Iraq's Relentless Insurgency: The Fight for Power ahead of U.S. Withdrawal

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Articles & Testimony

Most terrorist attacks in Iraq today are not meant for an international audience, but instead indicate various militias battling for influence after U.S. troops head home.

Last Monday, terrorist groups affiliated with al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) struck seven cities with 15 separate car bombings and attacks against security forces, civilian markets, and religious pilgrims. This strike was the first such large-scale coordinated attack in Iraq since August 2010, when AQI hit 12 cities across the country. Last week's attacks are undoubtedly worrying, because they signal that disparate insurgent cells spread across central and northern Iraq can, on occasion, coordinate their actions for added impact.

AQI's own national-level command disintegrated following the deaths in April 2010 of AQI leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and AQI minister of war Abu Ayub al-Masri. Since then, groups such as Jaish Rijal Tariqah al-Naqshabandi (JRTN), an insurgent movement led by former Baathist officers and officials, have filled the void. These groups play coordinating roles, commissioning attacks by AQI and nationalist cells across the country, boosting the number of attacks across north and central Iraq.

Yet a closer look at the phenomenon of car bombings in Iraq shows that facilitating groups such as JRTN are carrying out few spectacular, headline-grabbing strikes, and instead are focusing mainly on larger numbers of smaller attacks to position themselves for the post-U.S. era in Iraq.

To be sure, attempted mass-casualty attacks have increased this year, with the number of attacks averaging 13 a month in the first half of 2011, rising to 33 in the month of July alone, compared to 20 in July 2010. August's total such attacks will reach more than 40.

But the attacks are becoming less lethal, with the number of suicide car bombs plummeting since the heyday of AQI.

Only one in seven devices was detonated by suicide bomber in 2011. The use of unattended car bombs (in other words, those detonated by remote control) reduces lethality, as the explosives may not be detonated at the optimal location or time. Far more of these devices are discovered prior to detonation and disarmed, yielding valuable forensic intelligence. Moreover, the explosive yield of car bombs is much smaller than in previous years due to the difficulty of passing large devices through Iraq's numerous vehicle checkpoints. On August 25, 2010, each of the bombs accounted for an average of 9.6 fatalities; on August 15, 2011, the bombs killed an average of 4.2 people per device.

Coordinated attacks such as last week's bombings allow terrorist groups to attract international attention for a brief moment. The lethality of the bombings is of secondary importance; what these groups care about most is demonstrating their relevance, assuring their place in the post-U.S. pecking order of militant movements, and attracting funding. It appears that the August 15 bombings were the result of extensive planning to carry out a high-profile attack to coincide with the religious month of Ramadan, meant to highlight the breadth and cohesion of the insurgency.

Yet the vast majority of mass-casualty attacks in Iraq are not meant to attract international attention; they are local strikes by disparate cells. The choice of targets demonstrates how inward-facing political violence in Iraq has become. With some exceptions, most car bombings strike soft targets that are easy to attack, such as exposed Iraqi Security Force checkpoints, municipal buildings, and civilian markets. Whereas AQI, as recently as early 2010, tended to attack highly visible national targets such as hotels, government ministries, and media headquarters, most car bombings are now directed against Iraqis active in local politics, executed by terrorist cells based nearby. Insurgents are now focused squarely on the struggle for dominance of the neighborhood police force, the sub-district council, the district courtroom, or vital pieces of terrain with local significance. They are fighting to dominate local communities while the dysfunctional government is in flux, unable to appoint all its ministerial posts or pass vital legislation, and while the United States is in the middle of its withdrawal.

With the exception of anti-U.S. attacks carried out by Iranian-backed groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (splinters from the Sadrist movement and the Badr political party with ties to Iranian intelligence services), the vast majority of violent actions in Iraq are no longer targeted against U.S. forces. Indeed, most violent factions are already looking well past the U.S. drawdown; the U.S. withdrawal will probably not unleash more violence because to many Iraqis, particularly insurgents, the U.S. military has already been gone for months, or even years in some areas.

The main event in Iraq, which was postponed for many years due to the U.S. presence, is the struggle among Iraqis to control the country. In today's Iraq, the most common forms of low-profile attacks -- far more numerous than the headline-grabbing bombings -- are drive-by shootings and bombs attached to the underside of personal vehicles. These attacks are largely contained within sectarian communities (Sunni against Sunni or Shia against Shia) and reflect the ultra-local struggle for dominance that is broiling throughout Iraq. Such attacks are by definition low-lethality: they are intended to intimidate as much as they are to kill. They are also the inevitable epilogue of a violent and protracted civil war in which some members of each community sided with the Iraqi government and the U.S.-led coalition while others backed the insurgency. Now the scores must be settled.

The campaign of assassinations in Iraq shows that the political parties are not immune from the temptation of violent jockeying. After 2003, political parties and movements have been able to slide around on the fringes of the political spectrum at will, with relatively reputable parties able to reach out to affiliates in the insurgency when they needed to get tough. The intense campaign of assassinations in Baghdad began in 2010 as the selective attacks of insurgent groups such as AQI and JRTN against government officials quickly became a free-for-all that drew negative energy from the stagnation of the government formation process.

As Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki admitted at a press conference last April, Iraq's political parties used the cover of large numbers of unsolved killings to undertake "political assassinations." This, in turn, unleashed a wave of score-settling and intimidation attacks. Shiite political factions, including various splinters of Muqtada al-Sadr's movement, the Badr organization, and Maliki's own Dawa party appear to have fought low-profile skirmishes with one another for dominance of various security agencies, key Iraqi Army formations, and regions throughout the southern provinces.

As part of these struggles, Shia political parties have carried out a wave of Shia-on-Shia assassination attempts against Iraqi Army division commanders, political party bosses, and local representatives of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. By this June, when the assassinations had reached their height, senior Iraqi politicians and bureaucrats were attending multiple funerals per week. Although the pace of these attacks is now slowing due to government raids against assassination gangs, the spring season of assassinations cast a spotlight on the violence lurking just beneath the surface of Iraqi politics.

As the crackdown on Baghdad assassinations showed, events can only deteriorate so far before the Iraqi government will act. The government has unacceptable "red lines" for general destabilization that are broadly understood by militant groups. For example, in response to closed-door meetings with government representatives, Sadr has stepped back from his threat to mobilize his militia; Sadrists, meanwhile, have scrupulously avoided taking actions that would trigger a government offensive, such as openly carrying weapons at their parades or mounting armed patrols within their strongholds. In places such as Basra, local political pressure and operations by Iraqi security forces have curtailed armed resistance against U.S. targets, such as the heavy rocketing of the U.S. base at the airport.

Likewise, although the violent jockeying within sectarian factions has increased, the government has been sure to take steps to prevent any widespread conflict between sectarian communities in Baghdad and other trouble spots. In other words, there appear to be definite limits to how far security can deteriorate in Iraq. The flip side, however, is that there are probably equally definite limits concerning how much better things can get in the coming years.

For a while, Iraq will be stuck on this plateau: a moderate level of insecurity in which the country suffers somewhere between 300 and 500 insurgent attacks per month, including around two dozen attempted mass-casualty attacks.

A formal extension of the U.S. military presence will not shorten this period of moderate insecurity. Today, most Iraqis do not interact with U.S. forces, and the U.S. military is no longer the glue holding together many ISF divisions and brigades. Indeed, there is little that a formally extended U.S. presence on Iraq's streets could achieve at this point. An extension would also prove contentious: Iraq's highly fragmented parliament and an equally uncertain public may not be ready to debate and approve a formal security agreement that would modify the December 31, 2011 departure date for U.S. military units.

Behind the scenes, the U.S. mission in Iraq can still achieve a great deal. Iraqi politicians seem ready to approve a less formal memorandum between the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the U.S. Department of Defense that would allow the United States to rotate additional military training teams through Iraq.

Using such mechanisms, Washington should make sure that the U.S. Office of Security Cooperation in Iraq monitors and shapes Iraqi military efforts to maintain or build support within all-important Sunni Arab communities (for example, to complete the population-focused counterinsurgency campaign begun by the United States). Insurgent groups will be severely challenged by the loss of their arch-nemesis and raison d'etre: the U.S. military. They are already shifting their rhetoric to build up the case for long-term resistance against the Iraqi government, portraying federal military and police units as either Shiite-led pro-Iranian stooges or Kurdish-led proxies intent on dismembering Iraq and evicting Arabs from their homes.

Finally, insurgent movements such as AQI and JRTN (plus Shia equivalents such as Kataib Hezbollah) seek to perpetuate violence by turning militancy into an industry, paying Iraqis to launch attacks long after any ideological motives have disappeared. The sustained presence of U.S. intelligence and special forces targeting the small leadership cadres of these movements will continue to be one of the most prized and effective forms of security cooperation between the two countries, providing one means of keeping violence in Iraq as low as possible in the coming years.

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