

# Assessing the Iraqi Sunni Resistance

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Brief Analysis

Since President George W. Bush declared an end to "major combat operations" in Iraq on May 1, coalition forces have repositioned themselves to deal with the emerging resistance in Iraq. Although many attacks on the coalition have taken place in Baghdad, 90 percent are occurring in the so-called "Sunni triangle," located north and northwest of the capital, according to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers.

According to U.S. military officials, the intensity of attacks on coalition forces has ranged between ten to twenty-five per day. Weapons used include AK-47s, hand grenades, rocket-propelled grenades, mines, improvised explosive devices, and roadside charges. On June 16, resistance elements in Baghdad launched a surface-to-air missile (SAM) at a U.S. C-130 transport plane. This was the second incident since April 9 involving a SAM.

General Myers has stated that attacks on coalition forces are being carried out by groups consisting of former Saddam Husayn-regime members, foreign jihadists, members of Ansar al-Islam (an al-Qaeda affiliate), Sunni religious extremists, and criminal elements. A review of press coverage shows that at least two dozen indigenous and foreign groups have either claimed credit for or been identified as participating in attacks on coalition forces. This report seeks to identify the attackers and their goals.

## Diverse Identities

In postwar Iraq, a variety of groups representing various political tendencies have emerged to announce their intention to fight the coalition or take credit for attacks on coalition forces, including groups with proclaimed Ba'athist, Nasirite, or Islamist orientation, such as:

Jaysh Muhammad, an ostensibly Islamist group. A leaflet they reportedly disseminated states that despite the former regime's repression of Islamists, they will fight with Ba'athists against coalition forces.

Black Banners Group, an Iraqi group that, according to London-based Arabic daily al-Zaman, has urged "Iraqis, Arabs, and Muslims to deprive the Americans and Europeans from the oil by bombing oil pipelines and oil wells everywhere."

Nasirite Organization, an Iraqi group that has issued a statement claiming it had formed a military wing to "participate in the resistance against the hateful US-British occupation."

It is difficult, however, to identify which groups are actually engaged in anticoalition violence, because some groups active in the resistance may avoid claims of responsibility for some attacks, while others make exaggerated claims. For instance, as reported in Jordan's al-Majd, the "Iraqi Armed Forces General Command for Resistance and Liberation" claimed on June 12 to have killed thirty-six U.S. soldiers, wounded sixty-three, and downed three U.S. Apache helicopters and an F-16 fighter.

In Fallujah, wahhabi groups are also reportedly trying to organize operations against U.S. forces. The Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Islamic organization that has origins in Jordan and Egypt and that has spawned violent groups elsewhere (such as the Palestinian Hamas), has also appeared in Fallujah. Moreover, according to U.S. military

officials and Arab press reports, several thousand Arab and Chechen fighters have entered Iraq for the purpose of fighting coalition forces. Although some attacks are believed to be the work of foreign jihadists, it appears that others have been carried out by financially pressed individuals paid by supporters of the old regime to attack coalition forces and engage in acts of sabotage. Iraqis who refuse to participate in these attacks have sometimes had their families threatened.

#### 'Saddam's' Resistance

It is impossible to know with any accuracy the number of individuals involved in attacks on coalition forces. Military officials at U.S. CENTCOM have estimated that approximately 5,000 hardcore regime loyalists remain at large, while a senior U.S. Army official has stated that the number of regime loyalists and their allies in the Sunni region is somewhere between 3,000 and 9,000. According to CENTCOM commander Gen. John Abizaid, the loyalists consist of former mid-level Ba'athists, former intelligence and security personnel, and former members of the Special Republican Guard "organized at the regional level in a cellular structure[in] a classical guerilla-type campaign."

Hizb al-Awda (The Party of the Return) is reputed to be the best-organized loyalist resistance group in post-Saddam Iraq. According to U.S. officials and Iraqi sources, it has access to "funds, weapons, transportation, listening devices and informants" used by the old regime (Washington Post, June 21). It is also said to go by various other names, including some that would suggest an Islamist orientation.

Although al-Awda claims Saddam's backing, it is possible that the group uses Saddam's name to perpetuate an environment of fear and instability conducive to its goal of returning its members to positions of power. On this point, an anonymous former Iraqi general quoted by the Washington Post has said concerning al-Awda, "They don't love Saddam. The idea is to kick out the Americans and get back in charge."

A former Iraqi military officer-turned-resistance leader cited in another press report claimed that al-Awda uses "money stashed away by Saddam and his supporters well before the coalition's invasion" and that its budget has been "enhanced by bank robberies and the removal of huge quantities of cash from the central bank early in the conflict" (Washington Times, June 17). Al-Awda apparently uses these funds to commission attacks on coalition forces and acts of sabotage: Iraqis were initially offered around \$500 per American killed; today the figure may be ten times that.

Interestingly, some press reports claim that al-Awda cells include both former regime members and Islamists. Whether or not this is the case, it is worth noting that an alleged top-secret Iraqi intelligence document dated January 23, 2003, and addressed to Iraq's various intelligence and security services exhorted the members of these organizations to loot and sabotage government facilities, and join and use nationalist and Islamist groups as a cover for their activities in the event the regime should fall.

#### Conclusion

Most attacks on coalition forces are believed by U.S. military officials to be the work of mid-level Ba'athists and members of the old regime's intelligence and security services. These elements can draw on financial resources plundered from the old regime, and they also enjoy a favorable operational environment as a result of anti-U.S. sentiment among many of the residents of the Sunni triangle. To a lesser degree, local and foreign Islamists as well as criminal elements are believed to be involved in attacks against coalition forces. The diverse and varied nature of the groups engaged in anticoalition violence would seem to indicate that a multifaceted response is required to deal with a complex problem that has no easy solution.

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