

The Confused Security Situation in Iraq:

Some Less Publicized Units

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Brief Analysis

While U.S. and coalition forces—and increasingly the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)—struggle to defeat the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, they are also dealing with a range of armed groups that complicate the security scenario. Militias and ad hoc units with different levels of government sanction are growing in strength, and the training of the ISF is progressing unevenly. While it is not possible to conduct a comprehensive survey of both independent groups and ISF units, a sampling of less publicized units illustrates how diffuse military power in Iraq has become.

The Problem of Shiite Militias

The growth of Shiite militias that exist outside of any legal security frameworks threatens to feed ethnic conflict and challenges the authority of the Iraqi government. Shiite militias ranging in size from neighborhood groups to nationwide organizations are growing in strength and attacking Sunnis, either as retaliations for insurgent attacks or out of sectarian motives. This has led the United States to see them as an increasing threat on a level of with Sunni insurgency. At the same time, Sunnis in mixed-sect neighborhoods are forming local militias in response to Shiite militia organization, and many Sunni clerics are calling for their followers to arm themselves and fight against those who attack them.

The two most prominent and influential Shiite militias compete with the Iraqi police for control in Iraq's largest cities, Baghdad and Basra. The Mahdi Army, led by the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Badr Brigades, the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, an influential political party with longstanding ties to Iran, are well organized and gain popular support with their religious character and their ability to provide security and certain social services. Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki has repeatedly pledged to contain these militias and others by absorbing them into the current security forces. He has also pressed Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a statement calling for militias to be disbanded. Sistani made a public statement at the end of April 2006 calling for a country free of militias and sectarian violence and for weapons to be in the hands of the security forces alone. While Sistani supports Maliki's push to disband militias, the effort to integrate them into the security forces went directly against Sadr's wishes. Coalition and Iraqi forces on June 14 began a campaign to rid Baghdad of militias that is still underway.

In addition to directly challenging the ISF, Shiite militias pose a severe threat to stability in Iraq with their capacity to infiltrate the Iraqi police and army and form undercover death squads. A major concern in Iraq is the increasing incidence of men in Interior Ministry uniforms rounding up and killing Sunni men. Beginning around May 2005, after Bayan Jabr took office as minister of the interior, bodies of people who seem to have been killed by the police have been appearing in places ranging from rivers to sewage treatment facilities. The violent incidents are increasing, especially after the February 22 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, a Shiite holy site. The targets are civilians, and their bodies are usually found bound with police handcuffs and shot in the manner of an execution—and also often bearing the marks of torture. The death squads carrying out these attacks are said to be composed of

militia members who have enlisted in the police. While death squads are typically Shiite in composition and target Sunnis, there are also incidents of Sunnis targeting Shiites who have informed the police about explosives or improvised explosive devices.

Former interior minister Jabr and Shiite religious leaders maintain that these attacks are being carried out by outsiders who have stolen police uniforms and that the death squads are emerging from private security agencies, such as the Facility Protection Service, rather than from Interior Ministry forces. However, the frequency of these murders and the fact that police are often recruited from their local militias suggests that militias are working within the Interior Ministry and increasing sectarian violence.

Ad Hoc Units

A variety of government units arose in spontaneous or unplanned ways. Some of the more notable of these units are: Desert Protectors. An informant group formed in the late summer of 2005, this unit is made up of members of the Albu Mahal tribe, in western Anbar province, who were driven out of Husayba to Akashat after a competing tribe, the Salmanis, struck an allegiance with al-Qaeda. The Desert Protectors have received weapons and training from U.S. forces. Their role is to move with the Americans and identify insurgents. In fall 2005 there were three platoons, with about one hundred men in total, and the goal is to develop nine platoons. The Desert Protectors worked with U.S. and Iraqi forces in the November 2005 Operation Steel Curtain along the Iraqi-Syrian border to keep al-Qaeda operatives from infiltrating the Euphrates River Valley.

Iraq Freedom Guard. Originally an independent unit of about one hundred members that performed well in Anbar province, the Iraq Freedom Guard is being folded into the Iraqi army. While this unit did good work arresting insurgents and finding weapon caches, in March 2005 its leaders took decisions without clearance from the Marines commanders with whom they were working. In particular, the Iraq Freedom Guard marched into Haqlaniyah seeking revenge for the death of one of its members; Marines had to intervene to prevent violence from escalating. U.S. forces subsequently dismantled the unit, folding its members into the larger New Iraqi Army.

Facilities Protection Service (FPS). This unit was formed as a group of about 4,000 night watchmen protecting public buildings, but it has since grown into a large force—or rather, a number of largely independent forces—of around 150,000. They are typically armed and wear police uniforms, though they do not wear badges. Each unit is in effect under the authority of the ministry for which it works. For example, the FPS contingent attached to the Ministry of Transportation is led by an open Sadrist, and the entire unit is loyal to the Shiite cleric. In April 2006, the Interior Ministry began to take steps to provide more direction and oversight for the FPS, proposing to give its members identifying badges and to make FPS members liable for crimes they commit. The Iraqi government is also talking about bringing the FPS under some centralized command, or at least providing more structure for supervision by ministries. There is also talk of relying more on private firms for some guard functions.

Regular Units

Some units of the ISF have been quite successful in developing the skills that U.S. and coalition forces stress in their training efforts. These include:

Tiger Battalion. Officially the 205th Iraqi Army Battalion, this unit has been praised for exhibiting the professionalism and competence that U.S. forces are trying to foster in the New Iraqi Army. Officers have been receptive to the idea of delegating responsibility to their soldiers, a departure from the traditional hierarchy of the Saddam-era military. Tiger Battalion's members mostly come from the area in which the unit operates, which helps them with their intelligence gathering efforts.

Second Battalion, Second Brigade, Iraqi Army First Division. A five-hundred man, predominantly Shiite battalion

based in the Sunni city of Falluja, this battalion has been commended by its U.S. mentors for its progress toward standing alone. This success is particularly meaningful given the Iraqi Army's dispersal during fighting in Falluja in 2004. While the battalion still relies on U.S. advisors for guidance, its skills with human intelligence has made it capable of identifying and battling insurgents.

Firefighters. There are twenty-five fire stations in Baghdad, each of which has 120 firefighters and equipment including rescue trucks, command vehicles, and high-tech equipment for fire and explosion rescue missions. These units are crucial for responding to the daily bombings in Baghdad.

Problematic Units

Some police and army units within the ISF have moved away from their original training and developed independent and often problematic methods of operation. A variety of notable Police Command Units, such as the Scorpion, Tiger, and Thunder Brigades, were formed by the former interior minister Falah al-Naqib, a Sunni, in summer 2004 without the consent of U.S. commanders. These forces originally drew praise as effective Iraqi security initiatives and for their success in counterterrorism operations, but their high level of independence and reputation for brutality are causes for concern. Other problematic units include:

Wolf Brigade. A particularly feared commando unit, Wolf Brigade's members are self-selecting and mostly recruited from the former Iraqi Special Forces. They helped to maintain security in Mosul after an insurgent uprising in late 2004. The Wolf Brigade is led by Maj. Gen. Abu Walid, famous for hosting a television show airing what were claimed to be legally obtained insurgent confessions. The brigade's members are known to drive around Baghdad wearing Saddam-era uniforms.

Volcano Brigade. A police commando brigade, Volcano Brigade is distinct from the others by being made up of Shiites loyal to the Badr Brigades. In 2005, this brigade began operating as a death squad, openly intimidating civilians and targeting Sunnis for arrest and execution. It is thought to be the unit responsible for a massacre of thirty-six Sunni men in Baghdad's al-Hurriyah neighborhood in August 2005 and is greatly feared in Baghdad.

Punishment Committee. A police unit, the Punishment Committee is known to harass—at the very least—civilians, particularly Sunnis, accused of flouting Islamic law or the rulings of Shiite clerics.

Maghawir Special Commando Brigades. Special commando units largely made up of veterans of the Saddam-era military, the Maghawir Special Commando Brigades are made up of about 12,000 men in total. They have worked with U.S. forces in Najaf, Falluja, Ramadi, Mosul, and Baghdad, and are led by Maj. Gen. Flayih Muhammad. The brigades are known for both their effectiveness and their brutality.

Farook Brigade. A mostly Sunni Arab brigade that fought alongside U.S. forces in Ramadi and other places in Anbar province, this unit was disbanded when Jabr was appointed interior minister.

Secret Investigative Unit. A police unit that has been accused of bringing Badrist militia members into the police, the Secret Investigative Unit was housed at the bunker where U.S. forces found an Interior Ministry secret prison.

Conclusion

Assessing the training of the ISF or creating metrics for stability in Iraq is a difficult task because of the many active groups and the fluidity with which individuals move between government-sanctioned units and private armed groups. As army and police units increase and begin to diversify, and as the black market for weapons and uniforms flourishes, it becomes harder to regulate legitimate units within the security forces and to recognize militia members posing as Iraqi soldiers and policemen. While reducing the chaos in Iraq is proving to be an immense challenge, the future stability of the country will depend on the success of ongoing efforts on the part of the Iraqi government and U.S. and coalition forces to maintain the integrity of the ISF and eliminate militias.

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