

The Emergence of Resistance in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Whatever the long-term prospects for a stable and democratic Iraq, the potential exists for the development of resistance to that goal. This potential is rooted in both historical factors (e.g., Iraq's political culture; Iraqi distrust of the United States; enduring images of colonialism) and immediate circumstances (e.g., the collapse of Saddam Husayn's regime and the attendant destruction of governing systems and infrastructure; the legacy of regime crimes). Indeed, the latter circumstances have created precursors for resistance to coalition forces, the transitional government, and the eventual Iraqi government.

Sources of Resistance

Many of the regime's supporters have simply dissolved into the population; because there has been no formal surrender, a myth of defiance or resistance may emerge. Moreover, Iraqis have an extensive array of grievances that still need to be addressed. Ba'ath Iraq has been wrecked, and the new state is barely conceived, much less born. Not all those looking for advancement in the new Iraq will be satisfied, and the war has created a new class of disenfranchised -- the former rulers. Hence, the country is a fertile environment for the growth of violent political forces.

Potential sources of resistance can be readily identified, including former government officials, tribal elements, and ethnic and religious groups. Some of these elements may already be engaged in the beginnings of resistance. In Mosul, for example, much of the regime's presence simply disappeared. Many intelligence and security agents, Saddam Fedayeen fighters, and regular military personnel vanished rather than surrender, and they remain unaccounted for. In some cases, coalition forces have encountered residual opposition from an apparent combination of regime holdouts and local Sunnis.

In Tikrit, Saddam's home area and a center of regime loyalty, statues of the former dictator were not torn down when coalition forces arrived. The population was less welcoming toward the coalition than other Iraqis, and the locals organized themselves for self-defense against rival tribal elements. This sort of local self-organization on a tribal foundation could serve as a mobilization base for armed, organized resistance.

Initially, the Shi'is in Baghdad and elsewhere seemed divided and uncertain as to how to respond to Saddam's defeat. Currently, however, some Shi'i leaders are calling for the rapid departure of coalition forces, and these demands

could serve as a rallying cry. Indeed, both Sunnis and Shi'is participated in demonstrations in Baghdad on April 18 against "occupation." The Sunnis are used to being in power, and the Shi'is are used to resisting. Both have a built-in leadership structure in the form of senior or revered religious figures, some of whom are effective catalysts for mass mobilization. From this perspective, the mass Shi'i religious demonstrations held recently in Karbala have clear political significance.

The Development of Resistance

Resistance often emerges as a result of one of three processes. The first is self-organization, wherein salient incidents, nascent leaders, and local conditions and grievances merge to form the basis for more extensive opposition. The second is conscious decisionmaking and planning by motivated individuals or groups. The third is spontaneous ignition in response to something specific: a violent clash, an arrest of a key leader, or the empowerment of an unpopular leader. Any one or more of these processes could already be at work in Iraq, which is why the developments in Mosul, Baghdad, and Karbala are troubling.

Resistance usually unfolds in stages. Initially, a populace may exhibit sullen acceptance of superior force, with only local displays of opposition. Later, opposition becomes organized and is manifested in more serious challenges to authority. Finally, organized groups with political objectives initiate armed resistance.

Certain indicators could help coalition forces identify growing resistance in Iraq. One sign would be the emergence of causes and leaders capable of mobilizing Iraqis at the local, regional, or national level. Another sign would be the emergence of overt opposition groups. Although such groups might not advocate violent opposition at first, they could turn to it eventually or serve as a recruitment base for those who do advocate it. A third sign would be the initiation of organized violence, including armed attacks on coalition forces or the interim government. Evidence of increasing cooperation among groups opposed to the new situation would be yet another sign. In any case, the coalition should not take too much comfort from the fractious nature of Iraqi society; history suggests that even highly divided resistance movements can cooperate to achieve major goals (e.g., the French under German occupation; the Jewish community in Palestine under the British).

Resistance can begin at the local level -- in individual neighborhoods, villages, towns, or cities. The events in Mosul, Tikrit, and Baghdad, although different, could be early signs of emerging resistance. Moreover, problems at the local level can coalesce to pose challenges at the regional or national level. The country's ethnic, tribal, and religious divisions should serve to retard the formation of effective opposition at the regional level, but these divisions should not be counted on to prevent such resistance entirely. The largely Shi'i south, with its extension into Baghdad, is the most probable candidate for organized regional resistance. National resistance -- that is, resistance by one or more groups operating across the country and with similar objectives -- seems less likely than regional resistance. Only the prolonged presence of coalition forces or extended political instability are liable to create an environment in which national resistance could become a real problem. Nevertheless, the potential for Sunni-Shi'i cooperation needs to be monitored.

The wherewithal for opposition exists in Iraq, and manpower resources seem plentiful. The regime's survivors, foot soldiers and leaders alike, are just one source of such manpower. A number of non-Iraqi "volunteers" remain at large in the country, and more could arrive over time. Many elements of Iraqi society were armed and trained by the government, while others armed and trained themselves in order to resist the government. Moreover, the enormous amounts of cash in Iraq (some of which has disappeared during looting) suggest that financing resistance might not be a problem; the country is also awash in small arms, light crew-served weapons (e.g., mortars), and explosives, the ideal instruments of armed resistance. Finally, Iraq's neighbors could decide to provide support to resistance groups. Iran has a history of such activity, and Turkey, Syria, and Saudi Arabia could choose to become involved as well.

Countering Resistance

Some resistance is perhaps inevitable, but if it can be contained quickly, Iraq's future will be brighter. Several obvious measures will help to tamp opposition: repairing Iraq's damaged infrastructure, establishing the basis for stable self-governance, and withdrawing coalition forces. Although these measures are already in motion, they will have to outpace the growth of resistance. Suppressing resistance while rebuilding the Iraqi state will require other measures. First and foremost will be the creation of effective policing and intelligence services to identify and root out dangerous opposition groups: in other words, a political police force. This will be a delicate task in a country that has been terrorized by its police and security services for over thirty years, so the coalition must be prepared to take over these responsibilities for some time. In addition, the Iraqi authorities must develop the capability to intervene with whatever force is required to disrupt or eliminate armed resistance. Again, and for largely the same reasons, this responsibility will initially fall on coalition forces. Yet, it too will have to be passed to Iraqis themselves; whatever government eventually arises in Baghdad, it will need to be able to fight for itself.

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