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Warfare semantics in Iraq

In the argument over what to call the conflict in Iraq, something is still lacking: a plan to solve it.

By Rashunda Tramble

A US broadcaster has taken a relatively bold step in its coverage of the Iraq war. On the Monday broadcast of the NBC network morning show Today, news presenter Matt Lauer announced, "After careful consideration, NBC News has decided a change in terminology is warranted, that the situation in Iraq with armed militarized factions fighting for their own political agendas can now be characterized as civil war."

NBC is not the first US media outlet to describe the violent attacks between Sunnis and Shiites as a civil war. The US dailies The Los Angeles Times and The New York Times have also issued policies that employ its use.

The network's move comes after a series of deadly attacks in the restive country including one last Thursday that killed more than 200 people in Sadr City, a Shiite area. The UK daily The Guardian quoted former Iraqi prime minister Ayad Allawi as saying in March, "We are losing each day an average of 50 to 60 people throughout the country, if not more - if this is not civil war, then God knows what is." According to the report, the death rate has doubled since then.

"There's no question there is a civil war by any reasonable political science definition of what that means," Duke University war and public opinion expert Christopher Gelpi commented to the paper.

"You have organized groups engaging in violence against one another where the goal is the destruction of the authority of the government or secession from the state."

But the administration of US President George W Bush does not agree. During his visit in Latica for a NATO summit, Bush rebuffed the civil war designation as he has done previously during other semantic arguments over the Iraq war.

"There's a lot of sectarian violence taking place, fomented, in my opinion, because of these attacks by al-Qaida, causing people to seek reprisals," the president said. His national security advisor, Stephen Hadley, said that the Iraqis did not "talk of it as a civil war, the unity government doesn't talk of it as a civil war."

The Republican defeat in the US mid-term elections were seen by some as a mandate against the country's involvement in Iraq. With the rising casualty and death count not only among Iraqis, but US troops as well, the conflict thousands of miles away reverberated in the nation's voting booths.

If the Bush administration admits that the country it invaded and promised to bring law, order and democracy to has fallen into that two word phrase, it will be admitting something else: failure.

According Agence-France Presse, in Baghdad, close to 100 people are killed per day in the war between Sunnis and Shiites.

A car bomb exploded outside a Baghdad hospital killing two and injuring dozens. As authorities gathered to investigate, a second car bomb exploded. An officer was killed and 32 others were wounded. South of Baghdad, five people were killed during an insurgent attack on a water treatment plant. In Baquba, north of Baghdad, two people were shot dead near a government office and another three were killed near a garage in the same town. Further north in Kirkuk in an assassination attempt on a provincial governor, a suicide bomber injured 18 people. The governor escaped harm.

All of these events happened on Tuesday in under 24 hours.

So, if one wanted to call the situation a civil war by laymen's terms, they would probably be right, but would it help end the conflict?

The semantic argument in the media and among military experts and academics in and of itself shines a spotlight on the major issue in the Iraq war: No one has a plan to end the conflict.

Would calling the infighting "civil war" make it easier to find a solution to end it? Would being able to finally match the situation to a definition on the online encyclopedia Wikipedia or the Penguin Dictionary of International Relations bring Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds to the negotiating table?

In today's edition of The Chicago Times, columnist Clarence Page wrote that "words matter." "They shape our perceptions and perceptions shape our politics and, ultimately, government policy."

If using "civil war" will help the US coalition shape a viable policy to quell the insurgency and the war itself, then the semantic debate will be worth it.

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