Eyewitness Perspectives Assessing Progress in Iraq (Part I):

Security and Extremism

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Brief Analysis

On February 9, 2004, Jeffrey White, Jonathan Schanzer, Patrick Clawson, and Soner Cagaptay addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. All four were part of the Institute fact-finding delegation tasked with conducting an independent survey of local security conditions and emerging political currents in Iraq. The delegation traveled throughout Iraq, from the Turkish border to the Kuwaiti frontier, speaking with Coalition Provisional Authority officials, coalition military leaders, Iraqi Governing Council members, and Iraqi clerics, tribal leaders, and intellectuals. Mr. White, a retired U.S. government intelligence analyst specializing in military and security affairs, is an associate of the Institute. Mr. Schanzer is a Soref fellow at the Institute, specializing in radical Islamic movements. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. **Read a summary (templateC05.php?CID=1709)** of Dr. Clawson and Dr. Cagaptay's remarks.

JEFFREY WHITE

The Resistance

Resistance activities in Iraq were at a high pitch in fall 2003. Attacks became better organized and more lethal, and several successful operations were mounted against the coalition. By the end of December, however, the hope was that the security situation was improving in the wake of several developments: the capture of Saddam Husayn; a series of U.S.-led offensive operations; an increased understanding of resistance forces; attrition within the resistance networks and their leadership; and the capture of significant amounts of money and arms.

Yet, the resistance appears to have rebounded somewhat from the losses of November and December. Resistance elements remain active, carrying out many of the same types of operations that they did prior to November. Reported incidents of attacks on coalition forces have increased recently from eighteen to twenty-four daily. The resistance has also begun to shift its objectives and targets in response to coalition operations. Militants are now attacking an increasingly broad range of Iraqis associated with the coalition. The list of "collaborators" now includes

government officials, judges, police, intellectuals, informers, and translators.

The resistance seems to be focused on maneuvering itself into the best possible position for the imminent transition to Iraqi sovereignty. Resistance elements want to ensure that this transition is difficult and costly by making the situation on the ground as unstable as possible. Their goals include preventing the emergence of a Sunni leadership class associated with the coalition and penetrating the country's nascent political and security institutions. At the same time, the resistance wants to preserve its leadership and cadres, which probably accounts for its reluctance to engage coalition forces directly.

The resistance is more than simply the fighters who carry out the operations. The resistance operates from a base that includes command and control means, logistics, financial support, safe houses, and assistance in moving personnel and materials. It has apparently also developed an "outreach" component that recruits new members, conducts propaganda-related activities, and attempts to penetrate the institutions of the emerging government. In addition, some resistance elements appear to be heavily involved in counter-collaboration activities, killing, harassing, and threatening those individuals who support the coalition.

The resistance may also be benefiting from popular discontent with certain aspects of the coalition presence. For example, hundreds of detainees swept up by coalition forces in past raids have not yet been released back into the Sunni community. Curfews are still being imposed in towns and cities, while damage and loss of life remain uncompensated in some cases. Divisive issues such as these have led to popular demonstrations against the coalition in the Sunni triangle. Although the resistance is not yet popular among Iraqi society as a whole, it does appear to be gaining some measure of support.

Coalition Forces

The coalition's move from a proconsul-style arrangement to an ambassadorial relationship will likely have a significant impact on both the coalition and Iraqi society. At least one issue remains unclear: how the relationship between the U.S. embassy and the new Iraqi government will work out with respect to freedom of action for U.S. forces. The U.S. military posture in Iraq will undergo major changes, with a new corps headquarters being established in the country along with a four-star general position. This structure may allow for larger planning and intelligence staffs, which could in turn lead to improved overall management of coalition military operations. Some observers feel that the various U.S. divisions in Iraq have thus far waged more or less independent campaigns; this would likely change with the arrival of a new corps headquarters.

Coalition forces are in the midst of a massive troop rotation, during which a number of new divisions will be entering Iraq. This rotation will inevitably cause some loss in tactical experience and overall understanding of the situation, at least until the new divisions gain familiarity with current operational conditions. Coalition forces have proven highly adaptive as the character of the resistance has changed, and this dynamic will certainly continue with the introduction of new forces.

Although the multiple Iraqi security services currently being developed are making progress, they still have a long way to go before they can fulfill the mission requirements that are being thrust upon them. The new Iraqi army is making strides, but coalition and Iraqi authorities have yet to determine what role, if any, the army will have in providing internal security. The Iraqi Civilian Defense Corps appears to be evolving as a regional and perhaps rural force that can be quickly deployed to trouble spots. The Iraqi Police Service appears to be an urban and local force that will represent the first line of defense against crime and insurgency. Each component of the new security forces is in need of basic resources, from uniforms to ethics training. Establishing these forces and bringing them to a mission-capable standard will be a time-consuming process.

The Emergence of Politics

Politics has reemerged with a vengeance in Iraq. One official claimed that there are currently 130 political parties and factions operating in the southern part of the country. Although this figure may be exaggerated, many Iraqi factions have armed militias or military wings that are in fact being employed for political advantage. The objective of such factions is to establish themselves as the dominant political force at the local or even regional level. Managing this political activity will be a major challenge for the coalition, especially when it turns violent.

Despite the negative elements inherent in the security situation, the new Iraq is showing several positive signs. Iraqis have high expectations that major improvements will commence once money begins to flow into the country and reconstruction projects begin. Coalition forces have a much better understanding of the resistance and how to fight it, while the Iraqi security forces are making progress and appear to be on the right track. The coalition is also beginning to see the stirrings of civil society in Iraq; individuals are gaining basic training in democracy, and grassroots democracy is emerging in some areas.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the security situation in Iraq has dangerous components that should not be downplayed. There is no assurance that all will turn out in accordance with the coalition's long-term desires.

JONATHAN SCHANZER

Ansar al-Islam

Prior to 2003, Ansar al-Islam was a small organization confined largely to the northern part of Iraq, in the Halabja area. The group was highly centralized with a clear command structure. Yet, after February 5, 2003, when Secretary of State Colin Powell announced that the group was a major U.S. concern, its leadership developed a dispersal plan. As a result of that plan, approximately 400 Ansar al-Islam fighters reportedly escaped to Iran. In the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom, many fighters returned to Iraq, resuming their operations in the area of Fallujah, Tikrit, and Ramadi. Similar to the current global structure of the al-Qaeda network, Ansar al-Islam has become quite decentralized, with members operating via small cells and informal groupings. According to one intelligence source, the average cell consists of about six operatives with one commander. These cells employ freelancers, outsiders, Ba'athists, and militants who do not fit the al-Qaeda mold to carry out operations.

Recent interviews with Ansar al-Islam prisoners in Sulaymaniyah, as well as with other Iraqi and U.S. sources, indicate that the prewar cooperation between Ba'athists and Ansar may have been the result of one man's work: Col. Saadan Abd al-Latif Mahmoud al-Ani, also known as Abu Wael. Although he was not on the U.S. list of fifty-five most-wanted Iraqis, all of those interviewed stated that he was responsible for organizing some of al-Qaeda's activities inside Iraq. Apparently, he brought al-Qaeda to Iraq under a strategy not of winning war, but of foiling U.S. plans for the country. In the late 1990s, he invited several al-Qaeda groups to train at Salman Pak, a camp located twenty miles southeast of Baghdad, and helped to finance them as well.

In general, the majority of jihadis entering Iraq come across the Iranian border. Although Kurdish intelligence reports that three to ten such individuals are captured per week, they are unsure how many others are getting through. It is unclear whether the Iranian government is deliberately helping these individuals cross the border or simply turning a blind eye. Many foreign jihadis are using old smuggling routes that were employed during Saddam's time. After crossing the border they go to a safe house, receive weapons and orders, and then attack their targets.

Extremism

Although the coalition is doing a good job under difficult circumstances, some officials are overly optimistic about the prospects that Islamist extremism will not be popular in Iraq. Islamism is often a utopian crutch for people during uncertain times. It is usually popular among the young and unemployed, and Iraq has a young population with a high rate of under- or unemployment. Moreover, the Iraqi Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowment) is currently being restructured, leaving Iraqi mosques unmonitored in the meantime. For their part, Islamists are well

positioned to provide social services that the coalition and the Iraqi government are still struggling to establish. Indeed, providing such services has been an effective recruiting aid in other countries, where Islamists take advantage of the vacuum left by other authorities in order to gain the support of the masses.

The potential for Islamist growth in Iraq is also evident in attitudes expressed by Iraqis in the Kurdistan region. For example, even though that region is less susceptible to Islamism than the rest of the country, an official in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) stated that Islamist factions would garner 10 to 15 percent of the vote in the PUK area if elections were held today.

Some have speculated that Iraq will come to resemble 1980s-era Afghanistan. To be sure, foreign jihadis have flocked to Iraq from Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey, Morocco, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, the Palestinian territories, and elsewhere. Nevertheless, Iraq is not the next Afghanistan, despite an upsurge in terrorism, porous borders, general confusion, and weak central authority. In the north, the Kurds have been fairly successful at counterterrorism (despite the recent bombings in Irbil). In the south, the Shi'is keep the coalition informed about people who are new to the area and other suspicious individuals. In the central part of Iraq, however, the situation is likely to remain confusing. Fortunately, the foreign jihadi problem seems to be confined to that part of the country.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jeff Cary, a Dr. Marcia Robbins-Wilf young scholar and research assistant at The Washington Institute, and by Ryan Phillips, also a research assistant at the Institute.

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