Learning from American Street Gangs: Fighting Insurgency in Iraq

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INTRODUCTION

In December of 2005, two men shared similar feelings about the violence in their community. "[A]bsolutely incredible, absolutely too much death…. All around town today people are saying, 'Why are so many people dying in this city?'"[1] A second observer echoed similar despair, "You just never know what you will face. Each day when I come to work, I think it will be my last day alive."[2]

Despite describing similar situations, these men live worlds apart. The first is a former assemblyman from the Compton neighborhood of Los Angeles. In his city, street gang violence may be responsible for as many as sixty eight deaths this year.[3] The second is a shopkeeper from Baghdad, Iraq. He sees violent clashes between insurgents and coalition and Iraqi security forces on a regular basis.

A strong connection exists between American street gangs and the Iraqi insurgency. Military operators can learn a great deal from American gangs because their

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[1] Megan Garvey, "Compton Records Its 68th Homicide," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 2005, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-compton15dec15,1,6291504.story?coll=la-headlines-california&ctrack=1&cset=true> (15 December 2005).

[2] Doug Struck, "In Baghdad, Reality Counters Rhetoric; Violence Remains Everyday Pattern," *Washington Post*, 1 December 2005, *ProQuest* (15 December 2005).

[3] Garvey. Not all 68 deaths this year in Compton are attributed to gang violence. Many of the deaths may have an inter-relationship between families and gangs. See online discussion at www.streetgangs.com.

structures, motivations, and tactics closely mirror the current Iraqi insurgency.

This paper's ultimate focus is to validate a practical training tool that relates an identifiable American face to the nebulous concept of an insurgency.

<div align="center">**DEFINING IRAQI INSURGENCY**</div>

Defining the current insurgency in Iraq is a critical precursor to describing American gangs through the lens of an insurgency. Scholars to terrorist groups themselves have tried to define the Iraqi insurgency. Implicit in those definitions are characteristics including structures, demographics, identities, motivations, and tactics. This section uses definitions of insurgency in its application to contemporary Iraq in order to establish solid parameters by which to view Iraq's insurgency.

NET CENTRIC WARFARE

Defense analyst John Arquilla describes insurgent adaptation to new technologies and the demands of the information age as "Netwar."[4] Insurgents employ Netwar by operating as loosely structured cells in the absence of a hierarchy. Groups must share the same ideologies and goals, but retain flexibility in execution. Information is

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[4] John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, (Arlington, VA: Rand, 2001), 6-13.

passed through the network and disseminated laterally.
Through the network, insurgents develop the ability to
"swarm." Although disjointed in structure, insurgencies
that practice true Netwar can execute coordinated assaults
on key targets, while retaining the ability to fold back
into the population. Independence is the camouflage that
gives them the ability to literally and figuratively hide
in plain sight.

APPLICATION TO IRAQ

Compound Insurgency

Terrorists in Iraq include anarchists,
preservationists, and traditionalists. Anarchists are
foreign fighters like Abu Musab Zarqawi, who is part of
Ansar al Islam and is loosely affiliated with al Qaeda.
Preservationists are former Ba'ath party members and
government officials loyal to the Saddam Hussein regime.
Traditionalists are the fawq, Shiite tribal fighters who
seek to uphold traditional Islamic beliefs.[5] The differences
in these groups shows the complex nature of the
insurgency's structure.

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[5] Jim Ruvalcaba, "Understanding Iraq's Insurgency," *al Nakhlah*, The Fletcher School – Tufts University, Spring 2004, <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/al_nakhlah/archives/spring2004/ruvalcaba.pdf> (21 November 2005), Article 7. Ruvalcaba uses insurgency categories originally proposed by Bard O'Neil and applies them to the Iraqi insurgency.

While all these groups are united by a desire to eject the United States from Iraq, each has a different vision for the future. Foreign fighters subscribe to the pan Islamic goals of al Qaeda and their tactics may be much more fatalistic, such as suicide bombings. Ba'athists, while opposed to the creation of a new government, are secular and thus may not exercise the same extremist tactics as foreigners. Still, some Ba'athists may be foreign fighters from Syria, which is ruled by a Ba'athist regime. Traditional Shiites, located in the southern part of Iraq, engage in violence but may be more apt to cooperate with the coalition especially if their goals of Islamic law and federalism are incorporated into the new government.[6]

Defining Characteristics

Given these differences in long-term goals, location, and to some degree tactics, defining a common set of characteristics in the Iraqi insurgency is problematic. One of the greatest similarities across the insurgent landscape may be a reliance on networks. None of the groups in question conduct centralized operations. Few, if any, have any type of hierarchical structure. Notable

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[6] Even with increased cooperation, violence still occurs in southern Iraq. This may be a result of factionalism amongst Shiite tribes.

exceptions exist, such as the strong point defense established in Fallujah. However, the majority of operations exist as tactically disjointed missions.

Hoffman validates this argument by claiming that the Iraqi insurgency is currently the best example of Netwar. He says that a "post-modern" insurgency has emerged in Iraq, defined by a lack of centralized leadership, organization, and ideology. Even more revealing is his description of insurgent activities at the operational level:

> In this loose, ambiguous, and constantly shifting environment, constellations of cells or collections of individuals gravitate toward one another to carry out armed attacks, exchange intelligence, trade weapons, or engage in joint training and then disperse at times never to operate together again.[7]

Particularly revealing is the possibility that insurgent groups cross ideological boundaries to conduct operations in the manner Hoffman describes above. Evidence points to the possibility that former Ba'athists are cooperating with Islamic extremists.[8]

Iraq's insurgents seek change to the government thus they do not have to conduct open warfare. They simply must influence the Iraqi public and the governing elites. They

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[7] Bruce Hoffman, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Rand Corporation*, June 2004, <http://www.rand.org> (21 November 2005), 17.

[8] Ibid. Hoffman makes this claim based on knowledgeable sources inside what was then the Coalition Provisional Authority.

must also influence the United States government via the public, from which the government derives its legitimacy. These acts of influence are generally brief and shocking in effect and form. Taken as discrete events, acts like suicide bombings and RPG attacks are ideal for quick, non-substantive, yet shocking news stories. Viewed as a whole, these violent acts may create an environment of hopelessness as described in the introduction. This may then help assure the Iraqi's acquiescence to the insurgent's ideas for regime change.

AMERICAN STREET GANGS AND INSURGENTS

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Urban street gangs, both in the United States and worldwide, seem to be a mutated form of urban insurgency.[9] However, not all characteristics are identical between each group. Original motives and tactical operations may be vastly different. Their similarities stem from a desire to depose or control governmental functions. This end state is a sliding scale between total anarchy, as described by

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[9] Max G. Manwaring, "Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency," *Strategic Studies Institute*, March 2005, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi> (21 November 2005). I will draw heavily on Dr. Manwaring's writings for this section. This article demonstrates many parallels between insurgents and gangs. However, based on this and previous writings, Manwaring does not make specific references to the Iraqi insurgency nor to American street gangs. He has previously written specifically about Latin American street gangs. See Max G. Manwaring, *Nonstate Actors in Colombia: Threat and Response* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2002).

O'Neil, and a power sharing arrangement between gangs and the state.

Beyond the Violence

Looking at gangs as non-state actors who simply execute violent acts is severely limiting and ignores the link to insurgencies. Third Generation gangs who are more developed and linked into a variety of criminal networks (ala Netwar) prosecute only just violent wars but also social, economic, and political battles.[10] This holistic view shows the linkages to the Iraqi insurgency. Just as former Ba'athists fight to regain their economic stature, so do gang members struggle to improve their own economic status and gentrify their communities.[11] Foreign al Qaeda fighters seek a deep, fundamental change in the social and political construction of the entire Arab world. Likewise, gangs wrestle for control of community power.[12]

The political war conducted by gangs results because of injustice, inequity, corruption, and repression.[13] Many of these conditions exist in Iraq today. Former Ba'athists

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Gentrification is an example I have not validated. I need to find out if economic improvement is a purely selfish motive for gangs. Former Ba'athists may not have any selfless motivations (they, and others, may just use economic shortcomings as a recruiting tool) but it seems the Shiites tribes want some sort of community improvement.

[12] The community power struggle example may be a great segue way for practical lessons that can be applied tactically by the Platoon Commander on the ground.

[13] Manwaring.

feel they are being repressed by the Shiite majority.
Foreign fighters try to convince the Iraqi public that the
new government is corrupt, largely due to the heavy
American influence.

Operational Divergence: Motivation

A study conducted between 1995 and 1998 examined the
motivations behind 200 homicides in the East Los Angeles
community of Hollenbrook. Half of the murders were based
on gang turf and/or respect disputes. One quarter involved
arguments among gang members, some about drug debts, others
of a domestic nature. The study found a common thread was
expressive homicides. These acts of violence were based on
the honor and status of the gang or a gang member.[14]

Based on the gang motivations of honor, status, and
the control of territory, the link to the Iraqi insurgency
is tenuous. Insurgents appear to be working together in
some form, as net centric warfare would suggest. In
locations where they do not work together, insurgents
physically separate themselves. Southern Iraq, for
example, is clearly controlled by Shiite cells without any
outside insurgent influence.

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[14] George Tita et al., *Reducing Gun Violence: Results from an Intervention in East Los Angeles* (Arlington, VA: Rand, 2003), 6.

Fundamental to gaining, or regaining, honor and status in gang culture is the concept of retaliation. Iraqi insurgents have different motivations, like regime change or Islamic rule. When insurgent groups do attack each other, their motivations are based in their fundamental differences of religion and values. While their surface motivation may be retaliation, something greater than personal or group honor is at stake.

When Iraqis are motivated by retaliation, American forces can prevent acts of violence by paying blood money.[15] Most retaliation violence in Iraq is rooted in family or tribal conflicts based on honor or possibly territory. Tribal conflicts may have the strongest link to gang violence.

PRACTICAL LESSONS

The motivations and even tactics of insurgents are separated by geography. Not all lessons from street gangs will apply throughout the country uniformly.

The American military and Iraqi security forces must seek overall security in order to achieve the coalition's strategic objective.[16] Although somewhat (but not entirely)

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[15] Ben Connable, "Marines are from Mars, Iraqis are from Venus," *United States Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning*, 30 May 2004, <www.tecom.usmc.mil/caocl/OIF/Cultural_Guidance_Learning/ MarinesAreFromMarsIraqisAreFromVenus%5B1%5D.pdf> (7 December 2005), 5.

separate from quelling the insurgency, preventing tribal

conflicts is key to security. An intimate study of

American street gang operations will benefit military units

in tribal intervention.

MISAPPLICATION OF AMERICAN STREET GANGS

CULTURE

A glaring flaw to the blanket cross application of

American street gangs to the Iraqi insurgency is the fact

that Iraq is not America. The two civilizations have

entirely different histories, traditions, and societies.

This application risks creating culturally insensitive

military operators. A critical component to achieving

victory in Iraq is the United State's ability to gain the

cooperation of the Iraqi population. Great strides have

been made in training America's military in cultural

awareness. The military clearly cannot afford to take a

step back from that progress.

A second flaw is the generalization of tactics and

operations. Standard operating procedures may differ

between gangs within the same American city. Likewise,

operational differences are bound to occur between cells,

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[16] See President Bush's 30 November 2005 strategy for victory in Iraq, http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq/iraq_strategy_nov2005.html.

networks, and especially regions in Iraq. Gang operations
are not an exact duplicate of the Iraqi insurgency.

CONCLUSION

The gang example acts to describe in broad strokes
what a platoon commander may see on the ground in Iraq.
The small unit leader should be prepared for a wide range
of scenarios and be flexible in his actions and reactions
towards the insurgents. Similarities do exist between
American gangs and the Iraqi insurgency in structures,
motivations, and tactics.

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