

The Assault on the Iraqi Police

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Brief Analysis

Attacks by insurgents on Iraqi police officers and facilities have become a major feature of this stage of the insurgency in Iraq. Hundreds of police personnel have been killed, the police in some areas have been routed by insurgent forces, and police have been penetrated and subverted by the insurgents. Deployed widely and to the neighborhood level in towns and cities, they have become a prime target for the insurgents.

The police are important because they play multiple roles in providing security. These include: law enforcement counter-insurgency operations -- both routine and special operations, showing a government presence, and criminal and insurgent intelligence collection. They are crucial to providing a sense of security to the local population. Currently, with just over 50,000 police on hand, they comprise about 44 percent of the state's new security forces. They, or at least those in the non-elite police units, are also exposed in two important ways. First, in order to do their job they must be out among the people and hence are vulnerable to direct attack. Second, if operating in their own neighborhoods, or if recognized, they risk retaliation against their families. They are in effect highly vulnerable to both direct attack and intimidation. The importance of the police and their vulnerability has made them logical and lucrative targets for resistance attacks.

Insurgent Strategy

The assault on the police is part of a much broader strategy to undermine the political process in Iraq and the stability of the government. A central element of this strategy has been attacking the new Iraqi security services, with the police a prime target.

The insurgents appear to have three specific objectives in the assault on the police, beyond the general objectives of creating instability and intimidating those who would work with the new government. The first objective is to force the police off the streets and out of the neighborhoods. This is aimed at reducing the government's presence, limiting the collection of intelligence against the insurgents, creating the feeling that the government cannot provide security for the local population, and enhancing the security and freedom of action of insurgent elements. Secondly, the insurgents aim to penetrate and subvert the police at all levels. This serves to weaken the police as a component of the Iraqi Security Forces and creates a source of intelligence for the insurgents. Thirdly, the insurgents hope to inflict a kind of defeat on the police, to break them as a security arm of the new government, forcing other security forces to perform their missions and demonstrating the government's impotence.

Insurgent Operations

Employing diverse tactics, the insurgents have had substantial success in achieving their objectives in Sunni areas, with 1,000 policemen killed in action (KIA) since the Coalition reestablished Iraq's security forces, according to Iraqi Interior Ministry information. Principal insurgent tactics include:

Suicide bombings. More than a dozen have occurred since the beginning of 2004. These vary from attacks on police convoys and vehicles to attacks on recruiting centers and police stations.

Assassination of individual police officers. Last week alone three police officials of the rank of colonel or above were killed.

"Complex" attacks, featuring multiple elements, significant organization, and coordination. The December 3 attack on the al-Amil police station in southern Baghdad was carried out by insurgents who arrived in eleven cars and conducted a deliberate assault on the post. At least sixteen Iraqi police were killed.

"Routing" of local police forces. This tactic involves a deliberate effort to bring about the local collapse of the police by a series of coordinated actions in a town or city. The best example of this was in Mosul in November, when a reported 80 percent of the force dissolved in the face of a series of insurgent attacks. One Iraqi police officer was quoted as saying: "We were afraid, so we went home."

Subversion of police. Conflicting loyalties among police officers make them vulnerable to subversion, or even willing supporters of the resistance. The police in Ramadi, Falluja (before the U.S. assault), and elsewhere have been regarded as largely under the sway of the insurgents. The police chief of Mosul himself was implicated in supporting the insurgency.

Terror and intimidation. Police officers at all levels are the targets of terror and intimidation. Police chiefs in Baghdad, Ramadi, al-Khalis, Hillah, Mahmudiyah, Irbil, Mussayab, Kirkuk, and Karbala have all been assassination targets since the beginning of 2004.

Insurgent Actions

The scope of the assault on the police is suggested by reported attacks on police personnel or facilities. Data from January through November 2004 show a steep rise in attacks in Sunni areas beginning in August and continuing into December. In this period, at least fourteen Sunni cities or towns have witnessed three or more attacks on the police, with Baghdad, Mosul, and Baqubah accounting for the majority. More than 540 police were killed in these incidents.

In addition, the insurgents have shown significant willingness to engage in direct attacks on Iraqi police forces. At least 48 percent of Iraqi police killed died in direct engagements with insurgents, based on reported incidents. This suggests that the insurgents are not overawed by the police, indeed that they see the police as prey, due to their vulnerability, the law enforcement nature of their training, and problems in armament and cohesion. Insurgents employed some eighteen different combinations of weapons in their attacks on the police.

Despite these difficulties, some elite police units seem to be performing well, especially in combined operations with U.S. forces. When backed up by U.S. forces, or even Iraqi National Guard units, regular police tend to stand and fight. Importantly, the assault on the police is now largely confined to Sunni areas. The Kurdish area is well policed, and the police have had some success in reestablishing themselves in the south with the ebbing of the al-Sadr rebellion. Nevertheless, the future of stability in Iraq will largely be decided in the Sunni areas and it is here that the police are the weakest and under determined attack.

Implications

The insurgents have inflicted moral and physical damage on the police. The police are the weakest link in the security apparatus and are gaining a reputation for unreliability. One Iraqi National Guardsman in Mosul has been quoted as saying: "The police are traitors. We will never be able to count on them."

Police weakness has substantial implications both for short-term security during the January elections and, in the longer term, for the stability of the state. It is very unlikely that any substantial improvement can be made in police performance and reliability prior to the elections. This means that the major burden of security duties for the elections will fall on other Iraqi forces, backstopped by Coalition forces. This is going to make force allocation decisions by the Coalition and the Iraqi government more difficult. Overstretched security forces will themselves be potential targets.

The Iraqi police cannot be expected to perform their security missions alone, but they are inextricably involved in the war in Iraq. This may not have been the original intention, but it is an inescapable fact. The insurgent assault on them has made it so. For the foreseeable future the Iraqi police will need direct support from Coalition and more capable Iraqi units. Leaving them "alone in the dark," as has been too often the case in the recent past, is a recipe for disaster.

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