

Resistance Strategy in the Trans-Election Period (Part II): Opportunities, Effects, and Implications

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Brief Analysis

The Sunni insurgents in Iraq aim to establish the resistance as the primary political and military expression of the Sunni Arab community. The upcoming elections give them an opportunity to inflict a substantial defeat on the Iraqi government and the United States. Unlike November's Falluja battle, the insurgents are fighting this one on more equal ground.

Opportunities and Targets

In Sunni areas, the elections will be taking place within the very communities that harbor the insurgents. In a sense, then, targets will be coming to the doorstep of the resistance. The large number of polling places, the need for politicians and election officials to move about the country, and the dispersion of security assets all create opportunities for insurgents to attack using the wide range of capabilities at their disposal. In fact, the most likely target types have already been attacked repeatedly in recent months. These include:

- Government and political figures, as well as their offices. Since the beginning of December 2004, there have been at least 77 reported attacks in this category (not including attacks against election officials), the most spectacular of which were the December 27 attack against Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, the top candidate on the list of Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani, which resulted in 13 dead and 66 wounded; the carefully planned January 4 ambush that killed Ali Radi al-Haidari, governor of Baghdad; and the January 12 assassination of Mahmoud al-Madahaini, al-Sistani's representative in Salman Pak.
- Iraqi security forces. The Iraqi Interior Ministry reported that 1,300 police were killed during the last four months of 2004. More than 500 Iraqi police and soldiers have been reported killed since the beginning of December. Complex attacks and mass-casualty bombings have had particularly devastating effects. On December 3, for example, at least 60 insurgents initiated a coordinated attack on a Baghdad police station, pulling up in cars, minibuses, and taxis and using rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and small arms to overrun the building. A January 2 suicide attack outside a U.S. military base in Balad killed 22 Iraqi National Guardsmen and wounded 6 others. This attack was followed on January 5 by a suicide attack at the Babil Sports Club that killed 10 policemen and wounded 44.

- Election operations and officials. Some 30 election-associated targets have been attacked since the beginning of December, and at least 8 election officials have been killed. Given the high level of media interest in the elections, such attacks are receiving substantial publicity. The best example of this was the highly publicized December 19 attack in which approximately thirty insurgents executed three election workers in a busy Baghdad street in broad daylight. Moreover, dozens of election officials have reportedly stepped down due to insurgent intimidation campaigns. On January 10, an insurgent group posted a statement warning that it would deploy snipers to target voters in Wasit province during elections. Indeed, polling stations will be particularly vulnerable targets on election day.

- Convoys and other mobile targets. The movement of officials, politicians, and security forces will create opportunities for resistance action in the form of direct-fire attacks and improvised explosive devices (including suicide bombers) along roads and highways. Such attacks could also be aimed at voters traveling on election day.

- Coalition forces. Even as the election approaches, insurgents will continue to attack coalition forces, including base facilities and units operating outside of garrison. Coalition quick-reaction forces responding to incidents will also be targeted (e.g., via deliberate ambush). The objectives of such attacks are to force coalition elements to concentrate on force protection, divert coalition assets from election-security missions, and, when possible, inflict losses on coalition forces.

Effects

In the short term, the insurgents are likely to have substantial success disrupting the elections in Sunni areas, but limited effect in Kurdish and Shiite areas. They have already made some progress in this regard, with the withdrawal of the Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party from the elections, the continuing resignation of election officials and workers, and the noticeable level of voter intimidation and support for a boycott. These developments have made the already challenging mechanics of the election process substantially more difficult. Public campaign speeches are few and far between, and election officials are stretched increasingly thin as their colleagues are killed or intimidated into resigning.

For the longer term, insurgent operations will persist, posing a major challenge to the post-election transitional government and its security forces. Two important potential outcomes of the violence could be an escalation in counterinsurgency operations and, partially as a consequence, further separation of the Sunni Arab population from the government and the political process. The less successful the elections are in Sunni areas, and the more aggressive the post-election counterinsurgency effort, the more likely Sunni Arabs will be to gravitate to the resistance.

On Balance

The resistance lost the battle for Falluja, at least by some measures, and has suffered significant attrition; coalition and Iraqi forces have detained or killed impressive numbers of insurgent suspects, including key leadership figures, and have apparently reduced the rate of attacks in recent days. Moreover, despite all misgivings, the elections have remained on track. The resistance has been successful in other areas, however. Mosul and, to a lesser extent, Tikrit have reemerged as trouble spots after once being considered success stories. Other major Sunni cities and towns, including parts of Baghdad, remain areas of significant insurgent activity. Few if any population centers in the Sunni Triangle can be considered truly secure. Even in areas such as Samarra and the northern Babil province, where the coalition has conducted major pacification operations, resistance persists and security remains tenuous. Of the eighteen cities the coalition once deemed critical to secure before the elections, few can be said to be so.

Dealing with the insurgents' counter-collaboration campaign has been as challenging, if not more so, than coalition and Iraqi government efforts to establish security in Sunni areas. The killing or intimidation of government officials

and others has been a highly successful line of operation for the resistance, and the coalition has offered no real answer to it. The January 4 assassination of the governor of Baghdad via a large-scale, coordinated assault on his three-vehicle convoy underlines the point that few if any of those choosing to work with the government are safe, from the neighborhood policeman to the highest level official. The ability of the insurgents to kill Iraqis almost at will darkens the political future of the country.

Implications

What the coalition and Iraqi government are facing, then, is a complex set of operational challenges to both short-term objectives (holding successful elections) and long-term goals (reducing the insurgency to a level that permits the desired political progress). While the outlook for successful elections in Kurdish and Shiite areas is good, perhaps even excellent, the forecast for success in the Sunni areas is dimmer. Prospects for the longer term appear somewhat better. Much of Iraq will have conducted successful elections, the political process will be advanced by the formation of the Iraqi Transitional Government, and the creation of effective Iraqi security services can proceed without the immediate pressure of the election process. Nevertheless, no clear answers have been found, either military or political, to any of the insurgents' lines of operation. Consequently, there is a real danger that the situation will devolve to a war between the government and the Sunnis, especially if a triumphalist Shiite leadership takes power.

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