

# Gaining Ground—Resistance in Iraq since the Transition (Part I):

## Evolution and Status

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### Brief Analysis

The prospects for violence in Iraq were much discussed in the period leading to the June 28, 2004, transition to Iraqi sovereignty. The "smart money" was on the expectation that violence against the transitional government and coalition forces would increase. This has proved to be the case, with Sunni-based resistance actions in Iraq increasing in number, scope, sophistication, and lethality. Between the beginning of June and the end of August, some 150 U.S. soldiers have been killed in action and 1,977 have been wounded. It is now possible to speak not only of certain cities that have slipped beyond coalition or government control (such as Falluja, Ramadi, and Samarra), but also of "zones of resistance" that extend across multiple cities and towns in Sunni Iraq.

### Evolving Resistance

The resistance remains motivated by a number of reinforcing drivers. Anti-occupation sentiments, Sunni Arab nationalism, extreme Islamist views, and anti-Westernism have existed from the beginning of the resistance. Hostility toward "collaborators" has also been present from early on, but has been reinforced over time by the increasingly active and public role of the transitional government and its security services. In a sense, the resistance is now fighting two campaigns: one against the coalition and one against the Iraqi government, its organizations, and its personnel.

Geographically, the resistance operates over much of the Sunni Triangle and now controls some territory within this area. Since the beginning of June, resistance actions have been reported in as many as forty-three cities and towns in the Sunni Triangle. Resistance zones now include Baghdad and its environs, Falluja-Ramadi, Tal Afar-Mosul, Samara-Baquba, Mahmudiya-Latifiya, and parts of the Iraq-Syria border. In at least some of these areas, the resistance represents a complex mix of former regime associates, tribal members, Sunni fundamentalists, foreign jihadis, and criminals. Despite their lack of common vision and motivation, they are able to cooperate and coordinate attacks.

Overall, the resistance seems to be headed in the direction of a movement composed of disparate parts with a kind of collective leadership, versus a single or unified organization with centralized leadership. Former regime elements,

including Baath Party officials and members of the security services, appear to be central to the leadership and direction of the resistance. Several senior Baath officials remain at large (eleven of the fifty-five in the U.S. military's deck of "most wanted" cards) and are presumably playing significant roles in resistance activity.

At least outwardly, a second leadership structure appears to have developed around Sunni fundamentalist clerics. Sunni clerics appear to be especially active as leaders of the resistance in Falluja. Sheikh Abdullah al-Janabi exercises strong influence there; according to one account, he controls the "al-Falluja Emirate." Some Sunni groups may be little more than fronts for former regime elements. The regime -- including Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, a former senior official and now a key figure in the resistance -- worked hard to build connections with select clerics, including providing arms and money.

A third source of direction appears to come from foreign jihadis such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, although they do not exercise broad leadership within the resistance movement or across the Sunni population. Tribal members are clearly involved in resistance activity, but it is uncertain to what extent they are providing leadership based on tribal roles. All leadership elements appear to operate on the basis of extensive personal, family, or other social networks, providing natural leadership, support, and communication mechanisms and increasing the difficulty of penetrating them.

As many as thirty-five Sunni resistance organizations have been identified in media reportage, although some of these are probably ephemeral. The al-Farouk Brigades, the military wing of the Islamic Movement in Iraq, reportedly consists of multiple units operating in Falluja and Ramadi and claims responsibility for incidents in southern Iraq as well. Sheikh Omar Hadid, an Iraqi said to be in command of foreign fighters and Iraqi insurgents, commands the Black Banners, one of the groups reportedly operating around Falluja. Other groups include the Army of Muhammad (an extremist Sunni insurgent group said to consist of a coalition of cells) and the National Front for the Liberation of Iraq (a diverse organization of secular and religious members of the Republican Guard who have allegedly coordinated ambushes and drive-by shootings throughout the country). Unity and Holy War, ostensibly headed by al-Zarqawi, is believed responsible for multiple kidnappings and subsequent beheadings, as well as numerous mass-casualty suicide bombings. The Army of Ansar al-Sunna has conducted attacks in Baquba, Mahawil (south of Baghdad), and al-Anbar province.

Two issues have appeared to place some strain on the resistance: mass-casualty terrorist incidents and the kidnapping and execution of foreigners. Neither issue has been severe enough to produce an outright break in the resistance; cooperation across resistance organizations continues. As with any movement, the existence of divisions and tensions within the Iraqi resistance is unsurprising and should not be seen as a critical weakness.

#### Resistance Capabilities

The resistance is now capable of persistent operations rather than mere sporadic attacks. Equally important, it has proven capable of, and willing to engage in, sustained fighting. Falluja, Ramadi, Samara, Tal Afar, and Baquba have all been the scenes of battles that have extended for days rather than hours. The resistance learned the lessons of Falluja and Muqtada al-Sadr's April rebellion and has used this knowledge to gain ground.

Resistance operations are broad in scope and include extensive actions against the Iraqi government and those who support it, against foreigners sustaining reconstruction efforts, and against the coalition in general. All of these actions are aimed at undermining the new government, creating instability, and driving out or killing those who support the new Iraq. The tactics employed are varied and innovative, allowing the resistance to shift tactical emphasis as circumstances warrant and to avoid becoming predictable.

#### The al-Sadr Diversion

An important element in the progress of the Sunni insurgency has been the revolt of Muqtada al-Sadr -- not because

of any direct cooperation between his organization and the Sunni-based resistance, but because of the diversion of coalition military effort his revolt has made necessary. With the outbreak of open rebellion in April, the coalition could no longer focus its most capable military assets on the Sunni insurgency. The limited offensive capability of most of its coalition partners (the British forces being the major exception) meant that the coalition was forced to divert U.S. combat troops to southern Iraq and Sadr City. The persistence of al-Sadr's revolt, with the second major round erupting in August, has meant that U.S. ground forces will be retained in the south for the foreseeable future. The 11th and 24th Marine Expeditionary Units have assumed responsibility from Multinational Division Center-South for much of the troubled areas of southern Iraq, including Najaf. During al-Sadr's August uprising, they required reinforcement from heavy armored elements of the Baghdad-based 1st Cavalry Division. This represents a substantial diversion of effort from operations directed against the Sunni insurgency.

### Scope of the Problem

By almost any measure, the resistance has become more rather than less of a problem. Its evolution in terms of capabilities has at least kept pace with the coalition and exceeds the capacity of the new Iraqi security forces. Moreover, the growing territorial expression of the resistance calls into question both the possibility of holding elections across the Sunni region, and, if they are held, the legitimacy of the results. The loss of territory has compelled the coalition and the Iraqi government to take the offensive to regain what has become lost ground. Perforce, the burden, and the casualties, of conducting an offensive will fall on U.S. troops until such time as the Iraqi security forces are ready.

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