

# Resistance in Iraq: Emerging Capabilities and Threats

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## Brief Analysis

The increase in resistance attacks in Iraq is not simply a matter of a few spectacular successes, such as the five coordinated suicide bombings in Baghdad on October 27, the downing of a Chinook helicopter on November 2, or the suicide bombing of the Italian base in Nasiriyah on November 12. Since September, resistance elements have appeared to be better directed, better organized, and more capable, employing both new weapons and new tactics. Their capabilities are evolving, and even more serious threats may emerge over time. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to regard the current situation as a tipping point in which the resistance has gained the upper hand.

## Changes in Fitness

The resistance has become more fit, or better adapted, to the environment in Iraq in several important ways.

**Persistent.** Despite frequent coalition raids, plentiful (though not perfect) intelligence, thousands of arrests and detentions, and the capture of tons of weapons, those areas that were troublesome from the beginning of the occupation—Baghdad, Fallujah, Tikrit, Mosul, and other parts of the so-called Sunni Triangle—remain troublesome today. In fact, Fallujah, Mosul, and the areas around them seem to be getting worse. The resistance is apparently making up for whatever losses the coalition inflicts upon it. In short, resistance elements have been persistent, continuing to operate despite the coalition's superior military technology and professionalism.

**Embedded.** The resistance also seems to have solidified its relationship with the Sunni community. Backing from radical Sunni Islamists, which emerged early on, has continued to foster generalized support for resistance, opposition to coalition authority, and recruitment of militant resisters. The mosque provides a moral and philosophical underpinning for resistance, a source of recruits, and a place for organizing, planning, and hiding. Although evidence is limited, at least some Sunni tribal leaders appear to be offering a measure of support to resistance elements. Clearly, they have not expressed meaningful opposition to the resistance. In a society where tribal relationships are important, even indirect or tacit support of the resistance can have a significant effect.

**Gaining from backlash.** The coalition's counter-resistance actions often cause considerable distress within the Sunni communities in which they occur, frequently leaving dead or wounded Iraqis, damaged property, detained relatives, and humiliated citizens. Even with the best of intentions and efforts to minimize collateral damage, such actions

generate recruits and support for resistance.

### Growing Capabilities

In addition to adapting to its environment, the resistance appears to be expanding its capabilities in several important ways. At the most basic level, it is more active; coalition sources report an increase in anticoalition incidents from 1215 per day over the summer to 3035 per day since then (there were 46 incidents on November 12 alone). This rise in activity is likely due to several factors: an increase in the number of resistance elements (currently estimated at 5,000 by coalition commanders), better command and control over resistance forces, and more aggressive operations by coalition forces.

The resistance also appears to be spreading geographically. In October, Kirkuk, previously regarded as quiet, became an active point of resistance. According to various press reports, this change reflected the movement of a small number of organizers and fighters (along with ample funds) to the area from the Sunni heartland.

Resistance elements are also employing an increased range of weapons in their attacks. Iraqi militants employed katyusha rockets for perhaps the first time in an October 28 attack in Kirkuk. Other relatively advanced weapons reportedly used by, or newly available to, the resistance include 160-millimeter mortars; shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles (used to down the Chinook helicopter); an improvised, though not crude, multiple rocket launcher (used to attack the Rashid Hotel in Baghdad); as well as large improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and antitank mines (both used to damage several heavy-armored coalition vehicles). Resistance elements continue to attack with their original means including rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and smaller IEDs while adding new weapons, allowing them to engage more difficult coalition targets from longer ranges.

Resistance actions are also becoming more complex and well organized. Some resistance operations now feature combined attacks with IEDs, RPGs, and automatic weapons. Coordinated suicide bombings against nongovernmental organizations and police targets have been conducted in Baghdad, and the most visible symbols of the occupation—the coalition headquarters and facilities in the heart of the capital—have been repeatedly attacked with mortars and rockets. Moreover, the resistance has carried out a campaign of attacks on prominent Iraqis deemed to be collaborating with coalition authorities. Overall, the ability to attack in multiple places, identify and locate vulnerable targets, and conduct precisely timed operations suggests a greater degree of organization and improving command and control. Such improvements in resistance capability are a natural development given the passage of time.

In addition, one account states that a relatively large component of the Jaish Mohammed is operating in the Tikrit area with some 600 men organized into six divisions of 100, each with a commander. Although there is undoubtedly an element of exaggeration in this claim, it suggests that the resistance now has a degree of substructure, which gives it greater flexibility.

Finally, resistance operations have exhibited improved planning and targeting, largely due to an enhanced intelligence flow. Press accounts citing U.S. intelligence sources indicate that resistance forces obtain extensive human intelligence on coalition activities, allowing them to plan more effectively while protecting their own activities. Again, this is a natural development given that the coalition operates in close proximity to the Iraqi population and that remnants of Saddam Husayn's ubiquitous intelligence services are probably still active.

### Implications

The resistance will not remain static; in fact, it may continue to improve its effectiveness. Changes that could occur in the future include: the rise of larger and more competent resistance units; the creation of areas of continuous resistance (i.e., the temporary liberation of some specific area); the emergence of more skilled resistance leaders; and the merging of popular opposition to the occupation with armed resistance.

The result of these changes could be larger, more frequent, and more skillfully conducted attacks, including attempts to isolate and destroy a coalition unit or outpost; more effective mortar attacks, including directed fire; increasing attacks on heavy-armored vehicles; and systematic efforts to restrict coalition air and road mobility.

Coalition commanders and officials are aware that the resistance is posing a growing challenge. On November 13, Gen. John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, stated that armed opposition in Iraq was increasingly well organized and well financed, and that it was expanding geographically. The military challenge for coalition forces and the new Iraqi security forces will be to outpace the resistance, primarily through a better understanding of the opposition as well as adaptive tactical and operational methods.

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