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## **Iraqi Insurgence: a qualitative change?**

As the nation is guided through its last months of occupation before the US hands over to a local administration, Iraq continues to suffer from an internal instability which bodes ill for the post-withdrawal chances of the country. Several recent developments have pointed to the fact that the insurgents targeting US forces and their allies seem to be becoming more sophisticated in their operational methods. Additionally, and perhaps related to the latter fact, there is finally some evidence that, if valid, could prove the existence of ties between al Qaeda and the individuals masterminding the suicide attacks.

### **Technique**

To begin with there is the question of methodology. In recent weeks the US forces and their allies have had to face threats of a more subtle and serious nature than the numerous RPG attacks which have been used against their soft-skinned patrol vehicles. The first novelty will be familiar to those knowledgeable on Northern Ireland (NI) and PIRA's improvised explosive devices (IEDs). During the worst years of the NI campaign, PIRA developed and became extremely proficient at the use of the culvert bomb. This IED was primarily used against vehicular patrols and was usually denoted remotely by wire, by an operative located some distance from the road being travelled by the security forces. As the target vehicle passed the IED would be detonated, the stone culvert acting as a forcing cone, projecting its shrapnel-laden payload against the soldiers inside. This technique is now being used against the occupational forces in Iraq. Less than a month ago a vehicle carrying one of the regional US governors of Iraq was attacked in this way, the lives of all inside being saved only by the fact that they were travelling in a newly acquired vehicle which whilst of civilian appearance was in fact heavily armoured. The interesting difference between the NI and Iraqi attacks is that due to the different style of urban planning, the Iraqi roadside culverts are in fact more like small gutter drains, meaning that the IEDs used have to be much, much smaller than those PIRA worked with. The resultant lethality of the Iraqi devices is therefore all the more impressive and indicative of a sophisticated level of IED knowledge.

The second phenomenon is the growth in audacity and professionalism of conventional attacks. Again, very recently, an Iraqi police station in Faluja was in fact stormed by a platoon sized force of fighters, in daylight and from several directions at once. The fact that the insurgents not only feel comfortable moving in such numbers, but that they can maintain discipline operationally amongst so many fighters, clearly separates them from a conventional terrorist force, which at best can execute single assassinations, or stand-off mortar attacks, but not head-on synchronised confrontations.



In the meantime the vehicular suicide attacks continue, in one case the vehicle actually managing to penetrate the external security of a US base and being detonated inside the compound. On the week of the 20<sup>th</sup> February, the Hungarians became the newest NATO partner to suffer casualties as the result of such an attack. In this case two trucks were driven up to the multinational compound, each with several hundred pounds of explosives on board. Interestingly enough, after the explosions there was an immediate enquiry by the Hungarian parliament regarding the safety of the nation's forces. Surprisingly, during one hearing, the deputy minister of defence reported that eyewitnesses had before the attack seen several people scouted the vicinity and had in fact spoken to them. He went on to state that they must have been connected to al Qaeda, given the fact that the witnesses said that they were not locals, speaking in accents that were instead probably Jordanian. If one ignores the fact for a moment that an accent does not constitute an al Qaeda membership card, it nevertheless seems surprising that the Hungarian authorities would be in possession of such sensitive information at such short notice. Even so, the evolution in resistance techniques mentioned above, does automatically make one posit the question of just how indigenous a force this is.

### **Ansar al-Islam and “the letter”**

Much has been made of late of purported evidence that could finally tie the events in Iraq to al Qaeda's broader network. In January a Pakistani al Qaeda operative, Hasan Guhl, was intercepted carrying a CD Rom letter which was supposedly written by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who has allegedly been based in Iraq for sometime. It is said that the letter was intended for the highest level of the al Qaeda leadership.

In fact the document, which has since then been made available by the authorities, seems too good to be true. Not only does it go into some detail about operational issues, it also portrays the US forces as too resilient and has a tone in places of distinct pessimism. As a result of this tone, the author sees the only way out as engineering a rude awakening for the “sleepy” Sunni community by instigating a broader Shiite-Sunni conflict. Whilst the document itself may seem “too perfect” (Pentagon officials even joking about having written it themselves), the truth is that events occurring after the capture would seem to bear this out. Attacks have not only become more lethal, they have also occurred in places that could be susceptible to sectarian conflict, as in the case of the recent attack on a headquarters in Kirkuk.

Whilst such events echo the calls of the author of the letter, this does not in fact verify the letter's authenticity. As a result, the smoking-gun of Iraqi-al Qaeda links, has yet to be found. Many commentators and journalists have pointed to the quasi Wahabist group Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), based in Kurdish northern Iraq as the key to this connection. This young organisation, created around the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and originally under the name Jund al-Islam, or fighters for Islam, has it is estimated around 800 fighters. Whilst it is clear that such an organisation does exist, that it is multinational in nature and that it operates in Iraq, much of the rest is hearsay. Some have written that the group was actually founded with al Qaeda seed money, that it recruits fighters for al Qaeda across Europe and that it is working in



collaboration with members of the former Saddam regime, but none of this has been credibly proven. To quote a US official formerly responsible for a sizeable region of Iraq “we know there are foreigners involved and domestic religious fanatics, but no one can really navigate his way around the various groups and alleged ties.”

Perhaps it is too early to believe – as the Guhl letter states – that the insurgents are losing the fight. Nevertheless, perhaps the real question at the moment is not whether or not the document is genuine or whether or not the link to al Qaeda has been made, but how fast the indigenous extremist religious and nationalist forces are growing and what skills they are acquiring. If these groups flourish, there will be no need for external help and Iraq will remain unstable.