



Threats in Southern Iraq Ahead of a U.S. Withdrawal

John Johnson

In November 2008, the U.S. and Iraq signed a bilateral security agreement, which set two major deadlines leading up to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq: the withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009 and the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq by December 31, 2011.¹ Additionally, in February 2009, President Obama announced that all U.S. combat forces would be withdrawn from Iraq by August 31, 2010, leaving several advisory and assistance units and headquarters elements in Iraq and setting the force ceiling at 50,000 for those remaining at the end of August 2010.²

As was the case during the deployment of U.S. forces into Iraq in 2003, the majority of U.S. forces will likely exit Iraq through the south, moving equipment to Iraqi and Kuwaiti ports in the northern Arabian Gulf for loading onto ships and subsequent return to U.S. bases or to other theaters of operation. There are three primary threats to the combat forces drawdown in southern Iraq including: Shia militant groups opposed to the presence of U.S. forces; Iranian influence that ranges from helpful to disruptive and deadly to U.S. and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF); and intra-Shia violence, where Shia political groups compete for power and resources. This paper focuses on Shia militant groups and malign Iranian influence, and also briefly addresses the potential threat of intra-Shia politically motivated violence. Additionally, while the majority of violence in Iraq over the past six years has been concentrated in Baghdad, Anbar Province in western Iraq and in northern Iraq, the environment in southern Iraq described in this paper highlights how the complex, multi-faceted nature of the southern region can affect the impending withdrawal of U.S. forces.

This paper provides a description of the three major threats in southern Iraq, identifies several unlikely wildcard events which could alter the security situation, and concludes that while violence in the south is quite low when compared to historical trends and compared to the rest of Iraq, there remains several areas where U.S. forces should focus their efforts to ensure violence remains low ahead of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. U.S. forces should focus on five areas including: maintaining active force protection measures during convoys and at U.S. bases;

¹ Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq, November 17, 2008.

² "Remarks of President Barack Obama – Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq," As Prepared for Delivery, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, February 27, 2009.

retaining the capability to conduct targeting operations against militant leaders; sustaining an information operations (IO) campaign which emphasizes U.S. compliance with the security agreement; supporting Government of Iraq (GoI) reconciliation efforts with militant groups, and countering Iranian influence through continued intelligence collection emphasis and border security improvements along the Iraq-Iran border.

Shia Militant Groups

The three major Shia militant groups in southern Iraq are Muqtada al-Sadr's Promised Day Brigade (PDB), and independent groups Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kata'ib Hizballah (KH).³ They all share a common opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq and by extension a common goal of having U.S. forces leave Iraq. All three groups use violence against U.S. forces as their intent is to hasten a U.S. withdrawal and to claim credit for forcing the U.S. departure. It is also likely some militants move between groups depending on factors such as availability of funding and weapons, and whether or not their group leaders support reconciliation efforts.

First, Muqtada al-Sadr's PDB militia is a relatively new organization in name only. Sadr created PDB's predecessor militia group Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), or the Mahdi Army, in July 2003 to oppose the Coalition presence. From 2003-2008, JAM employed a variety of different attack mechanisms against Coalition Forces including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) and indirect fire (IDF). Further, JAM staged two uprisings against the Coalition in April and August 2004,⁴ and was also heavily involved in sectarian violence following the February 2006 attack on the Shia al-Askari (Golden domed) mosque in Samarra as Sadrist indiscriminately attacked presumed Baathists and Wahhabists.⁵ In August 2007, after several Sadrist splinter factions emerged and Sadr's followers desecrated a major Shia religious festival in Karbala, Sadr ordered a freeze on JAM activity. In 2008, Sadr announced that the majority of JAM would be transitioned into a socio-cultural organization called the Mumahudun and a small number of fighters under a new name, the PDB, would be retained to continue the fight against Coalition Forces.⁶

Second, AAH is a Sadrist splinter organization formed by senior Sadrist Qays al-Khazali who was detained by Coalition Forces in March 2007.⁷ The group is currently led by co-founder Akram al-Kabi.⁸ Like the PDB, AAH employs IEDs, EFPs, IDF and has publicly claimed over 6,000 attacks against the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces.⁹ The AAH was initially formed in late 2004 as an elite JAM group with the support of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-

³ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release, "The Insurgency," April 30, 2009.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 55, July 11, 2006.

⁶ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release, "The Insurgency," April 30, 2009.

⁷ Marisa Cochrane, "Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Khazali Special Groups Network," Institute for the Study of War, January 13, 2008.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release, "The Insurgency," April 30, 2009.

Qods Force (IRGC-QF).¹⁰ The AAH leadership split from Sadr in mid-2006 leading Sadr to publicly challenge the group's leaders for negotiating with the Coalition.¹¹

Finally, KH is a small, but lethal Shia militant group that has actively opposed the Coalition since 2003. Additionally, KH condemned the signing of the U.S.-Iraq bilateral security agreement, and threatened Iraqis who signed the agreement.¹² The group previously claimed attacks under the name of the Shia Islamic Resistance in Iraq. The KH conducts attacks with advanced weapons from Iran, such as IEDs, EFPs and improvised rocket assisted mortars (IRAMs). In July 2009, the U.S. State Department designated KH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and the U.S. Treasury Department designated KH as an "Entity Posing a Threat to Stability in Iraq." These designations prohibit all transactions between KH and any U.S. person and freeze any assets KH may have under U.S. jurisdiction.¹³

Iran's Malign Influence

Iran's influence on southern Iraq's political and militant groups runs the gamut from benign--as in the case of political engagements with Iraqi political groups, some of whose leaders reside in Iran--to overtly disruptive as in the case of providing lethal aid (weapons), funding, training and safe haven to Iraqi Shia militants. During the height of attacks against U.S. forces in 2007, U.S. military and diplomatic leaders in Iraq provided a litany of statements and some evidence displaying Iran's malign influence in Iraq including Iranian markings on weapons and evidence of Iran supplying technology and training to militants.¹⁴

In September 2008, a Defense Department quarterly report on stability and security in Iraq stated, "Malign Iranian influence continues to pose the most significant threat to long-term stability in Iraq. Despite continued Iranian promises to the contrary, it appears clear that Iran continues to fund, train, arm and direct [special groups] intent on destabilizing the situation in Iraq."¹⁵

In May 2009, the U.S. State Department released excerpts from its annual Country Reports on Terrorism. The following excerpt highlights Iran's involvement in Iraq.

Despite its pledge to support the stabilization of Iraq, Iranian authorities continued to provide lethal support, including weapons, training, funding, and guidance to Iraqi

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq," Press Room TG-195, July 2, 2009.

¹⁴ Greg Bruno, "Iran's Involvement in Iraq," Council on Foreign Relations, March 3, 2008.

General David H. Petraeus, "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq," September 10-11, 2007.

Carol L. Bowers, "Iran Playing 'Destabilizing Role' in Iraq, Crocker Says," American Forces Press Service, September 11, 2007.

Tim Kilbride, "Blocking Flow of 'Accelerants' Critical to Baghdad Security," American Forces Press Service, May 11, 2007.

Barbara Slavin and David Jackson, "Iran's Role in Iraq Met With Skepticism," USA Today, February 5, 2007.

¹⁵ Fred W. Baker, "Report Says Iraq Security Improves, Fundamental Conflict Remains," American Forces Press Service, September 30, 2008.

militant groups that targeted Coalition and Iraqi forces and killed innocent Iraqi civilians. Iran's Qods Force continued to provide Iraqi militants with Iranian-produced advanced rockets, sniper rifles, automatic weapons, and mortars that have killed Iraqi and Coalition Forces as well as civilians. Tehran was responsible for some of the lethality of Anti-Coalition attacks by providing militants with the capability to assemble IEDs with EFPs that were specifically designed to defeat armored vehicles. The Qods Force, in concert with Lebanese Hizballah, provided training both inside and outside of Iraq for Iraqi militants in the construction and use of sophisticated IED technology and other advanced weaponry.¹⁶

Since 2003, the flow of lethal munitions from Iran to Iraq has resulted in the death or injury of hundreds of U.S. forces in Iraq.¹⁷ In June 2009, General Odierno, Commanding General, Multi-National Forces-Iraq, stated Iran's support to Iraqi groups has slowed.¹⁸ Additionally, General Odierno said Iran "might also be trying to do a bit more soft influence in Iraq as well," a reference to Iran's political, religious and economic influence versus lethal aid to militant groups. He indicated Iran's shift in strategy was due to several factors including the security agreement being signed, Iranian-supported candidates doing poorly in the 2009 Iraqi provincial elections, successful targeting of Iranian surrogates in Iraq, and pressure applied to the Iraq-Iran border by U.S. and Iraqi Security Forces.¹⁹

In spite of Iran's recent and apparent shift in strategy, Iran is still providing training and some weapons to Iraqi militants.²⁰ Additionally, while Iran's focus ahead of the January 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections appears to be on supporting Shia political groups, Iran retains the capability to increase training, funding and weapons flow to militant groups in Iraq should circumstances change, and thus necessitates further monitoring.

Intra-Shia Violence

The three major Shia political groups vying for power and resources in southern Iraq are Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party or State of Law Party, Sadr and his followers--often called Sadrist; affiliated with the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).²¹ Among these political groups, only Sadr (presently in Iran) has consistently opposed the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq.²² In November 2008, ahead of an Iraqi cabinet vote on the bilateral security agreement, Sadr read a statement to thousands of supporters at Friday prayers saying, "I repeat my demand to the occupier to leave our land without keeping bases or signing agreements. If they keep bases, then I would support honorable resistance."²³ The Islamic Dawa Party and the ISCI generally have worked with U.S.-led

¹⁶ U.S. State Department, "Excerpts of Country Reports on Terrorism 2008: Middle East, Iraq," May 4, 2009.

¹⁷ James Phillips, "Iran's Hostile Policies in Iraq," The Heritage Foundation, Background No. 2030, April 30, 2007.

¹⁸ General Ray Odierno, "Press Briefing, 30 June," Multi-National Force-Iraq, June 30, 2009.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Changing Situation in Iraq: A Progress Report," April 4, 2009.

²² Greg Bruno, "Muqtada al-Sadr," Council on Foreign Relations, May 16, 2008.

²³ Campbell Robertson and Suadad Al-Salhy, "Cleric Call for Resistance to U.S. Presence in Iraq," New York Times, November 15, 2008.

Coalition Forces and probably do not directly represent a threat to U.S. forces unless conditions change significantly.

The intra-Shia threat stems from potential violence perpetrated by competing political groups and their supporters that could spill over and effect stability in southern Iraq, thereby complicating the U.S. withdrawal during the post-election phase to the seating of the new Iraqi government in the May/June timeframe. In January 2009, even though the ISF proved to be capable of providing adequate security for election voting stations, the Iraqi provincial elections were marked by some violence and intimidation.²⁴ We can expect some attacks leading up to the January 2010 parliamentary elections, which will likely come in the form of targeted political assassinations and intimidation attacks; post-election violence is also a possibility.

Wildcard Scenarios

While Wildcard Scenarios are not necessarily threats, there are several unlikely but dangerous potential wildcard scenarios, which if they were to occur, would negatively impact the security situation in southern Iraq. The upcoming January 2010 parliamentary elections offer three such wildcard scenarios. The first is a scenario whereby the Iraqi public does not view the elections as free and fair. This scenario was typified by the June 2009 Iranian national elections, which were widely viewed as unfair and resulted in large-scale protests and violence in Iran. However, the prospects of such an election outcome in Iraq are belied by two previous highly successful election events; the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections and the 2009 provincial elections. The second Wildcard Scenario is a Bitter Loser scenario where certain political parties come out of the elections dissatisfied with the outcome and resort to violence as a means to voice their dissatisfaction. The third Wildcard Scenario is related to the security agreement referendum. Originally scheduled for July 2009, there are signs that the Iraqi government may approve a bill that calls for an Iraqi vote on the security agreement in conjunction with the January 2010 parliamentary elections. If Iraqi voters reject the security agreement in a referendum, U.S. forces could be forced to leave Iraq within one year. This outcome could hasten, and thereby complicate a U.S. withdrawal and could also provide additional justification for militant Shia groups to conduct attacks against U.S. forces. The fourth Wildcard Scenario involves the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's Najaf-based senior Shia cleric. While there are no indications that Sistani is in ill health, his death certainly would result in large gatherings of mourners and probably a prolonged period of uncertainty over the Shia clerical leadership in Iraq as senior clerics in Najaf choose his successor. Finally, the fifth Wildcard Scenario involves desecration of Shia holy sites. Specifically, southern Iraq is home to several important Shia shrines in Najaf and Karbala. As was seen after the 2006 attack on the Golden Dome Shia shrine in Samarra, there was a sharp increase in Shia-versus-Sunni sectarian violence across Iraq. A similar attack on one of southern Iraq's Shia shrines in Najaf or Karbala could set off a series of sectarian-motivated reprisal attacks, although this would not likely be on the same scale as was seen following the Samarra attack.

²⁴ Martin Chulov, "Violence and Intimidation Mark Run-Up to Iraqi Elections," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2009.

Further, while beyond the scope of this paper, unemployment, effective rule of law and corruption are areas which bear watching closely as they have the potential to be “game changers” and drive instability.²⁵

Conclusions/Recommendations

Based upon the analysis of the three primary threats in southern Iraq ahead of a U.S. withdrawal, there are four conclusions and associated recommendations which are discussed below.

Presence of U.S. Troops: Continuous Issue. Despite positive security trends, an increasingly capable ISF and the impending departure of U.S. forces, the principal grievance of the three major Shia militant groups in southern Iraq is the presence of U.S. forces. This suggests that low level attacks will likely continue for as long as U.S. forces remain in Iraq. Therefore, U.S. forces should maintain vigilance in their force protection posture during vehicle convoys and at U.S. bases, and should continue to put pressure on militant networks through lethal and non-lethal targeting operations partnered with the ISF against militant group high value individuals (HVIs).

Militants Planning Parting Blow. Despite a decrease in violence Iraq-wide, and in southern Iraq in particular, over the past 24 months Shia militants did conduct multiple attacks leading up to the June 30, 2009 departure of Coalition Forces from Iraqi cities. These attacks were likely done in order to claim credit for the Coalition’s departure and to take advantage of lingering distrust over U.S. intentions in Iraq. These attacks also suggest that militants have the capability to conduct attacks against U.S. forces as they withdraw from Iraq. To counter this threat, U.S. forces should continue aggressive route clearance procedures, include mandatory ISF escorts with redeploying U.S. convoys and, at the strategic and operational levels, sustain an IO campaign, which clearly conveys U.S. intentions to withdraw within established security agreement deadlines.

Reconciliation: An Effective Tool. As Iraqi Security Forces have become more proficient and the security situation in Iraq has improved, some Shia militant groups have engaged the Iraqi government in the reconciliation process.²⁶ From March to August 2009, reports have surfaced which indicated AAH and the GoI were involved in negotiations whereby AAH would agree to an unconditional cease-fire and move “towards peaceful integration into Iraqi society.”²⁷ As part of the negotiations, Laith Khazali, a senior member of AAH, was transferred in June 2009 from U.S. custody to the GoI and subsequently released.²⁸ The decrease in violence in Iraq, and particularly Baghdad’s International Zone recently, suggests reconciliation between AAH and the GoI has resulted in at least a temporary decrease in attacks. While a strategic decision, similar GoI efforts to engage southern Iraq’s other two militant groups (KH and PDB) should be considered in order to persuade militants that the way ahead lays in political engagement with Baghdad and not in violence.

²⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Changing Situation in Iraq: A Progress Report,” April 4, 2009.

²⁶ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release, “The Insurgency,” April 30, 2009.

²⁷ Marisa Cochrane, “Senior Shia Militant Released from Custody,” Institute for the Study of War, June 10, 2009.

²⁸ Ibid.

Countering Iran's Malign Influence. We should expect some Iranian influence in, and engagement with Iraq given their lengthy shared border; however, the analysis suggests that Iran shifted in 2008-2009 to more of a soft power approach in Iraq. Analysis also suggests a sizable force of Iranian trained and equipped Shia militia; Iran has trained and provided lethal aid to Shia militants, funded their operations and provided safe haven to southern Iraq's Shia political and militant group leaders. Therefore, at the strategic, operational and tactical levels, U.S. forces should continue to work aggressively with their Iraqi counterparts to counter Iran's malign influence. At the strategic level, pressure from GoI leaders on Iran's senior leaders has proven effective and should continue.²⁹ At the operational and tactical levels, we should continue and possibly increase intelligence collection emphasis along the Iraq-Iran border coupled with border security improvements, specifically funding, training, manning and infrastructure for Iraq's Department of Border Enforcement.

Final Thoughts

Due to a number of factors including the success of the "surge" strategy, the Sons of Iraq (SOI) citizen security program, improved ISF proficiency, Sadr's freeze order, AAH reconciliation and Iran's shift to a soft power approach, violence in Iraq is sharply down from its 2007 highs. And while it is highly unlikely that the security trends will reverse themselves, there remain in southern Iraq a number of threats and potential wildcards which could prove problematic during a U.S. withdrawal. Therefore, U.S. forces should watch these threats and wildcard scenarios closely and be proactive in multiple areas such as force protection, IO, reconciliation and border security to facilitate the successful withdrawal of U.S. troops and equipment through southern Iraq.

Key Dates

Jul 03 – Muqtada al-Sadr announced the formation of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM)
Apr 04 – First JAM uprising against the Coalition
Aug 04 – Second JAM uprising against the Coalition
Late 04 – AAH formed as an elite JAM group with support of IRGC-QF
Jan 05 – Iraqi National Elections
Dec 05 – Iraqi Parliamentary Elections
Feb 06 – Bombing of the al-Askari Shrine (Golden Domed Mosque) in Samarra
Mid 06 – AAH leadership split from Sadr
Feb 07 – Start of Baghdad "Surge" Security Plan
Aug 07 – Sadr ordered "freeze" on JAM activity
Oct 07 – U.S. Treasury Dept. named IRGC-QF a Specially Designated Global Terrorist
Mar 08 – Start of Operation Charge of the Knights (CoTK) in Basra
Jun 08 – Sadr announced JAM would be disbanded
Nov 08 – Sadr announced formation of Mumahudun and PDB
Nov 08 – U.S.-Iraq Bilateral Security Agreement (SA) signed
Jan 09 – Iraqi Provincial Elections; possible SA Referendum
Feb 09 – President Obama announced U.S. combat forces out of Iraq by Aug 31, 2010

²⁹ Alexandra Zavis, "Iraq Sends Team to Iran to Discuss U.S. Accusations," Los Angeles Times, May 2, 2008.

Feb 09 – President Obama announced 50,000 U.S. troop ceiling by Aug 31, 2010
Jun 09 – AAH member Laith Khazali released as part of reconciliation talks with GoI
Jun 09 – SA deadline to withdraw U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities
Jul 09 – U.S. State Dept. designated KH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization
Jan 10 – Iraqi Parliamentary Elections
Aug 10 – Deadline to withdraw U.S. combat forces from Iraq; 50,000 U.S. troop limit
Dec 11 – SA deadline to withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq

Acronyms

AAH – Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
CoTK – (Operation) Charge of the Knights
DBE – Department of Border Enforcement
EFP – Explosively Formed Projectile
GoI – Government of Iraq
HVI – High Value Individual
IED – Improvised Explosive Device
IDF – Indirect Fire
IO – Information Operations
IRAM – Improvised Rocket Assisted Mortar
IRGC-QF – Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force
ISCI – Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISF – Iraqi Security Forces
JAM – Jaysh al-Mahdi
KH – Kata'ib Hizballah
OMS – Office of the Martyr Sadr
PDB – Promised Day Brigade
SA – Security Agreement
SOI – Sons of Iraq

Lieutenant Colonel John Johnson is the Director of Intelligence, Multi-National Division-South, Basra, Iraq. He holds a B.A. Degree from Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, a M.A. Degree from Alliant International University, San Diego, California, and a M.M.A.S. Degree from the U.S. Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. LTC Johnson deployed to Iraq from March 2005 to March 2006 as an Intelligence Operations Officer for Multi-National Forces-Iraq and from April 2009 to present with the 34th Infantry Division. He has also served in various command and staff positions with the Army G2, U.S. Army Europe, III Corps, 1st Infantry Division, 1st Cavalry Division and 501st Military Intelligence Brigade.

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