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U.S. Central Command Charts Sharp Movement of the Civil Conflict in Iraq Toward Chaos

By Michael R. Gordon / [New York Times](#)

WASHINGTON, Oct. 30 — A classified briefing prepared two weeks ago by the United States Central Command portrays Iraq as edging toward chaos, in a chart that the military is using as a barometer of civil conflict.

A [one-page slide](#) shown at the Oct. 18 briefing provides a rare glimpse into how the military command that oversees the war is trying to track its trajectory, particularly in terms of sectarian fighting.

The slide includes a color-coded bar chart that is used to illustrate an “Index of Civil Conflict.” It shows a sharp escalation in sectarian violence since the bombing of a Shiite shrine in Samarra in February, and tracks a further worsening this month despite a concerted American push to tamp down the violence in Baghdad.

In fashioning the index, the military is weighing factors like the ineffectual Iraqi police and the dwindling influence of moderate religious and political figures, rather than more traditional military measures such as the enemy’s fighting strength and the control of territory.

The conclusions the Central Command has drawn from these trends are not encouraging, according to a copy of the slide that was obtained by The New York Times. The slide shows Iraq as moving sharply away from “peace,” an ideal on the far left side of the chart, to a point much closer to the right side of the spectrum, a red zone marked “chaos.” As depicted in the command’s chart, the needle has been moving steadily toward the far right of the chart.

An intelligence summary at the bottom of the slide reads “urban areas experiencing ‘ethnic cleansing’ campaigns to consolidate control” and “violence at all-time high, spreading geographically.” According to a Central Command official, the index on civil strife has been a staple of internal command briefings for most of this year. The analysis was prepared by the command’s intelligence directorate, which is overseen by Brig. Gen. John M. Custer.

Gen. John P. Abizaid, who heads the command, warned publicly in August about the risk of civil war in Iraq, but he said then that he thought it could be averted. In evaluating the prospects for all-out civil strife, the command concentrates on “key reads,” or several principal variables.

According to the slide from the Oct. 18 briefing, the variables include “hostile rhetoric” by political and religious leaders, which can be measured by listening to sermons at mosques and to important Shiite and Sunni leaders, and the amount of influence that moderate political and religious figures have over the population. The other main variables are assassinations and other especially provocative sectarian attacks, as well as “spontaneous mass civil conflict.”

A number of secondary indicators are also taken into account, including activity by militias, problems with ineffective police, the ability of Iraqi officials to govern effectively, the number of civilians who have been forced to move by sectarian violence, the willingness of Iraqi security forces to follow orders, and the degree to which the Iraqi Kurds are pressing for independence from the central government.

These factors are evaluated to create the index of civil strife, which has registered a steady worsening for months. “Ever since the February attack on the Shiite mosque in Samarra, it has been closer to the chaos side than the peace side,” said a Central Command official who asked not to be identified because he was talking about classified information.

In the Oct. 18 brief, the index moved still another notch toward “chaos.” That briefing was prepared three days before General Abizaid met in Washington with President Bush, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and Gen. Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to take stock of the situation in Iraq.

A spokesman for the Central Command declined to comment on the index or other information in the slide. “We don’t comment on secret material,” the spokesman said.

One significant factor in the military’s decision to move the scale toward “chaos” was the expanding activity by militias.

Another reason was the limitations of Iraqi government security forces, which despite years of training and equipping by the United States, are either ineffective or, in some cases, infiltrated by the very militias they are supposed to be combating. The slide notes that “ineffectual” Iraqi police forces have been a significant problem, and cites as a concern sectarian conflicts between Iraqi security forces.

Other significant factors are in the political realm. The slide notes that Iraq's political and religious leaders have lost some of their moderating influence over their constituents or adherents.

Notably, the slide also cites difficulties that the new Iraqi administration has experienced in "governance." That appears to be shorthand for the frustration felt by American military officers about the Iraqi government's delays in bringing about a genuine political reconciliation between Shiites and Sunnis. It also appears to apply to the lack of reconstruction programs to restore essential services and the dearth of job creation efforts to give young Iraqis an alternative to joining militias, as well as the absence of firm action against militias.

The slide lists other factors that are described as important but less significant. They include efforts by Iran and Syria to enable violence by militias and insurgent groups and the interest by many Kurds in achieving independence. The slide describes violence motivated by sectarian differences as having moved into a "critical" phase.

The chart does note some positive developments. Specifically, it notes that "hostile rhetoric" by political and religious leaders has not increased. It also notes that Iraqi security forces are refusing less often than in the past to take orders from the central government and that there has been a drop-off in mass desertions.

Still, for a military culture that thrives on PowerPoint briefings, the shifting index was seen by some officials as a stark warning about the difficult course of events in Iraq, and mirrored growing concern by some military officers.