IRAQ: Insurgency Goals

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What is driving the Iraqi insurgency?

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What are some of these motivations?

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**A return to Baathist rule.** Experts say hard-line loyalists of Saddam Hussein, including former high-ranking military or intelligence officers of the Baath Party, may be seeking to regain power through a so-called "third coup." In 1963 and 1968, Baathists came to power in Iraq by taking control of the Iraqi military and seizing political power. The Baathists now fighting in the insurgency are a powerful group, well-funded and stocked with military officers trained during Saddam Hussein's regime in conventional urban warfare. But even Baathists not directly involved in the fighting have some experts worried. "The Baath Party strategy has always been to get control of the security forces," says Kenneth Katzman, senior Middle East analyst for the Congressional Research Service. Katzman theorizes that some former Baathists joining the Iraqi security forces are waiting until the political process fails and Iraq becomes further destabilized. They will then emerge--perhaps violently--and present themselves as the only solution to the nation's security problem. "Their goal is simple: The return of Baathist rule through a military coup," wrote Hiwa Osman, training director of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in Iraq, in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed. "To do that, they are willing to make common cause with people who do not share their secular outlook."

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Establishment of Islamic rule. This appears to be the goal of those who organize foreign fighters infiltrating Iraq from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, and other Arab countries, experts say. By sowing chaos, Islamist militants hope to force U.S. forces out of Iraq and create a fertile recruiting ground, not unlike Afghanistan in the 1990s, from which to train and recruit jihadis. Their ultimate purpose is to restore an Islamic caliphate, a theocracy based on Islamic law that for 12 centuries spanned the Muslim world. "They're thinking decades in advance, and they see Iraq as the first nation in the set of dominos," says Thomas M. Sanderson, deputy director of the Transnational Threats Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The jihadis are coming into Iraq from throughout the region, but a recent Washington Post article, citing radical Islamist websites, argued the majority of suicide bombers in Iraq are Saudis from wealthy and well-educated families. Once in Iraq, some foreign fighters join the terror network of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born leader of al Qaeda in Iraq. Pentagon officials say foreign jihadis, though comprising only 10 percent of the insurgency, carry out nearly all of the suicide bombings targeting Iraqi civilians. The recent spate of car bombings--126 since the end of February--has been attributed to Zarqawi's group.

Nationalism. "It's the strongest force [in insurgencies]," said Leslie H. Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, in a May 14 interview on the Charlie Rose Show, citing the success of the North Vietnamese and other insurgent movements. Nationalism is also what motivates many of Iraq's insurgents, many experts say. These include Iraqis who, after Saddam Hussein's regime fell, were fired from their military or other government jobs but do not favor a return to Saddam Hussein's secular form of Arab socialism. Most of them are Sunnis who fear a Shiite-led government, support a strong state run by Sunnis, and want U.S. forces out of Iraq quickly. Some experts say these fighters are less likely to target Iraqi civilians or engage in suicide bombings. These insurgents, like the Baathists, may be using the foreign jihadis as "cannon fodder" to fight U.S. forces, says Steven Metz, director of research at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute.

What other factors explain the insurgency?

Organized crime. Recent news reports suggest a rise in insurgent attacks related to organized criminal activity. Bruce Hoffman, an insurgency expert at the RAND Corporation, says the kidnapping of civilians has been common in postwar Iraq, but "we only notice it more now because they've been kidnapping foreigners." These attackers are motivated more by greed than politics. Some are leftovers from the 100,000 to 200,000 prisoners Saddam Hussein released before the U.S. invasion. Others are what Metz calls "casual insurgents": out-of-work Iraqis drawn to crime because it pays. Detonating an improvised explosive device can pay $100 to $200, Metz says; killing an American can pay upwards of $1,000. There are around 20 criminal gangs operating in Iraq, according to a recent report by Olive Security, a British security-consulting firm. Many of them kidnap high-level Iraqi officials or foreigners and then sell hostages to the highest bidder, experts say; other kidnappings are subcontracted out by militant groups.

Tribal feuds. Prominent throughout Iraq's rural regions and the so-called Sunni triangle, extended families and clans command strong loyalty and are a common source of group identity among Iraqis. It's unclear how much of the recent surge in violence stems from tribal leaders, but as Metz points out: "Local elites recognize that in a secular, modernized Iraq, their power would be challenged."

Revenge. Some Iraqi civilians join or collaborate with the insurgency for more personal reasons: they can't feed their families or they lost loved ones during the war. "There's a need to prove their manhood," Metz says. "One can't overemphasize factors like honor and justice in this culture." These civilians may take up arms because they are fed up with the U.S.-backed government's inability to provide basic staples like security, running water, or electricity. Collusion by neighboring countries. Many of the countries on Iraq's borders--Iran and Syria in particular--are believed to be indirectly abetting the insurgency, experts say. The United States and Iraq accuse Syria of not doing enough to prevent foreign jihadis from crossing its 380-mile porous border with Iraq, and for failing to stop an alleged secret meeting by Zarqawi's group last month that may have incubated the latest wave of violence. Iran has been accused of funneling money to insurgent groups in Iraq, though Tehran's primary concern, according to a
recent report by the International Crisis Group, is "to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a threat, whether of a military, political, or ideological nature." Some Middle Eastern countries may be provoking a degree of instability in Iraq because they do not want a democracy on their doorsteps, many experts say. More importantly, these states may not want to see Washington succeed in its experiment to remake the Middle East to its liking.

--by Lionel Beehner, staff writer, cfr.org