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## Outthinking the AIF

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 1 (January 2005)

by [Maj William C. Thomas, USAF](#)

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The Iraqi national and provincial elections in January 2005 are an important milestone in the effort to rebuild the nation. They offer a major step toward establishing effective Iraqi-led governance while facilitating a better security environment and helping create conditions under which economic development and infrastructure repair can occur. As important as the elections are, their impact will be diminished if the Coalition and the new Iraqi leadership do not take advantage of the environment they create. Of particular concern is the establishment of a more stable security situation, as this provides the setting for other improvements to occur.

While the tactical situation immediately following the January 2005 elections may look the same as before, there will be new strategic opportunities available to the Iraqi government (IG) and the Coalition forces (CF). The elections will create a new environment in which both friendly and anti-Iraq Forces (AIF) will operate. This new battlespace presents two unique possibilities for striking the AIF, which is a collection of various insurgent, terrorist, and criminal groups:

1. First, following the “life cycle” approach to examining violent non-state actors, the individual components of the AIF are likely to undergo a transformation as they reevaluate their goals and strategies in light of post-election changes.
2. Second, the seams between different elements of the AIF should be more vulnerable to exploitation when their objectives, which have been somewhat common up until now, begin to diverge.

### **AIF Transformation**

The “system of systems” model for evaluating violent nonstate actors (VNSA) suggests that these groups function within a four-phase life cycle.<sup>[1]</sup> They go through a Gestation period in which goals and values are identified and initial tactics are developed, a Growth phase during which members new and old are indoctrinated with these goals and values, a Maturity phase in which the established organization carries out operations, and a Transformation phase during which new values and goals are developed in response to changes in the situation. Insurgencies are adaptive, so this process continues, though not necessarily at a constant pace.

Transformation occurs when the battlespace in which the VNSA functions changes to such an extent that their goals and values may no longer be applicable.[2] This could occur when their goals have been achieved or certain options are no longer open. Regardless, the group must reevaluate where it stands and where it wants to go. When environments change, organizations face the prospect either of not surviving or of changing their activities in response to these environmental factors.[3] In many cases a threat to an organization's survival provides the incentive to adapt, lest it cease to exist. Changes in activities and organizational structures are based on a new understanding of the battlespace and the internalization of new beliefs. Thus, a true transformation occurs when the group adjusts not just its tactics, but the objectives it is trying to attain. This transformation can lead it to recruit new types of members, socialize those members in a different way, adjust their strategies, tactics, and targets, and move toward becoming a new form of the previously-established organization.

The AIF are likely to transform after the January 2005 elections much as they did after the June 2004 transfer of sovereignty. Prior to that point a common goal of the various AIF elements seemed to be to reduce support for the Iraqi operation among the Coalition members' populations and also to delegitimize the Coalition in the eyes of the Iraqi people. The transfer in June 2004 changed that. Many Shia groups saw an opportunity to begin engaging in a political process where they were likely to be in the majority, while Sunnis saw themselves being pushed further out of power. As the goal changed from repelling an invader to stopping the emergence of a new political structure, the number of violent actors and their recruiting pool may have shrunk, but the intensity for some groups may have increased. The one constant across the different environments is the foreign extremists working for Zarqawi, who seem bent on waging *jihad* against Westerners, regardless of the government situation.[4] [See [Table 1.](#)]

## Changing Strategic Environments

Their post-election transformation will represent not only a change in tactics but also in operational and strategic goals. Insurgents have political goals they are trying to accomplish, and a shifting battlespace forces them to reevaluate whether those goals are still relevant. For example, a current objective of some groups is to disrupt the January elections—that objective, one way or another, is about to be out of date. Insurgent leaders will need to reevaluate their longer term goals and determine how the election results affect their viability.

## Disrupting the AIF's Transformation Process

Transformation is a vulnerable period. A group's goals are unclear during this time and the leadership may not be in agreement regarding its future—dissension at the highest levels may result and uncertainty may permeate the organization. Members may begin to question their operations, particularly in a decentralized operation like an insurgency where the decision making processes may not be transparent to operators at the lower levels. It becomes difficult to recruit new members and train them when an organization is unsure what it is recruiting and training for, and it can similarly be difficult to rally support from the local population to provide resources and information that insurgents need. If they fail to move quickly through the transformation they may fall back into their previous phase—Maturity—and “hibernate,” continuing with the same goals and strategy until the battlespace changes further or they have a better opportunity to evaluate where they stand and where they want to go.

The upcoming situation in Iraq, however, presents a unique opportunity. The Coalition's progress is linear in nature, moving along a path through various decision points and meeting the demands of a process that includes the January 2005 elections, the constitutional draft and referendum, and the election of an Iraqi government under that constitution in December 2005.

This timeline has been set by UN Security Council Resolutions and the Transitional Administrative Law currently used for governing Iraq.<sup>[5]</sup> The insurgents have been trying to pull the Coalition off of that plan, and in the process have been seizing the initiative because Coalition forces are committed to a particular path, deviation from which is not really an option. The IG and CF have had to adapt to meet the threats of the insurgency while remaining on track, but the elections create a situation in which the insurgents are the ones who must now adapt, not because they choose to, but because they are forced to. Presuming a new battlespace emerges after the elections, the Coalition and new Iraqi government can attempt to disrupt the insurgents' transformation process. Further, the AIF elements can be denied the opportunity to hibernate in the Maturity phase because their goals and strategies that were inherent in their former environment will no longer apply. If they cannot go forward and cannot go back the IG and CF can use this period of uncertainty to seize the initiative and pursue them until they are thoroughly disrupted.

How can the Coalition take advantage of this opportunity? Primarily by being better at "learning" than the AIF are. One part of this equation is to disrupt the AIF elements' learning process. Some of the things that are important to organizational learning include feedback from the field, intelligence gathering, analytical capability, and communication among the leadership as well as between the leaders and subordinates. Targeting multiple aspects of the learning process slows it down and would delay the AIF transformation while increasing uncertainty and disrupting the groups.

A second part of this is to speed up the Coalition's learning process. This requires recognition of the upcoming battlespace change, having mechanisms in place that facilitate learning, and being open to the idea that change is coming. What the environment will look like remains an unknown—the results of the election will shape that—but what is known is that it will shift and time is available to adapt the Coalition's own goals and strategy. This requires advance planning because, while the different elements of the AIF are used to the idea of adapting, the Coalition forces tend to operate more in a straight line and so may be slower to adapt. The key is not so much to prevent the AIF from learning and transforming as it is for the Coalition to be able to do these things better than them. This will be difficult—insurgencies tend to be more adaptable whereas large bureaucratic structures are often slow to change.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Exploiting Seams Between Groups

An important point to keep in mind is that as the elements of the AIF look at where they want to go and how they want to get there, they might not end up in agreement with each other. Even those groups that currently have complementary goals and strategies may find themselves diverging—some might focus on shaping the constitution-writing process, others could emphasize delegitimizing the government, while others might work to get more Coalition countries to leave. Many of these groups have had common near-term goals, but at some point they are likely to go in different directions, which could disrupt their effectiveness as they lose the synergy that comes with complementary objectives. They could potentially start working directly against each other.

This offers a second opportunity for disrupting the AIF. In addition to targeting the transformation processes of the individual elements the CF and IG can also work to pit them against one another. For example, a group that is trying to affect the development of the constitution, say, by intimidating individual Assembly members, needs a legitimate government that it can influence. Its plans will be thwarted by another group that tries to delegitimize the government, such as by continuing to attack the ISF. Intra-AIF dissension could be helpful for disrupting their plans and making them more vulnerable to attacks by the IG and CF.

As with disrupting transformation, this second course of action requires advance planning—waiting until after the elections to start thinking about it is waiting too long. Though it will be

impossible to develop specifics until the election results are known, it is possible to start creating a broad plan that incorporates intelligence gathering and analysis, strategic communications, direct operations, and other methods for drawing AIF elements into competing actions. There is bound to come a point where the differences between the various groups' long-term political goals will drive them apart—the Coalition and the Iraqi government would do well to speed the progress toward that day.

The elections represent a major milestone in Iraq's progress. They will demonstrate progress toward an ultimate end state in which the Iraqi government is able to exercise full control over the country. As a result the strategic environment after January 2005 will shift. The new battlespace will present new opportunities for countering the insurgency and driving the wedge further between the AIF and the Iraqi public. Whether or not the Coalition and the Iraqi government can take advantage of those opportunities depends on how much thought they give to them before the elections.

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