IRAQ REPORT

BAGHDAD, Iraq (April 5, 2008) - 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, provides security on a street in the Sadr City District of Baghdad. Photo by Sgt. Mark Matthews, U.S. Army.

Summer, 2007 – Summer, 2008

Special Groups Regenerate

By Marisa Cochrane

The greatest threat to stability in Iraq is violence by Iranian-backed militias, known as Special Groups. As Coalition and Iraqi Forces refocused their efforts on combating such groups, they launched a number of offensives in the spring of 2008 that left these Iranian-backed networks fractured and brittle. In the wake of these operations, much of the enemy leadership fled to Iran to reconsolidate and retrain. Now, as US Commanders plan for their return, past enemy behavior can help predict the options available to Special Groups. This report offers a comprehensive look at this pattern as well as current trends in Iranian-backed enemy activity and the likely enemy response. Having consolidated their networks in Iran, it is highly likely that Special Groups will return to Iraq and rebuild their networks, adopting new tactics to escalate violence accordingly. U.S. Forces and their Iraqi counterparts must thwart such actions by continuing to dismantle Special Groups by targeting leaders, financiers, trainers, and facilitators; by preventing Special Groups and JAM from to reestablishing their criminal rings; by continuing to improve the Iraqi Security Forces; and by accelerating reconstruction efforts to improve basic services and reduce popular support for the militia. Disorder and weak government allow Special Groups to operate effectively as a Hezbollah-like organization.

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INTRODUCTION

Since early 2007, U.S. forces have aggressively targeted Iranian-backed militias known as "Special Groups." The pace of operations against these networks intensified dramatically in mid-2007; and by the fall, the Special Groups network was starting to unravel. As a result, in late 2007, Iranian-backed Special Groups embarked upon a period of regeneration and preparation. They sought to consolidate their networks and shift their tactics in response to increased pressure by Coalition Forces. By early 2008, Special Groups began to escalate their attacks on Coalition and Iraqi Forces, in what appeared to be the first actions of an impending enemy offensive coordinated with Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM). Their efforts were disrupted, however, as Prime Minister Maliki launched a surprise military counter-offensive in Basra in late March 2008.

As Special Groups and Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) partners reacted to the Basra offensive and attempted to stir up violence across the south, Coalition and Iraqi Forces moved to contain the violence. Subsequent security offensives in Baghdad and Maysan Province left Iranian-backed enemy networks fractured and brittle. Indeed, much of the JAM and Special Group leadership has fled to Iran in order to evade capture. According to some estimates, 5,000 fighters have sought refuge across the border, where they are regrouping and training.[1] Their motives and aims likely have not changed;[2] therefore, it is almost assured that

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they will seek to reconsolidate and reconstitute their networks in Iraq. Hence, a key issue for Coalition and Iraqi forces right now is how to predict and prepare for the enemy response. They must shape conditions in Iraq in such a way that will minimize the threat of violence as JAM and Special Groups fighters return from Iran. U.S. Forces must also respond in such a way that the actions of the reconsolidated JAM and Special Groups organizations do not compromise its strategic objectives, which include a secure Iraq with a legitimate and capable government. A study of the last year of Special Groups activity indicates a deliberate pattern of enemy activity that may prove helpful in predicting the enemy reaction and mitigating its effects.

This report documents the pattern of Iranian-backed militia activities over the past year. After defining JAM and Special Groups, the first section of this document examines the pattern by which these hostile organizations regenerated their capacities in late 2007 and early 2008. At that time, Iranian-backed groups were consolidating, training, preparing for a future offensive. The essay also documents their deliberate escalation of violence from January to March 2008, in advance of their offensive. While Special Groups attempted to commence their offensive in late March, Prime Minister Maliki's decision to launch a security operation in Basra sparked an abrupt response by these Iranian-linked cells, diverting them from their plan. The second part of this report details the Government of Iraq counteroffensive against JAM and Special Groups, as well as their fight for Sadr City and the enemy's flight to Iran. Finally, the report concludes with an assessment of current trends in enemy activity and a consideration of measures to thwart their eventual return from Iran.

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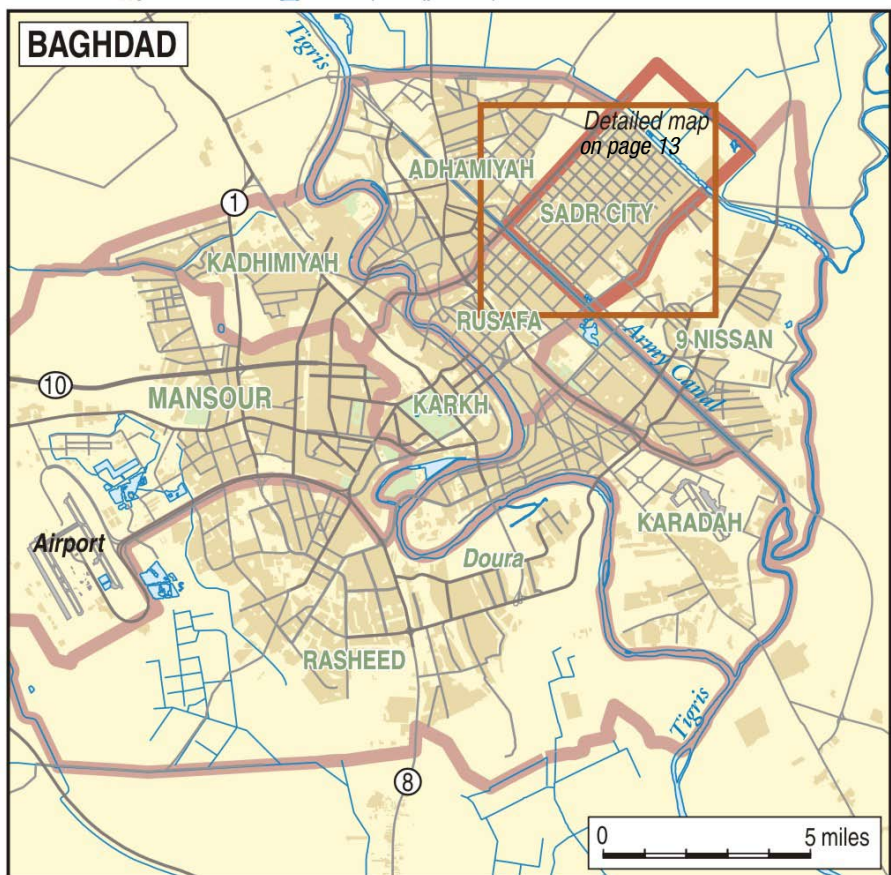
JAM AND SPECIAL GROUPS

The Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) is the militia of the Sadrist Trend, the Shi'a political faction that is led by Muqtada al-Sadr. JAM first became prominent in April 2004 when it fought against US forces in East Baghdad and in Najaf. From 2006 to mid-2007, JAM militias engaged in a territorial struggle with al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni groups for control of Baghdad. During this time, JAM expanded its territorial control, moving into mixed or predominantly Shi'a neighborhoods and forcefully displacing or killing the local Sunni population. JAM was initially able to gain control in many of these areas of Baghdad by offering the Shi'a population protection from AQI and social services not provided by the government. JAM groups were largely self-financing; and they supported their operations primarily through racketeering networks. At the height of their expansion in late 2006 and early 2007, JAM militiamen relied upon corruption, intimidation and extortion of the Shi'a population to enhance their power and wealth.[3] During this period, Sadr's control over his militia was diminishing and pre-existing splinters in the movement became evident. A number of these splinter groups were formed as early as 2004.[4] Sadr's departure for Iran in January 2007, just before the surge began, accelerated the fracturing of the groups.

In 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr twice instructed his militia to stand down, first at the beginning of the Baghdad Security Plan, Operation Fardh al-Qanoon, in February 2007, and later in August 2007, when he declared another six-month ceasefire in the wake of violence in Karbala during the Shabaniyah festival and pilgrimage.

A number of JAM loyalists heeded Sadr's calls; however, long-standing splinter cells, such as Special Groups, used this window to continue and escalate their violent activities.

Special Groups are Shi'a militia cells that receive funding, training, and weapons from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), the Iranian Special Forces that export the Islamic Revolution to other countries. Special Groups are not responsive to the directives of Moqtada al Sadr. (For a detailed account of the formation of Special

Groups, see Iraq Report 6, "Iran's Proxy War.") The constituencies of the JAM and Special Groups nevertheless overlap a great deal, and the leadership likewise blends together. Many of the top Special Group leaders were close associates of Muqtada al-Sadr, including commander Qais Khazali. Khazali, who headed Special Groups until he was captured by Coalition Forces in

March 2007, has a long personal history with Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement, but a differing vision of its proper directtion. This was evident in the departure of Khazali as Sadr's spokesman and close aide following the JAM uprising in Najaf in 2004. Moreover, as the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces have placed increasing pressure on JAM, many of its fighters have turned to Iran for support.[5] Special Groups operate almost exclusively in JAM-dominated neighborhoods. During the recent security offensives in Basra and Baghdad, the distinction between groups was blurred at best.[6] This was especially evident in Sadr City, where Iranian-backed militia elements fought alongside their JAM counterparts.[7] In addition, Special Groups have operated in 9 Nissan, Kadhimiyah and West Rasheed. South of Baghdad, Special Groups have been active in Karbala, Hillah, Diwaniyah, Kut, Nasiriyah and Basra. Some Special Groups activity also occurred just north of Baghdad, in Diyala Province.

Special Groups principally target US forces operating in Iraq, in the hopes of prompting their eventual withdrawal. They also actively seek to undermine the Maliki government with attacks on the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iraqi Government. The hallmark weapon of Special Groups is the explosively-formed penetrator (EFP), an especially lethal, Iranian-manufactured improvised expolsive device (IED) capable of penetrating heavily-armored American vehicles. Special Groups use other advanced weapons provided by Iran, including light and heavy mortars, 107-mm rockets, and 240-mm rockets, to launch indirect fire attacks on Coalition and Iraqi bases, as well as the International Zone.

Under the Baghdad Security Plan, Coalition and Iraqi Forces conducted major offensive operations in the capital throughout 2007. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was deemed the primary enemy threat. At the start of the Baghdad Security Plan in February 2007, the decision was made to focus on clearing their strongholds in Baghdad. While most Sunni and many Shi'a enemy havens were cleared during this time, U.S. and Iraqi forces did not conduct widespread operations in Sadr City because AQI was deemed the main threat,

the level of resistance U.S. forces expected to encounter in Sadr City was high, and the political ramifications for doing so were significant.

U.S. forces instead adopted a strategy to contain the violent elements in Sadr City, rather than conduct full-scale clearing operations at that time. They conducted targeted raids against criminal and extremist elements, capturing numerous Jaysh al-Mahdi extremists and Iranian-backed Special Groups members. While these efforts helped to reduce levels of violence throughout Baghdad, the Jaysh al-Mahdi, Special Groups, and other Shi'a criminal elements operated freely in Sadr City and could project force from there. The district became the last major enemy stronghold in Baghdad and the hub of JAM and Special Groups activity, which presented a serious threat to security and stability in the capital. By early 2008, U.S. Forces isolated Sadr City, meaning that they sought to prevent the enemy from receiving support in that location and from projecting force from there.[8]

SPECIAL GROUPS REGENERATION

Over the last year, a clear pattern of activity by Iranian-backed groups has emerged. This cycle included periods of consolidation, training, and preparation, followed by periods of increased activity and attacks on Coalition and Iraqi forces. The past enemy behavior can help us predict the options available to Special Groups after the spring 2008 offensives against Shi'a militias in Basra, Baghdad, and Amarah, and also which options the organization is most likely to choose.

Fall 2007: Special Groups Consolidate, Train, and Prepare for an Offensive

The threat presented by Iranian-backed Sh'ia militia groups became increasingly evident as Coalition operations debilitated Sunni insurgent groups throughout central and northern Iraq. Indeed, by August 2007, violence by these Shi'a groups accounted for seventy-three

percent of the attacks on U.S. forces.[9] Despite Muqtada al-Sadr's call for a cessation of all militia activity in the wake of the Karbala fighting, Iranian-linked militia elements continued their attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces. Their activities centered on Baghdad, where they sought to spark destabilizing violence in the capital so as to undermine the Iraqi government and impede Coalition security and reconstruction efforts. Coalition patrols were frequently targeted with EFPs, which impeded their movement and inflicted heavy casualties.[10]

The recurring ceasefires helped the Coalition identify and target Special Groups, break-away militia cells, and persistently violent leaders, who distinguished themselves from the mainstream of the movement by continuing their activities despite the call for ceasefires. In addition, the Coalition's knowledge of the Iranian-backed Special Groups networks grew over the course of 2007, as Special Forces captured leaders of the networks, including Qais Khazali, the Iraqi Commander of the Special Groups, his brother Laith Khazali, and Ali Mussa Daqduq, a Lebanese Hezbollah leader who served as a liaison between the Special Groups and the Iranian Qods Force.

Consequently, Coalition Forces increased their targeting of those networks. The pace of operations against Special Groups accelerated dramatically in the late summer and fall of 2007. Coalition Forces pressured the enemy networks by gathering and exploiting intelligence on their lines of communications, weapons caches, facilitation networks, finances, cell leaders, and trainers. Building on a series of operations that began in June in the southern city of Amarah, U.S. troops traced the enemy weapons trafficking networks to a hub in the Sadr City district of Baghdad. On August 8, 2007, Coalition Forces conducted a raid in Sadr City that targeted high-level members of this enemy trafficking network that had close links to the IRGC-QF.[11] During this operation, Coalition Forces met with heavy resistance and in the ensuing gunfight, thirty Special Groups members were killed and twelve were detained. Subsequent intelligence-driven raids on Special Groups command nodes and supply depots in Sadr City and the surrounding neighborhoods continued to dismantle the trafficking networks.[12]

While Special Groups activity largely centered on Baghdad, complex supply networks moved men and materiel across the Iranian border. Special Groups cells in Baghdad were supplied by two primary lines of communication—a northern supply network ran from the Iranian border through Diyala Province, northeast of Baghdad;[13] a larger southern supply network moved weapons and fighters across the Iranian border to the cities of Kut, Amarah, and Basra and up along the Tigris River Valley and Highway 8 corridor into Baghdad.[14] Diyala Province, located northeast of Baghdad province, shares a long eastern border with Iran. It contained a number of important Special Groups hubs, including the towns of Khalis, Jadidah, and Rashidiyah, which lie north of Baghdad, and the areas of Khan Bani Saad and Nahrwan to the east of the capital. These towns were key nodes along the enemy transit routes from Iran to east Baghdad and functioned as weapons depots and safe havens for facilitators, financiers, and trainers.[15]

In mid-2007, the enemy lines of communication in Diyala Province actively supplied the Special Groups cells in northeast Baghdad with Iranian weapons, funding, and trainers. However, as an increasing number of Coalition Forces moved into Diyala Province to conduct clearing operations under the Corps offensives, Operation Phantom Thunder and Phantom Strike, the enemy lines of communication in the province came under greater pressure. By the fall of 2007, with the threat from al-Qaeda in Iraq diminishing as a result of the offensive operations, U.S. forces increasingly turned their attention to the problem of Iranian-backed militias in Diyala. From August to November, Coalition Soldiers captured or killed a number of Special Groups weapons facilitators, financiers, and cell leaders in frequent operations.[16] By December 2007, efforts to dismantle the Diyala enemy supply networks were succeeding, as activity by Iranian-backed groups noticeably decreased.[17] Aggressive targeting of Special Groups limited their ability

Special Groups Communication, Supply, and Training Networks in 2007

Legend:
- Special Groups Supply and Communication routes
- Train the Trainer Networks

Scale: 0 — 25 — 50 — 100 miles
0 — 25 — 50 — 100 kilometers

to project force and to move supplies along the lines of communication between Diyala and East Baghdad. Because their northern supply lines were blocked, the Baghdad Special Groups network needed to expand alternate supply depots to support their operations. Hence, they increasingly relied on the southern lines of communication and consolidated their routes along the Highway 8 corridor south of Baghdad.

By November 2007, reports surfaced that activity by Iranian-backed Special Groups was on the decline.[18] While some linked the decrease in violence to an Iranian decision to reduce the flow of weapons, General Odierno and Defense Secretary Robert Gates said it was too soon to tell and thus remained unclear.[19] Indeed, the reports suggesting that Iranian support for Shi'a militias had diminished proved erroneous. During this time, the IRGC-Qods Force and Special Groups shifted their methods in response to Coalition targeting. They embarked on a period of consolidation and training in order to prepare for a future offensive. The IRGC-QF increasingly employed "train-the-trainer" tactics to cloak their Iranian links and to minimize the possibility that foreign trainers would be caught on Iraqi soil. (Train-the-trainer efforts were not entirely new. They had been employed as early as November 2006. However, the increase in their use in late 2007 is notable.) Under this method, Special Groups leaders recruited a select number of Iraqi Shi'a militants and sent them to camps in Iran, where they were trained by the IRGC and their Hezbollah proxies in the use of a variety of weapons and tactics.[20]

A robot controlled by soldiers from the 789th Ordnance Company, from Fort Benning, Ga., currently attached to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, investigates an Iranian 107mm rocket at a launch site, Oct. 23, 2007. (MNF-I)

The training program for Iraqi militants in Iran was "formal and sophisticated," with courses on "leadership, training, commando operations, weapons and explosives."[21] These fighters then returned to Iraq, where act as trainers for larger cells of Special Groups fighters. Just as Coalition Forces provided the Iraqi Army with Military Training Teams (MiTTs) to improve their performance, the IRGC-QF sponsored training for the Special Groups can be understood as a MiTT effort, adapted to the cellular structure of illegal armed groups.

The arrest of numerous suspects involved in "train the trainer" activities in late 2007 demonstrates that the IRGC and Special Groups were sponsoring an ongoing training program and an advisory effort. In fact, the number of trainers that were targeted for their efforts spiked dramatically in late November 2007. In the month of December alone, ten important trainers

were detained in Khan Bani Saad, Baghdad, as-Suwayrah, al-Aziziyah, ad Daghgharah, al Mashru, al Kut, and Kut al-Hayy.[22] The detention pattern indicates that Special Groups training networks operated widely in Baghdad, Babil Province, and Wasit Province, especially along the Tigris River Valley corridor south of the capital. They were primarily engaged in EFP, IED, rocket-propelled grenade, sniper fire, mortar, rocket, operational security, and computer security training.

Moreover, Special Groups cells were also consolidating their networks in response to the closing of their lines of communication and supply in Diyala Province. Accordingly, they increasingly relied on the southern Iraq supply networks in order to move weapons, fighters, funding, and resources into their Baghdad havens. Over the next few months, Special Groups weapons facilitators placed large Iranian weapons caches in the rural areas south of Baghdad so they could be used as resupply hubs for the Baghdad network.[23] It would later become clear that Special Groups were preparing to escalate their activities.

Winter 2008: The Escalation of Violence

Shortly after the New Year, violence by Special Groups increased dramatically.[24] It seems unlikely that the increased violence resulted from Coalition action, because the Coalition had been consistently pressuring the Special Groups throughout the winter. Rather, Special Groups most likely intentionally escalated their violent activity in January 2008. The number of EFP attacks in January rose to the highest monthly total seen up to that point, with an average of one attack every three days.[25]

The increase in Special Groups violence continued into February and centered on Baghdad. According to Lt. General Ray Odierno, then the Corps commander in Iraq, Special Groups were attempting to reinfiltrate into the capital to "create some chaos."[26] This escalation was particularly evident in northeast

Baghdad, where a Special Groups cell led by Arkan Hasnawi conducted acts of intimidation, kidnapping, murder of local civilians, as well as attacks against Coalition and Iraqi Forces. In response to this uptick in violence in the Shaab and Ur neighborhoods, Coalition Forces conducted a series of successful intelligence-driven raids to dismantle the Hasnawi network, launched on February 11.[27] It is worth noting that tips provided by local citizens were integral in the operations against the Special Groups cell. As residents tired of the violence, they provided critical intelligence to U.S. and Iraqi troops.[28]

In February, Special Groups also intensified their indirect fire (IDF) campaign in the capital. Special Groups cells launched four coordinated attacks on U.S. bases in Baghdad. On February 18, Special Groups fired a barrage of Katyusha rockets at the Baghdad Airport and neighboring Victory Base Complex, the main U.S. military base in Baghdad and the seat of Coalition headquarters.[29] Five Iraqis were killed in the attack and sixteen others were injured, including two U.S. Soldiers.[30] The next day, Iranian-backed militias launched two other IDF attacks. The barrages were only minutes apart and targeted a Combat Outpost in the Oubaidi neighborhood and Forward Operating Base Rustamiyah, both in southeast Baghdad.[31] As the Iraqi Security Forces responded to the first two attacks, they discovered a third barrage of unexploded rockets on a truck used as a launcher. As Iraqi forces went to defuse the rockets, they were remotely detonated in a "well-planned ambush," killing fifteen Iraqi police officers and injuring dozens more.[32] Four Coalition Soldiers were also wounded and one was killed in the first two attacks. [33] On February 23, just one day after Muqtada al-Sadr renewed his ceasefire, the Green Zone in central Baghdad came under rocket attack.[34] While Coalition bases had been targeted in the past by indirect mortar fire, the indirect fire attacks launched by Special Groups also contained rockets barrages. This marked a dangerous development, as rockets can be aimed with greater precision and fired from longer distances.[35]

The timing of the February escalation deserves some consideration. Only days before the first of

these attacks, Imad Mughniyeh was assassinated (presumably by Israeli intelligence) in the Syrian capital, Damascus, when a bomb exploded in his car. Mughniyeh was a top leader of Lebanese Hezbollah, who oversaw the organization's international operations.[36] In this role, he was involved in the 1983 terrorist attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut;[37] that same year, he also masterminded the twin truck bombing of the U.S. barracks in Beirut that killed 241 Marines.[38] As one of the world's most wanted men, he was also the architect of the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, during which a U.S. Navy diver was executed; the 1992 attack on the Israeli Embassy in Argentina; and the attack on a Jewish center in Buenos Aires two years later.[39] Mughniyeh has served as the key conduit between Hezbollah and Iran.[40] In recent years, he has reportedly maintained close links with Iranian-backed Special Groups militias and oversaw Hezbollah's operations in Iraq. [41] In 2005, he was purportedly tasked with the organization of Hezbollah's training of Iranian-linked militias in southern Iraq.[42] Shortly after receiving this directive, Ali Musa Daqduq, a fellow Lebanese Hezbollah operative, was sent to Iran to with the IRGC-QF and spearhead the training efforts.[43] Soon after, in May 2006, Daqduq traveled to Iran with Yousef Hashim, a Hezbollah Special Operations Commander who was his superior and presumably reported to Mughniyeh.[44]

Moreover, the six-month ceasefire enacted by Muqtada al-Sadr in late August 2007 was set to expire in the third week of February 2008. As the deadline approached, many in Baghdad feared a return to the levels of violence witnessed at the height of JAM expansion a year before. Sadr ultimately renewed his ceasefire on February 22, but the uptick in violence as a result of the rocket attacks no doubt fueled public concern over whether he would renew the agreement and whether it would hold.[45] While one cannot definitively establish the causes behind the rise of Special Groups attacks in February from available sources, the timing of the IDF campaign correlates closely with the aforementioned events.

In addition to the IDF campaign, Special Groups networks sought to consolidate and expand their resupply routes into the capital. Because Coalition operations in Diyala hindered their northern lines of communication, Iranian-backed groups increasingly relied on the Highway 8 corridor south of Baghdad to support their activities in Baghdad. Hence, from January to March 2008, they increased the number of weapons stockpiled in these areas south of the capital. As Coalition Forces pursued Special Groups facilitation networks, they discovered a number of these caches, several of which were the largest seen to date.[46] Some of the largest caches were found in the area near Jabellah, which is located near Highway 8 south of Iskandariyah. These caches contained materials for roughly 100 EFPs in addition to dozens of rockets and mortars.[47] Other caches were found east of Baghdad, in the Madain Qada (district) and along trafficking routes of the Tigris River Valley in Wasit Province. [48] Moreover, many of the arms discovered during the Basra and Sadr City offensives later in the spring contained Iranian weapons that dated from early 2008, further demonstrating the influx of weapons stockpiles during the winter months.[49]

There was a brief but noticeable decrease in Special Groups' escalation in early March 2008. This decline coincided with the visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Iraq. [50] Ahmadinejad arrived in Baghdad on March 2 for a two-day visit to the country, the first ever by an Iranian President. According to Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, the Corps Commander in Iraq during the surge, "it was not surprising that there were fewer attacks during Ahmadinejad's visit to Baghdad, since it is mainly Iranian-backed Shiite military members who have been conducting rocket and other attacks in the capital."[51] Shortly after his departure, however, Special Groups resumed their campaign. In mid-March, successive rocket and mortar attacks targeted U.S. forces across central and southern Iraq. Three U.S. Soldiers were killed in a rocket attack on Tallil Airbase, southwest of Nasiriyah.[52] Two other attacks, just days apart, targeted U.S. Forces at FOB Falcon, just south of Baghdad.[53] Special Groups also targeted Coalition patrols with EFPs, particularly in Baghdad.[54]

Screen shot from a captured video showing insurgents firing Iranian 240mm rockets
at Forward Operating Base Hammer in Iraq. (MNF-I)

The Special Groups Offensive

The Special Groups escalation came to a head in late March 2008, when militants launched a major attack on the heavily-fortified Green Zone in Baghdad. The attack occurred on the morning of March 24, when nearly twenty rockets and mortars struck the Green Zone, falling "quite close" to the U.S. Embassy.[55] The attack was described as "one of the fiercest and most sustained attacks on the area in the last year;"[56] and the precision and timing of the Green Zone attack suggested a greater degree of planning and coordination. While U.S. military officials usually decline to comment on such attacks for security reasons, General David Petraeus, the Commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq, strongly condemned the attack, citing

evidence of Iranian involvement.[57] There is some question about why the Special Groups launched their attack just then. Two weeks later, on April 8 and 9, 2008, General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker were set to testify before congress regarding conditions in Iraq. A break-down in security as a result of a Special Groups offensive would have had important ramifications for this testimony.

Still, the Special Groups' precise reason for escalating their attacks on March 24 cannot be determined; the March 24 attack marked an intensification of the Special Groups campaign that likely would have continued, had Prime Minister Maliki not launched a surprise security offensive in Basra that sparked an abrupt response by Special Groups throughout the country.

SPRING 2008: THE GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ COUNTEROFFENSIVE

Early on the morning of Tuesday March 25, 2008, the Iraqi Security Forces launched a major offensive termed Saulat al-Fursan, or Operation Knight's Charge, to reclaim control of Basra by defeating militias in the area. Iraq Report 9, The Battle for Basra, describes the operations in detail. Fighting between the government security forces and the Iranian-supported militias erupted across the city and the hasty planning for the operation soon became evident. The newly-formed and inexperienced 14th Iraqi Army Division struggled to contain the violence during the first few days of fighting, as they faced unexpectedly strong resistance due to large amount of Iranian weapons provided to the militias.[58] To stabilize the situation, Iraqi reinforcements were quickly rushed to Basra from Anbar Province.[59] The fierce fighting continued for nearly a week, until Sadr ordered his fighters off the streets on March 30, 2008. Interestingly, the ceasefire was brokered in Iran, by the head of the IRGC-QF and followed negotiations between key leaders from rival Shi'a political parties.[60]

Seasoned Iraqi reinforcements arrived in Basra in early April, only days after Iranian-brokered ceasefire. They immediately embarked upon more deliberate security operations in Basra, systematically clearing the city from mid-April to mid-May.[61] Following the ceasefire, many JAM and Special Groups leaders fled Basra. To evade the security crackdown, some went to neighboring Maysan province, a large Sadrist stronghold, while many others crossed the border to Iran.[62] Many residents of Basra fear their return, and a return to the violence that accompanied the militia dominance.

The Basra offensive provoked a strong reaction by Special Groups and militias. In Baghdad, Special Groups and JAM intensified their attacks on Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces.[63] While Maliki's actions took the enemy—and indeed many friendly forces—by surprise by diverting attention from their planned target of Baghdad, Special Groups were well-prepared to react to the security offensive because of their prior preparations. The pace of mortar and rocket fire immediately increased dramatically. During the last week of March, Special Groups launched daily mortar and rocket attacks on the Green Zone.[64] In addition to these indirect fire barrages, violent clashes erupted as Coalition and Iraqi Security Force patrols came under attack throughout the capital, but particularly in the JAM strongholds of eastern Baghdad.[65] In the first week of fighting alone, Coalition and Iraqi forces killed or captured scores of Shi'a militia criminals during these engagements.[66]

Immediately after the fighting began, the Iraqi government issued a curfew in Baghdad, while Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces sealed off Sadr City with a double-cordon and ban on vehicle traffic.[67] While this act hindered the ability for enemy groups to move men and materiel into the district, it was unable to stem the indirect fire attacks on the Green Zone, the vast majority of which were traced to Sadr City.[68] Indeed, nearly 700 rockets and mortars were fired at the Green Zone during late March and early April; more than eighty percent of those attacks originated in Sadr City.[69] It soon became clear that the primary way to stop the indirect fire attacks was to deny JAM and Special Groups criminals launch sites in the district. Consequently, U.S. and Iraqi forces prepared to enter Sadr City in force for the first time in years.

The Government of Iraq Defeats Special Groups South of Baghdad

While JAM and Special Groups sought to escalate the violence across the south in the wake of the Basra offensive, they were unable to do so. In the Five Cities area—Karbala, Hillah, Kut, Najaf, and Diwaniyah—these Shi'a militia groups were seriously weakened as the Iraqi Security Forces were able to thwart enemy efforts. In Najaf, where JAM and Special Groups lack a significant operational presence, the period following the ISF offensive in Basra was especially quiet.[70]

In Diwaniyah, Special Groups did target a nearby Coalition base with Iranian rockets

in the immediate wake of the Basra operation. However, the 8th Iraqi Army Division, which is based in the city and is one of the most capable Iraqi units, responded promptly to attacks and launched a security crackdown targeting these extremist groups.[71] It is also worth noting that JAM and Special Groups in the area had already been weakened by intra-Shi'a fighting and a series of security operations that occurred the year before.[72]

In the weeks prior to the Basra offensive, the Karbala provincial government and Iraqi Security Forces were particularly aggressive in going after JAM and particularly Special Groups elements in and around the city. Not only were there several major Special Groups weapons cache finds outside Karbala, but operations were conducted within the city targeting JAM and Special Groups assassination cells.[73] The situation escalated in late March, as the Iranian-backed groups responded to the Basra operations. On March 26, as security personnel were ordered from Karbala to support operations in Basra, gunmen who appeared to be affiliated with JAM staged attacks against Iraqi Police in neighborhoods that were suspected to be JAM strongholds.[74] The Karbala Operations Commander, who heads security operations in the province, returned from Basra the next day and led an offensive, arresting 48 people and seizing weapons caches.[75] The Iraqi Security Forces were effective in and around the city, as they continued to discover weapons caches and IEDs in the areas surrounding the city and defeat JAM in street battles that left numerous gunmen dead and many more captured.[76] Additionally, as these fighters suffered heavy losses, many JAM members began to turn themselves in to take advantage of Prime Minister Maliki's amnesty offer.[77] Subsequent operations have maintained pressure on enemy cells in Karbala.[78]

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The violence in Kut actually preceded the Basra offensive, as fighting erupted between the Shi'a militias and the Iraqi Security Forces in the area on March 11, 2008. At that time, militia forces were trying to assert control over several districts within the city.[79] On the first day of fighting, fierce clashes erupted between the Iraqi Security Forces and armed gunmen in central Kut, leaving eleven dead and 40 others wounded.[80] Indirect fire attacks on Forward Operating Base Delta (which houses Coalition Soldiers in Kut) as well as repeated Katyusha rocket attacks on central Kut, despite Moqtada as-Sadr's recent ceasefire renewal, further indicated a Special Groups presence in the area.[81] In the two weeks that followed, Iraqi Police teamed with US Special Forces to quell the violence, relying on a combination of intelligence-driven raids, cordon and clear operations, presence patrols, and checkpoints.[82] As the fighting subsided in late March, just as the offensive in Basra was beginning, Iraqi Security Forces were firmly in control of Kut.[83] Hence they were able to maintain security, even as JAM and Special Groups sought to escalate violence across the south.

Ultimately, the operations in the Five Cities area before and during the Basra offensive dealt a major blow to JAM and Special Groups networks in the area. As the Shi'a militia fighters attempted to stir up violence across the south, Iraqi forces and their Coalition counterparts were able to respond in kind, identifying and targeting JAM and Special Groups leadership, facilitators, weapons stores, and lines of communication. Consequently, Iranian-supported enemy groups lost a great deal of their operational capacity. As a result, it is highly probable that many leaders and fighters went into hiding or fled to Iran, joining those who had escaped from Basra.

Map of Sadr City Operations, April-May, 2008
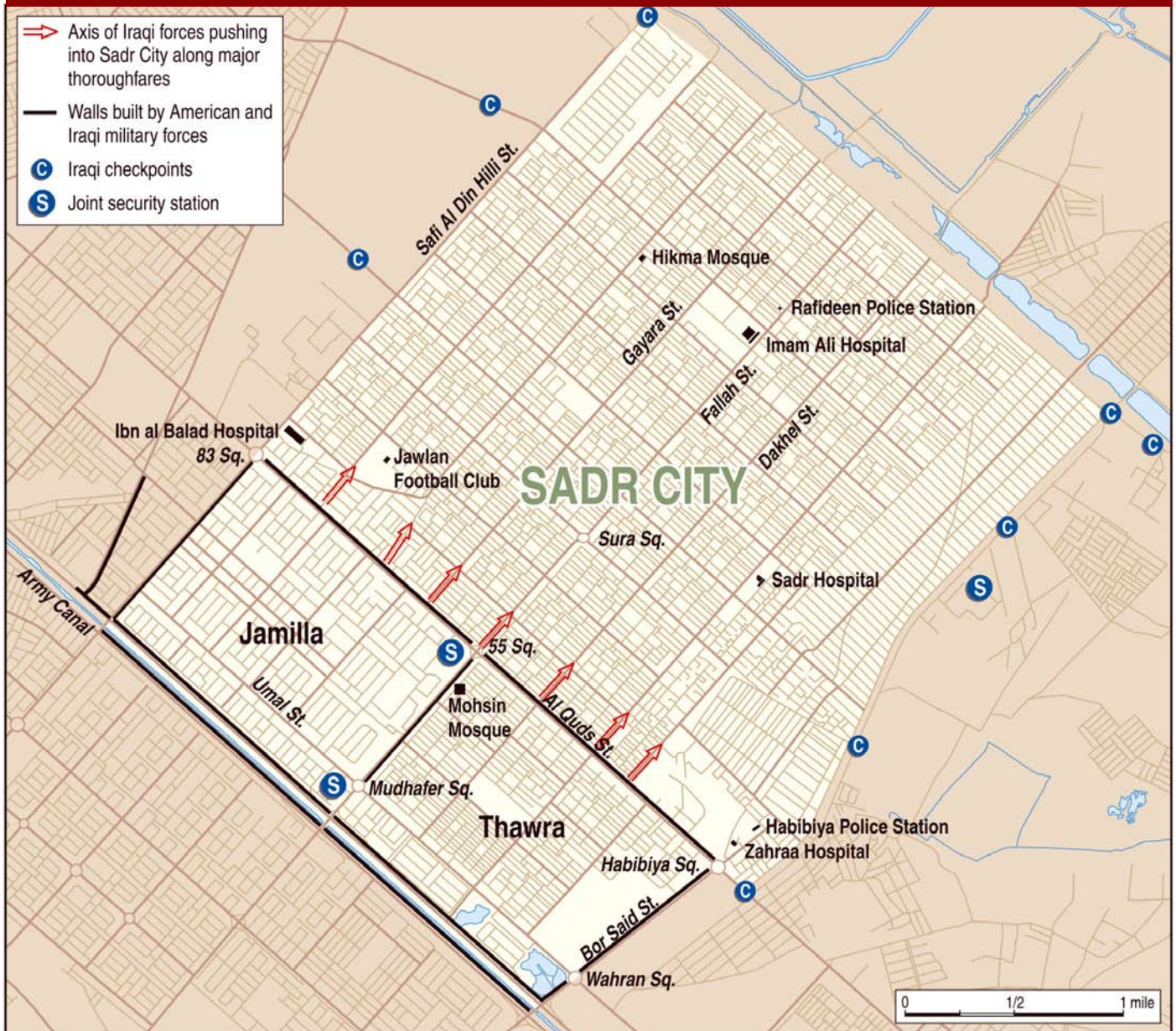
*The Baghdad Uprising
and the Clearing of Sadr City*

Coalition and Iraqi commanders had long-recognized the threat posed by the continued enemy safe haven in Baghdad. In late 2007, they began to prepare for an operation to clear Sadr City. The plans called for an extensive period of preparatory operations, where Coalition and Iraqi forces would "isolate and target [Special Groups] criminals over time, eventually planning at some point to enter into the area."[84] Indeed, in the early months of 2008, the isolation and targeting phase was well underway, as US and Iraqi forces were tightening the cordon around Sadr City.[85] The operations in Shaab and Ur against the Hasnawi network permitted the US and Iraqi forces to tighten the cordon around Sadr City. [86] By February, U.S. forces had encircled Sadr City and

constructed several Joint Security Stations (JSS) along the borders of the district. These stations allowed Coalition and Iraqi forces to maintain a permanent presence along the borders of Sadr City, so as to interdict criminal movement into and out of the district.

Presumably, the isolation and targeting of criminal elements in Sadr City would have continued well into the spring of 2008, until conditions for the full-scale clearing operations were set. However, in late March, Prime Minister Maliki's security offensive in Basra sparked a forceful reaction by Shi'a militias in Baghdad, which prompted Coalition and Iraqi commanders to accelerate their plans to enter and clear Sadr City.

The crackdown in Basra prompted a strong, and in some cases violent, backlash by Sadr's supporters in Baghdad. Civil disobedience movements and protests were conducted in a number of neighborhoods, including Sadr City, Aamel, Bayaa, and Shula. Over the course of the week, Coalition and Iraqi patrols were engaged by gunmen in the Sadrist strongholds of east Baghdad and Kadhimiyah. It is highly likely that mainstream JAM militiamen were involved, although level of enemy coordination during a number of the attacks suggests Special Groups' leadership. However, the Special Groups caused the greatest threat to security and stability in the capital by launching indirect fire attacks. During the last week of March, Special Groups fired barrages of Iranian rockets and mortars at the Green Zone each day, aimed at the Government of Iraq and Coalition headquarters.[87] While a number of the enemy rockets and mortars hit their intended target, others fell on nearby residential neighborhoods, causing dozens of casualties.[88] Most of the rocket launch sites were traced to Sadr City,[89] and over the course of the week, Coalition Forces aggressively pursued those responsible.[90]

In early April, U.S. and Iraqi forces began

■ During the initial push into Sadr City, Iraqi units were several hundred yards ahead of their U.S. counterparts. This move was intended to put an 'Iraqi face' on the operation, given the hostile operating environment for U.S. Soldiers.

moving into the western and northern fringes of Sadr City.[91] The purpose of the operation was to drive JAM and Special Groups criminals out of firing range of the Green Zone. Their efforts, therefore, focused on the Tharwa and Jameela neighborhoods in the southern third of the Sadr City. As Coalition and Iraqi Forces entered the district, they faced fierce resistance from the Shi'a militias, who had fortified their defenses with IEDs, including especially-lethal EFPs. Groups of militiamen frequently engaged Coalition and Iraqi Forces with small arms fire.

Over the next few weeks, U.S. and Iraqi forces fought to establish permanent positions in the first third of Sadr City.[92] As they pushed into the district, they also conducted preparatory operations "to shape the battlefield in Sadr City by cordoning off the main entry and exit points, building new check posts, instituting a vehicle ban, conducting a series patrols and humanitarian missions, carrying out targeted raids against Mahdi Army and Special Groups leaders, and providing a blanket of aerial coverage from unmanned aerial vehicles and helicopters from US Army air weapons teams."[93] Coalition air assets engaged a number of criminals as they attacked Iraqi patrols or attempted to launch mortar or rocket rounds.[94]

During the initial push into Sadr City, Iraqi units were several hundred yards ahead of their U.S. counterparts.[95] This move was intended to put an 'Iraqi face' on the operation, given the hostile operating environment for U.S. Soldiers. In the face of heavy resistance, some of the more inexperienced Iraqi units pulled back from their forward positions; however, the government forces did not cede the ground, as more seasoned Iraqi units rushed to replace them.[96] While the fierce enemy resistance and complex urban terrain challenged their initial drive, the Iraqi Security Forces demonstrated improved performance and capability.[97] They were able to occupy permanent positions in the neighborhoods, albeit with Coalition logistics, intelligence, and aviation

support.[98]

Throughout April, U.S. and Iraqi forces continued their push into Sadr City.[99] As they did so, they faced fierce resistance from the Shi'a militias, who had fortified their defenses with IEDs and EFPs. Groups of militiamen frequently engaged Coalition and Iraqi Forces with small arms fire. Coalition Air Weapons Teams frequently targeted JAM and Special Group elements attempting to launch indirect fire attacks or emplacing IEDs.[100]

In mid-April, Coalition Forces began construction on a wall along al-Quds Street, on the northern edge of the Jameela and Tharwa neighborhoods.[101] Coalition Forces had walled off the southern edges of the district the year before, and the new construction sought to prevent the infiltration of militia elements from the northern section of Sadr City. Coalition Forces intended to create a "safe neighborhood" in the southern third of Sadr City, as they had done with much success elsewhere in Baghdad. The partition would prevent JAM and Special Groups members from carrying out attacks in the southern section, while enabling Iraqi and Coalition Forces to accelerate reconstruction and humanitarian assistance efforts. Indeed, on April 12, Prime Minister Maliki ordered additional food rations for Sadr City residents in order to prevent shortages stemming from the vehicle ban.[102] Several days later, Iraqi Army troops launched an operation to provide medical assistance to residents of the southern section of Sadr City.[103]

As the construction of the wall progressed throughout late April, Coalition and Iraqi units building the partition became magnets for JAM and Special Groups attacks.[104] Militia fighters desperately sought to halt its construction, and launched persistent and complex attacks with rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, IEDs, and small arms fire. Some managed to blow several holes in the wall; others planted EFPs along stretches of the barrier.[105] Sandstorms also slowed the construction efforts, as U.S. helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) were unable to provide necessary air support.[106] This inclement weather did not only slow construction; on April 28, a sandstorm provided cover for militia groups to launch a complex attack on Coalition Forces patrolling near the wall.[107] In the ensuing fight, U.S. forces killed 28 JAM fighters; six U.S. Soldiers were also wounded in the engagement.[108]

In addition to the construction efforts, Coalition UAVs and air weapons teams provided constant surveillance of the northern section of Sadr City.[109] Throughout April, they frequently targeted JAM and Special Group elements attempting to launch indirect fire attacks or emplacing IEDs.[110] These air assets were also deployed to the areas surrounding Sadr City in order to contain the violence. Six Apache helicopters were stationed over northern and eastern Baghdad at all times.[111] As a result, militia groups bore heavy casualties throughout the April fighting. More than 160 enemy fighters were killed; sixty-one rocket and mortar teams were also destroyed.[112] The areas surrounding al-Quds Street also suffered heavy collateral damage, as many buildings were destroyed in the crossfire.

By early May, the operations in Sadr City were beginning to bear fruit. Construction on the wall was nearly complete and the number of indirect fire attacks on the Green Zone fell sharply.[113] Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces maintained control of the southern third of Sadr City, while Special Groups and JAM criminals continued to suffer heavy losses. On May 3, Coalition Forces launched a precision strike on a Special Groups command center in northern Sadr City. The command center was located in a trailer near the al-Sadr hospital, in a placement often used by Special Groups to discourage Coalition strikes.[114] The attack destroyed the trailer, killing a top Special Groups commander and injuring several other criminals. No patients in the hospital were wounded, although nearly two dozen civilians were injured nearby.[115] Several reports suggested that Arkan Hasnawi was killed in the attack. Hasnawi was a senior Special Groups leader in northeastern Baghdad, who was responsible for the uptick in violence in the Shaab and Ur neighborhoods in early 2008. However, amidst conflicting reports, the identity of the leader has not been publically confirmed. Still, the destruction of the Special Groups command

U.S. Soldiers during heavy street fighting in Sadr City in April 2008 (MNF-I)

center and the loss in its senior leadership dealt a significant blow to the militias.

The Sadrist Trend vs. the Jaysh al-Mahdi

The Coalition and Iraqi operations in Sadr City prompted a political crisis. In late April, the main parliamentary blocs granted Prime Minister Maliki a mandate for the operations and he vowed to continue the crackdown.[116] As they became more politically isolated, Sadrist politicians came under increasing pressure to negotiate a ceasefire, particularly from the residents of Sadr City who were suffering under the cordon.[117] Civilians were the primary victims of the violence, as the exchanges of fire killed or wounded many and caused extensive

property damage, particularly in the areas near al-Quds Street. It is likely that the threat of the further collateral damage, which would have resulted from a push into the northern sector of Sadr City, played an important role in the Sadrist's willingness to negotiate a ceasefire. Additionally, the Sadrist politicians were also pressured by the Iranians, who also pushed for an end to fighting "by throwing their weight behind the government after a delegation of Shiite members of Parliament visited Iran earlier [that] month."[118]

Like the Sadrist political faction, the Jaysh al-Mahdi and Special Groups also came under growing pressure to end the hostilities. Aside from suffering heavy losses, they were increasingly blamed by residents for civilian casualties.[119] Food, oil, and medicine shortages were intensified as JAM gunmen targeted vehicles carrying those

supplies.[120] This further alienated the population. Hence, the Shi'a militias faced the threat of continued fighting and casualties, in addition to a loss of popular support.

On May 10, after several days of negotiations, Salah al Obeidi, a top Sadrist aide, announced that a deal had been reached to end the fighting.[121] The Sadrist Trend negotiated the deal with the majority bloc in parliament, the United Iraqi Alliance. The fourteen-point agreement stipulated that JAM would cease all armed activities and the government would gain control over the entire district. In exchange, the deal restricted government raids, allowing arrests only for those actively involved in the violence. JAM would not be disbanded, but instead would be prohibited from publically displaying weapons.[122] The agreement also called for the reopening of roads into the district and an increase in humanitarian assistance in order to relieve the burden on Sadr City residents.

The truce was formally announced in the Green Zone on May 11; however, in Sadr City, there was not an immediate end to the fighting.[123] Indeed, clashes between Coalition Soldiers and the militias persisted for several days. Gunmen continued their attempts to destroy the wall, while targeting Coalition and Iraqi forces protecting it.[124] The lingering violence suggested that the Sadrist politicians were having difficulty imposing the agreement on the armed wing of their movement.[125]

Operation Peace

By the end of the week, Sadr City quieted. Despite reports of sporadic fighting, the ceasefire finally appeared to take hold.[126] The Iraqi government expanded its humanitarian efforts in the district, providing essential services and aid.[127] At the same time, the Iraqi Security Forces prepared for an offensive to assert its control over the northern sector of district. The offensive, termed Operation Peace, began early on the morning of May 20. The first phase of the operation called for the Iraqi forces to take control of the main roads in the district.[128]

To do so, six Iraqi Army battalions moved north along the six major thoroughfares in Sadr City in "long columns of Iraqi armored personnel carriers, tanks and trucks … some flying the Iraqi flag."[129] The force of roughly 10,000 continued to clear IEDs, while also occupying permanent positions throughout the northern sector of the district.[130] Coalition Forces did not participate in the ground operations, unlike during the Basra offensive, where Coalition military advisers were embedded with Iraqi Units.[131] They did, however, provide intelligence and air support.[132]

As the Iraqi forces moved further into Sadr City, they faced no resistance. By midday on May 20, they had moved deep into the northern sector and were take up key positions at the major hospitals and police stations without incident.[133] The atmosphere in Sadr City remained quiet as Iraqi units fanned out throughout the district and set up a number of checkpoints.[134]

The second phase of the offensive called for wide-scale clearing operations to rid the district of illegal weapons. Shortly after they took up positions in the northern section of Sadr City, the Iraqi Security Forces began these operations. In the weeks that followed, government troops uncovered a staggering amount of weapons. By June 5, they had seized more than one hundred weapons caches.[135] By June 16, the total number of weapons discovered rose to nearly 8,000, a vast number of which were traced to Iran.[136]

The Enemy Response:
The Flight from Sadr City

The calm in Sadr City stemmed not only from the ceasefire, but from the fact that most JAM and Special Groups commanders fled the district in the wake of the agreement. Indeed, by early June, ninety percent of militia fighters had left the area.[137] When the Iraqi Security Forces launched Operation Peace in Sadr City, there was a noticeable uptick in Special Groups violence elsewhere in the capital, particularly in the nearby 9 Nissan district and in the Shaab and Ur neighborhoods of the Adhamiyah district. Since many of the Coalition

forces that pushed into Sadr City in April came from the neighborhoods bordering the district, the smaller troop presence prompted militants to move into the area.[138] On May 19, the day before Iraqi Forces moved into the northern sector of the district, Coalition and Iraqi troops conducted an operation in Shaab to address the uptick in militia activity. As U.S. forces maintained the cordon, Iraqi soldiers and police raided mosque, where they found a large weapons cache; simultaneous house-to-house clearing efforts also resulted in the arrest of twenty-two suspected militiamen.[139]

Other criminals fled to western Baghdad, particularly to the Sadrist stronghold of Shula in the Kadhimiyah district. While Special Groups violence flared in this area in the immediate wake of the Basra offensive, further clashes erupted when the ceasefire went into effect as militia elements from eastern Baghdad reinforced the area.[140] It appears that Special Groups and JAM commanders fled northeast Baghdad, through the Special Groups hubs of Rashidiyah and Husayniyah just north of the capital, and over into northwest Baghdad. In the days surrounding the launch of Operation Peace, Coalition and Iraqi forces captured a number of Special Groups leaders transiting through Rashidiyah and Husayniyah.[141] In Shula, which was at the time considered a "high-threat area and a stronghold for Special Groups,"[142] militiamen clashed with Iraqi and Coalition troops, as U.S. helicopters provided air support.[143] In order to contain the violence, U.S. and Iraqi troops conducted a number of operations in late May and early June to dismantle the Special Groups network in the area, seizing numerous Iranian weapons caches and capturing several key leaders.[144]

In the wake of the negotiations, many JAM and Special Groups leaders also fled Baghdad altogether. While top Special Groups leaders, including those that survived the May 3 missile strike in Sadr City, fled to Iran, other mid-level

■ The security offensive in Maysan met with minimal enemy resistance; Sadrist politicians and clerics, wishing to avoid the destruction that accompanied the push into Sadr City, instructed their followers not to resist the government's operations.

JAM and Special Groups commanders fled to Sadrist strongholds in southern Iraq.[145] The cities of Kut and Amarah—both important hubs of militia activity given their large populations of Sadrist supporters and their proximity to the Iranian border—were the primary destinations of fleeing fighters.[146] Those who escaped from Sadr City joined JAM and Special Groups fighters who had fled Basra in the wake of offensive operations that were launched in the southern city in late March. As it became evident that Maysan province was the last major refuge for these Shi'a militia groups, Iraqi forces prepared for another major offensive.

Following the clearing of Basra, Iraqi soldiers with the 1st Iraqi Army Division, who were sent from Anbar at the onset of Operation Knight's Charge, entered Maysan province to continue their offensive against Shi'a militants. On June 12, large numbers of Iraqi Security Forces arrived in the province and began preparatory operations—fanning out through the provincial capital of Amarah; reconnoitering and clearing key routes; and replacing the guards along the Iranian border to interdict criminal movements. Like he did in the Basra and Sadr City offensives, Prime Minister Maliki also gave an ultimatum for gunmen in Maysan to turn in their weapons. On June 19, the day the ultimatum expired, the Iraqi Security Forces launched Operation Promise of Peace, to clear JAM and Special Groups criminals from Amarah.[147] The security offensive in Maysan met with minimal enemy resistance; Sadrist politicians and clerics, wishing to avoid the destruction that accompanied the push into Sadr City, instructed their followers not to resist the government's operations. Moreover, any Special Groups and JAM leaders that remained in Maysan in the wake of the Baghdad and Basra offensives fled to Iran before the operations commenced in Amarah.

By late June, Coalition and Iraqi operations

in Baghdad and southern Iraq had significantly weakened Special Groups and JAM networks. For the first time, Iraqi Security Forces controlled Sadr City, effectively removing the last enemy safe haven in Baghdad. During July, Iraqi and U.S. forces continued to target remaining militia elements in the capital. The Government of Iraq, in conjunction with Coalition Forces, also worked to accelerate reconstruction and humanitarian assistance efforts. The security operations in Basra, Baghdad, and Maysan seemed to have thwarted an Iranian-supported enemy offensive. By mid-July, it was reported that EFP attacks had decreased seventy percent since April. While these are promising statistics, U.S. commanders have been a bit more cautious in their assessments, saying that there is no evidence that Iran is curtailing its support for Shi'a militias.[148] Given Special Groups ability to reconstitute and renew their activities, as they did in the fall of 2007, it behooves both Coalition and Iraqi leadership to remain vigilant of an expected enemy response.

SUMMER 2008: PURSUING THE ENEMY

Special Groups and JAM Regroup in Iran

The Special Groups and JAM offensive failed to achieve its objectives. Not only was the Iraqi government and Iraqi Security Forces able to assert control over critical JAM strongholds in Basra and Baghdad, but Special Groups and JAM networks were severely degraded in the process. Moreover, the IDF campaign in Baghdad failed to accomplish the objective of weakening the Coalition will to fight. Moreover, as a result of the fighting, U.S. troops were, for the first time, occupying permanent positions in the first third of Sadr City. Finally, the recent offensives have buoyed confidence in the Iraqi forces and Maliki's commitment to security.

Violence by Special Groups and JAM dropped dramatically after the clearing of Sadr City. This is due, in large part, to the flight of much of the enemy leadership to Iran. An estimated 5,000 fighters have fled to Iran; other members of the Special Groups and JAM networks have gone to

ground.[149] The flight of Special Groups and JAM to Iran was a temporary expedient in the wake of the Iraqi government's counterattack against all remaining Sadrist strongholds. The leaders and fighters had no sanctuary in Iraq, and therefore reconstituted in Iran where they could remain safely. In addition, the IRGC-QF has used this opportunity to train these fighters in the latest tactics and weapons, with the expectation that they will employ them upon their eventual return to Iraq.[150] Still, Iranian-linked militia groups do remain active in Iraq, albeit in a much-diminished capacity. As a result, new and important enemy behaviors are emerging.

CURRENT TRENDS IN ENEMY ACTIVITY

IRAMS

While recent trends indicate a decline in EFP attacks, the threat of Improvised Rocket-Assisted Mortars (IRAMS), a relatively recent innovation in the types of weapons used against Coalition Forces, is increasing. An IRAM consists of propane tanks, other explosives, and projectiles such as ball-bearings that are attached to rockets; they are then launched from small trucks at a short-range target. Like other improvised explosive devices, the detonation can be triggered remotely, by a cell phone or washing machine timer.[151] Successful assembly and execution of an IRAM attack requires a high degree of technical skill; hence, training in such tactics is likely done with Iranian support.[152] It is believed that the 107mm rockets used in the bombs are manufactured in Iran.[153] IRAMs are particularly dangerous because they can be launched over the protective barriers and buildings that guard the Coalition's bases in Baghdad. If aimed and launched properly, they have the potential to kill dozens of U.S. Soldiers in a single attack.[154] Once launched, the weapon cannot be stopped; "a U.S. soldier who might be in position to witness the approach of a potential IRAM-bearing vehicle would have less than two seconds to decide whether the person emerging from it has just set it for firing or is simply an

innocent driver getting out to change a tire."[155]

The IRAM as a weapon is not new—it was used by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in their February 1991 attack on 10 Downing Street.[156] However, its usage is new to Iraq. Although they first appeared in Iraq in late 2007, the IRAM network has become more active in recent months.[157] According to Major General Jeffrey Hammond, the commander of all Coalition Forces in Baghdad, IRAMs are "The greatest threat right now that [U.S. troops] face."[158] Indeed, IRAMs have thus far only been found in Baghdad.[159] There have been more than ten IRAM attacks thus far and they have been launched at several small U.S. bases, killing three and wounding fifteen Coalition troops. [160] In the deadliest attack to date, on June 4, 2008, rockets arrayed as an IRAM detonated prematurely in an attempted attack on Combat Outpost Callahan in the Shaab neighborhood of northeast Baghdad.[161] Sixteen Iraqi civilians were killed in the attack, and dozens more were wounded. The two Special Groups criminals who were driving the truck were also killed.

The most effective way to prevent IRAM attacks is to go after their networks. Coalition Forces have prioritized this mission and, in recent weeks, have worked to define the IRAM network in Baghdad. U.S. forces have also "stepped up patrols around outposts, fortified their buildings, and offered money for information about networks that use the weapons."[162] These efforts have met with initial success. For example, on June 24, a tip from a local resident led Coalition Forces to an assembled IRAM in the Hurriyah neighborhood of northwest Baghdad.[163] Nine rockets and about 200 pounds of explosives were set to detonate in the attack on a nearby Joint Security Station.[164] Coalition patrols have also searched for IRAM materials, factories, and cell leaders.[165] In an important breakthrough, U.S. Soldiers captured of a key member of the bombing network in the Oubaidi neighborhood of east Baghdad on July 10.[166] Maj. General Hammond described this individual as a potential "big lead," who could "provide valuable insights into the group behind the bomb making."[167] The capture of this individual in Oubaidi, a

neighborhood in the 9 Nissan security district bordering Sadr City, is not surprising; enemy activity in Sadr City has long spilled over into neighboring districts. This has also been the case in the Shaab and Ur neighborhoods of Adhamiyah.

It is highly likely that the use of IRAMs by Iranian-backed groups will continue in Baghdad. Their high potential for lethality and the difficulty in preventing such attacks makes them a logical choice for the pressured Special Groups networks. Although the manufacture and launch is more sophisticated, IRAMs are made from commonly-used materials, such as cooking gas; this makes it harder for Coalition and Iraqi forces to deny these criminals the necessary components. U.S. troops will need to maintain their concerted efforts to dismantle the network, while continuing to work with the local population to prevent such attacks.

Assassinations

In addition to the rise of IRAM attacks, there also appears to be a coordinated assassination campaign against moderate Sadrist clerics and Iraqi government officials as well as U.S. and Iraqi security forces. In recent weeks, a top U.S. military intelligence officer affirmed that assassination teams are currently receiving training in four Iranian camps (Qom, Tehran, Ahvaz and Mashhad) and are preparing to return to Iraq over the next few months.[168] Coalition Forces have provided a list of expected targets to the Iraqi National Security Advisor, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, in order to prepare for the return of fighters.[169]

Two of the most prominent assassinations to date have been of Sheik Riyadh al-Nuri and Shiek Safa al-Lami. On April 11, 2008, Al-Nuri, the brother-in-law and close aide to Sadr, was ambushed by gunmen in Najaf, as he returned home from Friday prayer.[170] While a top Sadrist spokesman quickly blamed the United States for the murder (a common Sadrist practice), other sources close to al-Nuri blamed extremist elements of the Sadrist Trend for the assassination.[171] It was later reported that al-Nuri

A T-barrier wall provides security for residents of the Sadr City District of Baghdad.
The walls, which are typically a dull, gray color, were painted by residents to illustrate
national themes of hope and unity." (Maj. Michael Humphreys, U.S. Army; 8/2/08)

had written a letter to Sadr shortly before his death, asking the Shi'a leader to disband JAM and purge extremist elements from the movement.[172] This request presented a direct challenge to Iranian-linked JAM and Special Groups leaders, such that they had clear motivation for the killing. While mystery still surrounds al-Nuri's assassination, the involvement of Special Groups is plausible and even probable.

More recently, on July 17, unknown gunmen assassinated another well-known, moderate Sadrist cleric in east Baghdad.[173] In a sophisticated attack, Safa al-Lami was shot in his car by gunmen using a silenced weapon fired from another moving vehicle.[174] Al-Lami was best known for his determined efforts to foster reconciliation between Sunni and Shi'a in

Baghdad, even at the height of the 2006 sectarian violence.[175] In December 2007, following his first trip to the Sunni neighborhood of Adhamiyah, al-Lami was abducted by "hardline Shiites," likely from JAM, who accused him of collaborating with Sunni insurgents.[176] He was eventually released by his kidnappers and immediately continued his reconciliation efforts. As a result, Sheik al-Lami was again targeted by gunmen, surviving a May 2008 assassination attempt, likely by the same network that ultimately killed him.[177]

Interestingly, in early June, Iraqi Ministry of Interior officials warned of the return of a number of Special Groups criminals following twelve weeks of training in Iran.[178] These members targeted several police commanders in Baghdad, targeting several Iraqi police

commanders in June.[179] The Special Groups criminals were reportedly trained in "new types of explosives, bringing with them small bombs which are attached under cars, instantly blowing them up."[180] This report suggests an innovation in Special Groups explosives usage and an assassination tactic that will likely increase in frequency over the coming months, particularly as fighters return from Iran.

PREDICTING AND THWARTING THE ENEMY RESPONSE

It is extremely likely that Special Groups and JAM fighters will return from Iran in the near future. Coalition commanders have been restrained in their assessment of the Iranian-backed enemy network. According to Corps commander, Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, U.S. commanders "know that Special Groups criminal elements have left the country and have gone to Iran and other places with the intent to come back at some point. There is work to be done yet."[181] His assessment of the enemy from a June 23 briefing is worth printing in full:

"We think that we have had a significant impact or effect on them. And we think that many or most of their leaders have subsequently departed, left the country. Many of them probably have gone to places like Iran for additional training and resourcing.

But even though we're not declaring defeat against the Special Groups criminals right now, I will tell you that every day that they're not fighting us is a day that we're getting stronger. And it's my job to ensure that at the point in time, if they decide to take up arms again, that we will have changed, will have done everything that we can to gain an advantage and change the landscape."[182]

Most Likely Course of Action

If past activity is any guide, Special Groups have proved adept at consolidating and rebuilding their networks. When their Diyala lines of communication were closed in late 2007, they quickly moved to consolidate and expand their supply routes south of Baghdad. Even with increased Coalition pressure, in the winter of 2008, the Iranian-backed militias were able to escalate their attacks, adopting new tactics such as the IRAM. JAM and Special Groups networks are undoubtedly more fragile now than they were in late 2007; hence, it will likely take more time and a more concerted effort to rebuild and reinfiltrate. Still, Iranian assistance in training and supply will no doubt accelerate and enhance their likely response. Despite recent statements by Muqtada al-Sadr directing JAM to halt all armed operations and transform into a cultural force, the fact remains that there are a large number of Iraqi fighters in Iran who are being retrained in special tactics and weapons and who intend to return to Iraq. These fighters may or may not be responsive to Sadr's directives and may consist of JAM members.

Coalition and Iraqi Forces have a limited window to predict and prepare for the immediate enemy response; to shape conditions in such a way that will minimize the enemy threat. They can set these conditions in several ways: by continuing to dismantle funding networks by targeting financiers, leaders, trainers, and facilitators; by denying Special Groups and Jam the option to reestablish their criminal rings and extort the local population; by continuing to improve the Iraqi Security Forces; and by accelerating reconstruction efforts. Coalition commanders have already taken such measure to advantageously shape their operating environment.

Coalition Forces continue to conduct aggressive operations against remnants of Special Groups and JAM cells, particularly in Baghdad. Since late July, U.S. and Iraqi have captured dozens of criminals associated with Special Groups cells in Baghdad, including key weapons traffickers, financiers, and logistics leaders.[183] By early August, the damage done to Special Groups' funding and supply networks was clear; MNF-I reported that "the criminal organization is struggling financially, since most of their leadership fled to Iran before the Iraqi Army's push into Sadr City in May."[184]

U.S. and Iraqi forces are also implementing

measures to create an inhospitable operating environment for returning militants. Such efforts include "plastering concrete walls, buildings, and even armored vehicles with posters of wanted militants to make it harder for them to slip back into the capital unnoticed."[185] To maintain and expand popular support, Iraqi and Coalition Forces have also emphasized reconstruction efforts. The purpose of such efforts is two-fold. First, as Iraqis in former JAM strongholds receive basic goods and services at a much lower price than they did under the militias, it is much less likely that returning fighters will be able to reestablish their extortion and corruption rings. Because these criminal activities were a major source of JAM and Special Groups funding, a population that is no longer willing to be intimidated or extorted can further cripple enemy support networks. For example, the costs of cooking oil and kerosene have dropped dramatically in Sadr City since Operation Peace, as JAM is no longer able to drive up the cost to finance their activities.[186] Second, as the quality of life improves, local Iraqis increasingly seek to preserve such improvements by working with Iraqi and Coalition Forces to maintain security. The number of tips by local Iraqis has skyrocketed in recent months, helping uncover more than 700 caches in Baghdad.[187]

Most Dangerous Course of Action

The Special Groups and Iranian-retrained JAM can take a less immediately violent, but more strategically dangerous course of action: namely, to reintroduce a better-trained and well-commanded militia in 2009 or later, as U.S. forces draw down. The training and reorganizational period might compensate not only for tactical weaknesses, but for the brittleness of the command structure that accounted for its inadequacy. Ties between commanders of different geographical areas and echelons could

be strengthened in Iran, if the organizations are not excessively fractious or if leadership there has the capability to overcome disagreements quickly. Alternatively, it is possible that the IRGC-QF could create an elite and responsive force – weeding out divisive members and leaders and retraining them over a six-month to a year period– in order to have a small but effective militia capable of fomenting attacks against the government of Iraq over the long-term. The most likely form of this militia would be an adaptation of the Hezbollah model suitably modified for Iraq, which could be reintroduced whenever or wherever the government is suitably weak. The organization might be ready to function during the 2009 national election or in 2010 as the new Parliament, Prime Minister, and Cabinet take office—a moment that was central to the creation and use of Special Groups in 2006.

CONCLUSION

Iranian-backed Special Groups are quite capable of regenerating their networks and adapting new tactics to a changed operating environment. This was evident in the reconsolidation of their networks and evolution of their methods in late 2007. JAM and Special Groups have also proved especially capable of escalating violence, as they did in Baghdad in early 2008 in advance of a planned offensive. The operations in Basra, Baghdad, and Maysan in the spring and early summer of 2008 diverted their plans and debilitated their network, forcing their leadership to Iran or into hiding. However, given their motives, determination, and past patterns of activity, JAM and Special Groups fighters will certainly return from Iran and attempt to rebuild their networks. Consequently, Coalition and Iraqi Forces must do all they can now to prepare for this eventual return and to mitigate the dangers that accompany it. This will require sustained and aggressive operations to target returning fighters, facilitators, financiers, and trainers. Yet, it will also require increased efforts to deny the enemy

popular support. Reconstruction efforts must be a top priority for both Iraq and the Coalition, as it is one of the most critical ways to undermine support for the enemy. Coalition and Iraqi Forces will be most effective in targeting JAM and Special Groups if they have popular support.

The recent security offensives have presented an important, but limited window of opportunity for increased progress towards sustainable security. Coalition and Iraqi troops must be vigilant and aggressive in predicting and thwarting an Iranian-backed enemy response.

ENDNOTES

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