

A Terrorist Front in Iraq?

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Brief Analysis

MATTHEW LEVITT

The widespread notion that the war on terror cannot be pursued simultaneously with the war in Iraq is erroneous, a fact that was bolstered by the capture of al-Qaeda leader Khalid Shaykh Mohammed on the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Counterterror operations continue, with wide international support from European governments as well as numerous Arab and Muslim countries (e.g., Yemen, Pakistan).

Al-Qaeda has been quiet since its February 2003 statement calling on Iraqis to carry out suicide attacks against Americans. In fact, al-Qaeda has an interest in allowing hatred and frustration to fester throughout the region, while continuing to instigate tension via radical Islamist organizations. Through this tactic, al-Qaeda hopes to validate its claim that the international jihad is not a terrorist-driven campaign but a mass Islamic and Arab movement against the West's imperialist and anti-Muslim intentions. Yet, al-Qaeda's recent silence should not be interpreted as an inability to carry out operations; their attacks are likely to resume during postwar reconstruction in Iraq.

Syria and various Palestinian terrorist groups pose a more pressing and unexpected threat. Unlike al-Qaeda, they are reacting out of an acute fear of being next on the antiterror hit list and have therefore attempted to derail the war on terror by encouraging anti-American attacks during the war in Iraq. Breaking with its longstanding strategy of pursuing limited cooperation with the United States (e.g., against al-Qaeda) while simultaneously supporting Hizballah and Palestinian groups, Syria has decided to stand with Saddam Husayn against the United States. Syria's foreign ministry has expressed its desire to see the United States defeated in Iraq, and it is backing up its rhetoric with action by issuing passports to irregular volunteers and night vision goggles and tractor engines to Iraqi fighters. For their part, several Palestinian groups have called for strikes against Western interests. They believe that a U.S. victory in Iraq will lead to a renewed peace process, which would end the two-year terrorist nirvana that has flourished in the West Bank and Gaza.

ROGER CRESSEY

Despite U.S.-European fissures over building a coalition against Iraq, most European governments recognize the threat of terror. As such, the antiterror alliance is strong and will continue to pursue radical Islamist organizations such as al-Qaeda. Although transatlantic intelligence and counterterror maneuvers have diminished al-Qaeda's ability to execute attacks, the organization still poses a threat to U.S. forces in Iraq and other Western targets worldwide. Operation Enduring Freedom achieved its strategic aim of ensuring that Afghanistan could no longer be used as a sanctuary for Osama bin Laden's group. Yet, al-Qaeda maintains functional capability in Iraq. The coalition is unable to seal all border crossings and prevent all terrorist infiltrators. Moreover, al-Qaeda members are experts at forging official documents and could enter Iraq through the front door. Following regime change, the U.S. occupation of Iraq is likely to fuel regional animosity toward the West, generating widespread sympathy and recruits for al-Qaeda's mission. U.S. allies such as Jordan are also at risk of attack given al-Qaeda's antipathy toward regimes that collaborate with the West.

Several wildcards may also increase the threat of terror in Iraq. First, indigenous terrorism is a serious concern, particularly if the U.S. occupation is prolonged. Second, Iran may perceive the U.S. presence along its border as an imminent threat, prompting Tehran to commission al-Qaeda or its affiliates to attack U.S. soil or interests in order to decrease American willpower and send a signal that the Islamic Republic will not collapse as easily as Saddam's regime. Third, although graduates of al-Qaeda training camps are quiet at the moment, they are still active and will continue to seek new recruits. Fourth, despite historical Sunni-Shi'i animosity, regional terrorist groups are likely to form an alliance of some sort, given that they can operate relatively freely in Iran, Syria, and Lebanese and Palestinian refugee camps.

AVI JORISCH

Hizballah disseminates its message through its Beirut-based al-Manar television station, which is broadcast globally via satellite to an audience of approximately 10 million viewers. Since the Bush administration began to target Iraq, a portion of al-Manar programming has focused on what it calls American imperialism and oppression, highlighting what Hizballah believes are Washington's five main goals in Iraq:

Destroy an Arab regime. To Hizballah, the only way to stop U.S. oppression is resistance. Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 proved to Hizballah that resistance works. This mantra is therefore repeated at most Hizballah functions and throughout al-Manar programming.

Deep American involvement in the region (i.e., a new world order). To Hizballah, the United States is public enemy number 1 (with Israel cast as public enemy number 1-B). The organization is opposed to Western culture and American values; its members believe that American culture, if given free rein, will restrict them as a movement and curtail the influence of Islam.

Restrict Iranian and Syrian support of terrorism. Although Hizballah was originally an Iranian creation, its continued freedom of mobility depends on Syria. The group realizes that it is an expendable asset in the Iranian arsenal of war; Tehran could sacrifice Hizballah if that were the necessary price for gaining access to its Shi'i brethren in southern Iraq. Similarly, Syria and Hizballah know that once the military campaign in Iraq is over, pressure will build on Damascus to stop supporting terrorist organizations; if and when a new Middle East is created, Syria may have no choice but to suppress Hizballah.

Arab-Israeli peace. Since the May 2000 withdrawal, the destruction of Israel has become Hizballah's ideological cornerstone. The organization justifies its existence by trumpeting this goal and by exporting its resistance ideology to the Palestinians. Hizballah has repeatedly declared that the only way for Palestinians to achieve total liberation is through armed resistance, and that they should accept nothing less than complete victory.

Wage the war against terror. Until September 11, Hizballah was responsible for more American deaths than any other terrorist organization. The organization knows that America's war on terror might eventually come its way, either through a direct attack or by giving the Israelis carte blanche. Whatever the case, the prospect of such action could have a debilitating effect on Hizballah's standing in Lebanon.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eran Benedek.

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