Iraq: Strategy versus Metrics:

The Case for Information-Based Policy

Anthony H. Cordesman
Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies

Working Draft: Revised January 21, 2005

Iraq: Strategy versus Metrics

Anthony H. Cordesman

It is as easy to propose a strategy for Iraq as it is easy to have a strong opinion. The problem is to substantiate any such strategy with something approaching facts. At this point, "experts" are proposing everything from quick withdrawal to staying the course regardless of cost. The practical reality, however, is that "experts" must rely on media reports; unclassified, public relations-oriented government data; or sheer seat of the pants guesswork.

1. A Flood of Opinion; A Drought of Fact

No one who served during Vietnam can fail to notice that there has been a polarization of the information people do choose to use out of the limited information available. Those who oppose the war and continued intervention choose every negative press report convenient to their case. The supporters of the war "mirror image" the opponents by choosing the favorable data.

The US government has responded by suppressing past reporting that has proved to be embarrassing, and by avoiding reporting information that might be negative and "spinning" data. This bias in official reporting is compounded by operational problems. Streams of individual data requests hit overburdened military and civilian staffs on the scene without any coherence and coordination. The end result is no time for structured data collection and reporting, plus the feeling such exercises are a waste of time.

The end result is confusion, rather than insight. The problem for policy making is not a lack of strategies, it is a lack of facts. It is the lack of metrics that can shed some light on what is really happening and the level of progress, problems, and risk.

Granted, no war ever has perfect metrics, but it would be far easier to know what strategy the US should propose if an objective effort was made to pull together the data that are available in ways that would allow some coupling between strategy and a knowledge of the facts on the ground.

2. **Looking at Governance and Politics**

The elections to come will help provide a much better picture of the level of polarization and religious alignment of the Arab Shi'ites; Arab Sunnis, Kurds, and other minorities. The elections in the governorates will be also be useful, and will the post-election power brokering and new allotment of government positions.

Metrics of governance, however, may be more useful than metrics of politics.

- *One key indicator of stability in Iraq is to map where the government is in full control*, where it has a limited or insecure presence, and where it is largely absent or ineffective. It is obvious that in at least four provinces, the Iraqi government is only partially functioning.

- *Maps by governorate and city that show the scale of the insurgency are key measures of the level of risk and improvement/decline* -- this is particularly true if such maps show the population in the area involved. It is obvious that in some half-secure areas, the government does not meet a key test from Vietnam days, it cannot operate at night or when insurgents are in the area.

- *Similar mapping of government services* adds meaning to the security test. Secure police presence is one key test. Ability to make government offices secure and functional is another.

- *It is equally important to map out the actual distribution of key government services* like pensions, economic aid, office services, etc. Most Iraqis, like most people in the world, need government services every day. Elections and politics are an episodic luxury.

All of the above options would be more effective if there was a census. The rough estimates that say the population is 60% Shi'ite, 20% Sunni, 15% Kurd, and 5% other are guesstimates first made over a decade ago. Having an accurate picture of the ethnic and sectarian mix would greatly aid in understanding how the insurgency tracks relative to such factors, as well as the true nature of the population size in threatened areas.

3. **Public Opinion Polls and Political Attitudes**

Sophisticated, properly structured public opinion polls can be of great value in understanding Iraqi views and needs. Public opinion polls based on small samples using limited questionnaires are little more than statistical drivel. The sample base may be "statistically valid" within a limited range of percentage error in the mathematical sense, but far too often, the methodology and results are empirically absurd.

The sample base in many recent polls is far too small and excludes too many areas and insurgents. Moreover results that cannot be broken out be area, ethnicity, religion, and social background lump together so many disparate groups that they provide few insights or no controls on who is really being surveyed with any adequacy.

The answer, however, is not to avoid public opinion polls. It is rather to see them as a critical metric worth funding at a high level of repeated activity with as much data on given localities and areas, and as much data on attitudes by ethnicity and sect as possible. Some past polls have provided much of the scope for this, but few recent polls seem to have made such an effort or to have credible transparency. A key metric is being ignored or misused.

A key tool is being misused or not used at all.

4. Mapping Warfighting

It is obvious that the US government is making steadily more detailed classified efforts to understand the patterns in the fighting and the nature insurgents at a time what it has virtually suppressed all meaningful public reporting. Its daily incident reports are no longer made available on background; the Iraqi government no longer provides meaningful public estimates of Iraqi casualties, and even the broad monthly incident totals vary so much from US spokesman to US spokesman that they seem to have uncertain credibility.

There are several types of summary reporting that would provide far more insight into the nature of the conflict, some of which the US provided on a background basis until the fall of 2004:

- *Providing daily incident breakouts* by type and effect by major city and governorate with national totals. These data were available in the past. Their censorship does not build confidence; simply confusion.

- *Providing meaningful casualty reports by location, cause, and for all those being attacked by category*. The totals of US killed and wounded are an important measure, but totals are no substitute for pattern analysis by location and cause. It is also a serious reflection on the US that it does not provide any meaningful reporting on Iraqi government, military, police, and civilian casualties, much less the kind of pattern and trend analysis that would help show what is happening in the war.

- *Reporting on insurgent captures and kills*. This again needs to be by governorate and major city, and show the nationality and ethic/religious character of those involved where possible.

- *Estimates of Insurgent strength by group and location.* These do not have to be precise, but would both show the scope of the threat, and whether progress is estimated to be made in defeating it. The inevitable lack of precision is not an embarrassment, it is a warning.

- *Summaries of US/Coalition military action*: Like all of the metrics suggested these should not be so precise as to risk compromising operational security. The various press releases, however, give no picture of the level of overall military activity or activity by region, and no picture of the level of intensity in operations or the resulting trends.

5. Realistic Metrics for Progress in Creating Effective Iraqi Military, Security, and Police Forces

US efforts to create capable cadres of effective Iraqi military, security, and police forces seem to be gathering momentum at a time that the US has again suppressed virtually all meaningful reporting. Some areas where meaningful metric would be extremely useful are:

- *Combat effective military, security, and police forces in terms of manning and unit strength*. The kind of meaningless totals for training and equipped manpower now being issued produce misleading totals with no correlation to war fighting or self defense capability. Leadership and quality are the issue.

- *Capable forces versus goals over time*: The key projection for strategy is how many effective forces will be created over time, and is there a stable set of goals to measure progress by.

- *Trained manpower by service/type of force showing different levels of training*: "Trained" becomes milspeak for "meaningless" when it is not tied to a clear definition of exactly what training is involved.

- *Equipped by type of equipment*: Like "trained," "equipped" is meaningless when there are no data defining what this means, and whether it meets valid requirements. For example, send Iraqis out ion unarmored vehicles is not a winning move if the US needs uparmored Humvees.

- *Facility metrics:* Sending men into soft or undefendable facilities is a way to either get them killed or see them break If attacked. Metrics of the adequacy of facilities are as important as metrics of equipment levels.

- *Patterns in casualties, and in desertions and defections*: These are simple metrics of how well the Iraqi forces are, or are not, doing.

- *Chronologies and maps of Iraqi force engagements and outcome*: These display how well the Iraqis fight.

6. Economic Mapping

This may be a need for nation wide economic data focused on long term planning in the future. To have a future, however, the government and Coalition needs detailed economic mapping that looks at jobs, economic activity, and how aid is flowing by major city, by governorate, and by key area.

It often will not be possible to assemble comparable or complete data, but this is not operationally necessary. A mosaic of disparate data will often red flag key problems and areas. Unemployment, access to health care, and functioning education are key metric. So are power, sanitation, water, and secure roads. The breakdown of past existing services in any area is a major warning.

There are critical overlays to such data that help measure the realities in the war:

- *Mapping sabotage and economic attacks*. Iraqi officials have issued guesstimates like a $10 billion loss to sabotage. Incident records need to be used to take a hard look at economic impacts of both insurgent and Coalition action. Sabotage that deprives areas or services, cuts or restricts nation building, and hits at key revenues or economic activity needs to be mapped and analyzed. The economic impact of the war should be known.

- *Understanding the value and impact of aid*. From the start, the public reporting by USAID has been a self-congratulatory sick joke. Even the FSU only counted actual project starts as success. Even the Communist system was not bold enough to count funds obligated or contracts signed as progress. Aid is a key weapon in counterinsurgency, but the real metrics for judging its success are:

    o How well Iraqi expectations and requirements are being met, not simply whether things are as good or better than under Saddam, and by area and by group of Iraqis --not by some national total.

    o How money is being dispersed in the field by location, and particularly in high threat or insurgent areas.

    o How sustainable project completions are in terms of surviving attack and continuing to function to meet a need once "completed."

- *Linking aid to counterinsurgency impacts*. The reprogramming of aid has tied substantial funds to local efforts to use dollars as a substitute for bullets. Mapping this short term aid flow in insurgent areas is a metric of how aid impacts on warfighting.

7. The Limits of Data

One final, and hopefully obvious, point needs to be made about the above suggestions. A flood data may produce a flood of analysis but there is no reason it should produce a flood of wisdom. Every metric suggested above has limits and can produce confusing and sometimes contradictory result. No one set of metrics is likely to be decisive, and trend analysis will be critical.

Nevertheless, any one who has to analyze the current insurgency in Iraq has to be struck by how many strong opinion have been built on so weak a foundation of facts.