Mapping the Factional Structure of the Sunni Insurgency in Iraq

By Michael Gabbay

THE ZEAL AND DEXTERITY with which contemporary Islamist insurgent and terrorist groups convey their messages over the internet and satellite television channels is often cast as part of a public relations struggle with the United States over the hearts and minds of the Muslim masses.[1] In Iraq, it is apparent, however, that these media also increasingly serve as forums in which insurgent groups compete with each other for the loyalties not of the population at large, but rather of those who already support the insurgency, including insurgent fighters themselves. Accordingly, an analysis of insurgent rhetoric can provide a window into the factional structure and dynamics within the insurgency.

This paper describes a quantitative methodology for constructing diagrams that characterize and clarify insurgency factional structure using insurgent rhetoric as data. These "factional maps" can shed insight into insurgent dynamics involving cooperation, rivalries, decision-making and organizational cohesion. The results suggest that the coarse-graining of the Sunni insurgency into a nationalist-leaning camp on one side and al-Qa`ida-inspired jihadist Salafists on the other needs to be further resolved to serve as a guide for U.S. counter-insurgency policy.

Factional Mapping Methodology

The data used to construct the Iraqi factional maps includes 11 Sunni insurgent groups listed in Table 1 and spans the time period from August 2005 through April 2007, just prior to a process of alliance formation among the nationalist-leaning groups. The data set consists of hundreds of translated insurgent statements from jihadist websites and interviews of insurgent group officials in print and broadcast media as provided by the Open Source Center (OSC).

The notion of factional structure involves the integration of measures of: (i) insurgent group ideological or strategic differences; (ii) cooperative relationships between groups; and (iii) the overall influence of each group. The methodology fuses concepts from social network analysis and spatial models of politics, which frame political competition and voting behavior as occurring along a policy or ideology space.[2]

For the ideology measure, differences in the mix of target classes that are claimed by insurgent groups are considered. The motivation behind this choice is that disagreement over what types of targets are legitimate has often been the primary source of dissension within Islamist insurgencies.[3] The value of a *targeting policy* variable is calculated, which essentially scores each insurgent group by the average legitimacy of the target classes it claims operations against, where the legitimacy of each target class is the acceptability of attacking it as perceived within the ensemble of insurgent groups (at least according to their public statements).[4] The targeting policy is plotted along the horizontal axis of the factional maps where lower scores indicate the presence of less acceptable, more controversial targeting claims.

For the cooperative relationship measure, the study analyzes the number of either joint communiqués or declared joint operations between groups; the strength of the relationship is indicated by the thickness of the links connecting groups in the factional maps. The overall influence of a given group is assessed via its prominence within the rhetoric

of the other insurgent groups, under the assumption that more influential groups will be referred to more frequently by their insurgent brethren.[5]

Group	Symbol
Islamic Army in Iraq	IAI
1920 Revolution Brigades	1920RB
Mujahidin Army	MA
Rashidin Army	RA
Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi Brigades	JAMI
Al-Qa`ida in Iraq	AQI
Ansar al-Sunna Group	ASG
Fatihin Army	FA
Iraq's Jihadist Leagues	IJL
Shield of Islam Brigade	SIB
Just Punishment Brigades	JPB

Table 1. Insurgent Groups Included in Analysis.

Factional Structure

The factional maps are shown in Figure 1. Considering targeting policy, the groups are more evenly dispersed over the spectrum than expected from a simple binary division into nationalist-leaning and jihadist Salafist wings. Given its thinly-veiled, indiscriminate targeting of Shi`a and Sunni civilians, al-Qa`ida in Iraq appears on the extreme left whereas the Rashidin Army and the Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi Brigades, who unambiguously claim attacks only on U.S. forces, appear on the far right. In terms of prominence, AQI is seen to be very significant but nowhere near the dominant group that its overwhelming presence in the news coverage would suggest. It is the Islamic Army in Iraq that is seen to be most prominent followed by the 1920 Revolution Brigades.[6] On the low end of the scale, the little-known Shield of Islam Brigade is seen to have zero prominence having never been mentioned by other groups.

Observing the cooperative relationship networks, the joint operations network

2 Melvin J. Hinich and Michael C. Munger, *Analytical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

3 Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

4 Each insurgent group's *attitude* regarding targeting a given class is rated on a 5-point scale: claimed = 2; legitimate (but not claimed) = 1; no clear opinion = 0; weak condemnation = -1; strong condemnation = -2. The average of its attitude values across the groups is the *legitimacy* of a given target class. Listed in order of decreasing legitimacy values, the target classes are: U.S. forces (2); Shi`a militias (1.7); Iraqi government forces (1.7); police (1.6); spies and agents (1.2); Kurdish militias (1.1); Iraqi civilian government (0.8); foreign civilians (0.6); oil pipelines (0.6); politicians (0.2); Sunni local leaders (0.1); Shi`a civilians (-0.6); and Sunni civilians (-0.8).

5 The prominence of a group is proportional to the number of times it is referred to by other groups in the form of: (i) joint communiqués; (ii) joint operations; and (iii) simple mentions unrelated to (i) and (ii). It is normalized so that a value of 1 indicates average prominence.

6 The influence of the 1920RB has been substantially reduced since it fissioned in March 2007, with the breakaway faction taking the name, Hamas of Iraq.

displays more symmetric cross-cutting between groups than does the network of joint communiqués. This likely indicates greater operational cooperation between field units on a local level as compared with the more selective cooperation between leadership elements required for issuing policy statements. The isolation of the jihadist Salafist groups—AQI and the Ansar al-Sunna group—on this leadership level is apparent. In contrast, the groups that are commonly considered to be more nationalist in orientation—IAI, MA, 1920RB, JAMI, RA—are all inter-connected, forming a clique in social network terms. Moreover, given the substantial spread of these groups in targeting policy, the factional map suggests that it is on the level of ties among leaders, rather than ideological congruence, that the lumping of these groups into a single, nationalist-leaning camp is most on the mark. In terms of targeting policy, the IAI, which trumpets operations against an expansive list of Iraqi targets—national forces, police, Shi`a and Kurdish militias, spies and agents, government officials, and politicians—is far closer to the ASG than it is to most of the nationalist groups.[7]

It is striking that the IAI appears as the most prominent group and also at the center of the targeting policy spectrum. This is suggestive of a spatial politics paradigm in which positioning oneself at the location of the median voter is advantageous, but where the "voters" in this case happen to be the insurgency's pool of fighters and active supporters. Such a perspective implies that the IAI built up its power by appealing to both Salafists on the left and nationalists on the right—an inference about its factional composition that has crucial implications as will be analyzed below. The mixed composition of the IAI is also suggested by the joint operations network, where the IAI appears as a bridge between nationalist and jihadist Salafist groups. The IAI may, therefore, be better positioned than other nationalist groups to absorb fighters defecting from AQI in the wake of the recent degradation of AQI's capabilities.

A strong indication that targeting policy is indicative of broader ideological divisions is the fact that three major alliances of insurgent groups have nucleated around the most prominent group in each region of the spectrum: AQI's Islamic State of Iraq on the left;
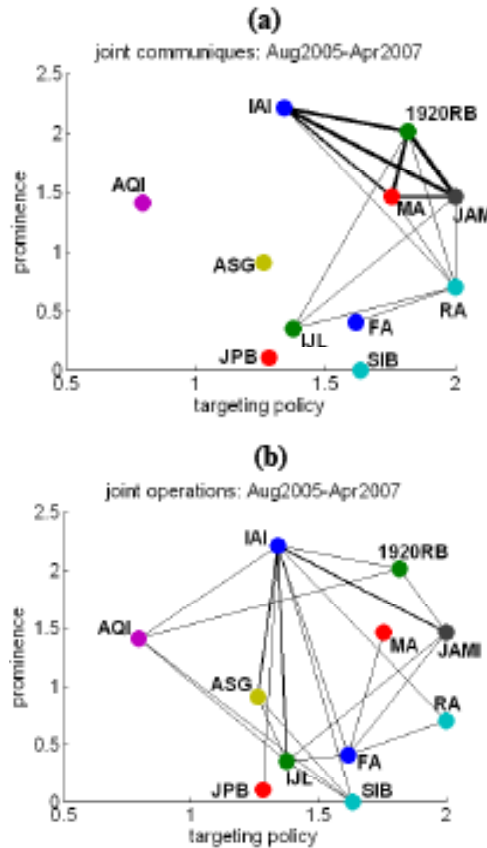

Figure 1. Factional map diagrams for the period Aug. 2005 - Apr. 2007. Links represent: (a) joint communiqués and (b) joint operations.

the IAI's Jihad and Reform Front in the middle, which includes the Mujahidin Army and a splinter group of ASG (and at one point the Fatihin Army); and, on the right, the 1920RB's Jihad and Change Front which includes the Rashidin Army as well as some smaller groups.[8] A broad coalition called the Political Council for Iraqi Resistance (PCIR) has appeared recently whose members are the Jihad and Reform Front, JAMI and Hamas of Iraq. The dispersion of its members along the targeting policy spectrum, however, suggests that its cohesion is not high; it is doubtful that JAMI, which does not

claim operations against Iraqi targets and has opposed targeting the police and Iraqi state institutions, would have the same underlying strategic agenda as the IAI. Consequently, the PCIR should not be considered as an IAI-led alliance. Rather, it may be intended primarily as a bloc for negotiating with the United States. Yet the fact that the PCIR's most prominent member is also its most extreme could have serious implications for the demands of the PCIR in negotiations, particularly with respect to power-sharing with Shi`a.

Nationalist Ideological and Strategic Divergences
This study suggests the conclusion that the spread of nationalist-leaning groups along the targeting policy dimension reflects fundamental differences in their underlying ideologies, goals and constituencies. If true, this could help explain the lack of greater consolidation among nationalist groups which would otherwise be puzzling given that their professed high level political goals are essentially identical: a territorially intact, non-federal Iraq with a basis in Islamic law and a place for all Iraqi sects and ethnic groups. This study's inference that the IAI's power base is composed of both Salafist and nationalist factions implies that in order to satisfy both constituencies, the IAI, for reasons of organizational cohesion and survival, must jointly pursue the goals that each constituency holds most dear; for the Salafists, that is Sunni Shari`a rule, and for the nationalists, it is an intact Iraq.

Accordingly, this paper contends that the IAI and its allies are deeply committed to re-establishing Sunni central rule in Iraq—a revanche, however, that is unmistakably religious in nature and for which heavy sectarian bloodletting is an acceptable cost. The IAI's declaration that the "Iranian occupation" is more dangerous than the U.S. one indicates that it is the Shi`a threat axis which is of highest priority.[9] The possibility that the IAI may be gearing up for a renewed sectarian battle is supported by its recent formation of special anti-Shi`a militia units dedicated to "purifying the land of Iraq from the Safavid enemy."[10]

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7 The strong Salafist strain in the IAI's overall rhetoric is described in Pascale Combelles Siegel, "Partner or Spoiler: The Case of the Islamic Army in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 1:2 (2008).

8 Since its split in March 2007, 1920RB has only claimed U.S. targets, which would give it the same targeting policy as RA. Hamas of Iraq has claimed attacks against Shi`a militias, however.

9 OSC, "Iraqi Islamic Army Spokesman on Resistance Operations, Talks with Americans," April 11, 2007.

10 OSC, "Islamic Army in Iraq Announces New Anti-Shia Militia Units, Post Video," October 8, 2007.

The IAI does not explicitly state its goal of seizing power, cannily calling for the formation of a technocratic government. The public presentation of a watered-down agenda with real goals concealed, as well as the instrumental formation of broad but loose coalitions, such as the PCIR, is classic insurgent strategy.[11] The supposition that the IAI is a mix of Salafists and nationalists, however, should also be borne in mind as it implies that the IAI's freedom of maneuver is limited and it could fracture if the twin goals of Sunni rule and an intact Iraq become ever more at odds.

In contrast, groups on the right side of the spectrum, such as the 1920 Revolution Brigades and the Rashidin Army, have primarily a nationalist constituency. Consequently, they appear more committed to preserving the integrity of Iraq's Arab nature—within the context of an expulsion of U.S. forces—rather than imposing Sunni religious dominance. Although they no doubt harbor ambitions of seizing central power themselves, their strategy for doing so likely stops short of re-igniting a Sunni-Shi`a civil war. Rather, they may hope that in the event of a U.S. withdrawal, the acclaim that they and their religious authority—the Association of Muslim Scholars—would garner from their longstanding and consistent defiance of the United States, combined with the less hostile face they present toward the Shi`a, will translate into national political legitimacy and power. If this is indeed their strategy, they can be expected to publicly position themselves as the most implacable of foes to the United States. This may explain their absence from the PCIR, if that organization is indeed intended to provide a platform for negotiating with the United States, and would also be consistent with their growing criticism of the Awakening Councils. Yet, if faced with an increasingly real prospect of Iraq's partition, these groups would be more disposed to settle for a lesser goal of Sunni parity with the Shi`a, in which Sunnis are given what they perceive as a fair share of power in an Iraq freed of U.S. occupation. Tellingly, both the 1920RB and RA have dismissed the idea that the "Iranian occupation" is more dangerous than the U.S. one, which can be interpreted as both a rejection of a sectarian strategy and the notion that cutting a deal with the United States is the lesser of two evils.[12]

Conclusion

The factional mapping methodology presented in this paper uses insurgent rhetoric to generate a compact quantitative and visual representation of insurgency factional structure. Given the proliferation of insurgent groups in Iraq, the methodology provides a useful way of clarifying which groups are important, where they stand in relation to each other on an ideological and strategic level, and their cooperative relationships on a political and operational level. The use of targeting policy as an ideology indicator provides finer resolution of fundamental differences between insurgent groups than simply looking at their high level political goals. Consideration of declared political goals alone leads to overestimating the level of ideological congruence between the nationalist-leaning groups, a misimpression that would be compounded by the apparently strong network of relationships among the leaderships of the major nationalist groups. Since the targeting policy is based on public rhetoric, it sheds light on the constituencies that insurgent groups rely on and compete over, and so can also be used to assess the factional composition within individual insurgent groups. This paper's conclusions about the different composition and strategies of the nationalist-leaning groups may have a crucial bearing on the trajectories of the Sunni Awakening Council militias currently cooperating with the United States given that they are reported to have a substantial number of former insurgents in their ranks.

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11 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964).

12 OSC, "Jazirah TV's Talk Show Discusses Expected US Strike Against Iran," September 23, 2007; OSC, "Jihadist Forum Posts Interview with Al-Rashidin Army Amir," August 8, 2007.