

Security in Iraq: Prospects for Progress in the al-Maliki Era

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May 5, 2006

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Brief Analysis

On April 28, 2006, Jeffrey White, Matt Sherman, and Michael Eisenstadt addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Jeffrey White, the Berrie Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute, spent thirty-four years with the Defense Intelligence Agency. Matt Sherman recently returned from Iraq after serving for two years as the senior coalition advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior. During his tenure, he counseled four interior ministers and was the lead coordinator for policy on Iraqi police services. Michael Eisenstadt is director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program, and is the coauthor, with Jeffrey White, of the Institute Policy Focus, *Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JEFFREY WHITE

Tracking the [recent activities of the Sunni insurgency](#)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/newsletterImages/white-overalltrends.jpg>) shows that while there are fluctuations in the rate of attacks on a monthly basis, the overall trend has been an increasing number of attacks, with a particular jump after the February 22 bombing of the al-Askariya mosque in Samarra. In the past several months there have been a number of complex attacks involving planning, coordination, and multiple weapons systems, sometimes with as many as one hundred insurgents.

The breakdown of the attacks shows an [increase in attacks on the Iraqi Security Forces](#)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/newsletterImages/white-attacksagainstiraqis.jpg>) and in

"[instability attacks](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/newsletterImages/white-instabilityoperations.jpg>)," that is, attacks on civilians and religious sites. By contrast, [attacks on U.S. troops have been decreasing](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/newsletterImages/white-kiatrends.jpg>).

The insurgency -- which despite the sectarian Sunni-Shiite violence and the threat of it expanding remains the root of the

violence -- has shifted focus somewhat from the U.S. forces to the Iraqi army and other Iraqi institutions. In this context, it is of particular concern that the new Iraqi security forces face infiltration from several sources. Shiite militias have already infiltrated the Iraqi Security Forces and especially the police, raising questions about the current participation of these elements in sectarian violence and about their ultimate loyalties. Iraqi intelligence organizations are also bound to be infiltrated by the insurgents and the militias.

The [data show that Baghdad and Anbar provinces remain the most dangerous parts of Iraq](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/newsletterImages/white-problemsinprovinces.jpg)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/newsletterImages/white-problemsinprovinces.jpg>). In Ramadi, insurgents and snipers have taken a kind of stand against U.S. forces, engaging in frequent attacks, including significant sniping. This not only provides a serious challenge to the U.S. soldiers, but also shows that insurgent morale remains high. Overall, the insurgents are adaptive, changing strategy, operations, and tactics over time, and quick to regenerate. There is some evidence of the emergence of meta-networks among groups.

The violence has not only come from Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias. There is evidence of classic insurgent activity in some Shiite areas, which indicates that Sunnis are not the only ones engaged in the insurgency. Insurgent activity continues at some level in Kirkuk, where there has also been an influx of Shiite militias. An emerging aspect of the violence in Iraq has been the development of Sunni militias -- that is, armed groups not necessarily opposing the government or the occupation. In Baghdad, these Sunni militias seem to mostly be local groups arming themselves against the Shiite threat, while in Anbar they seem to be more tribally organized, and have been most active in combating foreign jihadist fighters.

MATT SHERMAN

During Saddam's reign, the police were at the bottom of the hierarchy of the regime's security forces, and their purpose was not to protect the people but the regime itself. During the war the army and the intelligence services fell apart, and the police, in the Ministry of the Interior, was thrust into a role for which it was ill-prepared.

In 2004 there were several problems with the police. They were not well prepared to deal with an insurgency or heavily armed militias and fled from fighting in Fallujah and Najaf. Furthermore, Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order 71 decentralized power out of Baghdad much too early, taking authority from the Ministry of the Interior and passing it to the individual provinces. This prevented Baghdad from effectively employing what police assets it had to restore order. In July 2004, the minister of the interior at the time, Falah al-Nakib, began to create special police commando units. This was considered a success at the time; it produced a force, the special police commandos, many of whom were Sunnis, that fought the Sunni insurgency with spirit and determination.

After having going through four interior ministers in three years, Iraq's new permanent government hopefully will allow for more continuity in the Interior Ministry. That government will have much to do to improve the police. The Iraqi police should learn from the Kurds, who transformed their police force after the first Gulf War. Civilian leadership must be cultivated to develop a stable and strong police force. One priority will be dismantling the militias. There will be no unified demobilization and integration plan for militias: a different plan will be needed for each militia, taking into consideration political realities, and where possible, integrating their members into the security forces. One piece of good news is that U.S. training and equipment of the police has been handed over to the U.S. military, which seems to be doing a good job.

Public perception of the police has shifted, and now people see the police as being at the front line of security who are willing to risk their lives for the general good. To build on that, the Iraqi government must curb crime if it is to gain the confidence of the people and to consolidate authority. To that end, the Major Crimes Unit should be strengthened to deal with drugs, rape, and revenge killings.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

The debate in Washington over whether Iraq is on the brink or the midst of a civil war is a diversion from the real issue: what can be done to stem the sectarian violence in Iraq, that threatens the political transition and potentially the stability of the region?

The United States should take the following steps to curb the violence -- with the understanding the even the simplest of things in Iraq are extremely difficult:

- Contain the insurgency, which is the driving force behind the sectarian violence. The United States needs to convince the Sunni Arabs that there is a political alternative to the insurgency and armed struggle.
- Mitigate the consequences of ethnic cleansing. Displaced persons often find employment in militias, thereby further fueling the conflict. A focused effort is needed to find legitimate employment for the internally displaced persons in order to keep them out of the militias.
- Protect at-risk populations. While some of the violence in civil wars is random, atrocities and massacres often occur in contested areas, and are done in accordance with a well thought-out strategy. Accordingly, it should be possible to identify known or potential flash points and establish early warning and rapid reaction capabilities to protect the civilian population.
- Halt the drift toward chaos. Shiite militias, death squads, and radical Shiite clerics are all warning signs of a fracturing of religious and political authority that could lead to chaos and disorder in Iraq. Embedding U.S. personnel with Iraqi security forces, carefully vetting recipients of U.S. financial assistance, and clamping down on illegal diversions of oil to fund insurgent and militia activities might help mitigate this problem.

The violence in Iraq is likely to continue at current levels; a dramatic increase in sectarian violence is not inevitable. As the Iraqi Security Forces are growing and the U.S. forces start to disengage, the overall number of potential targets for the insurgents will increase while the vulnerability of U.S. forces will decrease; this fact may account for the overall decrease in U.S. casualties in the past few months. Dealing with a possible escalation in insurgent violence may, however, require a reversal in the U.S. trend toward disengagement.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cecile Zwiebach. ❖

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