

Faces of Resistance

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Brief Analysis

The violent incidents that have occurred in Iraq since the beginning of this month illustrate the diverse faces of Iraqi resistance. The terrorist-style attacks in Iskandariyah and Baghdad on February 10 and 11 drew much attention to the presumed links of terrorist organizations to anti-occupation incidents. Although resistance elements do indeed employ terrorist tactics, the broad scope of resistance activity faced by the coalition has been reflected in several recent incidents, including a failed ambush on February 7, a series of military-style attacks in Falluja on February 12 and 14, and day-to-day attacks involving a range of explosive devices. Indeed, resistance elements seem to have rebounded from their losses of November-December 2003.

The transitional Iraqi government and its nascent security forces are likely to face a similar array of attacks once the coalition transfers authority to them. In fact, resistance elements are already beginning to shift their focus onto Iraqi "collaborators." As the United States withdraws its forces from high-threat areas, resistance actions will likely target Iraqi security forces with even greater frequency. These local forces are more vulnerable and are likely perceived to be more important targets in the long term, as they represent institutions critical to the future stability and security of the state.

A Variety of Tactics

The February 10-11 suicide bombings of Iraqi recruiting facilities were shocking, high-visibility events, killing as many as 100 army and police recruits and bystanders. These incidents reinforced widespread perceptions that the coalition is unable to prevent attacks on important Iraqi targets, a fact that may have a chilling effect on recruiting for the new security forces. From the perspective of resistance elements, the bombings were low-cost attacks in that they did not require exposure of cells and cadres to direct combat with coalition forces. Although the bombings served the goals of the resistance -- that is, countering the threat represented by the new security services -- they were probably carried out by terrorist cells associated with organizations such as Ansar al-Islam or al-Qaeda.

Iraqi resistance showed a different face during recent attacks in the Falluja area. Falluja lies thirty-five miles west of Baghdad, in the Sunni triangle, and falls within the area of responsibility of the 82nd Airborne Division. The city has a long history of resistance activity, including attacks on U.S. forces and members of the Iraqi Police Service (IPS) and Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC). U.S. forces had been withdrawn from the city in order to reduce friction with the population and the frequency of violent incidents.

Nevertheless, resistance elements launched what appeared to be a series of professional, military-style, small-unit raids in the area on February 12 and 14. First, militants attacked the ICDC compound in Falluja on February 12, a strike that may have served as either a probe of local defenses or a deliberate attack on a U.S. convoy arriving at the compound carrying the commanders of U.S. Central Command and the 82nd Airborne. Then, on February 14, two heavily armed groups struck separate targets, with one element attacking the ICDC compound (probably in order to pin down the forces stationed there) and the second assaulting the police station with the intention of killing as many Iraqi policemen as possible and freeing prisoners. Based on press accounts, as many as seventy attackers may have been involved. The February 14 incident had all the earmarks of an attack carried out not by a terrorist organization, but rather by resistance elements associated with the military and security services of the former regime. In terms of numbers, organization, preparation, and weaponry, it was similar to the major fight that occurred in Samarra on November 30, 2003. Both the Falluja and Samarra battles were highly visible clashes that will likely remain in the minds of local witnesses. Unlike in Samarra, resistance forces won the fight in Falluja.

Resistance elements demonstrated additional capabilities on February 7 when they attempted to conduct a sophisticated night ambush near Muqdadiyah, a town northeast of Baghdad. The attempt was broken up by troops from the 4th Infantry Division, who killed all ten of the insurgents involved. The troops found rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, assault rifles, and night-vision goggles at the site.

These incidents demonstrate that resistance leaders remain willing to put armed, organized elements in the field despite the risks. In addition to these larger-scale military-style strikes, resistance elements have continued to mount near-daily attacks on Iraqi and coalition targets using mortars, rockets, and improvised explosive devices.

Troubling Questions

Although most experts acknowledge that it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely prevent suicide bombings, the military-style attacks in Falluja have raised several troubling questions. For example, who actually carried out the attacks? Rumors and reports of Islamic slogans, Shi'i banners, foreign accents, and Iranian militants have emerged in the wake of the attack. Although Islamist resistance elements may well have been involved, organized Shi'i and Iranian participation seems improbable.

Moreover, one press account indicated that, prior to the February 14 strike, warnings had been issued to the populace that an attack was imminent. Why were those warnings not brought to the attention of the intended targets? According to one U.S. commander, 95 percent of the population of Falluja supports the coalition. In light of this fact, how could ICDC, IPS, and U.S. forces have been so completely surprised by both the timing and the sophisticated nature of the attack? Did the citizens of Falluja play any role in the incident? U.S. forces detained the city's mayor for questioning concerning the operation, and the raiders themselves and the prisoners they released melted into the population quickly following the attack, suggesting some measure of popular support.

Perhaps most important, how did fairly large and well-equipped resistance forces come to be in a position to conduct sophisticated attacks on the local and coalition forces that were supposedly providing security in the area? Did the attackers come from within Falluja itself, or were they "outsiders"? Accounts of the February 14 attacks indicate that the militants used vehicles for, at the very least, local mobility. If they came from outside the area, how were they able to get to, and then move into, Falluja undetected? Moreover, the use of separate but coordinated attacks on the fourteenth suggests a significant degree of organization. If these attacks are in fact related to the February 12 incident, this would suggest an even more substantial degree of planning and command-and-control capacity.

Implications

Despite the setbacks of November-December 2003, resistance elements have demonstrated the capacity to mount high-impact terrorist- and military-style operations while maintaining some level of more routine attacks. Their

targeting and planning capabilities also seem to be improving. The incidents described above, far from being mere random attacks on vulnerable targets, are indicative of a concerted "counter-collaboration" campaign. They reflect the work of dedicated and embedded organizations with substantial capabilities.

These resistance capabilities must be viewed in the context of changing U.S., coalition, and Iraqi capabilities. Although some of the changes that will accompany the ongoing rotation of U.S. and coalition forces will likely be beneficial, others will be detrimental. As fresh units are introduced, these forces will inevitably begin operations with less skill and knowledge regarding local environments. Even currently deployed units have not received advance intelligence on certain important incidents. As they withdraw to more secure locations outside towns and cities, U.S. forces will perhaps lose some awareness of, and sensitivity to, local conditions. Finally, it is unclear whether the new Iraqi security services will be able to compensate for these changes. In Falluja and Samarra, at least, they could not.

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