

# Patterns of Sunni Resistance in Iraq

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## Brief Analysis

**A**lmost from the beginning of the occupation of Iraq, coalition forces have faced "resistance" -- armed action against coalition forces, equipment, or facilities. Resistance is to be distinguished from violence by Iraqis against other Iraqis and from "opposition" -- that is, anticoalition statements, demonstrations, or the organization of political activity -- which appears to be more characteristic of the Shi'i.

## Situation

The U.S. Central Command's daily incident and security reports show that from the end of major combat operations in Iraq on April 14, 2003, until June 10, 2003, there were at least 112 incidents in which lethal force was employed against the coalition. Most of these incidents have occurred in Sunni areas of the country (53 incidents) or around Baghdad (39 incidents). Because incident reporting for Baghdad is usually not location specific, not all of the actions there can be attributed to Sunnis; at least 14 (of the 39), however, are very likely to have involved Sunnis. This supports the belief that "resistance" is primarily a Sunni phenomenon, whereas "opposition," or at least preparation for it, is characteristic of Shi'i areas, including those in Baghdad. In the Sunni-associated incidents, coalition casualties have included 10 killed in action (KIA) and 37 wounded in action (WIA). Casualties among Iraqis have been much higher, with 54 KIA and 104 WIA as a direct result of the incidents.

## Explanations

The number of incidents, the recent increased lethality of these incidents for U.S. forces, and the concentration of incidents in Sunni areas has provoked considerable analysis. There are four models that have either been used, or could be used, to explain Sunni resistance. The two most commonly used are the "locally organized" and "regime diehards" models (sometimes these two models are combined, as in "local resistance by Ba'athists"). A third model, "centrally directed," has generally been dismissed. U.S. military officials in Iraq maintain that there is, in fact, no central direction -- that resistance is directed at the local level and based on remnants of Saddam Husayn's party and forces.

A fourth model, the one that seems to best fit the data, suggests that Sunni resistance is "self-organizing." That is, resistance elements are forming based on a combination of factors: friction with the coalition; general discontent created by the loss by Sunnis of a relatively privileged position in Iraqi society; and overlapping local, family, tribal,

and religious affinities. Ba'ath diehards clearly comprise part of the resistance story, and at least some of the activity in Fallujah has been attributed to "outsiders." The resistance also depends on political, economic, and social "microclimates," which can vary significantly from town to town or among city districts. Penetrating these affinities and microclimates is a difficult and time-consuming task for intelligence services. "Closing with and destroying" embedded resistance elements, as has been pledged by U.S. commanders, will be a challenge -- perhaps more an intelligence- and security-service function than a combat-unit task.

## Types

Attacks have ranged from simple roadside snipings to "quality attacks" featuring command and control; direction of fire; and a combination of weapons, including assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and light and heavy machine guns. The most common type of attack has consisted of firing at coalition targets (the "signature attack" consists of a small group armed with RPGs and automatic weapons); troops (38 attacks) and convoys (10 attacks) have been the most frequent targets in these attacks. Quality attacks have already taken place at Hawija, Haditha, Fallujah, al-Qaim, and Tikrit; greater frequency, sophistication, and geographic spread of such attacks would be a cause for concern. There have also been a few cases in which anticoalition demonstrations or spontaneous events may have either been generated or exploited to produce clashes with coalition troops. This is one explanation for the bloody incidents that took place in Mosul and Fallujah in April, and more recently in Hit. Whatever the cause, these events produce grievances against the coalition and contribute to the hostility that feeds resistance.

To some extent, the intimidation factor (large, armored vehicles; heavily armed, helmeted, and body-armored troops; helicopters overhead; disproportionate casualties) of U.S. forces has eroded. Resisters seem to be adapting and developing tactical responses to U.S. operations and activities. Some of these adaptations may include "RPG sniping" by individuals or small teams of three to four men, ambushes of soft vehicles on highways or in towns, and the targeted killing of individual U.S. soldiers manning guard posts or checkpoints. Resistance successes will contribute to further erosion in the deterrence value of coalition units, emboldening other, would-be resisters.

Baghdad is a special case. Western Baghdad appears to be the center of Sunni resistance, and, according to the Wall Street Journal, one district -- Aadhamiyeh, in northwest Baghdad -- has been identified as a particular problem area with its own potential resistance group, the so-called "Army of Mohammed." Opposition to the coalition is reportedly supported by the Abu Hanifa Mosque, and attacks are attributed by locals to both Ba'ath cadres and Saddam Fedayeen still active in the district. Attacks in Baghdad have varied widely, with a range of weapons -- from knives to mortars -- employed.

## Evolution

The nature and future growth of Sunni resistance will hinge on whether or not connectivity develops among so far geographically separate resistance elements. While resistance is occurring within a region roughly defined by Fallujah -- al-Qaim -- Mosul -- Baghdad, there is only indirect evidence that connections exist among resistance elements within this area. The existing road network supports movement and communication throughout the region. On May 24, a large shipment of gold was intercepted in the al-Qaim area of western Iraq. Numerous vehicles have been stopped transporting more weapons than needed for the self-defense of the occupants. Personnel, including Ba'ath Party officials, have been captured on the road. And the June 8 checkpoint attack near al-Qaim is similar in method to attacks that have occurred in Baghdad. None of these incidents serve as strong evidence of a regional command and logistics structure, but they do suggest the potential for such a development.

The long-term outlook for Sunni-based resistance in Iraq is unclear. Occupation forces have begun to recognize the seriousness of the problem and are taking strong measures against resistance elements. Several resistance-type leaders have been arrested in Fallujah and elsewhere; Ba'ath Party officials are being actively pursued; and

significant numbers of weapons have been seized. However, there is still much to be concerned about. Baghdad, Fallujah, and Tikrit are the most active areas, but resistance incidents are occurring in more locations over time. Resistance also seems to be adapting -- at least at the tactical level -- and coalition deterrence, at least for some resisters, seems to be fading. While resistance may not yet be coalescing at the regional level, it may be doing so at the local level; that is, Ba'athist, religious, tribal, and family elements may be joining in support of armed action against the coalition. There is no fundamental reason that local affinities cannot naturally expand to the regional level, where family, tribal, and religious ties also exist. In some cases, resistance actions also appear to be more sophisticated; while the trend in the number of incidents per week has been decreasing, the incidents seem better organized and are more lethal.

Dealing effectively with emerging Sunni resistance will be one of the major tests of the occupation administration. At this point, relatively few Sunnis are likely involved actively in resistance. It needs to be kept that way.

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