

The Implications of Saddam's Capture for the Resistance in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

The December 13 capture of Saddam Husayn is proving to be a compelling event, drawing massive media and official attention. Many commentators have been quick to offer profound conclusions regarding the impact that this development will have on the future of Iraq, the U.S. presidential elections, and the war on terrorism, among other things. Although the capture is indeed significant, its actual short- and long-term implications for Iraq generally, and for the resistance in particular, are likely to be complex and contingent, and not a matter for instant analysis.

Context of the Capture

Saddam's "end" came with a whimper, not a bang, a fact that is significant in its own right. He was captured as a result of coalition pursuit operations that were abetted by an informer. Moreover, his meek surrender -- being pulled out of a hole in the ground, alone and looking for all the world like a vagrant -- was both predictable and fitting. Unlike his sons, he chose not to die or be wounded in a "heroic" battle or suffer anything like martyrdom. Instead, he gave up without a fight, perhaps hoping for a better day. The coalition has thus eliminated an important loose end from the war and likely prevented any potential heroic "Saddam myth" from arising.

The military and political context in which Saddam was captured is also significant. Prior to this development, neither the resistance nor the coalition had a clear advantage in the Sunni areas of Iraq. Although no one views Saddam's capture as an indication that the end of active resistance is in sight, it could serve as a brake: slowing the momentum of the resistance; increasing doubts, especially among Ba'athist holdouts, regarding the future of the resistance; and discouraging more Sunnis from joining resistance elements. Some short-term deflation of Sunni opposition seems inevitable, even if it is only temporary.

Why It Matters

Saddam's capture is important for several reasons. The deposed leader was a symbol of an incomplete victory, of the triumph of Iraqi cunning over American technology, of the notion that the coalition could be successfully defied. His capture could serve the same purpose as a formal surrender, which the coalition did not receive at the end of the war in May. More than anything else, it should bring home to the Sunnis that they lost the war and need to accept the new

political and military reality in Iraq. Prior to his capture, Saddam was always lurking in the background, psychologically if not physically, casting a pall over Iraqis fearful of his return. Uncertainty over his location or fate allowed him to, in a sense, be everywhere. This supposed omnipresence was reinforced by rumors of his movements in Iraq (e.g., one rumor placed him in the town of Ramadi on the same day as Gen. John Abizaid, head of U.S. Central Command) and by the intermittent release of taped messages from him encouraging resistance. He was the personification of the old regime and a frequently employed icon of those Sunnis who rejected defeat and occupation. Even Iraqis who did not like Saddam may have rallied to him or his image in response to coalition actions. At the very least, perhaps fewer Iraqis will now stand over burning U.S. vehicles chanting, "O Husayn, we will die for you." His capture could also propel some Sunnis into supporting the coalition more actively, as a consequence of either reduced fear of the old regime or the natural tendency to bet on a winner. The coalition needs all the support it can garner from this sector.

Saddam's capture should also generate intelligence on a number of important issues. In particular, he should be able to provide details regarding the still obscure nature of the regime's planning for the postwar situation, including preparations for resistance, movement of funds, escape plans for senior officials and family members, and the participation of other countries and foreign officials in this activity. For example, even if he does not know the current location of senior officials such as Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri (who is suspected of playing a key role in the resistance), he may know something about their plans, assets, and activities since the fall of the regime. It has long seemed unlikely that Saddam himself directed the resistance. The circumstances of his capture suggest he was not active at the moment, but until more is known about where he has been and what he has been doing, it is inappropriate to draw firm conclusions on this issue. Even if he was providing only inspiration and funds, however, his capture should hurt the resistance. If he played a larger role, the damage will be correspondingly greater. For example, he may be able to help the coalition develop an increased understanding of current resistance operations, organization, leadership, methods, assets, and objectives. More broadly, his removal may make Iraqis more willing to provide intelligence on active resistance elements and their leaders.

Will It Matter to the Resistance?

Paradoxically, Saddam's capture may have only a limited impact on the resistance itself. Saddam was not leading the resistance in the sense of being its commander, so his removal does not strip resistance elements of their leadership. No resistance fighter will be looking over his shoulder or left waiting for orders from Saddam. In some ways, his capture may even allow a more robust leadership to emerge naturally from the struggle. The resistance has become somewhat of a popular phenomenon rather than simply a collection of regime diehards. This trend reflects the wide range of motivations underlying the opposition, including virulent and religiously infused anti-Americanism, anti-occupation nationalism, Sunni discontent, revenge, and personal profit. The resistance has also proved to be persistent, finding a place within Sunni society and making itself difficult to root out. Adding to this persistence is the fact that the resistance has been a distributed phenomenon, emerging rapidly in a number of places. Resistance elements have also become better organized in recent months, further enhancing their durability and operational strength. Because of these characteristics, individual setbacks have not had a major effect on the opposition, thus endowing it with a degree of resilience.

Moreover, resistance elements do not seem to be running short of certain key assets. They do not need weapons in huge numbers, nor do they expend large amounts of ammunition as a field army would. In addition, they seem to have ample numbers of active personnel and supporters with the Sunni community. There are some signs, however, that money may soon become an issue of concern for them, particularly as the Iraqi currency exchange program progresses and coalition forces target their finances more deliberately.

Conclusion

Although Saddam's capture was an important victory for the coalition's fight against resistance in Iraq, it does not spell the end of the resistance. The positive effects of this development are likely to show up gradually rather than immediately, and they will be counterbalanced by certain well-established characteristics of the resistance itself. In the wake of Saddam's capture, the resistance will continue to evolve, perhaps in unanticipated ways.

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