COUNTERING ISLAMIST PROTO-INSURGENCIES: THE IRAQ EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The proto-phase of an insurgency is the time during which a fledgling insurgent movement seeks to gather the resources, expertise, and organizational capacity to wage a violent, credible, effective campaign against a governing authority. Whereas a full-scale insurgency enjoys momentum, some population support, and a concomitant inertia that makes it hard to decisively defeat, a proto-insurgency is weak, and should be relatively easy to defeat. In this paper, I build on Dr. Daniel Byman’s ground-breaking work on proto-insurgencies to explore the dynamics of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s successful proto-insurgency in Iraq against the United States, between 2003 and 2004. I argue that three primary factors account for a rapid transition to a full-scale insurgency: the adoption of violent shortcut strategies, such as Che Guevara’s foco strategy, modified to leverage local, as well as foreign fighters; strategic pre-positioning that aids political acceptability and the attraction of foreign fighters; and the dearth of counterinsurgent forces and resources. The underlying premise is that by more effectively understanding proto-insurgencies, we will be better equipped to detect and defeat them, thereby allowing us to avoid resource-intensive campaigns against full-scale insurgencies and preserve our strategic freedom-of-action.
For James H. Haygood, Jr. and Rhonda Haygood. Hoya Saxa.

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With love and gratitude,

Matt
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 INTRODUCTION

Approximately three and a half years into the United States’ occupation of post-Saddam Iraq, as the security situation was rapidly deteriorating, military analyst and Middle East expert Dr. Kenneth Pollack delivered a scathing criticism of US post-war planning and performance: “[i]t never had to be this bad.” Today, after almost a decade of fighting grinding insurgencies in two theaters, the US faces a sobering question regarding any future military engagement in the Middle East: “will it be that bad, next time?” The adoption of the US Army and Marine Corps Field Manual for Counterinsurgency (FM 3-24) offers hope that we will be more prepared for fighting the next insurgency. However, even with a viable doctrine, counterinsurgency remains an expensive and time-consuming endeavor. The ultimate solution to defeating the next insurgency is to detect it and stop it early, when the insurgency is in its proto-phase, before a full-scale insurgency erupts.

The proto-phase of an insurgency is the time during which a fledgling insurgent movement seeks to gather the resources, expertise, and organizational capacity to wage a violent, credible, effective campaign against a governing authority. Whereas a full-scale insurgency enjoys momentum, some population support, and a concomitant inertia that makes it hard to decisively defeat, a proto-insurgency is weak, and should be relatively easy to defeat. In Understanding Proto-Insurgencies, Dr. Daniel Byman sums up the challenges facing the proto-insurgent:

“[The would-be insurgent] and his comrades are unknown to the population at large, and their true agenda has little popularity. Indeed, most countries around the world oppose their agenda. Many of the fighters are not experienced in warfare or
clandestine operations, making them easy prey for the police and intelligence
services. Their families are at the mercy of government security forces.”

Byman points out “[f]or every group that becomes an insurgency, dozens—or perhaps
hundreds—fail,” citing prior academic research on and conclusions about terrorist and guerrilla
group survival, conducted by Dr. Bruce Hoffman\(^2\) and J. Bowyer Bell.\(^3\) The weakness of proto-
insurgencies stands in stark contrast to the strength of full-scale insurgencies. Therefore, the
most pressing tasks of a proto-insurgency are (1) to survive, and (2) to acquire the strength and
effectiveness to sustain its campaign and threaten the governing authority.

In this paper, I argue that three primary factors account for a rapid transition to a full-
scale insurgency: the adoption of violent shortcut strategies, such as Che Guevara’s foco
strategy, modified to leverage local, as well as foreign fighters; strategic pre-positioning that aids
political acceptability and the attraction of foreign fighters; and a dearth of counterinsurgent
forces and resources. I reached this conclusion through an in-depth case study of Abu Musab al-
Zarqawi’s successful proto-insurgency against the United States in Iraq, between 2003 and 2004.
During this period, Zarqawi’s movement successfully transitioned to a full-scale insurgency,
ultimately costing the United States thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars. In
drawing lessons from this case, I build on Byman’s ground-breaking work on proto-insurgencies.

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The underlying premise is that by more effectively understanding proto-insurgencies, we will be better equipped to detect and defeat them, thereby allowing us to avoid resource-intensive campaigns against full-scale insurgencies and preserve our strategic freedom-of-action.

Zarqawi’s proto-insurgency is a valuable case with which to build upon Byman’s work, for three reasons. First, Zarqawi’s insurgency transitioned from the proto-phase to a full-scale insurgency within six to twelve months of the US invasion, providing the US a narrow window with which to defeat it. Second, Zarqawi’s insurgency was largely connected to the global, radical Islamist^4 and Al Qaeda movements that tap into Sunni fears and distrust of the West.^5 Third, Zarqawi’s insurgency was a direct response to the US invasion of a Muslim country. Given the success his insurgency enjoyed in the early phase, his strategy could serve as a model for future Islamist insurgencies against the US or US allies. Whereas much of Byman’s advice may be most applicable to a standing national government, rather than an occupying force, this paper seeks to apply and expand Byman’s lessons to post-invasion stabilization campaigns.

This study identifies three reasons Zarqawi’s Islamist proto-insurgency transformed into a full-scale insurgency within six to twelve months of the US invasion of Iraq:

(1) Zarqawi successfully implemented Che Guevara’s foco theory, which, as defined below, emphasizes using small bands of guerrillas to spark a revolution, while avoiding the time-

^4 It should be noted that the word “Islamist,” as defined below and used throughout this paper, is not synonymous with “Islamic.” As I discuss below, as defined by Dr. Kenneth Pollack, Islamism, also known as political Islam, refers to the belief “that Islam provides a complete set of guidance, not just for how individuals should behave but also for collectives, like nation-states, as well. Thus, political Islam argues that the religion of Islam can and should guide politics, economics, and social structure, not just personal behavior.” See: Kenneth M. Pollack, A Path Out of the Desert (New York: Random House, 2008), 125. Dr. Pollack argues that while Islamism alone “is not necessarily a threat to the United States, … [it] has become both a refuge and a motivation for many of the most extreme elements of Middle Eastern society, and so aspects or segments of it have become the vehicles for the phenomena that do threaten the United States and our interests in the Middle East.” (Pollack, A Path Out of the Desert, 125-126)

^5 It should be noted that Zarqawi did not officially declare loyalty to Al Qaeda until Oct. 2004, after his group had transitioned to full-scale. However, his extensive network and ideology were closely affiliated with Al Qaeda.
consuming process of political and organizational work to prepare a society for the desired revolution. Zarqawi’s strategy leveraged local ethnic groups as well as foreign fighters, thereby enabling his proto-insurgency to transition to full-scale status so quickly that it provided US forces insufficient time to squash the insurgency in its infancy.

(2) Due to the preliminary work done by Al Qaeda and like-minded Islamist groups over the previous two decades, Zarqawi’s proto-insurgency was largely able to short-circuit two of the proto-insurgent’s most vexing tasks: establishing an identity and linking the identity to a cause.

(3) After the invasion, US force levels were insufficient to transition to an aggressive counterinsurgency strategy to quickly stop the proto-insurgency, before it could make the transition to full-scale status. As a result of poor planning and a myopic strategic doctrine that discounted the threat and reality of insurgency, the US lacked the resources to pivot into the role of providing security and stabilization.

These three factors indicate that future Islamist groups could be well-positioned to launch similar campaigns against weak national governments or under-resourced occupying forces.

Counterinsurgents can learn from the Iraq experience to be more prepared to combat proto-insurgencies, before proto-insurgents can make the transition to a full-scale insurgency.

**The Proto-Insurgent’s War: Survival, Effectiveness, and Sustainability**

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6 Marc Becker, introduction to *Guerrilla Warfare*, by Ernesto “Che” Guevara (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), xii.
7 Byman, vii.
Terms such as insurgency, terrorism, guerilla warfare, civil war, and revolution are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper, I adopt Bard O’Neil’s definition of insurgency:

“...a struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities in which the nonruling group consciously uses political resources (e.g., organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics.”

An insurgency can be divided into two broad phases: proto-insurgency and full-scale insurgency. In Understanding Proto-Insurgencies, Dr. Byman defines a proto-insurgency as “a small, violent group that seeks to gain the size necessary to more effectively achieve its goals and use tools such as political mobilization and guerrilla warfare as well as terrorism.” For the purposes of this paper, I adopt the same definition, with one exception: I define the threshold between proto-insurgency and full-scale insurgency in terms of effectiveness, rather than physical or geographic size.

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8 Bard E. O’Neil, *Insurgency and Terrorism*, 2nd ed., (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), 15. Dr. O’Neil’s definition is somewhat broader than Dr. Byman’s. In *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, Dr. Byman adopts CIA’s definition of insurgency, as laid out in the *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, which states: “Insurgency is a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. Insurgent activity – including guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and political mobilization, for example, propaganda, recruitment, front and covert party organization, and international activity – is designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy. The common denominator of most insurgent groups is their desire to control a particular area. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations, whose objectives do not include the creation of a alternative government capable of controlling a given area or country.” (Central Intelligence Agency, *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, Washington, DC (n.d.), 2, as quoted in Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, 3 - 4.) Although Dr. Byman’s definition works well for “protracted” campaigns, the expansiveness of Dr. O’Neil’s definition provides for the analysis of insurgencies that adopt other strategies. In *Insurgency and Terrorism*, Dr. O’Neil identifies nine different insurgent strategies, including protracted-popular campaigns, such as Mao in China, and military-focus strategies, such as Che Guevara in Cuba (O’Neil, 45-67). Moreover, Dr. O’Neil treats terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and conventional warfare as “forms of warfare,” that can be adopted by insurgents, like tools in a toolbox, depending on their strategy (O’Neil, 33).

9 Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, 5.
In Byman’s definition, the size of the insurgency is the key feature that distinguishes proto-insurgencies from full-scale insurgencies. According to Dr. Byman,

“[t]he size at which a proto-insurgency is better classified as a full-blown insurgency is best seen relative to the size of the state’s population and the strength of the government…. With size comes another common characteristic of an insurgency: the ability to seize and hold territory.”

Indeed, for analyzing protracted-popular campaigns, such as Mao Tse-tung in China, size is a good indicator of the progress of the insurgency. However, with O’Neil’s broader definition of insurgency that I adopted above, which accounts for insurgencies that adopt strategies other than protracted-popular campaigns, size can be an insufficient delineator between proto-insurgencies and full-scale insurgencies. I, therefore, argue that the effectiveness of the insurgency in executing its strategy, relative to the strength of the governing authority it opposes, is the best measure with which to distinguish between the proto-phase and full-scale.

The effectiveness of an insurgency is the product of the group’s manpower and geographic reach, as well as its materiel, financial resources, popular support, ability to sustain high-profile operations against the governing authority, frequency of its operations, and its ability to weather the inevitable blowback and scrutiny it will endure from the governing authority. Size is but one factor in the group’s overall effectiveness. The effectiveness of the insurgency is measured in terms of the consequences of its attacks. For example, the ability of Zarqawi to attack the UN compound in late-2003 demonstrated the significant operational capability of his young group. Moreover, the decision of the UN to reduce its presence in Iraq,

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10 Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, 5.
as a result of that attack, represented a tremendous victory for the insurgents and a setback to the US-led Coalition. Given the dearth of visibility into insurgent movements, indicators such as the number and frequency of attacks, and the repercussions of those attacks, are often the only external indicators by which a counterinsurgent can judge the progress of a given insurgent movement.

It should be noted that the age of an insurgency, as an independent measure, is an unreliable indicator of the insurgency’s progress. The proto-phase is generally, correctly associated with the “early” days of the insurgency. However, the speed with which an insurgency transitions from proto-phase to full-scale is dependent on the quality of the insurgency’s leadership, the insurgency’s strategy, and the capabilities of the counterinsurgents. Whereas Mao advocated a long period of political pre-positioning, before the insurgents initiate violence,\(^{11}\) Che Guevara and Zarqawi each became quite effective in a relatively short period of time. Again, effectiveness, measured in terms of the consequences of the insurgents’ operations, best distinguishes between the proto and full-scale phases.

When the proto-insurgency reaches the point that it can sustain high-impact operations and effectively challenge the standing government authority, it becomes a full-scale insurgency. During the full-scale stage, the insurgency enjoys a momentum of success, growing authority, popularity among a segment of the population, and a concomitant inertia that makes the insurgency much more difficult to smother and defeat than in the proto-phase. This momentum is often reflected in the populations’ fear of the insurgents and distrust of, or lack of faith in, the governing authority.

\(^{11}\) O’Neil, 59.
To achieve the effectiveness necessary to make the successful transition to a full-scale insurgency, a proto-insurgent must accomplish a number of tasks. Byman offers four general steps the group must conduct: create an identity, link the identity to a cause, gain dominance over rivals, and establish a sanctuary. Through each step, the proto-insurgent seeks to gain the attention, loyalty, and respect of the target population, and violence is his tool. The proto-insurgent must gain operational expertise and the resources to carry out his attacks and sustain his operations. Moreover, the proto-insurgency must develop the organizational capacity necessary to conduct his operations and weather the government’s response.

During the proto-phase, the insurgents’ political tasks are paramount. The proto-insurgents’ operatives and supporters must believe that victory is possible and worth risking their lives. As Clausewitz argued, an enemy’s “power of resistance” is “the product of the total means at his disposal and strength of his will.” Therefore, the proto-insurgent must convince the population that his cause is worthy of their support. Most importantly, the operatives and supporters must believe that the political objective is attainable. It should be noted that increased proximity to the population often provides the proto-insurgent with an intelligence advantage over the government forces. If the population fears the insurgents, they are less likely to provide intelligence, or other forms of support to the counterinsurgents. If the population supports the insurgents, they will actively deceive or deny intelligence to the counterinsurgents, in the hopes of directly aiding the rebels.

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12 Byman, vii.
13 Byman, 7-9.
Because proto-insurgencies are usually weak and the counterinsurgent enjoys tremendous advantages in money, weapons, and international political legitimacy, a proto-insurgency that makes the successful transition to a full-scale insurgency is the exception, rather than the rule. Zarqawi’s insurgency is such a case. As I demonstrate below, three primary factors account for Zarqawi’s transition to a full-scale insurgency: the adoption of Che Guevara’s foco strategy, modified to leverage local, as well as foreign fighters; Islamist, and especially Al Qaeda’s, strategic pre-positioning, which aided the political processes, and allowed Zarqawi’s proto-insurgency to rapidly expand in Iraq, while drawing hundreds of foreign fighters; and the dearth of coalition forces and resources available to counter the rapidly growing proto-insurgency.

Zarqawi’s strategy, coupled with Al Qaeda’s political pre-positioning in the Middle East, allowed his proto-insurgency to rapidly gain strength. After the US invaded in March 2003, US forces had only six to twelve months in which to squash his proto-insurgency. With insufficient forces and the US senior leadership’s refusal to acknowledge that an insurgency existed in the early days, the US was unable to prevent the emergence of a full-scale insurgency.

**ISLAMIST-FOCOISM: ZARQAWI’S IMPLEMENTATION OF CHE’S MODEL**

As a fledgling group of insurgents works to attain the resources, manpower, materiel, and financing to be able to challenge a standing government authority through sustainable violent operations, the insurgent can pursue one of two patterns identified by classical counterinsurgency theorist David Galula: the orthodox pattern and the bourgeois-nationalist shortcut pattern. The orthodox pattern, modeled on Maoist doctrine and implemented primarily by Communist insurgencies, emphasizes politics and organizational development in the early phases, before

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violence begins. To ensure the movement had the necessary resources, Mao argued that violence
should not begin until the political campaign was successfully implemented and the party built. 17
The second pattern, the bourgeois-nationalist shortcut pattern, referred to hereafter as the
shortcut pattern, is a variation of the orthodox pattern in the early stages. 18 In the shortcut
pattern, the insurgents resort to violence more quickly. According to Galula, the quick resort to
violence is designed to “set up a revolutionary party rapidly,” and it is necessarily much more
risky in the early phases. 19 Zarqawi’s group opted for the second pattern: violence first.

Zarqawi was no Mao. He was not considered a brilliant strategist, nor did he possess the
patience required for a time-consuming political phase to build up his organization. 20 His
doctrinal and strategic thinking seems to have gone little beyond his hatred and bloodlust. Brian
Fishman argues that Zarqawi “lack[ed] an extensive formal education,” and was “consistently
intransigent on strategic issues, [possessing] a stubborn confidence in the validity of his own
ideas.” 21 As such, he relied on a series of spiritual advisors to handle the strategic rationale and
Islamic justification for his actions. 22 He was more of a tactician. 23 Violence was his goal and
his tool, often at the expense of the political. Much to the dismay traditional insurgency and
counterinsurgency theorists, it proved remarkably effective, in the proto-phase.

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18 Galula, 30.
19 Galula, 39-42. This is a broad summarization of Galula’s analysis of the shortcut pattern. Based on his
observations in Algeria, he divides this pattern into two steps: blind terrorism and selective terrorism. For the
purposes of this analysis of proto-insurgency, it is sufficient to summarize this pattern as quickly resorting to
violence, before lengthy political work is conducted to build the insurgency’s organizational structure.
22 Fishman, 4, 13. According to Fishman, these advisors included: Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Abdallah al-
Muhajir, Abu Anas al-Shami, and Abu Hamzah al-Baghdadi.
23 Fishman, 13. Mr. Fishman describes him as “profoundly flexible” at the tactical level.
In the build-up to the US invasion and during the first few months of the occupation, Zarqawi employed Ernesto Che Guevara’s foco theory of guerilla warfare, which emphasizes using small bands of guerrillas to spark a revolution, while avoiding the time-consuming process of political and organizational work to prepare a society for the desired revolution. His operational doctrine emphasized brutality, favoring suicide bombings and beheadings. With the support of his extensive international network, it successfully transformed his organization from a proto-insurgency into a full-scale insurgency with such speed that it left the US with only a few months with which to extinguish the insurgency while it was in its infancy.

As explain by Marc Becker, Che’s foco theory holds that “a small guerrilla army operating in the countryside could spark a revolution that would then spread to the cities.” It required “[o]nly a handful of guerrillas in each country,” and was offered as a short-cut to the time-consuming political process advocated by other strategists. It emphasizes that “[a] jungle environment that provided good cover for the guerrillas was more important than the ideological preparation of a large civilian base of support.” Guevara believed this strategy allowed his small band of militants to overthrow the weakened Batista regime in Cuba. However, according to Becker, later failures by other revolutionaries in Peru and Bolivia ultimately “discredited” Che’s strategy. According to Becker,

“[m]any people have criticized Che for overemphasizing the role of armed struggle in a revolutionary movement and have pointed out that, although a

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24 Becker, xii.
25 Becker, xii.
26 Becker, xii.
27 Becker, xiii.
28 Becker, xii – xiii.
relatively small guerrilla force overthrew Batista in Cuba, this came only after
generations of leftist political agitations and rising worker expectations…. [Che] did not
realize, however, how unique the Cuban situation was….”

Although Kurdistan was not a jungle, its terrain was mountainous, and Zarqawi’s preexisting
network of jihadist contacts provided him the resources and freedom to begin fashioning his
insurgency. Moreover, the previous political work of Islamist groups allowed Zarqawi’s foco
strategy to work quickly.

Although there is no evidence that Zarqawi deliberately chose Che’s foco model, in
effect, he did employ it. Its success in Iraq, in contrast to foco’s previous failures, resulted
primarily from its Islamist nature and the reinforcement provided by Zarqawi’s extensive
network of contacts. Zarqawi, a Jordanian-born radical jihadist, arrived in Iraq sometime prior to
the US invasion of Iraq. Before Iraq, he was involved in multiple jihads. Zarqawi allegedly
fought against the Soviets in the 1980s, and eventually “founded Jund al-Shams, an Islamic
extremist group operating primarily in Syria and Jordan” in the early 1990s. He would
eventually serve seven years in jail in Jordan, before being released in 1999. By 2003, he had
established an extensive network of terrorist contacts, ranging from Europe to Southeast Asia.

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29 Becker, xiii.
31 Levitt, “USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network.”
itic.janes.com.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/; Levitt, “USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network.”
He apparently ran a training camp in Afghanistan, and was involved in Al Qaeda’s training of chemical weapons. He also fought with Al Qaeda against the US in Afghanistan.

According to Jean-Charles Brisard, German intelligence services claim that Zarqawi arrived in “Mashhad, Iran on January 5, 2002 and received medical care there,” from wounds he had sustained in Afghanistan as the Taliban fell. In February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell alleged that Zarqawi had arrived in Baghdad for medical treatment in May 2002. Zarqawi eventually moved into “the Kurdish dominated areas of Northern Iraq and began to organize for an expected U.S. invasion.”

Al Qaeda commander Sayf Adel confirms that Zarqawi and his followers, including “20 – 25 Jordanians and Syrians,” deliberately infiltrated Iraq with the intent to resist the expected US invasion and occupation. As explained by Adel,

“[w]e had to draw up a plan to enter Iraq through the north that was not under the control of [Saddam’s] regime. We would then spread south to the areas of our fraternal Sunni brothers. The fraternal brothers of the Ansar al Islam [a Kurdish jihadist group based in northern Iraq] expressed their willingness to offer assistance to help us achieve this goal. The goal was to go to Sunni areas in central Iraq and begin to prepare for confrontations to face the U.S. invasion and defeat the Americans.”

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33 Levitt, “USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network.”
34 Evans, “US Provides Evidence of ‘Sinister Nexus’ Between Iraq and Al Qaeda.”
35 Brisard, 124.
36 Evans, “US Provides Evidence of ‘Sinister Nexus’ Between Iraq and Al Qaeda.”
37 Fishman, 8.
His preparation of the battlefield quickly paid off.

By late 2003 and early 2004, Zarqawi’s organization, known as Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad prior to officially joining bin Laden and Al Qaeda in late 2004, had successfully transitioned from a proto-insurgency to a full-scale insurgency, as indicated by the frequency and devastation of the attacks. Zarqawi’s operational doctrine, designed to shock and demoralize the West, emphasized suicide bombings and videotaped beheadings, targeting both Coalition forces and the local Shia population. On August 7, 2003, the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad was bombed, which “was soon followed by the devastation of the UN mission.” The UN attack stunned the international community, and succeeded in killing one of the world’s foremost experts on nation-building, Sergio Vieira de Mello, thereby coercing the UN to drastically reduce its staff in Iraq. According to George Packer, “[i]n October, as violence surged across Iraq with the start of the Ramadan Offensive, the Red Cross and several police stations in Baghdad were blown up on a single bloody morning.” In May 2004, Zarqawi beheaded Nicholas Berg, and by June 2004, Zarqawi’s insurgents controlled parts of Fallujah. The frequency and devastation of Zarqawi’s attacks, coupled with his growing territorial control and media attention, vividly illustrated the capabilities and competencies of his group and its capacity to sustain its operations.

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41 Packer, 310.
43 Packer, 310.
44 Brisard, 131 - 132.
Like Che, Zarqawi possessed a disregard, albeit a more violent disregard, for the importance of popular support. According to Mr. Fishman, Zarqawi “[embraced an] exclusionary identity” that served to strengthen his in-group cohesion, thereby making “his movement resilient.” Fishman concludes Zarqawi’s emphasis on violence served to reinforce his organization’s exclusionary vision and reflected his belief “in the supreme importance of violence for purifying both a man’s soul and the society he lives in.” It also propagated his message efficiently and attracted massive attention. Perhaps most importantly, his deliberate targeting of Shias facilitated an internecine clash, forcing neighbors to choose sides, and providing him at least some local Sunni-Iraqi support, thereby fanning the flames of his proto-insurgency.

To make up for resources that he could not receive from the bulk of Iraq’s local population, due to his brutality and exclusionary orientation, Zarqawi used his extensive jihadist network to provide for his group. This outreach included a significant foreign fighter contingent. According to Dr. Matthew Levitt, Zarqawi “relied on associates in Syria to facilitate travel to Iraq and other logistics for members of his European network. According to Italian prosecutors ‘Syria functioned as a hub for an Al-Qaeda network’ linked to Zarqawi.” Although Zarqawi’s foreign fighters eventually became hated in Iraq, even amongst the Sunni population, they provided him great strength in the short-term, rapidly expanding his proto-insurgency, and providing vital resources. Moreover, his network allowed him to maintain his strength, even when the local Iraqi Sunnis began to turn on him. The result was a Sunni implementation of

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46 Fishman, 13.
47 Fishman, 13.
48 As cited in: Levitt, “USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zarqawi Network.”
Che’s foco theory that was reinforced by a robust international network of support. This tragically ingenious hybrid facilitated his organization’s transformation from proto-insurgency to full-scale insurgency.

As I argue in the next section, Zarqawi’s strategy was largely aided by the political work conducted by Islamists during the preceding two decades, allowing Zarqawi’s organization to leverage both local Iraqi militants and foreign fighters. Scholars argue that Zarqawi’s brutality ultimately damaged his organization by repulsing many of Iraq’s Sunnis.\textsuperscript{49} Unfortunately for the US and Iraq, even if his brutality harmed his organization in the long-term, it hastened his organization’s quick transition to a full-scale insurgency, ultimately costing the US and Iraq precious lives and resources.

\textbf{Political Short-Circuits: Islamist Strategic Pre-Positioning}

The success of Zarqawi’s strategy was largely a result of the political work conducted by other Islamist groups, throughout the previous two decades, and most recently emphasized in Al Qaeda’s global jihad. According to Dr. Pollack, Islamism, also known as \textit{political Islam}, refers to the belief

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\textit{“that Islam provides a complete set of guidance, not just for how individuals should behave but also for collectives, like nation-states, as well. Thus, political Islam argues that the religion of Islam can and should guide politics, economics, and social structure, not just personal behavior.”}\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Dr. Pollack argues that while Islamism alone “is not necessarily a threat to the United States, … [it] has become both a refuge and a motivation for many of the most extreme elements of Middle

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\textsuperscript{49} Fishman, 23. \\
\textsuperscript{50} Pollack, \textit{A Path Out of the Desert}, 125.
\end{flushright}
Eastern society, and so aspects or segments of it have become the vehicles for the phenomena that do threaten the United States and our interests in the Middle East.”

Today’s radical Islamists, largely embodied by Osama’s bin Laden’s Al Qaeda, trace their philosophical roots to the writings of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, who advocated a restoration of the Caliphate across the broader Muslim world and the expulsion of the West. The message preached by radical Islamists of a crusading, evil US that propped up local leaders and defiled Islam created a rich recruiting base in Iraq and throughout the larger Muslim world for terrorists and insurgents like Zarqawi to exploit. Using their political groundwork and his personal network, Zarqawi’s headline grabbing tactics and merciless brutality brought angry fighters from Iraq and throughout region to his cause, allowing his organization to largely skip the proto-insurgent’s first step of establishing an identity and rapidly expand.

Islamist jihadists trace their recent militant heritage to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent jihad. Once the Soviet Union was expelled, many of the trained and experienced fighters migrated to numerous other jihads, from the Balkans to Indonesia, spawning countless militant groups along the way. The most well-known is Al Qaeda, which often acts as a venture capital organization, providing monetary or materiel support to other smaller jihads. Al Qaeda advocates a centralized mission of defeating the far enemy, the US, in order to

51 Pollack, A Path Out of the Desert, 125 – 126.
expel the US from the Middle East, so that the jihadists can turn their attention to the weaker, local corrupt governments – referred to as the near enemy.\textsuperscript{55}

In addition to its position of philosophical leadership, Al Qaeda’s second key contribution to the global, radical Islamist movement is its investment in propaganda. Bin Laden and his lieutenants have engaged in aggressive media and propaganda campaigns over the last two decades – most notably with the two fatwas he released in the 1990s, declaring war on the US. Numerous other messages extol the virtues of the jihad and seek to inspire new recruits to join the movement. According to Dr. Marc Sageman, the existence of complex social networks among jihadists and would-be jihadists, dating back to the first Afghan jihad against the Soviets, facilitates the movement and recruitment of resources and operatives in today’s conflicts.\textsuperscript{56}

These organizations are able to tap into much of the political and economic frustrations of Muslim populations in the Middle East, and have succeeded in channeling some of the frustrations to a violent hatred of the West.

Al Qaeda’s investments have benefitted from and contributed to a relatively rich recruiting base throughout the Muslim world. According to George Packer, the ideology of radical Islamism had taken root among a segment of Iraq’s Sunni population, at the time of the US invasion.\textsuperscript{57} This conclusion reflects a trend in the Muslim world, that began before the US invasion of Iraq and lasted throughout the proto-phase of Zarqawi’s insurgency. According to post-9/11 Gallup polling of ten Muslim countries, although most Muslims described the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Sageman} Sageman, 7-24.
\bibitem{Sageman2} See: Sageman, \textit{Understanding Terror Networks}.
\bibitem{Packer} Packer, 308 – 309.
\end{thebibliography}
September 11th attacks “morally unjustifiable,…significant minorities disagree[d].” Although Iraq was not one of the countries surveyed at the time, a *USA Today* synopsis of the poll results points out that even “[i]n Kuwait, which U.S. troops liberated from Iraq in 1991, 36% say the [9/11] attacks were justifiable.” Such radical views illustrate the fertile recruiting ground that Zarqawi was able to exploit in Iraq.

Zarqawi’s global network of contacts and the preceding Islamist political work throughout the Middle East were instrumental in facilitating Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad’s rapid progression through each step of Byman’s model, from proto-insurgency to full-scale insurgency. Due to the preliminary work done by Al Qaeda and like-minded Islamist groups over the previous two decades, Zarqawi’s group was largely able to skip the proto-insurgent’s first step of establishing an identity. The narrative of Western crusaders attacking Muslims lands was a familiar story that tapped into shared Islamic understandings of the history of Muslim-Western relations. Given that the radical Islamists had been at war against the West for over two decades, Zarqawi’s proto-insurgent identity practically wrote itself.

Zarqawi’s group was also able to largely skip the proto-insurgent’s second step: linking the identity to a cause. The presence of US forces, coupled with the perceived US favoritism

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59 Stone, “In poll, Islamic world says Arabs not involved in 9/11.”
toward the majority Shia in Iraq served as a point of major contention and worry among the Sunni population. Not only were Sunnis losing control of the government they had largely been in charge of (if only nominally) during the decades of dictatorial rule of Saddam Hussein, but now, the US was deliberately trying to empower the hated Shia. As pointed out by Dr. Pollack, Sunni perception of US favoritism toward the Shia largely alienated many Sunnis. The US failure to counter radical Shia spiritual leader Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army served to feed into this narrative, and prime Iraq for the descent into sectarian violence that Zarqawi worked so hard to promote. Zarqawi was able to tap local Iraqi fears of their Shias neighbors, as well as simmering affinities for the global Islamic community. Therefore, the fight (i.e. cause) against the Americans was to not only preserve Islam - in the global sense - but also to fight for Sunni survival locally, in a vastly different Iraq.

For Zarqawi’s insurgents, the third step, gaining dominance over rivals, also does not appear to have been as instrumental in the Iraq case, at least in the local theater, as it was for the cases studied by Dr. Byman. There are three reasons. First, as numerous scholars have noted, the months following the invasion witnessed the rise of numerous insurgent groups. George Packer, in the award winning book The Assassins Gate, quotes insurgency expert Thomas X. Hammes counting up to five separate insurgent groups. The plethora of insurgent groups put great strains on the undersized US forces, permitting each group to have greater freedom of movement. Second, the existence of other Sunni groups, such as Baathist elements, provided

60 Pollack, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq.”; See also, George Packer’s The Assassin’s Gate.
61 Pollack, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq.”
63 Packer, 302.
occasional alliances and the ability to leverage weapons and materiel. According to his biographer, Jean-Charles Brisard, Zarqawi successfully managed to forge a coalition among a variety of militant Sunni groups – including, Ansar Al-Islam, Ansar Al-Sunna, Jaysh Mohammed, Al-Jamaa Salafiya, Takfir wal Hirja, and Jund Al-Sham- under his leadership. Third, the ability to tap into an extensive network of ready and able foreign recruits largely mitigated the need to establish complete dominance in the immediate area of operations.

Where conflict with rivals did exist, it appears to have been related to the extreme violence of Zarqawi and his organization. The kidnapping and beheading of Nicholas Berg spawned a rash of kidnappings and brutality. Not only was this off-putting to much of Iraqi society, but is believed to have strained relations with the broader Al Qaeda movement, eventually earning Zarqawi the censure of senior Al Qaeda leadership. The brutality, however, produced strategic effects that aided Zarqawi. Not only did it raise the profiles of Zarqawi and his organization, but it exerted tremendous pressure on the American political psyche, which was still wrestling with the decision to invade Iraq and seemed overwhelmed by how to fight the growing insurgencies. Moreover, Zarqawi’s abhorrent violence largely aided his explicit goal to spark a civil war with the Shia, largely contributing to the formation of similar Shia insurgent groups and accelerating the spiral of communal violence. The brutality of the organization in those early days made ‘Zarqawi’ a household name.

64 “Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI),” Jane’s World Insurgency and Terrorism.
65 Brisard, 132.
66 Brisard, 131-132.
67 Packer, 310.
68 Fishman, 12, 15.
Zarqawi’s group achieved the proto-insurgent’s fourth step, respite, early as well. Given his arrival in Iraq prior to the US invasion, Zarqawi had ample time to prep the battlefield, developing his logistics networks and safe houses. Once the Coalition arrived, Zarqawi’s acquisition of respite was aided by the coalition’s inability to secure the entire country, discussed below. With the Coalitions’ troops oriented into traditional conventional formations – rather than population-centric deployments that would later be codified in doctrine with FM 3-24 – Zarqawi’s forces largely enjoyed freedom of movement throughout the mountains of Kurdistan and the urban jungle of Baghdad. In classic insurgent form, the proximity of Zarqawi to the Iraqi population provided him a relative advantage in tactical intelligence, and allowed him great access to intimidate the population. Large swaths of Iraq became exceedingly dangerous for US troops.

The political groundwork conducted by the broader Islamist movement, coupled with Zarqawi’s strategy, enabled the fledgling proto-insurgency to rapidly ascend to a full-scale insurgency during the early days of the occupation. The extensive combat experience many of the foreign fighters brought to the conflict aided the process. However, as Dr. Byman points out, it is often the response of the government that is most important. As will be demonstrated below, the missteps of the US strategic and political leadership largely contributed to the speed with which Zarqawi’s movement became a full-scale insurgency.

**NOT OUR KIND OF WAR: THE US FAILURE TO ADAPT**

The third key factor in Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad’s rise was the Coalition’s lack of resources to respond. Stopping a proto-insurgency is a two-stage process. First it must be detected. Second, it must be confronted and defeated. Unfortunately, even though US knew that
Zarqawi was in Iraq, and believed him to be affiliated with Al Qaeda, US senior leadership refused to admit that an insurgency existed in mid-2003, as violence was rising.69 Worse, as violence rose, there were too few US forces to adequately secure the population and defeat Zarqawi’s insurgency. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see that in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the first priority should have been to establish security with adequate forces and a population-centric approach. Unfortunately, as a result of poor planning and a myopic strategic vision, the US lacked the resources to pivot into the security and stabilization role. Against a determined and well-networked proto-insurgent like Zarqawi, the lack of adequate personnel, coupled with an ill-conceived post-invasion plan, proved a recipe for disaster.

One of the most common, and accurate, criticisms of the post-invasion campaign was the insufficient number of troops allocated for the occupation. General Shinseki famously “suggest[ed] that it would take several hundred thousand troops to stabilize Iraq.”70 He was proven correct. The Administration’s decision to invade with just 160,000 has been sharply criticized by former government officials and scholars.71 In the aftermath of Saddam’s decisive conventional defeat, US and coalition forces faced multiple missions – simultaneously. First, they were responsible for tracking down the WMDs the intelligence community and Administration believed were there. Second, they were responsible for locating and capturing Saddam, who fled Baghdad during the invasion. Third, they were responsible for quelling the

69 Packer, 302.
remaining Baathist resistance and violence. Fourth, they supported the Coalition Provisional Authority and worked to assist in the planned transfer of sovereignty to a new Iraqi government, while training Iraqi security forces. Given the limited number of troops who had participated in the invasion, which reflected Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld’s new smaller-faster-lighter agile force doctrine, there were not enough troops to counter Zarqawi’s fledgling insurgency.\textsuperscript{72}

The US embrace of network-centric war and the smaller-faster-lighter force doctrine reflected the oft-acknowledge US aversion to guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency. The US traces its aversion to guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency to the scarring experience of Vietnam. After years of vexing guerrilla warfare and an eventual US withdrawal from Vietnam, strategists and policymakers worked assiduously to avoid another “quagmire” like Vietnam. The strategic solution was to simply not fight the types of wars we do not like and that do not emphasize conventional forces and technology. For almost three decades, the approach proved mostly effective – we simply refused to engage insurgent forces on a large-scale. In those brief encounters in which asymmetric elements challenged us, such as Hezbollah in 1982 Lebanon or warlords in 1993 Somalia, we simply left.

The promise of “smaller-faster-lighter” was that technology-enabled forces could engage the enemy and earn a decisive defeat, without getting entangled in a messy counterinsurgency campaign. It was a perfect solution: we could engage asymmetric enemies, but avoid their favored forms of warfare by engaging and destroying the enemy on our terms: technology and brevity. Unfortunately, this misplaced faith in network-enabled warfare left the US with too few forces and unprepared to counter the resilient proto-insurgency led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, or

\textsuperscript{72} For a detailed account of Secretary Rumsfeld’s transformation doctrine, and its impact on post-invasion planning in Iraq, see: Packer, \textit{The Assassins’ Gate}, 117-120.
the numerous other simultaneous insurgencies that were emerging in Iraq in late 2003 and early 2004. Because we had generally refused to entertain the idea of such warfare for so long, when the insurgents emerged, the political-strategic leadership was unable to adequately respond.

Particularly damaging was the inability of the US to control Iraq’s vast borders. Classical counterinsurgency theorists like David Galula emphasized the importance of controlling borders to deny the insurgents access to safe havens and to deny them logistic networks outside of the country. Although adequate border control and security is vital to any counterinsurgency, it was likely a key pillar of Zarqawi’s strategy. Because his network provided support from abroad and allowed him to tap large numbers of militants and infiltrate them into Iraq, often via Syria or Iran, border access was particularly important to Zarqawi’s network. Denying his network access to Iraq would have disrupted his Islamist-focoist approach to growing his proto-insurgency. With a disbanded Iraqi military and insufficient US troop numbers, his network was largely uninhibited during the crucial early days of the proto-insurgency. The cruel irony of the United States’ new form of warfare was that an under-resourced, yet brilliantly organized, amorphous network of proto-insurgents was able to defy the “smaller-faster-lighter” network-centric Coalition force, even when the proto-insurgency was most vulnerable.

With insufficient troops numbers and a growing insurgency the US government was unprepared to confront, a quick fix emerged: train local Iraqis and hand off authority to them as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, while the US exerted tremendous energy and resources to the training and equipping program, Iraqis initially proved unable to meet the challenge. Numerous delays and setbacks in the program allowed further room for Zarqawi’s insurgency to

73 Emphasized throughout David Galula’s Counterinsurgency Warfare.
74 Packer, 306 – 308.
grow. The emphasis on training diverted attention and resources away from arresting the growing insurgency and stabilizing the territory.

The insufficient resources would eventually translate into an image of a US that was unwilling to commit to victory. While the US soldiers fought with honor and tenacity, policymakers in Washington clamored for an “exit strategy.” Few were willing to discuss “winning” or “victory.” The perceived weakness of US resolve, on the part of its leaders and policymakers, appeared to validate Bin Laden’s narrative of the US as a “paper tiger,” which traced unfulfilled missions and broken promises through Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia. The perceived weakness and hurried emphasis on a quick exit fed into the insurgency’s transition into full-scale insurgency—especially in the second step, as Zarqawi worked to convince his fighters that victory was assured.

As examined above, the second step for proto-insurgents, according to Dr. Byman’s model, is to link the proto-insurgent’s identity to a cause. Proto-insurgents effectively link the identity to a cause when their operatives believe that succeeding in the cause is plausible, if not inevitable. As discussed above, Clausewitz argued an enemy’s “power of resistance” is “the product of the total means at his disposal and strength of his will.”

Therefore, the over-emphasis on exiting Iraq as quickly as possible, despite the growing proto-insurgency, likely emboldened the proto-insurgency and hastened its recruitment efforts, thereby accelerating the rate at which the proto-insurgency was able to transition to full-scale. Denying the existence of a growing insurgency, while simultaneously clamoring for an exit, only provided much-needed hope to a movement that should have been otherwise weak.

75 Clausewitz, *On War*, 77.
CONCLUSION

Like all successful insurgent groups, Al Qaeda is a learning organization. They will take the lessons and experience of Iraq and apply them to the next jihad. Furthermore, the effectiveness of Zarqawi’s strategy means that it could be replicated by future Islamist groups or future Al Qaeda campaigns against faltering governments or occupying forces – especially when those governing authorities lack sufficient forces to counter the proto-insurgents and stem the flow of foreign fighters into the theater. Although Che’s foco theory failed miserably in Latin America after Cuba, the idea of adopting focoism for radical Islam and using a small network of well-connected insurgents to infiltrate a theater of combat and begin spinning-up an insurgency was proven quite effective in Iraq. Zarqawi’s implementation provided US forces a mere six-to-twelve months to stop the proto-insurgency before it required more drastic and costly intervention. When applied to conflict zones amenable to radical Islamist ideals, Al Qaeda’s modified focoism is a powerful strategy. Scholars have already identified the use of focoism by other Islamist organizations, such as the Taliban and Pakistani troops. The Iraq experience indicates it is gaining popularity.

Iraq also demonstrated the effectiveness and lethality of Al Qaeda’s pre-positioning. As the “vanguard” of Islamic resistance, Al Qaeda is well-positioned to challenge outside or occupying powers, especially in the aftermath of an invasion or war that devastates a society. Zarqawi demonstrated that no matter how risky, a violence-centric strategy that relies on a

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mixture of local fighters and foreign fighters can quickly achieve the strength to pose a significant challenge to the governing authority.

As I noted above, even though his brutality strengthened his in-group cohesion, some scholars argue that Zarqawi’s brutality against the Shias and local Iraqi Sunni population ultimately harmed his organization. While this may be true, it is likely that if Zarqawi had strictly channeled his violence against the US, rather than local Iraqis, his Islamist-foco strategy would have been even more effective in transforming his organization from a proto-insurgency to a full-scale insurgency, and provided his movement with greater stamina once the US population-centric counterinsurgency campaign began in 2007. Given that successful insurgent groups learn from previous mistakes, the next Islamist-focoist insurgency could prove even more lethal to governing authorities.

Numerous potential conflict zones could prove equally susceptible to an Islamist-foco strategy. Given the ongoing support for radical Islamist ideology across the Middle East and broader Muslim world, identified by the polls discussed above, the political ground-work has already been conducted. Should a well-networked insurgent group infiltrate remote areas and attempt to destabilize the regime, it would be well-positioned to grow rapidly—especially if the government is weak or occupation forces are too insufficient to smother it or stem the tide of foreign fighters. Fractious societies prone to interreligious conflict, could prove particularly susceptible. With the Middle East in political turmoil, weakened states like Yemen, Osama bin Laden’s ancestral homeland, and Libya might prove to be tempting targets for an Al-Qaeda affiliated Islamist cell.
The Iraq experience further illustrates that the US may have very little time (as few as six-to-twelve months, or even less) with which to extinguish a fledgling insurgency. The key is to have ample forces available to respond and implement the doctrine encapsulated in FM 3-24, before the full-scale insurgency can emerge. Policymakers must commit sufficient numbers of troops, before the military engagement commences, and be prepared to quickly transition to the stability phase. Increased troops not only provide increased intelligence gathering capabilities, but are critical to securing the borders to inhibit focoist strategies that rely on foreign fighters. Moreover, policymakers must be cautious when considering cuts to the size of the US military to ensure that the military contains the number of personnel needed to address unforeseen strategic developments. As a campaign unfolds, policymakers must also exude unwavering confidence in the military and the mission.

More research is needed on proto-insurgencies to identify their weakness and how best to counter them. Future research can focus on the tactical and operational issues that inhibit intelligence gathering necessary to identify and target the proto-insurgent network, before it gains significant strength. Additionally, a quantitative analysis of previous insurgencies could identify the best metric(s) for identifying when an insurgency makes the transition to a full-scale insurgency. For example, is the number of operatives, relative to the size of the population or relative to the size of the security forces, the best metric? Or, is the best metric the impact and frequency of attacks relative to the population or security forces? With such a metric, military commanders could gauge the relative danger of emerging insurgent groups, before they make the transition to a full-scale insurgency.
The study of proto-insurgency is a relatively underdeveloped field. By studying the
dynamics of proto-insurgencies and determining how best to defeat them, scholars can help the
US military and other counterinsurgents more efficiently prevent the onset of violence. By
defeating our enemies early, we can avoid wasting precious lives and resources, while ensuring
our strategic freedom of action.
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