkey and Syria to undermine such a Kurdish entity. During the crisis provoked by PKK's shelling of Turkey, the Iranian government sought to mediate between Turkey and Iraq, and Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki declared that there would be no need for a Turkish invasion of northern Iraq because there were other ways of dealing with the issue.[135] Iranian policy is aimed at drawing Turkey into a web of relationships, particularly on the Kurdish and energy issues,[136] in order to persuade Ankara not to side with the US on the Iranian nuclear issue. This policy is fully consistent with the actions of the leader of Supreme Islamic Council, Abd al Aziz al-Hakim, who is also the main advocate of Shi'i federalism in Iraq. Hakim declared that there was no justification for the PKK's actions,[137] going so far as to support Turkey on this issue.[138] It is too early to say whether Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's offer of a strategic relationship to Turkey[139] will change Turkish policy towards northern Iraq in the medium to long-term or whether Ankara will accept the existence of a federal Iraq.

Linkage politics and state-building

The strategic, policy and operational problems caused by informal networks in Iraq have been accentuated by the lack of a coherent programme for state-building. The decision to encourage democracy rather than a new form of republicanism in Iraq brought to the surface conflicting visions for its future. The decision was partly a response to Ayatollah Sistani's call for free elections in Iraq. Sistani himself was then used by the Iranian regime as a vehicle to further its own agenda in Iraq. Sistani's vulnerability to political pressure compounded the problems facing his supporters, a number of whom were assassinated in 2007. This was against a background of growing divisions within the Shi'i community which led to clashes between supporters of the Mahdi Army and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.

It would be no exaggeration to argue that the dispute over the future nature of the Iraqi state, or indeed even its existence, has been the main cause of the insurgency in that country. One can even argue that the state apparatus and the constitution are exacerbating the insurgency by preventing the formation of a centralized state capable of quelling the insurgency, and strengthening the very fault-lines that caused the insurgency in the first place. Moreover, such disputes have undermined the process of establishing governmental institutions both in Baghdad and provinces. It would be wrong to assume that the sectarianism tearing the country apart is the only cause of this dispute and that dividing the country will resolve the conflict.[140]

There have been significant intra-Shii and intra-Sunni conflicts in Iraq. The conflict between the Anbar Salvation Council and Al-Qa'idah Iraq and that between Muqtada al-Sadr and the Supreme Islamic Council are as much about the future orientation of Iraq as about Iraqi political leaders' struggle for power. At the same

time, any external proposals for the division of the country are likely to alienate all Iraqi political leaders, as the reactions to the Biden proposal for the soft partition of the country demonstrated.[141]

The Iraqi polity is being pulled in opposite directions by an array of informal networks which, at times, pursue vastly contradictory objectives. At the same time, powerful regional countries (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Syria) are unlikely to forego the option of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs, because they do not believe that either the coalition or Iraqi political leaders can be relied upon to secure their interests in an increasingly fragmented Iraq. Thus any effort to start the process of state, rather than democracy, building in Iraq must begin with an effort to shape Iraqi linkage politics. That is the domain in which vital strategic interactions will take place. One such linkage is the one affecting the central government and Sunni Arab tribes. The Maliki government has been trying to reconstitute its power base by reaching out to the Kurds. Some of Maliki's allies also favour a similar plan for the Sunni tribes, whom they find more reliable than the Sunni bloc of parties which left the government. At the same time, there is concern that the government must exercise greater control over efforts to reach out to the Sunni tribes.

The dynamics of the insurgency in Anbar and the political situation in southern-central and northern Iraq demonstrate various aspects of linkage politics. In Anbar the central government is dependent on the US and Sunni tribes for quelling the insurgency. In fact, Anbar has become a model for quelling Sunni insurgencies in the rest of the country.[142] Since the surge led to close cooperation with newly formed Iraqi units, Iraqis have established local security forces called Concerned Local Citizens. They are ad hoc auxiliary police forces and lightly armed. Although reportedly they receive no weapons, they are paid by US forces. The Iraqi government is reconsidering the status of such forces. In some areas they have been integrated into local or national police forces or into the Iraqi army. However, in some cases the Iraqi government has been reluctant to do so because some of them have fought against it.[143]

Indeed, while welcoming the fact that Sunni tribes have chosen to turn against Al-Qa'idah Iraq and promising 120 million dollars to the province as a gesture of reconciliation,[144] the Maliki government is concerned that counter-insurgency efforts might empower the Sunni tribes involved in counter-insurgency operations and undermine the rule of the central government.[145] In the north, however, the situation is vastly different. There the Sunnis are dependent on the government's bargaining power vis-à-vis the Kurds who are, in turn, vulnerable to the actions of Iranian and Turkish governments. In southern Iraq the dispute over federalism and the nature of the Iraqi state are likely to continue. In fact, Sadr's level of popularity in the south means that the continuation of the surge and the suppression of the Mahdi Army are likely to lead to civil war there, because Sadr and the Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council, Fazila Party and local Basra federalists are pursuing vastly different political agendas. Local Basra federalists do not approve of the boundaries of the sort of federal state that the Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council has envisaged.[146] Basrawi nationalists are primarily interested in ensuring that local oil revenues will be spent on their own region. Sadr, who remains the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's main opponent, however, still remains opposed to the federal project. Indeed, this is likely to be the main trigger point for a southern civil war, and given the level of influence of both Sadr and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, it is likely that such a civil war will spill over into other Shii regions of the country and rekindle hostilities among other sectors of Iraqi body politic.[147]

Not until the coalition has begun to shape the main arena in which informal networks operate, will it be in a position to envisage the contours of a future Iraqi

state. At present, there is no agreement among the major Iraqi groups involved in the insurgency that all the linkages are legitimate or should be maintained. For example, Sunni insurgent groups which have received assistance from Saudi or Syrian sources are unlikely to see the actions of Kurdish or Shii groups pursuing linkage politics as legitimate. The same is true of Shii and Kurdish informal networks. The Ankara security conference on Iraq in late 2007, which became an arena for settling Turkey's dispute with the Kurdish Regional Government over the issue of PKK presence in northern Iraq is a case in point.

Moreover, linkage politics in the south are such that they are likely to affect the region's relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait for years to come. A southern Iraqi Shii federal zone can be expected to try to integrate at least at the economic level with Iran, and to reach out to Saudi and Bahraini Shi'is. This will make the Iraqi state's access to the sea dependent on the Shi'is', not to mention the Iranians' goodwill.[148] The formation of an Iraqi Shi'i state will be a direct threat to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain and probably also other GCC states. Such a state will not be a maritime power, but it will be dependent on Iran, a maritime power which will probably be increasingly inclined to flex its muscles. Moreover, Iran is building a second nuclear reactor near its border with Iraq.[149] The Iran-Iraq border area is therefore likely to become even more geo-strategically important in the medium to long-term. Thus in southern and central Iraq the conflict for supremacy will have significant regional, and indeed global, geostrategic consequences.

Conclusion: Iraq and post-international politics

The activities of informal networks and the inability or unwillingness of the central government or provincial authorities to curb the activities of such groups have led some scholars, most notably a former head of the US State Department's policy planning staff Stephen Krasner, to propose the redefinition of the very concept of sovereignty in international relations. Krasner's proposal is based on the assumption that the concept of sovereignty has lost its meaning as the main organizing principle of international relations, which is based on the somewhat outdated assumption that international relations and inter-state relations are identical.[150] Krasner examined the prevailing models for resolving protracted conflicts and found them wanting. Krasner's proposed solution to the problem is based on re-introducing the concept of trusteeship for areas that are not governed by their central governments.[151]

The concept, as Krasner admits, is unlikely to be acceptable to the international community for a number of reasons. Firstly, in an era of increasing political awakening it is likely to be interpreted as being symbolic of a bygone colonial era. Secondly, given the disagreements between major powers, it is unlikely that the international community will be able to create a concert of powers arrangement for such conflicts. Thirdly and, above all, the main flaw in Krasner's argument is that it is based on an antiquated notion of sanctuary and generation of strategic power. It is based on the notion that control of territory is what gives insurgent groups power and that denying them such control will also prevent them from generating strategic power. However, control of territory is no longer necessary for gaining political space.[152] Indeed, in the era of globalized insurgencies control of territory can under certain circumstances be an obstacle to gaining political space.[153] Ultimately, gaining political, and not necessarily territorial, space and influence is the main objective of all insurgent groups.

Iraq is a microcosm of the global strategic landscape which has been shaped by the emergence of post-international politics. In post-international politics there is little or no distinction between domestic and international politics or national and transnational actors.[154] Such distinctions have been increasingly blurred by porous boundaries and the emergence of linkage politics. Spheres of authority have emerged in place of domestic and international actors, and represent the interests of sovereignty-free actors who are not necessarily bound by norms of international behaviour.[155] Given the porous nature of the Iraqi polity and the increasing fragmentation of the Iraqi state the informal networks active at all levels of Iraq's post-international politics have had major geostrategic effects at national, regional, and indeed global levels. At the same time, the concept of territoriality has lost much of its meaning in international politics.

The current British and American preoccupation with "governance of ungoverned spaces" says a lot about the dynamics shaping post-international politics. However, it is imperative to note that such "ungoverned" spaces are often under the control of forces that are hostile to the interests of the UK or the US or the state they are supporting. Iraq is a case in point. The Iraqi government does not have a monopoly on the use of force in the country and it is unlikely to have such a monopoly in the near future. Above all, it has become abundantly clear that even the Iraqi groups that are participating in the political process cannot agree on even a minimalistic definition of the concept of raison d'état. As a result Iraq has a multi-layered state apparatus fighting multiple insurgencies.

Moreover, given the large number of such "ungoverned" spaces in the world, it is unlikely that the old combination of direct use of military power and provision of economic assistance will put an end to insurgencies. In past insurgencies during the Cold War or the colonial period, it was possible to isolate insurgents and to clear up areas in which they were present through the use of military power, the provision of economic assistance and arming local forces hostile to insurgent groups. In post-international politics, however, the use of cyberspace means that the battle-space is non-linear and may even be non-territorial and non-contiguous. Thus sanctuaries can exist in the middle of metropolitan areas of countries involved in counter-insurgency warfare.[156] These are two areas in which informal networks increasingly thrive. Moreover, as sovereignty-free and amorphous actors, informal networks can engage in ambiguous warfare. Indeed capacity-building for ambiguous warfare is the area where informal networks are most threatening. Moreover, as the West's experience with Algerian and other networks has shown, capacity-building for terrorist activities can take place as part of a larger effort to engage in hostile political activities, not all of which may be illegal. Terrorist financing is an example of the use of virtual sanctuaries. The fact that there is no agreement on what constitutes terrorist financing demonstrates the difficulty of formulating effective counter-terrorism strategies in the era of post-international politics.[157]

Ultimately, the challenge at the broadest level is reducing the power and influence of hostile spheres of authority. It is important to note that there is a distinction between those and terrorist organizations. The dispute over the designation of various Middle Eastern groups as terrorist is a case in point. Indeed hostile capacity building for political action demonstrates the extent to which sovereignty-free actors can threaten the sovereignty of Western nations. Although the activities of Islamist groups seeking to change foreign policies of Western powers are not always state-sponsored, the fact remains that such activities are a direct threat to the sovereignty of Western nations whose governments have been given a mandate by their electorate to pursue their policies.

Iraq is a salient example of a post-modern insurgency taking place in the post-international political system in which the concept of raison d'état is losing its meaning. In fact, even a cursory glance at the historical evidence indicates that in Iraq the concept of raison d' état never really took hold. The country was governed by a series of patrimonial dictatorships in which informal networks played a key role.[158] What such informal networks did, of course, was establish spheres of authority. Some authors, such as Marc Sageman, have argued that the pressure on core Al-Qa'idah has led to the emergence of franchise groups or hubs which operate independently of core Al-Qa'idah if only because the leadership of core Al-Qa'idah has been under such pressure since 9/11 that the security of the leadership has taken precedence.[159] However, as we have seen in this paper, this is only a tactical explanation. The leader of Al-Qa'idah Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had managed to establish extensive links to various groups in Europe, including those who were responsible for terrorist attacks or plots.[160]

There are vast differences between various jihadist and religious/nationalist groups over the choice of strategy and tactics because they have different visions. Thus one cannot address the issue of governance in Iraq without dealing with the challenge of hostile spheres of authority. Indeed, by early 2008 some US commanders in the field had come to this conclusion, contending that while Al-Qa'idah was seen as a foreign entity and had been defeated, the Shii challenge was likely to be long-term and enduring.[161] However, in order to deal with the issue of governance, one must address the issue of what James Rosenau has called aggregation dynamics, namely the way in which issues are linked to one another at different levels,[162] and their role in the formation of informal networks. Key questions such as federalism, the role of religion in Iraqi politics and the conflict between Iraqi first and pan-Islamist insurgent organizations have generated aggregation and disaggregation dynamics within the insurgency itself that transcend sectarian boundaries. The major characteristic of insurgencies in the era of post-international politics is likely to be the relationship between aggregation dynamics at micro and macro levels. Informal networks will play a key role in all such insurgencies because through their nodes they inhabit all the levels of interaction ranging from intra-state to inter-state and global levels. What connects these levels to one another is the ability of individual members of such informal networks to attach emotions to issues of importance to them.[163] That is why the war of ideas is a vital part of counter-insurgency efforts in the era of post-international politics.

Endnotes

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ISBN 978-1-905962-43-3

Published By:

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

Advanced Research and Assessment Group
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Block D, JSCSC
Shrivenham
SN6 8TS
England

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ISBN 978-1-905962-43-3