

Shi'i Opposition in Iraq: An Emerging Challenge

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Brief Analysis

Riots last week in Baghdad and Basra raised questions about Shi'i opposition to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). While the Shi'i community has been relatively quiet compared to the Sunni population, elements of the Shi'i have adopted a consistent position against the CPA, occupation forces, and the appointed Governing Council. If they deem it necessary, those opposed to occupation have the means and motives to move to armed resistance, which would pose a substantial threat to the coalition.

Resistance in Shi'i Areas

To date, most of the armed resistance activity in Iraq has come from within predominantly Sunni areas. However, in the first eighteen weeks of resistance activity there were some thirty reported incidents in principally Shi'i areas, with fourteen coalition soldiers killed. Some of these incidents can probably be attributed to non-Shi'is, including regime elements. The range of tactics and weapons used has been more limited than in Sunni areas. There have also been a number of anticoalition demonstrations, but it is evident that the Shi'i community has been more accepting of occupation than the Sunnis.

While qualifying their support to the coalition and the Governing Council, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), led by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, and the Dawa -- major Shi'i political organizations -- have both joined the new Governing Council. Nevertheless, Shi'i acceptance of the occupation and transition process is conditional on progress toward self-rule, restoration of public services, and the expedited withdrawal of occupation forces. Ali Abdul Karim al-Madani, a prominent Shi'i cleric associated with the moderate Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was preaching anti-American violence and illegal arms activity, suggesting how precarious support for the coalition may even be among moderate Shi'is; he was arrested in July.

There are at least five issues that could potentially mobilize Shi'i opposition or that are already doing so: cultural clashes brought about by the everyday friction between coalition forces and volatile Shi'is; religiously based opposition, often combined with anti-American/anti-Western attitudes; problems related to reconstruction and the restoration of public services (security, water, power); spontaneous incidents; and political frustration, either for some Shi'is now or the broader community later. These issues are resistant to easy solution, and some combination

of them will likely pose problems as long as the occupation continues. These issues have already demonstrated the potential to rapidly merge, producing serious anticoalition outbursts. Serious incidents have the possibility to escalate further, and, in the wake of the inevitable casualties and damage, create conditions for further radicalization and armed resistance to emerge.

The most visibly dangerous Shi'i political element at this time is the faction grouped around Muqtada al-Sadr, a radical but junior Shi'i cleric who draws heavily on the memory of the regime's martyrdom of his father, revered senior cleric Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr. Muqtada has proposed alternatives to the Governing Council, [attempted to recruit] an "Islamic Army" and a militia to defend holy sites, and called for the withdrawal of occupation forces and an end to the CPA. In addition, he has built an organization with substantial presence in Baghdad's Sadr City, Najaf, and Nasiriyah, and perhaps Basra exploiting the need for social and other services and probably drawing at least in part on remaining elements of his father's extensive organization. His spiritual guide, Ayatollah Kadhimi Husseini Haeri, is in Iran, where Muqtada has visited and reportedly made contact with Iranian officials, including Expediency Council chief Hashemi Rafsanjani and an official of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force. Muqtada has also contacted Sunni Islamist elements opposed to the coalition, and may be receiving monetary and other support from them.

There is a sense of latent violence attached to Muqtada and his faction. By all accounts his supporters were involved in the April 11, 2003, murder of Shaykh Abdel Majid al-Khoei, a moderate senior Shi'i cleric. His group is probably behind threats to Iraqis not observing Islamic law in Shi'i areas of Baghdad. Given the history of Shi'i resistance to authority in Iraq, it would be surprising if Muqtada is not preparing for clandestine armed resistance. Statements by supporters indicate that they are already armed and prepared to act if given the order. So far Muqtada and his associates have chosen not to give that order.

Spontaneous Combustion

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Shi'i response to occupation is the potential for incidents to rapidly escalate into large encounters between Shi'is and occupation troops. So far there have been three significant cases. The first, the deadly riots in the southern town of Majar al-Kabir on June 24, left six British military policemen and an unknown number of Iraqis dead. This incident seems to have been mostly caused by tension between the local population and British forces over weapons searches. The local community appears to have rapidly mobilized, deployed significant firepower (British accounts indicate rocket-propelled grenades [RPGs] and heavy machine guns were used), mounted multiple attacks on British troops in the town, and may have organized a deliberate ambush of a British reaction force moving to the troubled area.

The second spontaneous event occurred in the Basra area beginning on August 9. Here shortages in fuel and power, combined with severe temperatures, produced an outburst of anticoalition rioting. This rioting extended over several days but was not seriously exploited by those opposed to the occupation, although the latter supported the rioting. The events in Basra also demonstrated that average Iraqi citizens, not just members of opposition or resistance groups, could be quickly pulled into anticoalition disturbances.

This potential was confirmed by events in Baghdad's Sadr City Shi'i district on August 13. It is unclear exactly what happened and why, but the Shi'i population of this district was left with the clear impression that U.S. forces had deliberately blown down Islamist banners with helicopter rotor wash. Sadr City is substantially under Muqtada al-Sadr's sway. His cadre in the city was able to rapidly mobilize anticoalition demonstrations and generate demands by local clerics for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Baghdad. Demonstrations turned violent and U.S. troops killed one Iraqi after receiving RPG fire. Coalition commanders subsequently apologized for the banner incident, and reportedly agreed to reduce patrolling and helicopter overflight activity.

From Opposition to Resistance

How large of a step would it take for some Shi'is to move from opposition to resistance? Unfortunately not a large one. There are perhaps three mechanisms that could bring this about:

A deliberate decision to organize violent actions against the coalition, most likely coming out of the al-Sadr faction. Muqtada al-Sadr has been very careful to avoid this step, skirting the edge of outright confrontation, but his willingness to challenge the coalition with demonstrations and demands is clear and appears to be growing; he also has the organization to move rapidly to armed resistance.

Simple spontaneity. Coalition forces, by exercising tactical restraint, diplomacy, and operational flexibility, have been able to prevent serious incidents -- such as those in Baghdad, Basra, and Majar al-Kabir -- from escalating uncontrollably and constituting resistance. But the coalition's measured response, apologies, and withdrawals ultimately may encourage opponents. There will likely be more -- and more serious -- incidents in the future, and there is no certainty that they will always be contained.

Some element decides to deliberately create or exploit an incident to generate violent resistance. Again, the most likely group is al-Sadr's.

Avoiding a serious break with the Shi'is will be a complex and sustained challenge for the coalition.

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