



Chad C. Serena. It Takes More than a Network: The Iraqi Insurgency and Organizational Adaptation. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014.

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In his book, It Takes More than a Network: The Iraqi Insurgency and Organizational Adaptation, Chad C. Serena attempts to analyze the organizational inputs and outputs of the Iraqi insurgency in an effort to arrive at a better understanding of what part these features played in both its initial success and eventual failure. The thesis of Serena's book is that the Iraqi insurgency failed to achieve longer-term organizational goals due to the fact that many of the insurgency's early

organizational strengths later became weaknesses that degraded the insurgency's ability to adapt (4). Serena employs a blend of technical analysis, in his assessment of the inner workings of complex covert networks, and empirical examples, which he draws from the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. This approach is successful in providing insight into the nature of the organizational adaptation of the Iraqi insurgency as well as in laying a framework for the future study of similarly organized martial groups.

Composed of five chapters, Serena methodically divides the book into a discussion of organizational inputs and outputs, an analysis of the Iraqi insurgency, and a comparative assessment of the Iraqi and Afghan insurgencies. The first three chapters are concerned with the nature of the Iraqi insurgency, its organizational inputs (goals, rewards, information, training, composition, norms, materiel, equipment, funds, intelligence, and external assistance) and its organizational outputs (application of skills and knowledge, task performance competency, command, control, and communication, and cognition and behaviour). The final two chapters provide a comparative analysis between the Iraqi and Afghan insurgencies and Serena's concluding thoughts, respectively.

The organization of the book, much like the insurgent networks it describes, is both a source of strength and weakness. Serena's technical descriptions of organizational inputs and outputs in the early chapters is insightful and provides an academic audience with a foundation for future study of covert martial networks similar to the Iraqi insurgency. However, the thin use of tangible empirical examples or sustained narratives from either the battlefields of Afghanistan or Iraq makes for a less compelling read than may be necessary to attract a broader audience. The same case can be made for Serena's use of titles and subheadings. While serving to orientate an informed academic audience, the frequent use of sub-headings interrupts the flow of his arguments, which could alienate a more casual reader.

To Serena's credit, when he does draw upon empirical examples from Iraq or Afghanistan, he enhances their explanatory value by reinforcing them with insightful quotes from academics, journalists, and members of the military. For example, when explaining the Iraqi insurgency's ability to detect and interpret changes in the

operational environment, Serena uses the following observation from a soldier deployed to Baghdad:

There was always the threat of one VBIED (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device) being followed by another. One part of their process was to figure out how long it took us to respond to a VBIED. They would set off one VBIED and you would get there, set up a cordon, and prepare. They knew how long it took you to get there so you would have to prepare for another one (60).

Another soldier provides Serena with a reflection on the ability of insurgents to adapt to the use of UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles): “We could throw up UAVs all day long but the insurgents know what a UAV is. They have satellite TV and when they hear a lawnmower in the sky they go to sleep. The insurgents can watch TV as well as we can.” (61) In addition to invigorating Serena’s narrative, these first-hand accounts lend the book credibility by highlighting on-the-ground examples of the organizational adaptation of the Iraqi insurgency.

Throughout the book, Serena is careful to avoid the pitfall of painting the Iraqi insurgency with one brush. Instead he demonstrates that the insurgency was an assemblage of tribes, former regime elements (FREs), various militias, criminal organizations, and foreign groups (91). A particular issue, brought up a number of times throughout Serena’s narrative, is that of conflict between these various elements of the Iraqi insurgency. Serena points out that cooperation among the groups that constituted the insurgency was crucial to achieving the long-term goal of removing Coalition forces from Iraq: the insurgency’s principal unifying objective (33-34). However, competition was as equally likely to occur as cooperation among the constituent parts of the insurgency due to disparate motivations, such as national pride, ideology, religious beliefs, or financial and other reward systems (31).

Serena argues that friction caused by antagonism within a network, such as the Iraqi insurgency, can be a positive if it leads to creativity and competition (18). Indeed, this was the case in the early stages of the Iraq War as the insurgency attempted to adapt its tactics to the Coalition’s. However, rivalry and conflict within the insurgency became a weakness when it negatively impacted the network’s ability to adapt organizational outputs and inputs and to learn effectively (86). Serena asserts that

“adaptation, which is only effective if it is directed toward the achievement of organizational goals, suffered as unity of purpose was replaced by competition and divisiveness” (139-140).

Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) provides Serena with tangible examples of detrimental rivalry and conflict within the insurgency there. Local insurgents relied upon the expertise and resources of AQI, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, at least in the initial stages of the insurgency (68). However as the conflict with Coalition forces progressed, AQI effectively alienated itself from other elements of the insurgency – particularly Sunni militant groups - by conducting suicide bombings and violent and indiscriminate attacks on Iraqi civilians. The Anbar Revenge Brigade, an armed Sunni militant group, for example, chose to rid its area of operation of AQI operatives rather than maintain an ineffectual relationship (46). Serena argues that as the conflict in Iraq progressed and general support for the insurgency decreased, standards of conduct and maintenance of organizational norms became increasingly important to the insurgency for retaining the support of the local populace (68).

In his comparison of the Iraqi and Afghan insurgencies, Serena notes that the Afghan insurgency did not experience the same level of internal discord as the Iraqi version. While fighting may have broken out between AQI and other militant groups belonging to the insurgency in Iraq, regular or widespread violent internecine competition among the constituent groups of the Afghan insurgency was uncommon (129). Serena attributes this discrepancy to a number of factors. A practical division of labor within the Afghan insurgency created conditions in which foreign fighters could be utilized without allowing those fighters to hijack the insurgency or to employ the extreme forms of violence that occurred in Iraq (121). Also, the Afghan insurgency was less complex and diverse than its Iraqi counterpart, enabling the Afghan insurgency to ensure that training levels, skills, and organizational goals remained fairly synchronized; much more so than was the case with the Iraqi insurgency (132). These differences provided the Afghan insurgency with room to maintain the ability to enforce codes of conduct and norms, which constrained its members’ behaviour and reduced the internecine fighting that afflicted the Iraqi insurgency (132). Overall, Serena argues, the Afghan insurgency was much more effective at adapting its organizational

outputs, inputs, and means of learning than was the Iraqi insurgency, as is evidenced by the continued survival of the insurgency in Afghanistan (129).

Towards the end of the book, Serena demonstrates that he is willing to extrapolate from his case study to make predictions about the future. Based on his study of the Iraqi insurgency and his comparative analysis of the Afghan insurgency, Serena predicts that the Afghan insurgency's proven ability to adapt will suffer if it achieves its long-term goal of replacing the Karzai government. He believes this will occur because it will force the insurgency to adjust its organizational goals, increasing the likelihood that the cooperation that currently characterizes the insurgency will be replaced by the type of competition that occurred, to its detriment, amongst disparate elements of the Iraqi insurgency (138). Serena is careful to caveat the conclusions drawn from his study (142). With the drawdown of the United States' military forces in Afghanistan set to occur at the end of 2014, it will not be long before the value of Serena's prediction becomes apparent.

It Takes More than a Network is a convincingly argued and well-written book that provides a good deal of insight into the essential functions and adaptive capability of martially oriented covert networks. A number of important implications and findings arise from Serena's book. In true Clausewitzian fashion, Serena states that goals should dictate organizational form and not the other way around (142). Furthermore, he argues that it may be more important to analyze the organizational adaptation of a martial group than its apparent or stated goals in order to understand that group's likely behavior (143). Serena concludes that while the Iraqi insurgency had many initial adaptive strengths, competition among its constituent parts and the need to maintain covertness, turned these strengths into organizational liabilities (145-146). Demonstrating the latent wisdom in the book's title, Serena declares that "ultimately it would have taken more than a network for the Iraqi insurgency to effectively adapt to achieve its organizational goals" (141).

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