Backgrounder # 25
The Growing Threat of Special Groups in Baghdad
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While al-Qaeda in Iraq remains the primary threat in northern Iraq, violence by Special Groups—Shi’a extremist elements funded, trained, and armed by Iran—remains a key challenge to stability and security in central and southern Iraq. Despite reports in late 2007 that Iranian sponsorship of Special Groups had declined,¹ the trend in Special Groups activity in January and February 2008 suggests otherwise. In a recent briefing, Admiral Gregory Smith, the Deputy Spokesman for Multi-National Force-Iraq, explicitly stated, “The Special Groups’ activity has not decreased in recent months. They continue to be probably the most violent of the extremist groups that we’re seeing from Shi’a sects. [The] intent of Iran in supporting the training and financing we believe continues.”² Other officials from both the Departments of State and Defense have also cited an increase in Special Groups activity since the beginning of 2008.³ The use of highly-lethal explosively-formed penetrators (EFP), a hallmark of Iranian-backed groups, has risen since the start of 2008.⁴ Indeed, the month of January saw twelve EFP attacks, which was the highest monthly total of such attacks in over a year. This meant that, on average, from early January to early February, there was an EFP attack every three days.⁵

Special Groups activity in Baghdad is particularly troubling, as it threatens to undermine many of the security gains of the past year. In recent interview, Lt. General Ray Odierno stated his belief that Special Groups extremists are attempting to reinfiltreate into Baghdad, seeking to destabilize the Iraqi government and security forces and “create some chaos.”⁶ Special Groups in southern Baghdad have launched numerous indirect rocket and mortar fire attacks on the government and Coalition buildings in the International Zone and on Coalition bases in the southern part of the capital.⁷ Yet, Special Groups activity in northern Baghdad is especially of note. In the last few weeks, there has been a marked spike in Special Groups activity in Shaab
and Ur, in northwest Baghdad. According to Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), this area “has recently emerged as a safe haven for Special Groups.” Special Groups criminals in these northeast Baghdad neighborhoods have conducted acts of intimidation, kidnapping, and murder of local civilians, as well as attacks against Coalition Forces, Iraqi Police (IP), Iraqi National Police (INP), and Sons of Iraq (SOI).

A Special Groups cell, led by Arkan Hasnawi, is responsible much of the violence in Shaab and Ur and in the last two months, the cell has become increasingly active. In January, the Hasnawi cell was responsible for an EFP attack that killed an Iraqi woman and child; the attack was meant for Coalition Forces in the area. In the first week of February alone, these Special Groups criminals kidnapped three INP officers and six SOI security volunteers from checkpoints in Ur. While the exact reasons for the spike in activity are unknown, according to officials from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, the Hasnawi cell carried out these kidnappings because they felt their operations and control of the population were threatened by the increased presence of SOI forces in the neighborhood.
Links between Special Groups in Baghdad and Diyala

Special Groups cells in northeast Baghdad are closely linked to the Special Groups facilitation and financing networks in Diyala Province. Diyala is located northeast of Baghdad province and it shares a long eastern border with Iran. Key routes from Baghdad to Special Groups’ strongholds in the Khalis corridor, Khan Bani Saad, and elsewhere in Diyala run through Shaab and Ur. Therefore, it is especially important to maintain a Special Groups safe haven in the northeast part of the capital. Additionally, given the number of Special Groups’ weapons caches found north of Baghdad in the last few months, particularly in the cities of Husseiniyah, Jadidah, and Khan Bani Saad, Diyala it seems clear that the province functions as a weapons depot for Special Groups operating in northeast Baghdad. What is more, a number of Special Groups members involved in weapons facilitation and training have been captured in Diyala. In mid-January 2008, Coalition Forces captured a Special Groups member who was responsible for the training of extremists in Khan Bani Saad and Baghdad, as well as the transfer and storage of weapons used by Special Groups. Special Groups in Diyala are also closely linked with the financial facilitation networks in Baghdad. In the last two months, Coalition Forces operations against Special Groups members in Baghdad revealed further evidence of the ties between Baghdad and the northeast belt. In late February, Coalition Forces detained another Special Groups leader in Shaab, who is a known financier believed to use Iranian money to support Special Groups in Diyala.

Operations against Special Groups in Northeast Baghdad

In response to the uptick in activity, Coalition and Iraqi Forces have conducted a number of intelligence-driven operations targeting Special Groups in northeast Baghdad. While Coalition Forces conducted several targeted raids in the month of January, the largest operations against Special Groups occurred in February. In a series of coordinated operations on February
11, twenty-five suspected Special Groups criminals were detained in the Sabak Sur neighborhood of Shaab and Ur. Days later, Coalition Forces captured another key Special Groups leader in Shaab, who was involved in weapons smuggling, IED attacks, and murder, as well as the planning and kidnapping of four INPs and three SOIs in the first week of February. The successful raids against the Hasnawi network continued into late February, when a top lieutenant of Arkan Hasnawi was captured by Multi-National Division-Baghdad (MND-B) Soldiers. The intelligence generated from these important captures aided Coalition efforts against the Iranian-backed groups in late February. MND-B Soldier conducted Operation Red River, targeting Special Groups in Shaab. Nineteen Special Groups suspects were captured during the day-long operation and local residents provided tips about and identification of each of the Special Groups members. It should be noted that while his network is being targeting in Baghdad, it is likely that Hasnawi himself is in Kermanshah, Iran. It was recently reported that Hasnawi was instructed to leave Iraq prior to the distribution of a list individuals most wanted by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior.

What is crucial to note, is that all of the aforementioned operations were driven by intelligence from local Iraqis. As more and more residents of Shaab and Ur were affected by the Special Groups violence, they increasingly offered tips to Coalition and Iraqi Forces. The cooperation of local Iraqis in targeting Special Groups is not limited to northeast Baghdad. Indeed, on February 15 and 16, SOI groups in Risalah turned several suspected Special Groups criminals into Coalition Forces. In Aamel, Bayaa, Abu Disheer, and Kamaliya, tips from local Iraqis have led MND-B soldiers to a number of Special Groups’ weapons caches. Special Groups rightly feel threatened by the partnership between SOIs and Coalition Forces. Indeed, Iraqi intelligence chief, Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahwani, has seen evidence confirming that Iranian Qods Force operatives are seeking to “sabotage” the SOI movements across Iraq.

Conclusion

Special Groups remain the primary threat to stability in Baghdad. Much of the current violence in Baghdad is conducted by these Iranian-backed groups. It is no surprise, therefore, that the quietest day in Baghdad in the last four year coincided with the recent visit of the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Qods Force reportedly instructed Special Groups to cease all activities during his visit, prompting the noticeable quiet. Hence, it is clear that Iran exerts a great influence on security in Iraq, with its ability to direct Special Groups activity.

Coalition Forces have largely defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq in Baghdad, and therefore are now aggressively targeting Special Groups in the capital. Operations against Special Groups over the last few months have generated a great deal of intelligence as to the nature of these criminal networks, which suggests that the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces will continue to rack up successes. Nevertheless, there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding the extent of Special
Groups’ networks. Given this uncertainty and the increasing Iranian influence in Iraq, it is likely that the fight against Special Groups will continue long after the battle against al-Qaeda in Iraq. What is clear from the last two months is that local Iraqis and SOI groups will continue to be proven weapons in the fight against Special Groups in Baghdad.

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4 Explosively-formed penetrators (EFPs) are made from special copper disks manufactured with highly-calibrated machine tools. They have been used by Hezbollah in Lebanon, with Iranian military assistance. Many of the EFPs found in Iraq have the markings that indicate that they were manufactured in Iran.


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