Does public debate about the pros and cons of the UK's involvement in Iraq undermine the chances of military success? **Radha Iyengar** examines the incentives of Iraqi insurgent groups to commit acts of violence, their responses to public opinion in the West, and the lessons for both communications policy and counter-insurgency strategy.

Violence in Iraq:
the impact of public debate during wartime

The Chilcot inquiry into the UK's involvement in Iraq between 2001 and 2009 is unique in its breadth of coverage: from the evidence available in the public domain for entering the conflict and the subsequent military action to the political and social aftermath, both in Iraq and at home. A central question is whether information to justify the UK's involvement was withheld or presented to the public in a misleading way.

Of potentially equal significance is the fact that the Iraq inquiry is available live via the internet and satellite television. A concern commonly cited across many similar conflicts is the extent to which such open debate in democracies can reduce the chances of a successful military outcome. Is it possible that public debate over the progress and plans for war may be sending information to opponents in conflict areas that may undermine the chances of military success by damaging the credibility of a nation's long-term commitment to persist until victory?

This concern is amplified in insurgent conflicts, in which guerrilla tactics are used to try to overthrow an incumbent government. Studies by conflict experts James Fearon and David Laitin have shown that insurgent groups operate using political as well as military techniques. These seek to 'delegitimise' the existing government. This is typically accomplished through the use of violence, which makes it difficult for existing political parties to govern effectively and maintain public support (Fearon and Laitin, 2003).

Such insurgencies tend to result in protracted conflicts with neither insurgent nor counter-insurgent forces achieving a decisive victory. As Eisenstadt and White (2005) show, the average duration of insurgencies in the twentieth century is approximately nine years, with about half resulting in success for the government. This gives time for insurgent forces to disseminate alternative political scenarios and win over the civilian population whose government they are attempting to overturn.

Concerns about domestic debate

hindering military success are particularly relevant to insurgent conflict in Iraq (and now, of course, in Afghanistan) for two reasons:

■ First, public debate may create the perception that the UK and its allies appear responsive to attacks by insurgents. Changing strategy in response to insurgent violence may increase the perceived benefits to that action. This may increase the willingness of insurgents to engage in greater levels of violence, endangering both civilians and military personnel.

■ Second, individual Iraqis, and particularly those as yet uncommitted to either side in a conflict, may be less likely to collaborate with the UK or its allies by providing information if pro-government forces cannot credibly protect them from retribution by insurgent groups.

Incentives for insurgents

To think about these issues systematically, it is useful to consider insurgent groups in Iraq as strategic actors who respond to incentives created by the policies of the coalition and the emergent Iraqi national government. That makes it possible to discuss how information on the counter-insurgent forces' commitment affects their perceived costs and benefits.

By all definitions, the UK and its allies have faced a devastating insurgency in Iraq since overthrowing the previous regime in mid-2003. Although the major conflict phase of military operations lasted until 1 May 2003, substantial military forces remain engaged in low-level conflict. Until very recently, the UK and its allies remained

largely responsible for maintaining Iraq's internal and external security. Figure 1 shows the trends in violence in Iraq between 2003 and 2008.

It is in this context that the Iraqi insurgency steadily grew in size and capability from 2003 onwards. Unlike nationalist or secessionist insurgencies that are initiated and led by a single, unified group, the insurgency in Iraq that emerged after the invasion and occupation of Iraq was fractionalised between the separate ethnic and religious communities that make up Iraq's population.

The result has been organisations and networks that are local and decentralised, small in scale and with loose or non-existent ties between them. This lack of centralisation of the insurgency in Iraq bears directly on the effect of new information on violence. In a centralised insurgency, two types of action may be predicted:
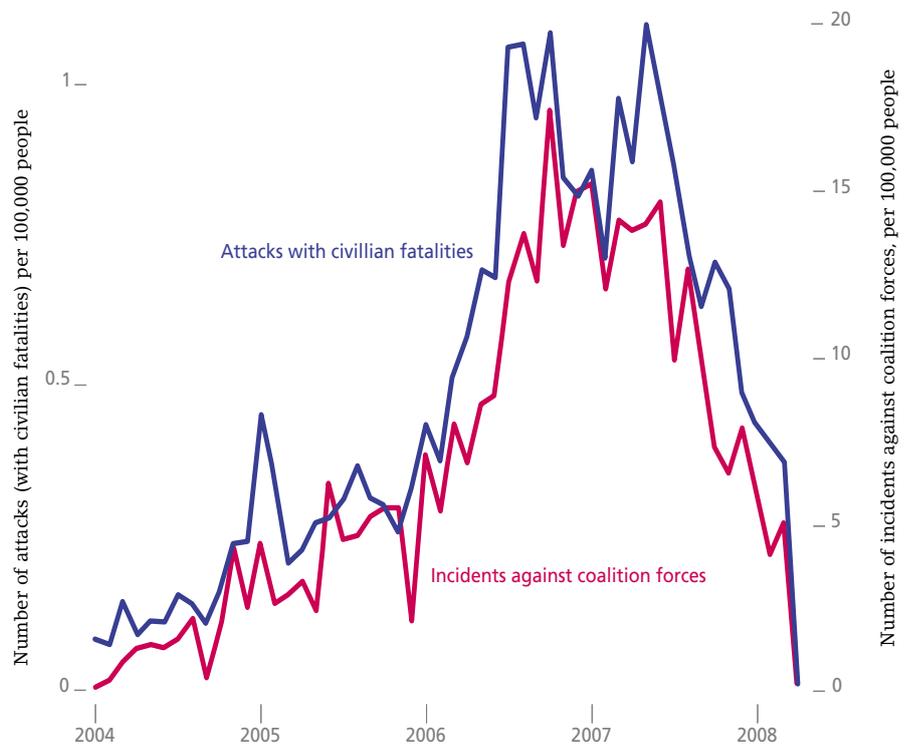
■ First, insurgent groups may decide whether to wait out the occupying forces by restraining violence until they withdraw.

■ Second, insurgent groups may increase the scale of violence in an attempt to induce withdrawal. The option to attack involves a decision of not only how much to attack but also where attacks might be most strategically advantageous.

In contrast, the strategy of reducing violence levels and waiting it out is not an option available to competing insurgent groups, which must situate themselves not only relative to the occupying forces but also relative to other insurgent groups. This is because insurgent groups are competing among themselves to maximise their power and influence over the state and society. They may use violence and terrorism not only to impose costs on the occupying force, but also as a tactic to establish dominance over competing groups.

In short, in a competing insurgency, the various groups compete for relative position using violence as their major tool. This results in a complex and selective pattern of violence in contrast to centralised insurgencies.

Military strategists need to understand the role that competition between insurgent groups plays in generating violence

Figure 1:

Trends in attacks and fatalities after the invasion of Iraq

Note: The number of attacks per province-week is defined as non-criminal acts that result in the death of one or more persons. The data do not distinguish between Sunni insurgent attacks and Shia militia attacks. Attacks that result in only injuries are not included.

The impact of information on violence

We can now start to consider the role of information, as provided by public debate, on violence levels in the conflict. To do this, we can consider the objectives of the groups and the role that violence plays in achieving those objectives, and then consider how information affects the perceived rewards to violent actions.

A commonly suggested objective for a group in a decentralised insurgency is to maximise their influence as the influence of the occupying force declines or withdraws completely.

Under conditions where some groups have information about the potential actions of the occupying force and others do not, changes in behaviour might be expected of the groups that have information. This is more likely to be the case with information relevant to whether the counter-insurgent forces' commitment is changing. Here are two hypothetical cases of how this might work:

■ First, suppose the occupying force is unambiguously dominant. Then, there are smaller returns to being in any insurgent group, as the chance of the insurgency winning power is very low. Similarly, there is less incentive to compete over relative position between insurgent groups, as the relative gain of being the top versus the second-best insurgent group is also small.

■ Second, suppose the occupying force is believed to have declining or lower levels of influence. The chances of influencing the civilian population and having meaningful political power for any insurgent group are higher than in the first case, especially where government counter-insurgency operations are weaker. So here, each insurgent group also has a larger incentive to strengthen their position relative to the other insurgent groups.

In this framework, attacks in Iraq targeted at the coalition military offer an opportunity for insurgent groups to demonstrate both absolute strength vis-à-vis a foreign occupier and relative strength with respect to other insurgent groups, and to increase the costs of continued military involvement. Attacks targeted at civilian settings establish relative strength too, but they also impose costs on civilians themselves.

The trade-off that insurgents face is the greater ease but lower return of civilian attacks versus the greater cost (and risk) but higher return of military attacks. In a competitive framework where insurgents seek to win the support of the population, such civilian attacks may become increasingly costly and military attacks increasingly desirable as the returns to establishing absolute dominance increase.

This theory generates two testable empirical implications:

■ First, insurgent-initiated attacks should differ depending on the locally available information about potential future coalition behaviour. If there are spatially different responses to information, this implies a geographically decentralised insurgency in Iraq with between-group competition.

■ Second, insurgent-initiated attacks should increase with respect to military targets and decrease with respect to civilian targets. This is because the value of civilian and military targets is different.

If there is a shift in targeting, this may imply competition between groups in the insurgency. This assertion is premised on the theory that new information about coalition involvement may change insurgent groups' incentives. The individual insurgent groups are motivated to impose greater damages on military targets to try to achieve dominance. Think of this as similar to a situation in which multiple interest groups or political parties vie for influence or share of the vote.

Conflict in the age of high-speed communications

Generally, the response of insurgent behaviour has been difficult to verify empirically because information on public support for war or dissatisfaction with the military's performance was difficult to obtain by insurgent groups on the ground. In the last decade, however, information technologies have dramatically changed that, enabling remote regions of the world to have near real-time access to information.

The conflict in Iraq represents the first major military engagement in which high speed international communications, such as satellite television, have been broadly and commercially available, making real-time information available to all. The sale of satellite dishes in Iraq 'skyrocketed in

Insurgents use violence not only to impose costs on the occupying force, but also as a tactic to establish dominance between competing groups

the months following the invasion, leading to one of the highest penetration rates in the world in just two years' (Cochrane, 2006).

Nevertheless, 'while nearly all (93%) Iraqis report owning a television, only about a third (33%) have access to a satellite dish', according to a media poll by the UK's Office of Intelligence and Research. Access varied dramatically by regions, largely based on pre-war infrastructure and regional weather conditions, and I have exploited such variations to test the relationship between access to news about US politics across Iraq's 18 provinces and patterns of insurgent violence.

Specifically, I combine data on US military and Iraqi civilian fatalities resulting from insurgent violence, the release of polls on US public opinion towards the Iraq war and access to satellite television media in Iraq.

With the assumption that provinces with greater access to satellite television have greater and more rapid exposure to US news, I investigate whether insurgent groups in these areas responded differentially following the release of US public opinion polls. I use a technique that makes it possible to control for many other variables between the provinces and over time.

Tracking the responses to polls released over a two-year period, I find that the frequency of attacks increased by between 5% and 15% in high satellite areas compared with low satellite areas in the two weeks following the release of new public opinion polls in the United States.

The analysis also shows that the number of military fatalities increased by between 40% and 50% in the weeks following poll releases, while the number of Iraqi civilian casualties decreased by between 20% and 30%. As Figure 2

shows, this difference dissipates by the fourth week.

These two independent findings are consistent with the original hypothesis that in a decentralised insurgency, individual insurgent groups act in a competitive manner both to gain dominance among groups and to increase local public support. Supporting the latter conclusion is my finding that attacks following poll releases shift from civilian targets and towards military targets.

Public debate in democratic societies

Before considering recommendations for policy based on these findings, it is important to note that the results do not represent a full analysis of the costs and benefits of an open public debate about military strategy. My study does not address the issue of whether criticism of war strategies brings sufficient extra benefits to society to make such costs acceptable.

Extensive empirical research suggests that open debate, independent scrutiny of official policy and transparency improves the quality of decisions in democracies relative to closed political systems and may
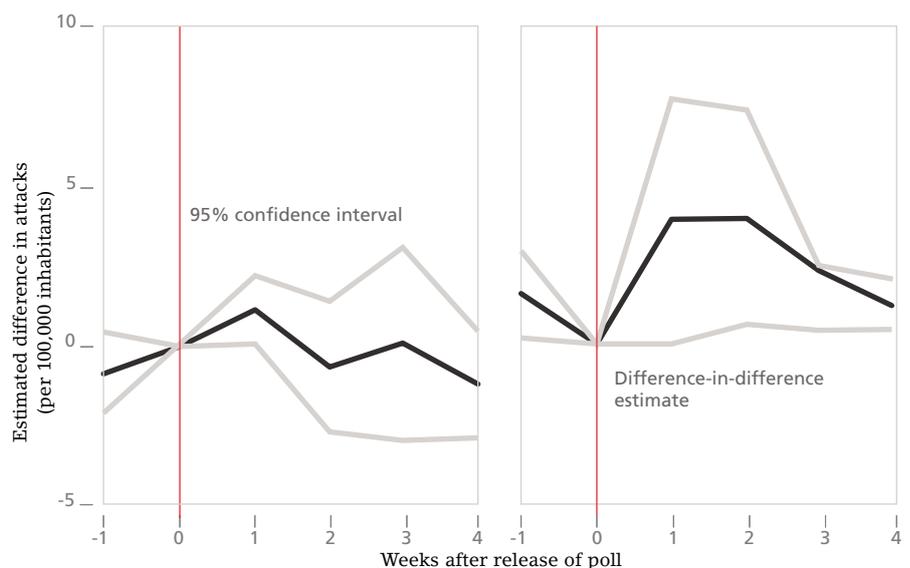
at times be necessary to force changes in war strategy (Kaufman, 2004; Snyder, 1991). Public criticism and policy reviews may therefore be beneficial overall if the resulting improvements in strategy produce a real reduction in attacks and fatalities.

But in democratic societies where public debate cannot, and should not, be limited, it is important to recognise the important role that information plays in affecting the behaviour of insurgent groups. It is also important to recognise that the concept of 'domestic' debate that remains unavailable to other non-domestic participants in a conflict no longer exists.

Debates on military strategy and public opinion are now internationally available. While they can and should occur, it is important to recognise that they will also be available to insurgent groups – and that discussion should therefore be responsibly managed by media organisations.

An important consideration may be the type of coverage, be it print, broadcast or satellite. Information available on the internet and via satellite has much broader and more rapid international diffusion than traditional broadcast television or print

Figure 2:
Difference in attacks after poll information is released on satellite television

95% confidence interval

Difference-in-difference estimate

Estimated difference in attacks (per 100,000 inhabitants)

Weeks after release of poll

Note: The number of attacks per province-week is defined as non-criminal acts that result in the death of one or more persons. The data do not distinguish between Sunni insurgent attacks and Shia militia attacks. Attacks that result in only injuries are not included.

media. Media companies may wish to consider what information to include in which communication form.

Strategies to reduce insurgent violence

Any conclusions for military strategy should be taken with a cautionary note. Given the complex nature of insurgencies and the limited empirical information available, further research is needed to identify more precisely the channels through which various counter-insurgent activities affect insurgent behaviour. With this caveat, I suggest that the following recommendations arise from the existing evidence.

If a short-term change in information changes the strategy of competing insurgent groups, then it may be possible to use both outgoing information and competition between groups to combat violent insurgent activity more effectively. Strategies may be used to take advantage of inter-group rivalry and the need to compete for public support. The following strategies could be tried:

■ Providing rewards for cooperation with counter-insurgency operations: there is some supporting empirical evidence for this approach in Iraq from recent empirical work (Berman et al, 2008). In Iraq, government and coalition provision of public services, such as schools and hospitals, are associated with lower levels of violence.

■ Increasing penalties for cooperation with any insurgent group: while there are often harsh penalties for cooperation, there is not a well-defined set of penalties for different levels of cooperation. My research in the context of US crime, as well as previous research on the economics of deterrence, suggests that such penalties are critical to reducing participation (Iyengar, 2008).

There is also supporting evidence for this in the context of political violence from Israeli penalties for Palestinian suicide bombers. Recent work suggests that house demolitions reduce suicide attacks (Benmelech et al, 2009). This suggests that even apparently extreme forms of political violence may be somewhat open to deterrence.

In addition, these results help to identify which strategies are likely to be unsuccessful. For example, if insurgent groups are decentralised, then counter-insurgent strategies based on identifying and incapacitating a single command-and-control operation will be ineffective.

Instead, approaches need to parallel policing strategies. Targeting lower level operatives and exposing individual groups requires increased patrols, community participation and even negotiated deals with former insurgents. Programmes such as the Sons of Iraq follow this line of reasoning and have been largely thought to be effective (though no formal evaluations have been undertaken).

Even if counter-insurgency strategy overall does not change, military strategists should now consider the returns to various operations, understanding the role that competition between groups plays in generating violence.

> ## Attacks following the release of opinion polls shift from civilian targets and towards military targets

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Further reading

Efraim Benmelech, Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor (2009) 'Counter-suicide Terrorism: Evidence from House Demolitions', paper presented at the Political Economy of Terrorism and Insurgency Workshop, UCSD, 27 June.

Eli Berman, Jacob Shapiro and Joseph Felter (2008) 'Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought? The Economics of Counter-insurgency in Iraq', NBER Working Paper No. 14606.

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Radha Iyengar (2008) 'I'd Rather be Hanged for a Sheep than a Lamb: The Unintended Consequences of California's Three Strikes Law', NBER Working Paper No. 13784.

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