

Let A Thousand Militias Bloom

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In trying to defeat the Iraqi insurgency, the Pentagon has turned to Saddam Hussein's former henchmen. Under former Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, U.S. officials has installed many of the hated Baathists who tormented Iraq in high-level posts in the interior and defense ministries. But the new Iraqi government, overwhelmingly composed of Shiites and Kurds who suffered the most under Hussein, have announced that they are going to purge the ex-Baathists, putting them on a collision course with the United States.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made one of his surprise visits to Baghdad last week, warning the new government not to "come in and clean house" in the security forces. The official line is that the U.S. is worried about losing the "most competent" security forces. But there is a deeper concern that purging the security forces could feed into sectarian tensions and explode in civil war.

Much of that is due to a ruthless U.S. policy of using any tactic, no matter how unsavory, in trying to defeat the insurgency. According to a slew of reports, the U.S. military is encouraging tribal vendettas, freeing kidnappers to spy on insurgents, incorporating ethnic-based military units into the security forces, and encouraging the development of illegal militias that draw in part from Hussein-era security forces.

There is clear evidence that the tactics are having an effect. U.S. casualties have declined by 75 percent since their peak of 126 combat deaths in November 2004. Part of that is probably due to sweeping thousands of Sunni Arab males of the street—Iraqis imprisoned under U.S. control have more than doubled since last October to 10,500.

It is the more ruthless methods that may be having a greater effect on squeezing the insurgency. Yet the establishment of militias may backfire. U.S. military officials express concern that if the former Baathists who lead the militias are removed, they could take their forces with them.

A report by the Wall Street Journal from Feb. 16 revealed that numerous "pop-up militias" thousands strong are proliferating in Iraq. Not only are many of these shadowy militias linked to Iraqi politicians, but the Pentagon is arming, training and funding them for use in counter-insurgency operations.

Most disturbing, one militia in particular—the "special police commandos"—is being used extensively throughout Iraq and has been singled out by a U.S. general for conducting death squad strikes known as the "Salvador option." The police commandos also appear to be a reconstituted Hussein security force operating under the same revived government body, the General Security Directorate, that suppressed internal dissent.

High-level White House officials are banking on the police commandos to defeat the insurgency. In hearings before the Senate Appropriations Committee on Feb. 16 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said the commandos are among “forces that are going to have the greatest leverage on suppressing and eliminating the insurgency.”

The police commandos were identified as one of at least six militias by Greg Jaffe, the Journal reporter. Last October it was said to have “several thousand soldiers” and lavishly armed with “rocket-propelled-grenade launchers, mortar tubes and lots of ammunition.” Yet these militias owe their allegiance not to the Iraqi people or government, but to their self-appointed leaders and associated politicians such as interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. Even the commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, Gen. John P. Abizaid, admitted in testimony before Congress on March 1 that such militias are “destabilizing.”

Of these militias, at least three are linked to Allawi. Jaffe writes, “First came the Muthana Brigade, a unit formed by the order of... Allawi.” The second is the Defenders of Khadamiya, referring to a Shiite shrine on the outskirts of Baghdad, which appears to be “closely aligned with prominent Shiite cleric Hussein al Sadr.” Al Sadr ran on Allawi’s ticket in the January elections and proved himself loyal when he attacked the main Shiite ticket publicly for stating it was endorsed by Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. (Al-Sadr also held the infamous press conference in Baghdad where several journalists in attendance were seen receiving \$100 gifts from Allawi’s government.)

The special police commandos is led by Gen. Adnan Thabit, who participated in the disastrous 1996 coup against Saddam Hussein that Allawi coordinated. Thabit was jailed and subsequently released shortly before the 2003 U.S. invasion. He is also the uncle of Iraq’s interim minister of the interior, under which the commandos operate.

Thabit told the Armed Forces Press Service last October that the police commandos are drawn from “police who have previous experience fighting terrorism and also people who received special training under the former regime” of Saddam Hussein. The report from Oct. 20, 2004, also quotes U.S. Army Col. James H. Coffman Jr., who specifies that police commandos are “former special forces and (former Directorate of General Security) personnel...”

The Directorate of General Security was one of the main security services Hussein used to maintain an iron grip on Iraq. The Center for Nonproliferation Studies describes the service’s role as “detecting dissent among the Iraqi general public” by monitoring “the day-to-day lives of the population, creating a pervasive local presence.”

Col. Coffman reports to Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, who heads the mammoth U.S. effort to create Iraq’s myriad security forces. Petraeus calls the police commandos “a horse to back” and has done so by providing it with “money to fix up its base and buy vehicles, ammunition, radios and more weapons.” In a satellite briefing to the press on Feb. 4, Petraeus repeatedly praised the special police commandos, calling the leadership “tremendously aggressive” in operations. Petraeus also revealed that the commandos, the Muthana Brigade and another militia called the Defenders of Baghdad were used to provide security on election day.

But a senior officer on Petraeus’s staff confided, “If you tried to replace Gen. [Thavit] he’d take his...brigades with him. He is a very powerful figure.”

Ousting wholesale the ex-Baathist security forces now in the government could push them to join the insurgency. And this precisely what Iraq's new president, Jalal Talabani is suggesting. According to the BBC, Talabani argues "the insurgency could be ended immediately if the authorities made use of Kurdish, Shia Muslim and other militias. Jalal Talabani said this would be more effective than waiting for Iraqi forces to take over from the US-led coalition."

The militias Talabani is referring to include the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shiite units such as the Badr Brigades. But such a move would cement the conflict as a sectarian one.

Military analyst William Lind notes that "the rise and spread of Shiite militias devoted to fighting Sunni insurgents puts ever-greater pressure on Iraq's Sunnis to cast their lot with the insurgency." Add to this the use of Kurdish Peshmerga also against Sunni Arabs and civil war would likely result.

U.S. BETS ON BAATHISTS

Ironically, Allawi—with U.S. encouragement—has put a network of former Baathists in charge of various security services to fight what the U.S. claims are other Baathists who form the core of the insurgency. They include Thavit's nephew, Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib, who is the son of a prominent Baath official. The Minister of Defense is Hazem al-Shaalan, a former Baathist from al-Hillah, and Brig. Gen. Muhammad Abdullah Shahwani, an old-time Ba'ath officer, is now head of the Iraqi secret police, according to author and analyst Milan Rai.

This policy of "re-baathification" is actively supported by Bush administration. The Washington Post reported on Dec. 11, 2003, that the CIA met with Allawi and another member of his Iraqi National Accord party to create "an Iraqi intelligence service to spy on groups and individuals inside Iraq that are targeting U.S. troops and civilians working to form a new government." The plan was to "screen former government officials to find agents for the service and weed out those who are unreliable or unsavory." Evidence of this role comes from Thabit who told the Armed Forces Press Service that former regime personnel in his force "were efficiently chosen according to information about their background."

Even before he officially assumed the post of interim prime minister, Allawi announced a reorganization of security forces at his first press conference on June 20, 2004. According to a Human Rights Watch report on torture in Iraq, Allawi mentioned "Special police units would also be created to be deployed 'in the frontlines' of the battle against terrorism and sabotage, and a new directorate for national security established." Human Rights Watch also noted that Al-Nahdhah, a Iraqi newspaper, reported on June 21 that the interior ministry "appointed a new security adviser to assist in the establishment of a new general security directorate modeled on the erstwhile General Security Directorate... one of the agencies of the Saddam Hussein government dissolved by the CPA in May 2003." That security advisor was "Major General 'Adnan Thabet al-Samarra'i." (There are numerous variations on Thabet's last name.)

Then on July 15, 2004, just two months before the police commandos became public, Allawi said the government would establish "internal intelligence units called General Security Directorate, GSD, that will annihilate... terrorist groups." Jane's Intelligence Digest

commented at the time that the GSD, “will include former members of Saddam Hussein’s feared security services, collectively known as the Mukhabarat. These former Ba’athists and Saddam loyalists will be expected to hunt down their colleagues currently organizing the insurgency.”

Perhaps Allawi’s announcement was spurred by events in the city of Samarra. A July 15 report from Radio Free Europe noted that a Shiite website, www.ebaa.net, stated Islamic militants had blown up numerous sites in Samarra, including “the headquarters of the Iraqi National Movement Party led by Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib, the City Council, the headquarters of the [Kurdish] peshmerga forces, and the home of Municipal Council Chairman Adnan Thabit.”

It seems then, former Baathist brutes may have gone from one security service under Hussein to the exact same one as under Allawi, another ex-Baathist. And the rogues apparently haven’t forgotten their old tactics.

‘GAY ORGIES’

The police commandos have been supplying suspects who confess their crimes on the TV show, “Terrorism in the Hands of Justice.” Described as the Iraqi government’s “slick new propaganda tool,” the program runs six nights a week on the Iraqiya network, which was set up by the Pentagon and is now run by Australian-based Harris Corp. (a major U.S. government contractor that gave 96 percent of its political funding, more than \$260,000, to Republicans in 2004). According to the Boston Globe, camera crews are sent “wherever police commandos make a lot of arrests.”

The show features an unseen interrogator haranguing alleged insurgents for confessions. Virtually every press account notes that the suspects appear to have been beaten or tortured, their faces bruised and swollen. The London Guardian states “some have... robotic manners of those beaten and coached by police interrogators off-camera.” The Boston Globe observed, “The neat confessions of terrorist attacks at times fit together so seamlessly as to seem implausible.” And then there’s the nature of the confessions. Many suspects admit to “drunkenness, gay orgies and pornography,” according to the Guardian. The Financial Times reported that, “One long-bearded preacher known as Abu Tabarek recently confessed that guerrillas had usually held orgies in his mosques.” Another preacher giving a confession says he was fired for “having sex with men in the mosque,” the Globe account stated that suspects “frequently admit to rape and pedophilia.”

The show is said to be popular, particularly among many Shiites and Kurds, which causes concern that depicting Sunni Arab nationalists as “thieving scumbags” could deepen communal strife. Political and religious leaders from the Sunni Arabs have denounced the show, calling for it to be pulled off the air.

The police commandos’ penchant for tall tales caused them considerable embarrassment after they crowed about a major operation that killed more than 80 insurgents at a training camp along Lake Tharthar in Al Anbar on March 22. Within a day many discrepancies emerged—how many insurgents were killed, reports of more than 20 prisoners versus none, a number of different locations cited, many miles apart. The story fell apart after an AFP reporter visited the camp and still found 40 to 50 insurgents camped there.

But the police commandos are still receiving special treatment from the U.S. occupation. A

State Department report to Congress from Jan. 5 noted that at the request of the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, “billeting space” was provided for 1,500 police commandos in the Baghdad Public Safety Academy, postponing a basic training class of 2,000 scheduled to begin in November and limiting the number of students to 1,000 while the commandos received training “until the planned January 2005 elections.”

Overall, the militias are a tacit admission that the U.S. effort to create an Iraqi military force has been a colossal failure, costing at least \$5 billion to date. During the most recent large-scale military campaign, “Operation River Blitz,” U.S. Marines raided towns West of Baghdad along the Euphrates River. The first order of business in many of these Sunni Arab towns, according to the Christian Science monitor, was to “round up and detain police officers”—the very ones who had been “trained” by the U.S. to fight the insurgency. In Tikrit in early March, the police went on strike after U.S. troops raided the provincial police headquarters there and arrested two high-ranking officers. (About the same time in Samarra, the mayor and city council resigned after the mayor’s office was raided and in protest of U.S. troops refusing to withdraw from the city as agreed.)

At the end of March, police brandishing Kalishnikovs staged a demonstration in Hit, one of the towns targeted, demanding their jobs back. An AP account of the protest dated March 29 noted that police forces have been dismissed across the province of Al Anbar, the heart of the insurgency, and “former local police officers have been protesting in several cities in recent weeks against a new plan to replace them with police from other Iraqi provinces.”

By introducing of militias and other units composed of Shiites and Kurds into the Sunni Arab regions, the U.S. may just turn the insurgency into a civil war.

10,000 STRONG

In terms of numbers, a column by David Ignatius in the Feb. 25 Washington Post notes that Thabit “commands a force of about 10,000 men,” which would make them larger than the British military, the second largest foreign force in Iraq. The commandos have been used extensively, first last October in the assault on Samara that was called a “model” for how to retake a city from insurgents (but which is stilled roiled by regular attacks). The commandos have also become a fixture in major cities such as Ramadi and Mosul. In Ramadi, The Stars and Stripes describes the commandos as “the Iraqi forces that might soon be responsible for security in the city.”

A report in Dec. 25 issue of The Advisor—a Pentagon publication with the tagline “Iraq’s Official Weekly Command Information Reporter”—stated that the “Special Police Commandos have been deployed all over Iraq to hunt down insurgents and to help provide security for the upcoming Jan. 30 elections.”

FEARS OF CIVIL WAR

Jaffe notes many of the pop-up militias come “from Shiite-dominated southern Iraq.” And they appear to be operating mainly in Sunni Arab areas. The police commandos in particular are taking the lead in operations in such Sunni Arab hotspots as Samarra, Ramadi, Mosul, Tikrit and Baghdad. Last October they were assigned to Haifa Street, which had been a resistance stronghold on the edge of the Green Zone, the heart of the U.S. occupation. It’s a district of 170,000 Sunnis and Shiites where insurgents find willing recruits among the Sunni neighborhoods. Two Iraqi battalions of more than 2,000 patrol the neighborhood, and the

New York Times observes that one is lead by a Shiite general “commanding a unit composed mostly of Shiites.” (The units are the Iraqi 302nd and 303rd Battalion; it’s unclear if they are affiliated with the police commandos assigned there.)

Knight Ridder correspondent Tom Lasseter filed a report from Haifa on March 16, also noting that “Most of the Iraqi troops who patrol the area... are Shiite.” During the operations, Lasseter wrote, “When Iraqi and American soldiers detained a suspected Sunni insurgent in Haifa this week, a group of the Shiite troops crowded around him. A sergeant kicked him in the face. Another soldier grabbed him by the neck and slammed his head into a wall. A third slapped him hard in the face.” The Americans’ Iraqi interpreter yelled at the detainee, “If you come with us, we will slaughter you.”

The ethnic-based militias are having a trickle-down effect on Iraqi society. With no functioning government, various communities are increasingly arming themselves. In another report, Lasseter spoke to a Shiite soldier who claimed that, “Shiite neighborhoods on the edges of Haifa have formed militias to enforce the sectarian boundary.” The soldier added, “That militia is secretly funded by a sheik at a local Shiite mosque... what’s happening right now could be the beginning of civil war in Baghdad.” And in what remains of Fallujah, “Sunni residents say anger toward Shiite troops is reaching a boiling point.” Bush may be right after all that “freedom is on the march” in Iraq: the freedom to hate and kill.

As for the “hunt” for insurgents, it seems to include death squads. Retired Gen. Wayne Downing, the former head of all U.S. special operations forces, appeared on NBC’s Today show on Jan. 10 to discuss a Newsweek report about the Salvador option. The reference is to the extensive use of death squads by El Salvador’s military during its war against the left in the 1980s. Downing called it a “very valid tactic” that has been employed “since we started the war back in March of 2003.” In the account, brought to light by analyst Stephen Shalom, Downing adds, “We have special police commandos now of the Iraqi forces which conduct these kind of strike operations.”

And there is evidence for such operations. According to the March 12 London Times, the body of Qahtan Jouli was delivered to his family in Samarra by commandos from the interior ministry. He had appeared on “Terror in the Grip of Justice” and confessed to collaborating with insurgents in 10 killings. Qahtan’s father charged that “My son was killed after he was tortured by the Interior Ministry commandos... They killed him to cover up the lies they broadcast on the al-Iraqiya channel that my son killed many people, including Iraqi army officers.”

Despite the pressure, the insurgency is still capable of conducting large-scale attacks. It’s still mounting 50 to 60 strikes a day across Iraq. The difference is U.S. forces have become more effective at responding to the attacks—with more armor, more surveillance and electronic countermeasures. The insurgents have responded by shifting their targets to the Iraqi security forces and intensifying economic sabotage by crippling the electrical and petroleum infrastructure. They still have the upper hand there by showing the U.S. and its Iraqi allies are incapable of ruling the country.

The militias are central to many of these roundups. According to The Advisor, in Samarra, the special police commandos detained 200 suspected insurgents in the “short time [they] have been operational in the area.” In one week in the Mosul area, according to a Dec. 7 press release from U.S. Task Force Olympia, the commandos and Iraqi National Guardsmen, backed by U.S. troops, detained 232 people. A report from the Iraqi Ministry of Defense

claimed that more than 400 suspects were seized in Baghdad in just one week in March with hundreds more taken from surrounding towns. Many of those arrested remain under Iraqi control—where many are tortured according to human rights groups as well as the U.S. State Department. Thus the actual prison population in Iraq is unknown, with many more thousands probably in custody above the U.S. total (which itself is unverified).

U.S. Marine units have taken the militia strategy to a new level: by creating their own. In a recent sweep through Al Anbar province, The 7th Marines Regiment brought with the Iraqi Freedom Guard, a 61-man unit set up by the Marines in January and paid \$400 a month each, according to a Reuters report. During the same operation, Marines of the 23rd Regiment were accompanied by 20 members of a special forces unit called the Freedom Fighters. The Christian Science Monitor described them as Shiites from the southern city of Basra, with “little love between them and the Sunni Arab citizens of Anbar.”

In the greatest irony, U.S. forces have reached a pact with elements of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mehdi Army to have them hunt down insurgents. This is the same militia that U.S. forces fought in lopsided battles last year that saw the Americans’ massive firepower devastate much of Sadr City in Baghdad and Najaf’s old city and kill thousands of Iraqis.

According to Agence France-Presse, U.S. forces are using a Shiite tribal leader to enforce vigilante justice in Baghdad’s Dura district. One U.S. officer calls the leader, Sayed Malik, “the godfather” and notes he’s received lots of public works contracts, enough to make him a millionaire. Another Sadr official states point blank that “people from Sadr organization are publicly hunting down the terrorists.” This apparently includes the kidnapping and disappearing of a Sunni cleric from a mosque in Dura.

The U.S. military is so obsessed with defeating the insurgents that it is “routinely freeing dangerous criminals in return for a promise to spy on insurgents,” according to The Independent. One senior Iraqi police officer charged that “The Americans are allowing the breakdown of Iraqi society...We are dealing with an epidemic of kidnapping, extortion and violent crime, but even though we know the Americans monitor calls on mobiles and satellite phones, which are often used in ransom negotiations, they will not pass on any criminal intelligence to us. They only want to use the information against insurgents.”

Despite the grab bag of ruthless and destabilizing tactics, the insurgency is far from over. One U.S. general recently noted that it takes on average nine years to defeat an insurgency. Additionally, it’s the violence of the U.S. occupation that gives the insurgency such force. Even if the rebellion is contained to “manageable” levels for the Pentagon, meaning a low rate of combat deaths, that does not mean the resistance will end. U.S. forces long ago lost the battle for hearts and minds.

And Iraq’s own “democracy” is already in trouble, leaving many Iraqis disillusioned. The winning parties have been unable to form a government almost three months after the election. They are still squabbling over who will control the most important portfolios—defense, interior and oil—which is where the real power lies. With a do-nothing government ensconced in bosom of the deadly U.S. occupation, the stage is now set for a further descent into rebellion and repression.

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