

Foreign Irregulars in Iraq:

The Next Jihad?

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Brief Analysis

In light of the recent dramatic events in Baghdad, U.S. policymakers are eyeing the next phase of the war. U.S. forces will almost certainly encounter increased guerrilla fighting. Saddam Husayn's vice president, Taha Yassin Ramadan, recently stated that more than 6,000 Arab volunteer fighters are now in Iraq. With increasing numbers of such volunteers vowing to fight, could Iraq become the epicenter for the next global jihad?

Volunteer Fighters in Context

Although the entrance of foreign irregulars into Iraq is an alarming trend that necessitates continued monitoring, it is not a new phenomenon in the Muslim world. Arab volunteers, including Muslim Brotherhood fighters and elements of the Iraqi military, were known participants in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. Nevertheless, each war ended in an Arab loss. In Iraq, an estimated 6,000 Arab volunteers joined Saddam's army in the early days of the Iran-Iraq War, increasing to 10,000 by 1985. Yet, their contribution only added to the number of casualties in a war that bloodied both sides, to no avail. During 1992-1995, approximately 1,000 fighters from a dozen Muslim countries fought the Serbs in Bosnia. The fundamentalist form of Islam that these fighters brought to the region was anathema to Bosnian Muslims, most of whom practiced a more liberal version of the religion. The volunteer fighters were accepted primarily because the Bosnians were in dire need of military assistance. This marriage of convenience ended when NATO forces intervened and the foreign fighters were marginalized.

One supposed exception in the ineffectual history of foreign Muslim irregulars is their role in the 1979-1989 war leading to the withdrawal of Soviet occupation forces from Afghanistan. Yet, the defeat of the Soviets was primarily due to the Afghans themselves, who constituted the vast majority of the fighters. Moreover, most of the weapons and funding for this resistance came from the U.S. and Saudi Arabian governments. The impact of foreign volunteer fighters became more significant after the Soviet withdrawal; their efforts played an important role in the Taliban regime's victories against the Northern Alliance, though both sides depended on extensive external assistance.

Foreign volunteers have also had some impact on the current conflict in Chechnya. Chechen fighters are not looking to establish a strict Islamist regime in their territory, but they have been forced to rely on Islamist military aid and personnel in the absence of help from other sources. Although analyst Stephen Schwartz estimates that only "ten percent of people under arms in Chechnya are mercenaries from Muslim countries," volunteer fighters continue to arrive on the front. Regardless, Chechen forces have little chance of military success against the more powerful and

organized Russian military.

Al-Qaeda Interrupted?

Many now fear that al-Qaeda elements might find a way to re-create their successes in Afghanistan (and to a lesser extent, Chechnya) by swarming to another area with weak central authority, where radicals can pool their resources and establish a formidable guerrilla fighting force. In the worst-case scenario, the terrorists dispersed from Afghanistan in early 2002 could reunite in Iraq. This is not likely, however, given the heavy presence of allied forces already in the country.

Still, Osama bin Laden recently released a message imploring Muslim fighters in Iraq not to be "afraid of their tanks and armored personnel carriers. These are artificial things. If you started suicide attacks you will see the fear of Americans all over the world. Those people who cannot join forces in jihad should give financial help to those Mujahedin who are fighting against U.S. aggression."

To date, however, U.S. officials have reported little activity on the part of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The most credible threat from the organization is the potential activity of Ansar al-Islam, an al-Qaeda affiliate based in northern Iraq. That group issued a statement on March 25 claiming that "300 jihad martyrs renewed their pledge to Allah, the strong and the sublime, in order to be suicide bombers in the victory of Allah's religion."

The Impact of Foreign Fighters in Iraq

The Associated Press reported Wednesday that thousands of foreign volunteers have been fighting allied forces in Iraq. Pockets of intense resistance by such volunteers continue to stymie coalition advances, despite significant gains in recent days. Indeed, volunteer fighters were out in force on the streets of Baghdad's Mansur district, close to the Iraqi intelligence service headquarters. They were also in control of streets in the Aadhmiya and Waziriya districts north of the city center. According to one government official, hundreds of these fighters have been captured. One officer with the 1st Marine Division reported that his troops fought a ten-hour battle with hundreds of fighters southeast of Baghdad yesterday, claiming to have killed several hundred. Some Iraqi citizens are now cooperating with allied forces, pointing out foreign fighters in their midst.

The foreign irregulars in Iraq hail from all over the region. Hizballah, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah have reportedly sent hundreds of trained fighters, while thousands of other volunteers -- trained and untrained -- have signed up to fight from Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Egypt, Somalia, and Lebanon.

Syria appears to pose the most serious threat. According to U.S. officials, the roads between Syria and Iraq, used by Saddam's arms smugglers in recent years, are now the main arteries for irregulars preparing to fight. According to the BBC, at least 2,000 fighters have left Syria in recent weeks to join the war. CNN reports that at least ten busloads of these volunteers from Syria have been stopped by coalition forces; one such bus, carrying Palestinians and other Arab volunteers, was struck by U.S. forces.

Implications

For the most part, the global jihad model has been unsuccessful; volunteer Muslim fighters have contributed relatively little to foreign military conflicts. Hence, it is unlikely that a jihad will bog down U.S. forces in Iraq so long as the foreign fighters remain limited in both number and training. In fact, this situation might even be in the best interests of the United States, since it presents an opportunity to fight several elements of the war on terror on the same front. Nevertheless, foreign irregulars may pose a threat beyond the war. In particular, they could impede or destabilize the new Iraqi administration by targeting both U.S. and Iraqi officials.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in Arab and Islamic politics.

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