

The Localized Nature of Violence in Iraq

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Understandably and perhaps inevitably, the ever more urgent effort to comprehend the causes of violence in Iraq has so far relied on familiar conceptions. The conflict occurring there is variously described as an insurgency, a civil war, and a manifestation of global terrorism. Standard religious and ethnic categories are used to identify the participants and impute their motives. It is becoming evident, however, that the pattern of violence reflects not only a collision of organized purposes but more fundamentally a profound disintegration of Iraq's social fabric, a process that exposes innocent victims but also limits the capacity of predators. Violence resulting from the breakdown of legal order does not have the same character as that which occurs between managed opponents. Better understanding of that distinction is likely to be one of the more important lessons to be learned.

The distinction has to do with the extent of effective organization. Any deliberate act of violence obviously reflects some explicit intention, but the scope and duration varies if the actors are isolated individuals or centrally directed combat units. Individual predators can generate an appalling amount of violence if there are many of them, but a multitude of such actors does not reflect a unified purpose and does not respond to strategic command. In any conflict situation, including Iraq, violence occurs at different levels of organization, but evidence from other conflicts suggests that there are statistical indications of the degree of organization that prevails. The statistics from Iraq resemble those from other conflicts, with one striking exception: there are very few of the large incidents that arise from centrally directed combat operations. While the early part of the conflict saw some major engagements -- Fallujah being the best known -- these have been much less frequent in Iraq than they have been in typical counterinsurgencies or civil wars. It appears that the occupying forces in Iraq have been able to destroy any organization capable of fighting large battles but have not been able to suppress regularly occurring smaller scale attacks.

That observation is not surprising. Saddam Hussein's 25 years as dictator created an organizational structure that exercised effective control over internal violence but was very brittle. His strongly hierarchical Baath Party was largely Sunni, because Saddam was a Sunni, but its basis was not primarily sectarian or ethnic. Its organizing principle was Saddam himself. An essential feature of his repressive strategy was to prevent the emergence of potentially competing social structures. The result was a country rich in small social structures (family, village, tribe, etc.) but essentially devoid of larger groups that were not parts of the Baath Party. The dismantlement of the party and of the military that had been subordinated to it completely shattered the one grimly functional large-scale organization in the country. Hierarchical networks are efficient, but are extremely vulnerable to the loss of high-level nodes. Removal of Saddam Hussein's regime destroyed virtually all of the functional high-level nodes in the Iraqi social network.

The result was a radical unraveling of effective authority and a surge of localized violence. The American occupying force did not attempt to reproduce the repressive power that had been the basis for coherence of the Baathist state and could not itself claim the moral legitimacy necessary to command consensual allegiance. It was not prepared to act as a comprehensive government and did not recognize that Iraq's shattered society was not capable of generating one either. The consequence has been neither an insurgency nor a civil war in the usual sense of those terms, but a reversion to predatory crime and violent intimidation throughout the country. Basic police functions cannot be reliably performed. The Iraqi population has been forced to improvise personal protection by appealing to whatever social connections they could find.

The resulting network of relationships can be broadly classified in recognized cultural terms but the fact that Sunni, Shia and Kurdish identities can be discerned does not mean that the conflict is actually driven by these distinctions. They are relevant but not the primary determinants. The conflict is being waged by dozens, even hundreds of unallied groups, with much of the killing being driven by village-level dynamics. There are too many participants with too disparate purposes to negotiate a settlement among them.

A thought experiment is helpful in understanding this fragmented pattern. Imagine what would happen in a US city, perhaps post-Katrina New Orleans if the National Guard had never arrived, where virtually all of the infrastructure was destroyed, all of the governmental institutions, including the police, were completely removed, and the place was left ungoverned and unpoliced for a matter of months in the heat of the summer. People would be forced to form groups to survive and defend themselves. These groups would probably be very local in nature and form along easily visible lines: race, religion, national origin, etc. Race plays a role in the social organization of New Orleans now, but it would very likely become a major fault line among these social groups, much as Sunni and Shia sectarian identities have become a fault line in Iraq. The social and political structure of a US city is much more organic and robust than that of Baathist Iraq and it probably could not be shattered as completely as Iraq's. Still the comparison is instructive.

This is a very different sort of violence than the US military has been designed to confront. It is unusually hard to count and monstrously hard to control. Several efforts to count the number of Iraqis killed in the conflict thus far have come up with numbers on the order of 75,000. However, a carefully designed and conducted epidemiological survey conducted in mid-2006 by researchers at Johns Hopkins University and published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* put the number closer to 650,000 (as of August, 2006), with about 600,000 of these due to violence. The *Lancet* study evoked a storm of controversy, but its methodology has survived the critical scrutiny of those who are reluctant to accept the results. It is in fact unlikely that the number of violent deaths in Iraq from 2003 to 2006 was less than 400,000 – the lower end of the 95% confidence interval of the *Lancet* study -- and it is quite possible that the study's estimate might actually be biased downward.

It comparing the various estimates, it seems likely that the count-based estimates, using data from Iraq Body Count (IBC) and the US DoD, are only capturing parts of the violence. IBC relies on accounts published by journalists in at least two sources, while

DoD estimates (which are largely classified) are based on a subset of what US forces actually see. For most of the duration of the conflict, journalists have been largely confined to the Baghdad area. This has severely limited their ability to report accurately on events elsewhere – particularly the kinds of small events (1 to 5 people killed) that have typified the violence that has been recorded. The US DoD only reports on certain types of violence which are reported to its personnel or to which they are directly witness. Because most Iraqis don't see the US military as a source of legitimate governance, few Iraqis are inclined to report violent incidents or to conduct them in places where US forces are likely to intervene.

Thus, both the IBC (aggregating the observations of the international press corps) and the US DoD can only report what they see, and neither group is in a good position to understand the complete picture. This probably explains the large difference between the population-based estimate from the Lancet study and the count-based estimates. The localized nature of the violence makes it very broad-based – much broader than any of the groups that are trying to count it. The main objection to the Lancet study estimates have been that they are simply too high to be believed. The centrally commanded killing of more than half a million people would, indeed, be hard to undercount by a factor of nearly ten. Locally generated violence is a very different matter, however.

To get a sense of how locally generated violence differs from centrally commanded violence, one can draw a comparison to the city of Baltimore. In 2006, there were 275 murders in Baltimore – a city with a population of about 650,000. The same murder rate, scaled up to the Iraqi population of 27 million would produce 11,500 violent deaths per year and 45,500 killed over four years of conflict. The lower estimates of 75,000 killed in Iraq over four years of conflict suggest that it is less than twice as violent as Baltimore, and that does not seem intuitively plausible. The Lancet estimate of 600,000 violent deaths over four years puts Iraq in the neighborhood of ten to fifteen times as violent as Baltimore, and that is much more consistent with qualitative indicators of violence – for example, the fact that reporters can move freely throughout Baltimore while even the most intrepid have very restricted mobility in Iraq.

Comparing the levels of violence in Baltimore and Iraq is useful because both are examples of locally determined violence. The specific causes are different, but in both cases they emerge from cultural and economic circumstances and cannot be eliminated simply by capturing or killing gang or insurgent group leaders and individual perpetrators, important as such efforts are. The reduction of violence in a US city requires an elusive combination of effective policing with greater economic opportunity and a host of other factors. It depends upon legal order robust enough to make violence more the exception than the rule, and that in turn requires coherent government broadly accepted as legitimate. Stabilization of Iraq can be expected to have comparable requirements.

It is tempting to imagine that those requirements might be achieved by the process of “bottom-up reconciliation” described by Michael O’Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack in their July 30, New York Times Op-Ed column. They reported considerable progress in Al Anbar province and attributed this progress to increasing unity among local groups in opposing al-Qa’ida in Iraq. That observation is prominently mentioned by those who believe that current stabilization efforts can eventually succeed. The recent intelligence

community report appears to admit, however, that we do not yet observe negotiated consolidation for that purpose taking place through the country. It also acknowledges that local coalitions against al-Qa'ida could hardly be the exclusive basis for regenerating a viable national government and might actually interfere with that process. Again, organized opponents can and have been defeated, but that alone does not restore fundamental legal order.

There is a grave humanitarian emergency in Iraq. Even those who escape violent death are hardly leading normal lives. Large numbers live in fear and economic deprivation without basic community services. Mastering that situation will almost certainly require a much more extensive and more sustained effort than has yet been undertaken, and the critical ingredients have to do with the determinants of legitimacy – the principles and procedures that might enable fundamental social consensus to form in that shattered society. Iraq is a major, unavoidable rehabilitation project that cannot be ignored or conveniently accomplished.

It is prudent to assume that the ultimate implications have yet to be understood and that they will be far more demanding than current political opinion is willing to admit. In particular we will need more extensive international assistance and in order to acquire it we will have to develop more accommodating attitudes and policies not only for Iraq but generally. The fundamental problem is that we forfeited at the outset the legitimacy required to command consensual allegiance. In order to have any hope of acquiring it we will need extensive international assistance from countries such as China, Russia, Iran and Syria that are themselves concerned about the use of American military power. Strong measures of reassurance will be required involving dramatic revisions of global security policy.