

Between Clausewitz and Mao: Dynamic Evolutions of the Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2008)

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Insurgencies are dynamic, not static. The idea of dynamic insurgencies was previously developed by Mao Zedong. In his book¹, Mao described guerrilla warfare as a pyramidal process divided into three linear but not definitive phases - from propaganda to conventional warfare - which means that the guerrilla must follow the order of the different phases, but maintains the possibility to move back and forth between them.

Mao's dynamic guerrilla, due to its linearity, explains only partly the tactical shifts adopted by insurgents. Therefore, in order to mirror the real dynamism of modern insurgencies, we propose a second model of dynamic insurgencies based on three operational poles: the terror pole, the guerrilla pole, and the conventional warfare pole. The three poles create a triangle of tactical possibilities, in which every insurgent action takes place.

Concretely, this means that a group closer to the terror pole will mainly rely on acts of terrorism, while maintaining a more or less pronounced aspect of guerrilla warfare, or even of conventional warfare, depending on its proximity to the other poles. This is to say - most groups do not rely on a single pole.

Historically, for instance, the Algerian insurgency – from the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) to al-Qaeda in the land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – moved from the guerrilla pole to the terror pole when resorting to bombings (including suicide bombings) against civilians instead of hit and run attacks against the military, although terror tactics pre-existed to AQIM, and guerrilla tactics are still used by AQIM.

Like magnets, the poles can either attract or repel, creating a magnetic triangle of tactical possibilities. The dynamic oscillation between the poles can be caused either by internal or external pressures. In the first case, the tactical shift is the result of internal evolutions (such as a change of group's leadership) or internal debates concluding on the advantages of a tactical shift (for instance, an anticipation of benefits in terms of money, military force or popularity). In the second case, sudden changes in the group's external environment force insurgents to adapt. This is the case, for instance, after a military offensive considerably weakens an insurgency.

¹ Mao Tse-Tung, « On Guerrilla Warfare », Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 2000, 114 p.

The concept of dynamic insurgencies, based on our model and Mao's, can be observed through an analysis of the current war in Iraq. In order to facilitate the analysis, we distinguish four main phases that correspond to four major adaptive processes between insurgents and counterinsurgents.

A Necessary Transition: From Conventional Warfare to Insurgency

Operation *Iraqi Freedom* launched on 19 March 2003 constituted a classic military offensive. However, the Iraqi army rapidly collapsed under overwhelming American dominance. The Fedayeen Saddam was among the last from Saddam Hussein's army to resist the American offensive and to attempt to slow military convoys by every possible means, including suicide attacks.

The Fedayeen Saddam constituted a specialized unit in irregular warfare. Saddam Hussein instituted this elite unit in 1994, inspired by the successes of the Palestinian intifada and the American failure in Somalia. He thought that the use of asymmetric warfare would render his regime invulnerable.

In the beginning of 2003, the conflict was still considered to be conventional warfare between two armies. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to Mao's pyramid to understand Saddam's move. Indeed, the deployment of the Fedayeen Saddam in 2003 must be interpreted as a first voluntary shift downward in Mao's pyramid, from the third phase - conventional warfare - to the second phase - guerrilla warfare. In our triangle of tactical possibilities, the move corresponded to a shift from the conventional pole to the guerrilla and terror poles.

The Fedayeen Saddam formed the main obstacle to the American offensive, notably in the salient of Hillah, forcing a temporary pause in the American advance between March 27 and April 1. The conventional victory over the Iraqi army was nevertheless reached quickly, and American units were able to transition towards the phase of stabilization, based on the experience from the 1990s. Hence, as early as in the summer 2003, officers tried to rebuild Iraq, establish links with local leaders, and ensure the security of the population.

After Saddam's arrest in December 2003, the guerrilla of the Fedayeen and former Baathists became leaderless. The forced devolution of the Iraqi army to an inferior level of guerrilla in Mao's pyramid had then become obvious and irreversible, despite an attempt of "qualitative jump" towards the conventional phase in 2004.

The Insurgency Takes the Initiative

In 2004, the Sunni insurgency developed itself, notably due to the absence of an adaptive US strategy. Three factors can explain the difficulty to move from stabilization operations to operations specifically targeting the nascent insurgency between summer 2003 and spring 2004.

First, there was no real battlefield strategy (the priority of Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez² was intelligence) which led to several different practices (raids *à l'israélienne* from bases located

² Commander of Coalition Ground Forces in Iraq.

out of cities, installation or outposts in the middle of communities) ill-suited for counterinsurgency operations.

Second, the links established with the Iraqi population did not create the expected trust due to “cultural disconnections” between both sides, because, among other things, US troops relied on local leaders that did not always enjoy the necessary authority and legitimacy. Finally, time was crucial: progress in reconstruction was slow, increasing Sunnis’ discontent and fostering the ambitions of some Shias, while the first insurgent actions destroyed the little reconstruction work actually accomplished.

In addition to attacks from Iraqi insurgents, American soldiers suffered attacks from al-Qaeda militants early in the conflict. Jordanian Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi emerged as the most notorious of these fighters. At the beginning of the war, al-Zarqawi associated himself with other jihadi fighters, essentially Afghan veterans that had found a safe haven in Iraq after the 2001 American offensive in Afghanistan. Al-Zarqawi’s group was called *Tawhid wal Jihad*, before trading its name for *al-Qaeda in the land of the Two Rivers*, also known as *al-Qaeda in Iraq* (AQI), following al-Zarqawi’s pledge of allegiance to Usama ben Laden on 17 October 2004. Despite a large international recognition – thanks to the media – AQI was still relatively marginalized in 2004, due to its ideological rigor and its practice of indiscriminate violence. AQI then operated a first transformation by creating circumstantial alliances with Iraqi insurgents. The change of name - which grounded the group in the Iraqi conflict - and the beginning of the “Iraqization” of the group - through alliances with local insurgents - marked the transition from a terrorist group to an insurgent group. This corresponds to a strategic shift within AQI, from a small entity with a limited agenda to a structured organization with territorial and political objectives. It is only as an insurgent group that it is possible to analyze AQI’s actions through the triangle of tactical possibilities.

“Iraqization” of the Conflict

As an insurgency, AQI moved slowly from the terror pole to the guerrilla pole for two reasons. First, the static American strategy allowed such move. Second, AQI started to perceive the possibility of seizing and controlling parts of the Iraqi territory. This tactical shift allowed AQI to further accentuate its “Iraqization”, with an increasing number of Iraqi militants joining the insurgency.

In 2006, AQI continued its transformation from an international terrorist group into a local insurgent group through a merger with other Sunni movements. First the group became known as *Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin* and later as *Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyya*, or the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), after more transformation. From a strategic point of view, the name “ISI” concluded the new glocal³ orientation of the group. The first part of the new name, “Islamic State”, was a message addressed to the ideologues of al-Qaeda to indicate that the group was part of the global jihadi struggle; while the word “Iraq” rooted the fight in a local context, in order to gain popular

³ The term “glocal” refers to the individual, group, division, unit, organization, and community which is willing and is able to think globally and act locally.

support. The main difficulty of this glocal structure came from the contradictory ambitions between radical al-Qaeda's ideologues and traditionally secularist Iraqis.

The new glocal strategy followed by AQI is best described by Abu Bakr Naji, a young ideologue of al-Qaeda. Naji's strategy, called "management of savagery"⁴, consists of creating chaos in certain regions in order to delegitimize local authorities and subsequently restore order through sharia (coranic law) and transfer legitimacy to al-Qaeda. The proposed method is a *war of attrition*, using the "power of vexation and exhaustion". The "Management of Savagery" constitutes a classic form of insurgency, given that the objective is to seize territory, control it, provide goods and services to inhabitants, gain popular support and eventually launch offensives from these territories.

Simultaneously, as a result of the generalized insurgency during spring and summer 2004, US troops abandoned their relative passivity. Nevertheless, they remained essentially reactive - as opposed to proactive. Adaptation to insurgents' tactics was non-linear and depended on a complex learning process that linked return of experience (sometimes informal and at the lowest levels) and reforms of operational preparation, whose principles were progressively isolated. This joint process formed an "informal doctrine".

In response to the rising of Anbar province and of Moqtada al-Sadr's Shia militias *Mahdi Army* and the establishment of sanctuaries under al-Qaeda's control, American adaptation resulted in a disconnect between tactical schemes and battlefield strategy. Tactically, US troops launched successive assaults in an attempt to seize back control of lost cities, followed by restoration of local security and eventually a transfer of power to Iraqi units, according to the model of Tell Afar (September 2005 - February 2006). Strategically, however, General George Casey - who succeeded General Sanchez in July 2004 - developed a "top-down stabilization", which relied on the "Iraqization" of the counterinsurgency through the new Iraqi army supposedly reproducing a model of national force that integrated all the factions of the country. More importantly, Casey tried to diminish the visibility of US troops in order to reduce their vulnerability and to avoid alienating local populations. But, in fact, the Iraqi army was composed of Shias in majority, which annihilated the comparative advantage of "cultural proximity" with the population, given that the Iraqi army was perceived by civilians - essentially non Shias - as an occupation force, corrupted or powerless without American support. Moreover, the Multinational Force lacked the necessary strength to ensure an efficient and sustainable control. In February 2006, the attack against Samarra mosque plunged Iraq into civil war.

"Bottom-up Stabilization": Counterinsurgency Takes the Initiative Back

Two processes overlapped in 2006. Although the "top-down stabilization" continued, notably through the deployment of the Iraqi army in Bagdad during the summer, empirical tactics generated "bottom-up stabilization" in Anbar province. The rapprochement between American officers and Sunni tribes' leaders gave birth to local militias able to take over American presence and effectively restore security. This movement was subsequently taken into account and generalized by the new commanders - Generals David Petraeus (Multi-National Force - Iraq) and

⁴ Abu Bakr Naji, "The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through which the Umma Will Pass", John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, May 2006.

Raymond Odierno (Multi-National Corps - Iraq) - under the form of recruitment programs along with pacification in “oil stain” targeting Baghdad and its belt and eventually the entire Sunni triangle. This indicated that the counterinsurgency won the initiative back: insurgents were converted or isolated from their support, while a sustainable control was developed on the Tell Afar model and the adaptation of the 2003 processes. Even better, the pressure on the *Mahdi Army* temporarily forced the neutrality of Moqtada al-Sadr. The objective of starting a virtuous circle instead of a spiral of violence was reached in many regions in the turn of 2007/2008. Beyond the restructuring of the operational preparation, the doctrinal simplification and the cumulative effect of experience benefited the counterinsurgency effort.

This new American strategy precipitated AQI's decline. Weakened, AQI insurgents were forced to shift back from the guerrilla pole to the terror pole, as indicated by the increase of suicide attacks against Iraqi civilians. This move was the result of external constraints more than an anticipated choice. AQI even pushed its adaptive process further. In order to skirt security forces, AQI developed new terror tactics, including the use of female and mentally-ill suicide bombers.

A New Phase Begins?

New risks and challenges are born from this strategy. AQI has returned to terrorist tactics since the beginning of the year. Current operations, led by Iraqi Forces and Coalition Forces in Ninewah, Diyala and Baghdad, have proven the salience of counter-terrorist methods, such as the use of police in greater number than military forces. Counterinsurgency has become more and more an operational theme, overlapping counter-guerrilla tactics, stabilization operations and counter-terrorism.

Thus, American forces have learned to use both coercion and mastery of violence. The coherence between strategic goals, operational art and “best practices” is the key that explains best the adoption of these organizational changes (adaptation and evolution).

The dynamic evolution of insurgency and counterinsurgency follows two mechanisms: the reversibility of tactical modes and of strategic choices. This double mechanism operates according to a reciprocal movement, confirming Carl von Clausewitz's adage that each adversary dictates the rule of its opponent. All this is not as much a matter of confronting physical forces than of confronting wills, given the growing importance of the informational sphere in contemporary complex stabilization operations. Between local and global, conventional and irregular warfare, tactical skirmishes and psychological campaigns, the actors' attitudes are not only evolving. They all occur simultaneously.

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