

# Insurgent Operations against the Highways in Iraq

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Apr 26, 2004

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## Brief Analysis

The intensification of Sunni-based resistance operations and the onset of Muqtada al-Sadr's Shi'i rebellion in early April confronted the coalition with a number of serious military and political challenges, few of which have been resolved. Coalition forces are facing new and increased operational demands, and among these demands is a substantially enlarged requirement for the coalition forces and reconstruction program to secure the main lines of communication (LOCs) connecting Baghdad to the outside world.

In situations of insurgency or rebellion, LOCs are almost always at risk, and Iraq is proving no different than cases extending from ancient warfare until today. The military problems inherent in protecting LOCs through hostile or potentially hostile territory are well known. The coalition must be able to move men and material with a high degree of assurance throughout Iraq. The April fighting has demonstrated that active measures and substantial resources are required to ensure such secure movement.

### The Problem

Four highways are especially important to the coalition's logistics and reconstruction effort: Highway 10 from the Jordanian border to Baghdad, Highway 1 from the Turkish border to Baghdad, Highway 8 from Kuwait to Baghdad, and the road from Baghdad International Airport to the city. This represents over 1000 miles of highway to secure. With numerous bridges, culverts, viaducts, and other chokepoints presenting targets for sabotage, these roads are vulnerable to interdiction throughout. Many highway segments pass through or near inhabited or agricultural areas, providing good locations from which insurgents can organize and conduct ambushes. Iraq's road system is relatively well developed and bypass routes exist, but these -- usually in worse condition than the main highways and slower and more difficult (especially for civilian vehicles) to traverse -- are no less vulnerable to attack.

Before April, the highways in Iraq provided relatively secure means of travel throughout the country. Attacks on coalition convoys and patrols were a routine feature of resistance operations in the Sunni Triangle, but until April no concerted resistance effort to interdict or seize control of highway segments had emerged. The events of April 2004 changed the situation dramatically. Resistance in Sunni areas intensified while the heretofore relatively quiet Shi'i areas erupted in violence. Reporting from Baghdad indicates that as many as eighty convoys were struck in the first two weeks of April, while U.S. military sources reported that the rate of convoy attacks had doubled. The character of the attacks on convoys also changed. Relatively large resistance units, reportedly with as many as sixty personnel in

some cases, were now involved. Resistance elements fought hard, actually contesting control of roads west and south of Baghdad with U.S. forces. The coalition military spokesman in Baghdad described this as "a concerted effort on the part of the enemy to try to interfere with our lines of communication, our main supply routes."

Determined and concerted attacks on highways represented a challenging new tactic on the part of the resistance. The size of forces and intensity of the fighting, coordination, and scope of attacks -- on all four major LOCs, at multiple locations, and with multiple means -- indicated new resistance capabilities. Resistance actions along the roads included:

Ambushing convoys, and firing on vehicles.

Hostage taking, at times combined with ambushes, primarily in the Ramadi-Fallujah area.

Traditional attacks with improvised explosive devices, sometimes combined with direct fire attacks.

Sabotage of bridges and overpasses, occasionally combined with ambushes, to disrupt convoy traffic and impede the redeployment of U.S. forces.

While the sustained fights along the roads between coalition forces and insurgent elements were more important in a military sense, hostage taking has had a dramatic psychological effect, personalizing the danger and insecurity along the highways and garnering massive press coverage. The theater of hostages in peril was an "information operations" victory for the insurgents.

#### Effects

Insurgent operations against the highways have had broad effects. Military operational effects included: some reduction in mobility for coalition forces; the requirement to allocate additional forces to convoy and route security; and increased difficulty in supplying forces. None of these represented insurmountable problems, but -- coupled with the dramatic increase in insurgent actions in the Sunni Triangle and the Shi'i south -- they stretched coalition military capabilities.

Insurgent operations along the roads also affected reconstruction efforts and the Iraqi economy. Both reconstruction and Iraqi economic activity are dependent on the movement of massive amounts of material and large numbers of people. Road movement for both reconstruction and economic purposes was significantly disrupted. At the height of the ambushes and kidnappings, civilian contractors either stopped or substantially reduced movement within Iraq, reportedly bringing some reconstruction projects to a halt, and some reconstruction personnel were told by their governments to depart from Iraq. Several major firms have decided to reduce or suspend reconstruction operations. Iraqi and other merchants have found it increasingly difficult to move within the country, adversely affecting what had been thriving commerce with its neighbors.

The attacks on the roads were also important psychologically. They reinforced the impression created by the uprisings of a loss of control by the coalition -- a sense that the coalition was under siege.

#### Coalition Response

The coalition responded to insurgent operations against the roads with traditional military measures. Coalition forces attacked insurgent elements to open roads, leading in some cases to intense and sustained fighting. Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, the deputy director of military operations in Baghdad, stated, "We've had to take extraordinary steps to get stuff to the [U.S. troops] fighting to open up some of the routes." Closures of segments of Highways 1, 8, and 10 were imposed to control road traffic and repair damage from sabotage. Convoys were provided with increased security in the form of more escort vehicles and troops and an increased number of armored Humvees and heavily armed patrol vehicles (the so-called "gun-trucks"). In addition, garrison commanders were given added responsibility to protect convoys moving through their areas. Logistics "work-arounds" were also

implemented, such as flying in essential military supplies, delaying nonessential convoys, and using alternative routes.

## Implications

The insurgents will have difficulty in mounting a sustained campaign against the highways at the level of intensity achieved in the first half of April. Serious LOC attacks already seem to have dropped off, much as the intensity of broader insurgent activity has fallen. Enhanced security measures instituted by coalition forces also have likely contributed to a reduction in successful attacks. Nevertheless, the insurgents have demonstrated that they can seriously impede road movement, and it is likely that intermittent attacks along the highways will continue to pose problems for military and civilian movement. In any future period of increased unrest, serious efforts to interdict the highway system can be anticipated. U.S. military action against either Fallujah or Najaf would almost certainly trigger renewed fighting along the roads.

Even though the situation along the highways has steadied, the concerted attacks by insurgents have important implications for the U.S. mission in Iraq. The battle for the highways represents a "third front" in the struggle with the Sunni based resistance and al-Sadr's supporters. Although coalition military forces can be supplied under such conditions -- albeit with increased cost -- the reconstruction program and Iraqi economic activity cannot be maintained if material and people cannot move relatively securely. The coalition is sustaining a society, not just an expeditionary force. Insurgent actions have shown that reconstruction can be seriously disrupted; and this will be of continuing concern, requiring the devotion of substantial military resources for the foreseeable future.

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