CHAPTER 3

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the Assyrian Empire during the Late Eighth Century BCE

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Introduction

During the eighth century BCE, Assyria made the transition from a hegemonic to a territorial empire in control of a well-organized provincial system, standing army, and vast wealth. The Empire experienced its greatest period of expansion under the leadership of Sargon II (721–705), who conquered lands from Egypt to the Persian Gulf in a series of expertly executed campaigns. Hundreds of cuneiform tablets and inscriptions dating to Sargon’s reign document the process of Assyrian imperialism, and most significant for the present study, how the Assyrians dealt with different types of resistance, including insurgency.1

According to a current usage, “insurgency in the most basic form is a struggle for control and legitimacy, generally from a position of relative weakness, outside existing state institutions.”2 This type of resistance, therefore, is distinct from rebellion, which can involve recognized governments and have various objectives, and from civil war, in which internal factions vie for power. Throughout the long history of the ancient Near East, rebellion and civil war played a vital role in the development of states and the fortunes of empires, yet while tales of strife permeate the historical record, insurgency has left little obvious trace, even in the abundant sources from Sargon’s reign. There are several plausible explanations for this state of affairs; because the Assyrians did not experience the same geopolitical conditions that we do now, they did not categorize opposition the same way either. In any case, a lack of clear evidence does not eliminate the possibility that insurgency occurred. In order to detect insurgency and counterinsurgency in eighth century records, it is important

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1 All translations in this paper are my own, although it is inevitable that they resemble those of previous translators to some degree. As is the convention in Assyriology, words in square brackets reconstruct broken text, whereas words in parenthesis have been added to aid readers’ comprehension.

2 FM 3–24 (2014). See also GAI (2012) 28; and Brice, chapter one in this volume.
to understand both the nature of the political culture that produced these sources and the problems involved in their interpretation.

Let us consider the geopolitical situation in the Near East during the eighth century. At the beginning of Sargon’s reign, the Assyrian Empire comprised more than twenty provinces spanning the area from Syria-Palestine to northern Babylonia. Small kingdoms and city-states that the Assyrians did not annex became tribute-paying clients, whose status was sometimes, but not always, formalized through treaty agreement. The Empire’s main foreign competitors were Urartu, Elam, Phrygia, and (in some sense) Babylonia, which between them claimed hegemony over assorted population groups within their own territories. Despite diverse cultural practices and language barriers, a system of international relations governed interactions both horizontally among kings of more or less equal status, and vertically between more powerful kings and weaker rulers. Constitutional government did not exist; power resided with the individual—clan patriarch, tribal chief, city ruler, or great king—and thus everyone was associated with a hierarchical authority in some way. Political opposition aimed to augment personal power and improve family/clan prospects rather than introduce a new form of government or promote an alternative ideology. Under these circumstances, a successful uprising—including rare popular insurrections—never did more than “trade one king for another.” Even in Assyria, royal control was provisional and centralization incomplete. Although Sargon’s closest advisers, the magnates, were loyal, the royal land management system and other societal factors caused some intra-elite rivalry and feuding. Insurgency and counterinsurgency within the Assyrian Empire must be understood within this wider socio-political context.

One of Assyria’s ablest kings, Sargon II fought throughout his reign to secure his empire and extend power over the greater Near East. Most of his campaigns were aimed at pacifying the mountainous territory to the north and east, where semi-independent kingdoms acted as buffers between Assyria and its rivals. Buffer kingdoms such as Šubria tried to maintain their independence by playing the stronger states—in that case, Assyria and Urartu—against each other and switching sides whenever politic. In effect, the great powers engaged in a “cold war” by striking at each other through proxies, spying relentlessly, and

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4 Richardson (2010) xvii.
5 For the magnates, Mattila (2000); Parpola (2007). Denunciations, disputes, and reports of violence among lower level officials are frequent subjects of letters; e.g., SAA xv 168, which reports that one official has robbed and destroyed the household of another after terrorizing the servants.