

Resistance Strategy in the Trans-Election Period (Part I): Concepts, Operations, and Capabilities

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Brief Analysis

The approach of the January 30 elections in Iraq has focused attention on Sunni resistance activity aimed at disrupting the electoral process. Yet, the increasingly well-organized and more capable Sunni insurgent elements are implementing a broad strategy aimed at establishing themselves as the dominant military and political force in the Sunni community. Their actions threaten to create a state of permanent political violence in the Sunni region, effectively pitting the new Iraqi transitional government, backed by the U.S.-led coalition, against the Sunnis in a sustained conflict. Although the outcome of the elections is important to the future of Iraq and U.S. objectives there, the struggle against the Sunni resistance is even more critical.

Resistance Strategy Although the major operational lines of the insurgency have been evident at least since March 2004, these activities are now seemingly better focused and more purposeful. In the short term, the insurgents are fighting to influence the outcome of the elections. In the longer term, however, they are fighting to define the future role of the Sunni community in Iraq—specifically, who will lead that community, and whether its stance with regard to the ongoing political process will be one of willing participation or violent opposition. The election represents only one stage in that struggle. Moreover, Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's withdrawal from open opposition to the Iraqi government and its coalition partners has left the Sunni insurgents as the only organized active resistance to the transformation of Iraq. Indeed, they have been successful in emphasizing the concept of resistance to both foreign occupation and any imposed and apostate Shiite-dominated government. These concepts provide an ideology of resistance that many Sunnis can accept.

Military Strategy Resistance military strategy is aimed broadly at preventing the coalition and the Iraqi government from establishing effective control over Iraq's Sunni areas, while asserting control over the Sunni population. There appear to be five military lines of operation along which the insurgents are acting. Two of these are central to resistance strategy:

- Counter-coalition actions, featuring direct and indirect attacks on coalition forces, with the objectives of inflicting casualties and forcing the coalition to concentrate on force-protection measures. Since September 2004, these kinds of incidents have constituted some 33 percent of reported resistance actions.

- Counter-collaboration actions aimed at preventing the government and other institutions, including those associated with the election process, from functioning effectively. Since September 2004, 36 percent of incidents have fallen into this category, with attacks against election-related targets occurring with increasing frequency.

Three other types of operations occur less frequently but are also important to resistance strategy: counter-stability actions aimed at increasing tensions within and among Iraq's sectarian and ethnic communities (13 percent), counter-reconstruction actions aimed at hindering the restoration of services and economic activity (7 percent), and counter-mobility actions aimed at impeding the movement of coalition and Iraqi forces and hampering the movement of people and goods around the country (10 percent; specifically, there have been more than 225 reported attacks on coalition and Iraqi convoys and transport vehicles since September 2004). Taken together, insurgent actions represent a complex and comprehensive challenge.

Political Strategy Sunni insurgents have a political strategy as well. By seizing the mantle of resistance to perceived occupation and apostasy, they have established an alternative political space—defined as those who resist the occupation—for Sunni Arabs stripped of power and fearful of the rise of the Shiites and Kurds. Through coercion, inducement, and appeals on multiple levels, the insurgents have brought some Sunni Arabs to their side and secured the compliance of others. As in the military arena, the insurgents act along multiple lines of operation in their political efforts:

- Open political opposition, represented primarily by the Sunni Muslim Clerics Association, an overt political party closely linked to the insurgents. The existence of such an organization permits the insurgency to maintain a toehold in the political process, which can be exploited. Currently, the main political messages of the resistance are the illegitimacy of the election process, its fundamentally anti-Sunni bias, and the need to boycott and disrupt it.
- Intimidation aimed at restricting cooperation with the government and participation in the political process. This is implemented via threats and direct attacks on Iraqis.
- Alternative politics, with the objective of keeping Iraqis out of the new political process by emphasizing other means of political expression, especially religious and tribal.
- Exploitation of pan-Arabism as a political-ideological theme that plays to the insurgency's foreign audience. This is also a practical strategy for leveraging support from Arab states and their predominantly Sunni political elites.

After the elections and beyond, the insurgents aim to remove Sunni Arabs from the political process of the new Iraq, except to the extent that it can be exploited. Although various insurgent elements have similar goals and motivations, Sunni Arab politics are highly factionalized in Iraq. There are no high-profile leaders who speak broadly for Sunni Arabs in the same manner that Kurdish and Shiite political leaders can represent large segments of their populations. Both military and political operations are aimed at fostering the idea that the resistance is the only legitimate political expression of the Sunnis.

Resistance Capabilities The insurgents have demonstrated that they are capable of acting simultaneously along all lines of operation, shifting emphasis and levels of activity in response to both opportunities and counterinsurgency operations. During periods of high activity, the insurgents have generated well over 100 incidents per day. They may be able to generate even more such activity for the elections, but probably could not sustain that pace for long.

Geographically, the resistance has been able to conduct operations throughout the Sunni Arab areas of Iraq and, occasionally, against targets in Kurdish and Shiite areas. All the major Sunni cities are centers of insurgent activity. At least sixty Sunni cities and towns have witnessed repeated attacks, and Falluja, Mosul, Samarra, Ramadi, Baquba, and Sunni districts of Baghdad, among others, have experienced dozens of attacks per week.

In addition, the insurgents are able to conduct a wide variety of attacks ranging from simple shootings and roadside

explosions to complex attacks featuring planning, coordination, maneuvering, and multiple combat elements and weapons systems. These kinds of “quality” attacks have been used to overrun police stations and assassinate even well-protected government officials. Along with suicide bombings, they are among the most dangerous tactics employed by the resistance, with high casualties and damaging psychological effects. The number and quality of such attacks seems to be on the rise.

Looking Ahead While the battle for the elections will not be decisive for the insurgency, it does provide an opportunity for both sides to test their mettle. Unlike the November 2004 battle for Falluja, where almost all the advantages lay with the coalition, the insurgents have some advantages in the election struggle, and the outcome is less certain. These issues will be addressed in [Part II \(templateC05.php?CID=2243\)](#) of this series.

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