

A Ramadan Offensive in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Ramadan starts on October 15 or 16, depending on the sighting of the moon. Last year on the first day of Ramadan, five car bombs went off in Baghdad within an hour, including one in front of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) offices. There is a disturbing prospect that the insurgents could try in Ramadan this year to mount a more significant offensive than any attacks to date. Such an offensive would underline the insurgents' claim to act in the cause of Islam; it could significantly complicate plans for elections in Iraq; and it might aim to influence the U.S. elections.

Ramadan As a Time of War

Last October, Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) chief L. Paul Bremer gave a major television speech before the start of Ramadan in which he heralded the "special character of a peaceful month." That is a profound misreading of Ramadan's role. In fact, Ramadan has been more a month of war than of peace. It is not one of the four months during which Islam forbids warfare. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad liberated Mecca on 17 Ramadan in 624 AD in the battle of Badr. Modern proposals for Ramadan ceasefires by secular governments - the Soviets in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein when fighting the Islamic Republic of Iran - were uniformly rejected by the Islamist side, which usually intensified fighting during Ramadan. During the Algerian civil war, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) used Ramadan as the occasion for increased attacks in 1995, 1997, and 1998. Going back further, the most intense Arab-Israeli war was started by Syria and Egypt in 1973 during Ramadan; indeed, that war is known in the Arab world as the Ramadan War.

During morning rush hour on the first day of Ramadan 2003 in Baghdad, suicide car bombers hit the Health Ministry, three police stations, and the ICRC offices, killing 42 people. The day before, rockets hit the al-Rashid Hotel in the Green Zone where Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was staying, killing a U.S. colonel. These 2003 Ramadan attacks were a dramatic escalation by those who had until then appeared to be isolated and scattered regime remnants and foreign Islamists; in retrospect, it heralded the transition to a more deeply rooted insurgency. There were few signs that the CPA had been prepared for the attacks. Indeed, two days before the start of Ramadan, the CPA had lifted the curfew in effect in Baghdad since the war, so as to facilitate the traditional rounds of night-time feasts and mosque prayers.

Reasons to Expect a Ramadan Offensive

The strategic centers of gravity in the Iraq insurgency are Iraqi and American public opinion. A Ramadan offensive would offer excellent prospects in this regard, for three reasons:

- Emphasizing the Islamic character of the insurgency. The resistance has not been particularly successful at articulating an ideological justification for its actions. Its claims to represent Iraqi nationalism are challenged by the transitional government. The Sunni resistance smells much like the old Baathist elite, which holds little attraction for the Shiite majority. Claims to act in the name of Islam offer the best prospects for the insurgents. The observance of Ramadan is arguably the single most important common element uniting the Sunni and Shiite communities. Plus Ramadan has in recent years been an occasion throughout the Muslim world for orchestrated complaints at the perceived suffering of Muslims at the hands of the West, especially the United States, so an insurgent offensive could be lauded by many influential figures in Muslim-majority countries.
- Undermining the prospects for credible January Iraqi elections. Besides the obvious shadow that an insurgent offensive would cast over the coalition's claim that security conditions will permit holding voting, such an offensive could also preoccupy the transitional government at a time when it needs to make several politically and technically difficult decisions about the election procedures. If the preparations for the election are delayed and the prospects for an active UN role are further undermined - or if decisions about the election rules have to be made on the fly by a government preoccupied with other problems -then any January election will be less likely to win broad acceptance.
- Potentially influencing the U.S. elections. To the extent that President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry concentrate on their different evaluations of how the Iraq war is going, an insurgent Ramadan offensive could suggest that Kerry has a better understanding of the situation than does Bush. If Bush loses the election, the Iraqi resistance will claim that as a victory, and many around the world will agree - irrespective of the fact that Kerry is firmly committed to winning the war and that his criticism is that Bush is not prosecuting it effectively.

Possible Types of Attack

Since the insurgents' aims would be political rather than military, the types of attacks they would mount would presumably be chosen for political impact, irrespective of whether the attacks can be readily suppressed by coalition forces. The 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam offers a sobering example of spectacular attacks which, though militarily unsuccessful and highly damaging to communist forces, left many in the United States with the opinion that the war was unwinnable and that U.S. forces should therefore be withdrawn.

The maximum political impact would come from attacks that are unexpected in three ways:

- Scope. The Shiite radical forces do not seem to march to the same drummer as the Sunni insurgency, as illustrated by Muqtada al Sadr's continuing dalliance with the idea of competing in elections. A well-coordinated insurgent assault in both Sunni and Shiite areas would be a disturbing escalation.
- Scale. The challenge for the insurgency is to create the impression that it can do more than harass the U.S. forces, that is, that it can win. Operations by larger units, or simultaneous operations in separate cities, would indicate a greater degree of coordination among insurgent forces, suggesting that it may be able to assume control once the U.S. forces leave.
- Target. The greatest publicity, and the largest impact on U.S. opinion, comes from kidnapping foreign civilians. In the last week, journalists from several Western countries have left Iraq out of concern that the next major target could be the media. A more challenging target would be to directly assault coalition bases, such as the Green Zone. Besides being well-prepared to counter attacks, the best coalition response to the risk of a Ramadan offensive is to warn Iraqis, Americans, and the world that such attacks are to be expected. If senior Iraqi and U.S. officials frequently provide detailed analysis of why an increase in attacks can be expected, this will not only take away the

surprise element of the attacks; it could also provide convincing reasons why the attacks may be a one-time surge rather than an indication that the insurgents are stronger than previously thought. Absent such preparation of public opinion, a Ramadan offensive could offer the insurgents good prospects for persuading Americans and Iraqis that the coalition's cause is hopeless.

Patrick Clawson is Deputy Director of The Washington Institute; he has just returned from two months in the Persian Gulf.

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