

Conducting Counterinsurgency Operations

Lessons from Iraq (2003–2006)

The United States is now in the fifth year of trying to quell violence that began when it invaded and occupied Iraq. Multiple challenges from insurgents, extremists, militias, and criminals have threatened to destroy the country. A new RAND Corporation study, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003–2006)*, examines the U.S. political and military difficulties in coming to grips with these challenges and in protecting the Iraqi population as the situation continued to deteriorate. The authors provide a historical overview of the conflict in Iraq and a discussion of the armed groups that have participated in it. However, the primary purpose of the report is to analyze the U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) effort in Iraq and to make observations and recommendations for improving the conduct of future COIN operations.

COIN Operations Should Exert Maximum Pressure on the Enemy’s Freedom to Act and Influence

The United States did not have a coherent COIN strategy in Iraq for more than three years. In the absence of such a strategy, coalition forces focused on tactical approaches—e.g., door-to-door raids and presence patrols—which became increasingly intermittent and ineffective over time. Unable to synchronize outcomes at the strategic and operational levels of warfare, senior commanders shifted their focus from one city to another—most notably Tal Afar, Fallujah, and particularly Baghdad, which was rapidly spinning out of control. Rather than being deterred, enemy combatants appeared to be emboldened. Law-abiding Iraqi citizens never knew what to expect from either side.

A successful COIN strategy involves selecting the right elements to pursue, achieving synergy and balance among those elements, and continually assessing their impact on the enemy’s

Abstract

From 2003 to 2006, the United States failed to mount an effective counterinsurgency (COIN) effort in Iraq and to adequately protect the civilian population. Combined with a persistent inability to adapt to changing dynamics and trends within the insurgency, this failure contributed substantially to a steady increase in violence. The authors analyze the actions that were taken—or should have been taken—by the United States, discuss implications for potential future conflicts, and offer recommendations to improve U.S. capability to conduct COIN operations.

freedom to act and to exert influence. Figure 1 illustrates seven key elements that should be part of COIN strategy. Maximum pressure must be exerted *simultaneously* along every axis, although the relative intensity may vary according to specific conditions. If this is not done, enemy reconstitution and regeneration can be expected to continue indefinitely.

- **Demonstrate the ability and willingness to use precise and appropriate force.** A deeply rooted insurgency, one that enjoys widespread support from a population, cannot be defeated by military force alone. However, the United States must be prepared to employ both ground and air power with sufficient speed, strength, and precision to deter the enemy. At least at the outset, Iraqi citizens appeared to understand and forgive mistakes regarding the use of force—for example, the rash of checkpoint incidents that plagued the coalition early on. What they did not understand was coalition *inconsistency* regarding the use of force.

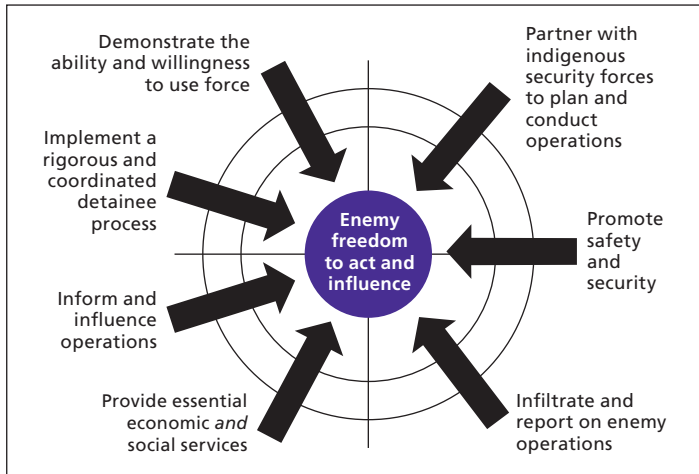
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Figure 1
Key Elements of COIN Strategy Should Be Conducted Simultaneously to Exert Maximum Pressure on the Enemy



- **Partner with indigenous security forces to plan and conduct operations.** Indigenous forces are central to a successful COIN effort, especially because the ultimate goal of COIN is to encourage allegiance to the legitimate government. At both the strategic and operational levels of command in Iraq, there was very little evidence of partnership in either routine or key planning sessions. In contrast, however, U.S. Army Special Forces undertook combat advising at the tactical level. Their approach, which seemed to work well, involved encouraging and motivating indigenous troops by living among them and accompanying them on missions.
- **Promote public safety and security.** A principal goal of COIN, and the first step in effective governance, is to protect the population in order to obtain its tacit and active support in putting down the insurgency. Until early 2007, the U.S. effort in Iraq failed to assign adequate priority to this goal. This policy oversight seriously damaged attempts to rebuild the nation. More specifically, the inability to secure Baghdad has remained a blight on U.S. COIN efforts in Iraq.

COIN requires ongoing examination of critical tradeoffs that are not always obvious at the tactical level. For example, the safety of U.S. forces cannot be perceived to be achieved at the *expense* of the host population. In addition to appearing to be insensitive to the rising death toll among Iraqi noncombatants, coalition planners tended to overlook or underemphasize the plight of Iraq's forgotten human capital—detainees, internally displaced citizens, and refugees—as a key indicator of a downturn in security.

- **Infiltrate and report on enemy operations.** In COIN, intelligence about the enemy is predominantly a bottom-up process based on reports from the field. Much useful information can be acquired by police who are in daily contact with their neighborhoods or through the efforts of intelligence organizations at various levels. In Iraq, senior field commanders, guided by shortsighted interpretations of risk management, often considered counterintelligence field activities to be too dangerous. Hence, there was minimal pressure on enemy foot soldiers—many of whom operated out of their local neighborhoods—to exercise caution in carrying out their activities or to decline joining the insurgency in the first place.
- **Provide essential economic and social services.** Reconstruction is an important tool in COIN, especially when it is associated in people's minds with the legitimate government. Unemployed and, more often, merely opportunistic young men are a primary recruiting pool for terrorist and insurgent groups as well as for militias. Therefore, in an effective COIN strategy, reconstruction projects and the windfalls of investment they bring to troubled neighborhoods must be carefully managed to prevent making matters worse. Sudden infusions of cash from well-intentioned projects may have the unintended effect of increasing the prospects of local militias and insurgents by providing the youth pool with a bonanza of DVD players with which to watch extremist propaganda videos, cell phones to be used by lookouts acting on behalf of insurgent cell leaders, and cars from which to drop improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by the side of the road. Equally important is the ongoing battle over the provision of social services, something that was largely overlooked by the coalition in Iraq. In their absence, the Jaysh al Mahdi, an Iraqi paramilitary force created by the militant Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, stepped in to fill the gap, thereby gaining support from the population.
- **Inform and influence operations.** Top-down, official information organs of the U.S. government have little credibility in the Arab world. The perceptions of a beleaguered Iraqi populace proved hard to change during this period. Even the most sophisticated influence campaigns attempted by coalition planners failed to change the harsh realities of the Iraqi street. All too often in Iraq, senior commanders and their information operations planners focus on the U.S. domestic audience and attempt to portray the situation too optimistically. The United States should make stronger efforts to *inform* rather than *influence* the more important target audi-

ence—the Iraqi public—regarding any given military operation.

- **Implement a rigorous and coordinated detainee process.** Detainee operations have been addressed in military doctrine as an issue of little import to COIN. The Iraq experience, and the deleterious effects that ensued from this oversight, have changed this perception. Rigorous detainee operations can assist COIN by removing dangerous persons from society, generating sources of useful information, and in some cases co-opting people who might otherwise remain opponents of the government. Detainees should be held under humane conditions that demonstrate commitment to human rights, thoroughly interrogated by personnel skilled in proper techniques, and segregated into groups that isolate hard-core terrorists from the rest. Confinement facilities should not be schools for insurgency, nor should they be allowed to become warehouses for young men who might be considered *potential* enemy combatants.

The United States Did Not Sufficiently Protect the Iraqi Population

In June and July of 2004, Iraqi insurgents began to shift their focus away from U.S. and coalition forces and instead began targeting the Iraqi population. By attacking civilians and accepting their targeting in retribution, the insurgents sought to expose the weakness of the coalition-Iraqi security and reconstruction apparatus, threaten those who collaborated with the government, generate funds and propaganda, and increasingly enact sectarian revenge. The coalition failed to

adapt to this shift, thereby making an error that had dramatic consequences, as shown in Figure 2.

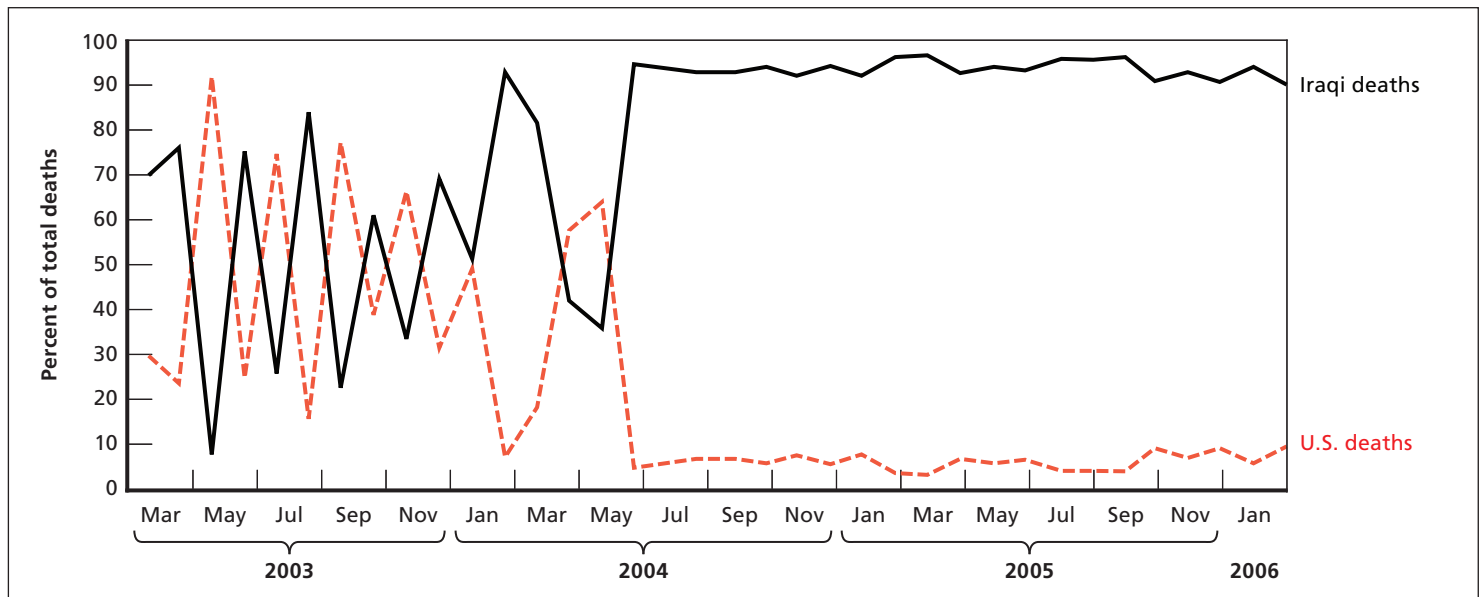
The U.S. response centered on hardening administrative and combat vehicles, fielding specialized bomb-clearance vehicles, deploying sensors mounted on unmanned aerial vehicles, and using snipers against persons emplacing roadside bombs. However, little thought or strategy has been devoted to countering suicide bombers and vehicle-borne IEDs, the main IED killers of Iraqis.

The United States Needs to Improve Its Ability to Plan and Conduct COIN Operations

COIN is a political-military effort that requires both good governance and effective military action. Among the recommendations the authors make for improving U.S. ability to develop COIN strategy are the following:

- **Quickly develop a coherent and balanced COIN strategy that includes the seven key elements discussed above.** Senior military commanders and planners must establish an adequate mechanism with which to constantly address and assess overall performance in COIN operations. The United States must also regularly evaluate its COIN strategy to determine what modifications might be required in response to adaptations made by the enemy. Another facet of effective COIN planning is to consider additional strategies that the enemy might employ in the future and to formulate plans to counter them—i.e., engage in “counteranalysis.”
- **Develop a planning process that embraces all departments of the U.S. government, insists on unity of**

Figure 2
Insurgents Changed Their Strategy in June–July 2004, and Iraqi Civilians Paid the Price



effort, and is on the same battle rhythm as the troops in the field. In the context of a national strategy, an office with directive authority should assign responsibilities to the various departments, assess their plans for discharging these responsibilities, request changes as appropriate, and promulgate a political-military plan that has enough operational detail to serve as an initial basis for executing a COIN campaign.

- **Allow Army Special Forces to focus on training and operating together with their indigenous counterparts.** Command arrangements should assure that Special Forces are brought into harmony with the overall operation while still allowing scope for their well-known hallmark—initiative. In addition, the Army should conduct training and exercises prior to deployment to educate conventional-force commanders about special operations, especially those involving *unconventional* warfare, a key component of deterrence in COIN strategy.
- **Prepare to conduct police work abroad and build foreign police forces on a large scale.** The Department of Defense or another agency in close coordination with it should be prepared to introduce large numbers of police rapidly into areas where governmental authority has deteriorated or collapsed. These new personnel should be prepared to partner with local police forces across the board, from participation in street patrols to administration at the ministerial level. In Iraq, traditional U.S.

military police units were deployed to aid in the COIN effort, but they were often trained only in basic skills such as patrolling, which were ineffective in combating insurgency.

The Current Outlook for Iraq

By late 2007, violence in Iraq had begun to diminish. There were several major contributing factors: Sunni reaction to al Qaeda excesses, a pullback of Shi'ite militias from anti-Sunni violence and confrontation with coalition forces, a diminution in externally supplied armaments, and strides made by a temporary increase in the number of U.S. forces coupled with a more effective use of Iraqi Army forces. In addition, moving out of forward operating bases into joint security stations in places such as Baghdad increased the ability of U.S. forces to monitor the safety and security of the Iraqi population. However, sectarian infiltration and political patronage have substantially reduced the effectiveness and reliability of the Iraqi police force. This is a troubling problem that needs to be corrected if public order and public confidence are to be improved.

While it is still not clear how the political-security situation in Iraq will eventually turn out, the reduced level of violence, once ubiquitous across Iraq, is an encouraging development. However, a coherent COIN transition strategy from coalition to Iraqi security forces will need to be put in place to ensure that the above concerns are addressed and that recent progress has a lasting effect. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003–2006): RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Volume 2*, by Bruce R. Pirnie and Edward O’Connell, MG-595/3-OSD (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG595.3/>), 2008, 134 pp., \$26.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4297-2. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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