

HOW BIG IS THE IRAQI INSURGENCY?

By John Robb

Iraq's insurgency could get a walk-on lead in any George Romero zombie drama. It has suffered numerous "broken backs" and "decapitations" only to arise again. This puts an entirely new spin on Rumsfeld's depiction of them as "dead-enders." The reason for this resilience may not be something supernatural, but rather something more mundane: bad assumptions.

A critical assumption upon which we have based our efforts in Iraq is the estimate of the size of the insurgency we are fighting. According to the US military, the Iraqi insurgency has between 12,000 and 20,000 members. Also according to the US military, we are capturing or killing insurgents at a rate of 1,000 to 3,000 a month (August was 3,000), and 14,000 insurgents are now held in US prisons in Iraq. So, according to the math, Iraq's insurgents have suffered a monthly loss rate of over ten percent for the last two years. If taken in total, the entire insurgency has been destroyed or imprisoned at least once over since the invasion. Typically, when an organization suffers this level of losses we would expect to see a catastrophic fall-off in the quality and quantity of attacks. This hasn't happened. In fact, exactly the opposite has happened.

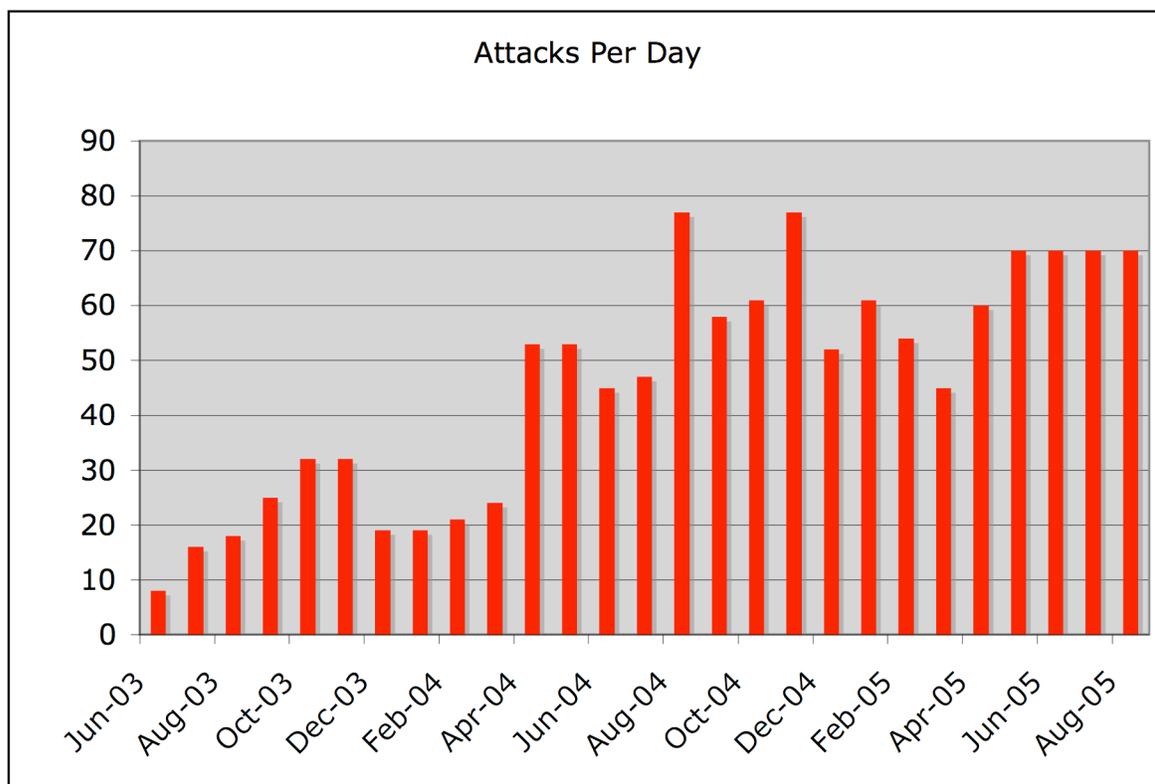


Figure 1: Attacks per day made by insurgents in Iraq. Source: Brookings Iraq Index

Despite this apparent success, the number of daily attacks by insurgents on Coalition forces has grown to a new high for the Sunni insurgency at 70 a day. Although the number has held relatively steady for the past several months, the quality of the attacks has improved with the introduction of new technologies for advanced bombs and new types of targets. And tactics are improving, as insurgents are learning to use multiple attacks to lure in and then kill relief personnel as they respond. From all accounts, the insurgency appears to be strong and getting stronger.

The most likely explanation for this is that the estimates we have for the insurgency are fatally flawed, most likely due to our bias to attribute insurgent activity to a large cohesive group rather than a highly decentralized insurgency. The best way to correct this is to start with a clean slate and build a better estimate. To start, we should ask ourselves who has both the capability and the desire to be an insurgent. Those most capable of being insurgents are those Sunnis with a background in the former Iraqi government, particularly those with some level of military training. These groups were given special training and encouragement before the invasion by Saddam to build guerrilla networks. These groups fall into the following categories:

- The Fedayeen Saddam. A special group of ultra-loyal Iraqi irregulars. This group was started by Saddam's son Uday but later turned into an officially sanctioned guerrilla organization. Estimates of their strength range from 40,000 to as high as 100,000 (which reflects a last minute build-up prior to the war).
- Sunni officers and loyal personnel in the Iraqi Republican guard and other military units. This group is likely at least 175,000 out of the 700,000 members in the military prior to the war.
- Members of the secret police (the Mukhabarat) and other security and intelligence organizations. Estimates are that this group is roughly 100,000, reflecting the priority that Saddam put on internal security.

At this point, we are starting with a pool of over 300,000 people that have the training and the capacity to fight an insurgency. Let's focus next on motivation. Two events demarcate the rise of the insurgency. First was Paul Bremer's disbanding of the Iraqi military. The second was the de-Baathification of the Iraqi state, which most recently was written into the new constitution. Both measures have served to completely alienate those most capable of conducting insurgency, since they are now effectively men without a state or a job. Further, it can be argued that this diminishment in status has been extended, through the ethnic and religious politics of Iraq, to include the entire Sunni population of Iraq. Because of this we can extend our analysis to include two more groups with the motivation to participate in the insurgency, senior Sunni Baathists not in the military and a portion of non-Baathist Sunni men:

- Senior Sunni Baath party members. The Baath party had two million members before the war. Senior Sunni membership can be calculated to be at least 50,000 if not more (5% activist party members not in the militarized groups).
- Sunni men not in the above groups. This is a large group of 1.5 million men out of a total population of 5.2 million Sunnis. Sunni females are also participating,

as evinced by a recent female suicide bomber, although because of the nature of Arab society, it is difficult to estimate how many.

From this pool of potential motivated and capable participants in the insurgency, we are now ready to make some estimates of the size of the insurgency. A good approach is to use a best, likely, and worst-case estimate for the levels of participation from each of these groups. From these calculations we should be able to determine the weighted average for the insurgency that reflects a 20% weight for the best case (only hard-core members are involved), a 60% weight for the likely case (a hard-core base plus a large and extremely active support and auxiliary force), and 20% for the worst case (all of the above plus a very large indirect support infrastructure). The calculation of a weighted average of potential outcomes is a standard approach in analyzing the potential payouts from financial investments with ambiguous outcomes.

	POOL	BEST	WORST	LIKELY	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Fedayeen	40,000	4,000	20,000	12,000	12,000
Sr. Baathists	50,000	5,000	25,000	15,000	15,000
Military Core	175,000	17,500	87,500	52,500	52,500
Special Police	100,000	10,000	50,000	30,000	30,000
<i>participation rate</i>		(10 percent)	(50 percent)	(30 percent)	
Foreign Jihadis	N/A	1,000	6,000	4,000	3,800
Sunni Adult Men	1,000,000	10,000	150,000	30,000	50,000
<i>participation rate</i>		(1 percent)	(15 percent)	(3 percent)	
TOTAL		47,500	338,500	143,500	163,300

Figure 2: Estimate of the strength of the Iraqi Insurgency. Weighted average 163,300 or approximately 150,000.

If we apply this analysis to these groups, we face, at the very least 40,000 active insurgents. Counting all the people that could participate depending on political and other factors, the insurgency has the potential to expand to over 300,000. For planning purposes, we should expect to face an active insurgency of over **150,000** members on any given day.

This estimate is much, much higher than that presented to US decision makers by the US military. Under this new estimate, the percent of the insurgency captured or killed every month is approximately one percent of the entire decentralized organization. This is a level of losses easily maintainable given historical experience and fully explains the ability of the insurgents to increase the quantity and quality of their attacks over the last two years.

This estimate also indicates that given our current assumptions and tactics, the US prospects for a successful resolution of the insurgency, even within a decade, are very low to non-existent. Typically, counter-insurgency requires at least an overwhelming

advantage of conventional forces over insurgents (some estimates are as high as 10 or 20 to 1). We not only don't have that, the insurgents outnumber us even if we include those elements of the Iraqi military that are able to operate without US support (which according to recent testimony by the US military to the US Congress, has declined from 3 brigades to only one) and the best case estimates of attrition we have inflicted. Most important, successful counterinsurgency requires the willing cooperation of the public, or a sizable fraction of them, to identify the insurgents and help locate their hiding areas and bases of operation. Clearly we do not have this cooperation. To wit: Kurdish and Shiite units undertook the only "successful" operations by Iraqi forces in Sunni areas. Until this changes, the Sunni population will continue to provide manpower for the insurgency in roughly the proportions shown above.

This failure to properly appreciate the current level of the insurgency is a mistake on par with the failure to generate plans for counter-insurgency prior to the invasion. If this estimate bears out to be even nearly correct, we will not see an end to disappointment and failure in Iraq until we depart.