

Ahmed S. Hashim. *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. xxviii + 482 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4452-4.



Reviewed by John Nagl

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Ahmed Hashim, a professor of strategic studies at the U.S. Naval War College, worked in Iraq between November 2003 and late March 2004 helping Central Command understand the Iraqi insurgency. He returned to Iraq in fall of 2005, serving in Tal Afar as a political and cultural advisor to Colonel H. R. McMaster in Operation Restoring Rights, an operation that has already entered the annals of military history as a textbook case of classic counter-insurgency theory in practice. In addition to being a reserve Army officer, Hashim holds a Ph.D. in international security from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and possesses various degrees of fluency in French, Arabic, German, Farsi, and Turkish.

Hashim's book, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq*, fills an important void in the burgeoning literature on Operation Iraqi Freedom, much of it produced by the indefatigable Tony Cordesman, who co-authored two previous books with Hashim. Hashim sees the war through the enemy's eyes. It is a chilling and enlightening perspective that should be widely and carefully read.

Hashim begins by reviewing the evolution of the Iraqi insurgency from April 2003 through October 2005, telling a story well known to most students of the war, but one that gains power by being told from the other perspective. The most important chapter of the book may be the second, "Origins and Motives of the Insurgency." Simple nationalism plays heavily in the insurgents' motivation, as in the case of "Mohammed," an insurgent leader in Fallujah who told journalist Patrick Graham in 2004 that "Countries always rebel against occupation.... The world knows that this is an honorable resistance and has nothing to do with the old regime" (quoted, p. 102). The actions of the American Army, which most Sunnis see as occupiers, also contribute to the fervor behind the insurgency. Hashim quotes a Sunni laborer named Abdul Razak al-Muaimi, who explained why he trains his sons to kill American soldiers: "It's not that I encourage my son to hate Americans. It's not that I make him want to join the resistance. Americans do that for me" (p. 101).

In a long chapter on "The Insurgents' Way of Warfare," Hashim describes the various and often

competing groups of insurgents in Iraq and their techniques for using Improvised Explosive Devices and the Internet to attack American national will—a protracted war strategy that takes advantage of the benefits of globalization and turns its disadvantages against America. He puts the lie to the often-heard argument that most insurgents are foreign *jihadis*; only 127 of the 8,000 suspected insurgents detained in 2004 held foreign passports (p. 139). Instead, the central driver of the insurgency is the "Contending National Identities" of homegrown Sunnis and Shia competing for control of Iraq—the struggle now approaching a possible denouement in Baghdad in fall 2006, one year after Hashim's analysis ends.

Four-fifths of Hashim's book details the Iraqi insurgency. His fifth chapter, "Ideology, Politics, and Failure to Execute" focuses on the American response, with the grade he gives the effort well indicated by the chapter title. The argument is similar to that presented by British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster's now-famous 2005 *Military Review* article "Changing the Army for Counter-Insurgency Operations." In Hashim's words, "U.S. policy and the counter-insurgency campaign have played a key role in the outbreak and perpetuation of the insurgency" (p. 272). In Hashim's eyes, the military has made its bed and now must lie in it.

As if that were not bad enough, Hashim does not think the Army and Marine Corps are getting any better. The U.S. military "has proven yet again, only thirty years after the Vietnam debacle, that despite its talent and enormous material resources it has neither the organizational nor the cultural flexibility to deal with insurgencies" (p. xxiv). Disturbingly, our enemies are learning more rapidly than we are. Hashim draws an unfavorable comparison between U.S. forces and their Iraqi opponents who "had started their operations with little knowledge of U.S. capabilities but had been able to adapt over the course of the insurgency" (p. 103). The picture is so bleak that there

is little hope that the U.S. military will ever improve its conduct of counter-insurgency: "It is in effect, as currently constructed, congenitally incapable of waging effective counter-insurgency" (p. 320).

This argument is overstated. In fact, the U.S. military has adapted to the demands of counter-insurgency in Iraq far more quickly than it did in Vietnam. Admittedly, much of the adaptation has been uneven, with some commanders and units developing effective techniques and procedures more rapidly than others. Army Major Generals David Petraeus and Peter Chiarelli and Marine Maj. Gen. James Mattis come to mind as innovative leaders who understood intuitively that success depended upon providing security to the Iraqi population. Importantly, the Army and Marine Corps have promoted all three of these thoughtful general officers and put them in positions of responsibility for reshaping their services' approach to counterinsurgency. All three have also been responsible for very good writing about the subject: Chiarelli with his excellent 2005 *Military Review* article "The Requirement for Full-Spectrum Operations," and Mattis and Petraeus as the intellectual engines behind the forthcoming new Army/Marine Corps *Counterinsurgency* Field Manual. Moreover, the performance of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar, conducted with the able assistance of Hashim as cultural advisor, puts the lie to the argument that the U.S. Army is incapable of conducting counter-insurgency effectively. Although there is much work still to be done, this glass is not as empty as Ahmed suggests.

Hashim's conclusion sadly notes that "the various Iraqi interests seem incapable of resolving, or unable to resolve, their differences or even reduce their maximalist demands *vis-a-vis* one another for the sake of the greater good. The only reason that they have not fallen upon each other in an orgy of violence is the presence of the Coalition" (p. 365). This is a stern rejoinder to those

who suggest partition as an answer to the sectarian violence that is now the greatest immediate danger to the future of Iraq; either a precipitate American withdrawal or a partition would result in a bloodletting that would be unlikely to remain contained inside Iraq's borders. The results for the region and for American national interests could well be catastrophic.

To my knowledge the only book that can be compared with Hashim's work is Anthony Shadid's *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (2005). Shadid's reporting won a Pulitzer Prize for the *Washington Post* in 2004. That book is journalistic and impressionistic, while this one is analytical and impressively well documented, boasting more than nine hundred footnotes. Hashim suggests in his preface that "there will not be a definitive study of the Iraqi insurgency and of the U.S. response to it for years to come" (p. xxv). While that statement is technically correct, this study will ably fill the need until then, explaining in discouraging detail the enemy who has presented such challenges to American military might for more than three years--and counting.

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