

## **The Battle for Saydia: An Ongoing Case Study in Militia Based Insurgency**

**Captain Michael Comstock**

Shi'a militias fought for, and in many cases, won significant territory in Baghdad's southwestern districts of West Rasheed by seizing neighborhoods of mixed sectarian composition, cleansing them of "undesirables," consolidating their gains to fund future expansion, and utilizing explosively formed penetrators (EFP)<sup>1</sup> to target US forces. Being able to effectively identify this type of activity before it has progressed too far is essential. In these contested areas, the primary militia in question is the notorious Jaesh al'Mahdi (JAM), a Shi'a paramilitary organization affiliated with the junior cleric Moqtada al'Sadr. There are, however, several other militias operating in Baghdad; two noteworthy examples are the Shi'a Badr Corps and the Sunni dominated Al'Qaeda in Iraq. Over the course of Iraq's regime change transformation since 2003, Shi'a militias have been continuously working to capture the prize of Iraq: control of Baghdad. This paper seeks to focus on a handful of West Rasheed's districts creating a microcosm case study that emphasizes how a militia operates in an insurgency. Through the benefit of hindsight, extensive open source reporting and a variety of personal experiences, these militia activities will be highlighted and examined.<sup>2</sup> The resulting militia tactics, techniques and procedures, once identified and removed from the clutter of a complex insurgent environment, will assist future combat leaders and intelligence officers to better identify and then defeat a militia throughout its development. The case study focuses specifically on Saydia and its neighbors to the north, Jihad, al'Amel and Baya'a.<sup>3</sup> The TTPs identified indicate the following

---

<sup>1</sup> The EFP is one of the deadliest IEDs the Iraq War has witnessed to date.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the nature of the ongoing conflict in Iraq, this paper will focus almost entirely on "Red" forces – the insurgent militias of West Rasheed. Some may misconstrue the paper as pointing out only the bad and destructive developments while ignoring the blood, sweat and tears shed by US Service members struggling to help a foreign culture in a distant land. This is not the case. Many positive developments have occurred in these areas, and perhaps the militia's advancement, unchecked, would have been far more destructive. A comprehensive analysis of the Battle for Saydia, complete with Coalition TTPs & Coalition victories will only be possible once the conflict is complete.

<sup>3</sup> Due to the significant differences between Arabic and English, these neighborhoods, Saydia in particular, are often spelled differently but pronounced the same. Saydiah, Saydyah, Saydiyah and others are all equally likely to appear in print.

actions will occur in a rough chronological order: First, militias first undermine basic services, conduct terrorism and utilize extensive inflammatory propaganda to drive away the unwanted demographic. Secondly, the militia will facilitate the repopulation of the contested area with a demographic sympathetic to its goals. This “desired” population will enjoy a restoration of basic services, for a fee to finance future operations. Meanwhile, the militia will utilize a deadly weapon system in an attempt to limit US combat power and demonstrate military potency to the local population. Thirdly, the militia will infiltrate any local national security force to facilitate and legitimize their actions. Finally, throughout the duration of these activities the militia will offer or impose its own brand of physical security on its base of support. Additionally, we will see how events far from the Battalion’s traditional Area of Interest (AI) effect the fight. As this case study shows, activity occurs in fits and spurts and can easily be lost in the ‘noise’ of insurgent warfare, especially as the events progress over a long timeline, making their early recognition all the more important. When dealing with these difficult issues, consider General Petraeus’ statement to US troops upon assuming command in early 2007: “hard is not impossible.”

When approaching a complex problem so closely related to insurgency, a prudent first approach utilizes the framework provided in the US Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual, where a simple definition is stated: “an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”<sup>4</sup> Within this broad definition there are five essential approaches that an insurgent group will likely adopt; the Conspiratorial, Military Focused, Urban, Protracted Popular War, and Identity focused. Throughout the manual, however, little mention is made of militias and their specific modus operandi. The student of insurgency warfare is left to extrapolate from the broader insurgent approaches what evidence can be observed throughout the duration of combat operations. Using this method a clear picture of JAM comes into focus as a composite of the Protracted Popular War, Urban and Identity Focused approaches. Conspiratorial and Military Focused approaches to insurgent warfare do not suit militias. This overlapping of approaches gives JAM a significantly different flavor than Al Qaeda in Iraq’s (AQI) more Conspiratorial and Urban approach, or the other purely Islamist insurgent movements. This distinction is essential to effectively combat and defeat this type of insurgency: leaders and intelligence officers must learn to ‘taste’ the difference in order to discover which groups are operating within their respective AOs. This ability to differentiate various combatant groups is very difficult when confronted with a multitude of insurgent flavors in one area, especially one as complex as the following Baghdad neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

Sandwiched between Baghdad International Airport to the west and the governmental district now known as the Green zone to the northeast, lay the neighborhoods of Jihad, al’Amel, Baya’a, and Saydia.<sup>6</sup> These neighborhoods housed most of Saddam’s party functionaries, generals and

---

<sup>4</sup> FM 3-24 p. 2; reference JP 1-02 as well.

<sup>5</sup> FM 3-24 p. 114

<sup>6</sup> In the 2003 conventional ground war, the road lining these neighborhoods’ eastern boundary was the scene of the Thunder Run Operations detailed in Michael Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor’s Cobra 2. For further detail see Heavy Metal: A Tank Company’s Battle to Baghdad by CPT. Jason Conroy and Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad, by David Zucchino.

other Ba'ath party apparatchiks prior to the 2003 regime change. The population is estimated to be roughly one fifth of Baghdad with around 800,000 inhabitants. These neighborhoods were wealthy, affluent, and predominantly Sunni in sectarian makeup, although Saydia was importantly a mixed neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> In addition to Saddam's most loyal followers, Saydia housed many successful Iraqi entrepreneurs, academics, and military officers during the Baath regimes tenure. Perhaps due to Saddam's secularized tyranny, "demographic distribution [was] more dependent on economic status or profession than on religion and ethnicity. This is particularly true of neighborhoods built after 1958 to house members of specific professions, such as teachers, army officers, and others."<sup>8</sup> Saydia, with its affluent inhabitants was one of Baghdad's mixing pots. Throughout the streets many houses incorporated the eight-pointed star, a symbol of the Ba'ath party, and as late as the summer of 2006, retired generals and academics could be found daily during combat patrols. In fact, the name Saydia has an important meaning in Arabic - 'loyalty' - the neighborhood was constructed as a reward for Baath party members that Saddam wished to keep close and in comfortable housing to discourage any need for dissent.<sup>9</sup> Although a mixed neighborhood, most of the nice and imposing Mosques are conspicuously Sunni. Following the 2003 regime change, many of these Baath party members, regime participants and military personnel fled the area and although exact numbers are not available, the quantity of large empty houses and the growing squatter communities attests to this population displacement. In Saydia, however, displacement was not extreme in the years of 2003-2004. The same cannot be said for the neighborhoods of Jihad, al'Amel and Baya'a.

An important aspect of this development was that formerly "disenfranchised Shi'a began migrating to the area and Sunnis began to leave."<sup>10</sup> Under Saddam's Regime, and indeed, most of modern Iraqi history, Sunni Iraqis considered practitioners of the Shi'a sect of Islam to be a fifth column, a group of traitors who were beholden to the Persian influence of Iran.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that Shi'a compose the largest group in Iraq, it was not until the 2003 invasion that they had any significant influence on the reins of power in Iraq. Their great collective moment of opportunity arrived, and the Shi'a seized the moment to begin affiliating themselves with the former regime's trappings of power and influence. In the early post regime change years, the transfer of political power was not completely violent. Sectarian tensions lay beneath the surface of society as a dangerous kindling awaiting a spark amidst the broader insurgency in Iraq. Most Sunnis simply left, and the Shi'a quickly occupied their new housing. Squatter housing sprung up in empty fields and among half completed construction projects. A house built from empty tin oil-cans housing a family of seven with a small herd of goats became common in 2006. "Many of the Sunnis we encountered in the area complained of the squatters and the Shi'a moving into the area."<sup>12</sup>

Among this backdrop of demographic shifting, two principal events radicalized the situation and ignited the flames of sectarian war: Moqtada al'Sadr's formation of the Jaesh al'Mahdi with its

---

<sup>7</sup> Shishkin, Wall Street Journal 31 October 2007 "In Baghdad a Tale of Shifting Fortunes" p. 1

<sup>8</sup> Fuller & Francke "The Arab Shi'a" p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Author, personal recollection of conversation with an Iraqi Interpreter, Summer 2006.

<sup>10</sup> CPT Eric Haas, interview by author via email, October 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke , The Arab Shi'a (New York: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 85-117.

<sup>12</sup> CPT Eric Haas, interview via email.

2004 insurrections<sup>13</sup> and Zarqawi's vicious anti-Shi'a attacks, particularly the March bombing of the al'Askari Mosque in Samarra.<sup>14</sup>

In spring<sup>15</sup> and summer<sup>16</sup> of 2004, Sadr's JAM forces instigated violent attacks against Coalition Forces in a misguided attempt to fast-forward through many phases of insurgency and arrive directly at a large scale uprising that would seize political power from Iraq's Interim Government and force a withdrawal of Coalition Forces from Iraq. Considered as a whole, US forces militarily crushed the roughly ten week rebellion and JAM's early prototype, but left Sadr and some battle hardened survivors to create a new incarnation of the militia. Sadr utilized the street credibility his rebellion created to enter into Iraq's political process, making him arguably the most influential Shi'ite leader after the revered cleric Ayatollah Ali al'Sistani.<sup>17</sup> This newly formed JAM integrated key elements of urban insurgent warfare; particularly the infiltration of Iraq's newly forming security forces and government institutions. The Iraqi National Police (INP), in one extreme example were almost entirely composed of Shi'a recruits, many of whom had formerly affiliated themselves with Sadr's movement. JAM also moved to fill key ministries of the new government, notably the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Health. These actions could reflect an awareness of another successful Shi'a militia, the Hezbollah movement of Lebanon, or it may have been a natural development in power accumulation. In any case, the Shi'a, under JAM auspices, quickly moved to control who was policed and who conducted the policing, as well as who received health care from the government. While this occurred, the Sunni population, stunned and shocked by their swift reversal of fortune, formed a host of insurgent movements and mostly boycotted the initial formation of Iraq's government and security forces, which exacerbated their lack of representation within the government security forces. Zarqawi's infamous contribution to the Iraq War was his deliberate inciting of sectarian hatred. With the al'Askari Mosque bombing, the sectarian conflict erupted from Iraq's subconscious prejudices and grudges out into the field of combat.<sup>18</sup>

The Shi'a militias of West Rasheed were well prepared to exploit these developments and "began attacks against Sunni targets, [while] the Sunnis retaliated and events led to the quick escalation of a neighborhood civil war."<sup>19</sup> In the neighborhoods of Jihad and al'Amel, this progressed quickly as the Shi'a militias "initially attacked Sunni mosques and then started killing

---

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 249-259.

<sup>14</sup> Abdel Bari Atwan, "Al-Qaeda's Hand in Tipping Iraq Toward Civil War," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 March 2006, accessed online.

<sup>15</sup> John F. Burns, "7 U.S. Soldiers Die in Iraq as Shi'a Militia Rises Up," *The New York Times*, 5 April 2004, accessed online via Lexis Nexis, November 2007.

<sup>16</sup> John F. Burns and Alex Berenson, "U.S. Troops Fight Iraq Militiamen on Two Fronts," *The New York Times*, 11 August 2004, accessed online via Lexis Nexis November 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Wong, "Shi'a Cleric is Forming Party that may play role in elections," *The New York Times*, 5 April 2004, accessed online via Lexis Nexis, November 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, "Many See Sectarian Roots in Wave of Killings in Iraq," *The New York Times*, 27 May 2005, accessed online via Lexis Nexis, November 2007.

<sup>19</sup> CPT Klaudius Robinson, interview by author via email, October 2007. Also reported two years later by: Aamer Madhani, "On the Ground it's a Civil War; The Debate Over What to Call Iraq's War is Lost on Many Iraqis as Shi'a Militias and Sunni Insurgents Wage Their Deadly Conflict," *Chicago Tribune*, 19 November 2007, accessed online via Lexis Nexis November 2007.

people and dumping their bodies on the street.”<sup>20</sup> What was occurring in these formerly Sunni neighborhoods was a series of mini-Samarra attacks at a very local and personal level. Sunni insurgent groups responded in kind by utilizing large catastrophic bomb attacks, typically in a market or Shi’a mosque, and JAM in turn using small arms fire and what has become known as Extra Judicial Killings (EJK) to drive the Sunni residents away. Any individual living in this environment essentially made the choice to affiliate with its respective sectarian insurgent group— a Shi’a militia or a Sunni terror cell. In Saydia of 2005, many residents chose to leave not only the neighborhood but the entire country following kidnappings and death threats, creating new openings for the Shi’a militants.<sup>21</sup> Generally speaking, “the Shi’ite militias were on the offensive and the Sunnis were reacting to their actions.”<sup>22</sup>

Jihad and al’Amel fell quickly to the Shi’a resurgence. This was partly due to their operationally sound tactic of locating an ‘Office of the Martyr Sadr Political Office’ (OMS) in southern al’Amel. Saydia was buffered from the OMS’s direct influence by physical distance – militias contended for Baya’a, providing a separation – and its historically mixed composition. Despite these factors, Shi’a militias were already moving toward expanding their influence into Saydia.

For example, near the boundary road between Baya’a and Saydia, Sunnis vacated a mosque that was in turn occupied by a Shi’a sect affiliated with the Badr Corps, the armed wing of a Shi’a political movement known as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The mosque was renamed Mhaba, the word for love, and its initial Shi’a Imam was killed sometime following its conversion. SCIRI is well known for operating in Iran during Saddam’s regime and is viewed as an Iranian proxy by both coalition forces and Iraqis themselves. In a vivid example of the militia infiltration of the INPs, the Huseniyah<sup>23</sup> located near the Mhaba mosque had both a Badr Corps political office and an INP security station incorporated into the building. This showed that although JAM certainly seized the moment, other Shi’a militia movements were also contending for political power in Baghdad. Additionally, in central eastern Saydia, Shi’a construction of a new Huseniyah was ongoing less than 20 meters from a large Sunni mosque in the summer of 2006. Shortly after the initial construction began, a car bomb detonated destroying one of the initial walls in early 2006. In May, a car bomb killed one INP company commander suspected of Shi’a militia activity with the Badr Corps before US forces could detain him.<sup>24</sup> Apparently the Sunni insurgent groups were fighting back against the encroachment of the Shi’a. Simply put, “the driving force for violence when we were there were the Shi’a militias with their direct ties to the ISF and the Sunni insurgents fighting back at the Shi’a campaign to take over all of Baghdad.”<sup>25</sup>

Another example of Shi’a expansion came in the form of EFP strikes on Coalition patrols. Most consider these strikes a hallmark of Shi’a militia activity due to the attacks’ proximity to Shi’a

---

<sup>20</sup> LTC Gian Gentile, interview by author via email, November 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Ali Hamdani and Ilana Ozernoy, “No Forwarding Address,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 2007, accessed online.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, interview via email.

<sup>23</sup> A Huseniyah is a community center most often affiliated with the Shi’a sect of Islam. Huseniyahs are commonly located near a Mosque of the same sect.

<sup>24</sup> CPT Haas, interview via email.

<sup>25</sup> LTC Gentile, interview via email.

neighborhoods and the locations of cache finds in Shi'a cities, such as Basra.<sup>26</sup> As one Battalion Commander in the area from 2005-2006 stated, "I did notice a movement north of EFPs in Saydia proper which might have indicated a concomitant shift northward of Shi'a influence in terms of taking over parts of neighborhoods that were previously Sunni."<sup>27</sup> Within Saydia during early summer 2006, EFPs were a rare occurrence and the primary threat to Coalition Forces came from Sunni groups utilizing simple military munitions and an occasional Shape Charge IED.

Saydia's relatively benign situation soon began to end. During "July, after the seating of the Maliki Government and the rise in power of the OMS/JAM in securing the Prime Minister's seat [that] JAM began to remove Badr-loyal officers from the MOI and the number of murdered bodies began to increase significantly."<sup>28</sup> North, in the neighborhood of Baya'a, many Sunni Mosques and businesses continued to receive threats from the encroaching militias, increasingly JAM rather than Badr Corps, reflecting the outcome of the internal Shi'a struggle for power. Menacingly, this militia intimidation began to show increasingly close ties to the local INP force<sup>29</sup> as "ISF intentionally set up checkpoints near Sunni mosques, it seemed. Most likely to recon or to set the stage for future attacks. All Sunni mosques [at some point during the summer of 2006] came under attack by small arms fire, IED and RPG. . . in one case, we believed, evidence showed that the INP Battalion commander himself was involved."<sup>30</sup>

While conducting joint patrols with INP units in Baya'a, this author witnessed the phenomenon of the Shi'a dominated INPs only very reluctantly visiting Sunni mosques in the presence of US forces – the Sunni Imams meanwhile, never said anything positive about the INP patrols unless US forces were present. When attempting to facilitate a meeting between the Sunni Imam of the Baya'a mosque and the Shi'a INP patrol leader, the assistant Imam had this to say: "Our Imam was killed three weeks ago, . . . The people around here are afraid to come here to pray on Fridays, . . . We would like to cooperate, but sometimes those people come to attack us, and we want to defend the mosque. Inside the mosque is our border. If they cross this line, we will shoot these guys."<sup>31</sup> During numerous patrols in the summer of 2006 many Sunni residents of Baya'a and Saydia stated that they did not pray at Sunni Mosques, due to fear of militia reprisals.

In another example of suspect Iraqi Police (IP)<sup>32</sup> activity, one frantic Sunni woman chased down the author begging for help. IPs apprehended her brother, Omar, and she feared he faced

---

<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "Deadliest Bomb in Iraq is made by Iran, U.S. Says," The New York Times, 10 February 2007, accessed online.

<sup>27</sup> LTC Gentile, interview via email (responsible for Saydia, among other neighborhoods in winter 05-spring 06).

<sup>28</sup> CPT Haas, interview via email.

<sup>29</sup> Also noted throughout many ISF units as reported by: Amit R. Paley, "In Baghdad, a Force Under the Militias' Sway; Infiltration of Iraqi Police Could Delay Handover of Control for Years, U.S. Trainers Suggest," The Washington Post, 31 October 2006, accessed online via Lexis Nexis November 2007.

<sup>30</sup> CPT Don Makay, interviewed by author via email, October 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Walid Khalid, quoted by Joshua Partlow, "Driving Around Waiting to Get Blown Up," The Washington Post, 27 July 2006, accessed online.

<sup>32</sup> Separate from the INPs, the Iraqi Police are more akin to US civilian police than the INPs.

execution. After tactically questioning the involved IPs, and their hapless prisoner, the full convoluted story unraveled in this fashion: Omar's business was located about two minutes walking distance from a permanent INP checkpoint along the main road dividing al'Amel and Baya'a. Omar claimed Shi'a security forces attacked him late at night when they were off duty from the nearby checkpoint. He fought them off with a pistol, his friend escaped, and IPs in uniform finally arrived from the checkpoint to arrest Omar. The IPs claimed Omar was a Sunni insurgent and had his name on a list of undetermined origin. What disturbed the author was the prisoner's hand, which was cleanly shot through the palm, reportedly during the struggle. During the questioning, conducted separately from the IP guards, he claimed all IPs and INPs were Iranian agents bent on destroying Iraq and he was sworn to destroy them.<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, many Sunni residents of these areas feared revealing their names to soldiers at the Shi'a dominated security check points throughout the city.<sup>34</sup> In Islamic tradition many names are taken from Islamic saints, and often these names follow sectarian lines. Omar, for instance, is considered Sunni while Ali is considered Shi'a.<sup>35</sup> Typically the naming convention stems from the initial split between Sunni and Shi'a early in Muslim history. Militiamen within the Shi'a dominated security forces now exploited this tradition to further terrify the Sunni residents.<sup>36</sup>

The real value of these anecdotes lies in their indicative value of competing militias' effect on society. When viewed collectively they show at the very least the menace of the militia's influence in tearing down the social fabric between Sunni and Shi'a inhabitants of the neighborhoods. JAM aimed to terrorize the Sunni populace and clear them from the mixed neighborhoods, and their techniques became increasingly gruesome as 2006 transitioned from summer to autumn.

During Israel's summer war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, several Shi'a Mosques in al'Amel and the Office of Moqtada Sadr brazenly displayed the yellow and green flag of Hezbollah in a sign of sectarian solidarity. This emphasized the symbolic and literal similarities between the two militias: EFPs encountered first in Lebanon sporadically prior to the Iraq War became much more common in 2006; both militias attempt to gain control of local resources and services; and Sadr announced that an elite group of his JAM fighters were dispatched to Lebanon (although the veracity of this claim is uncertain). The war in Lebanon served to inspire JAM further, and their activities in Baya'a and Saydia continued to expand.<sup>37</sup>

In the months of July through October, the instances of murdered bodies being dumped near Sunni neighborhoods rose considerably, as well as drive by shootings and threatening letters given to Sunni residents and business owners. "The most popular was extra-judicial killings or

---

<sup>33</sup> Personal experience. The prisoner was also being tracked through US reporting, was 'transferred' to US custody and later released.

<sup>34</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, "At Checkpoints in Baghdad, Disguise is a Life Saving Ritual," The Washington Post, 29 September 2006, accessed online via Lexis Nexis November 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Liz Sly, "The Name No One Wants; Omar is a Sunni Name. And Omars are Turning Up Dead," Chicago Tribune, 5 May 2006, accessed online via Lexis Nexis November 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Conversations with Iraqi citizens while patrolling Baya'a & Saydia in Summer 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Personal experience patrolling Baya'a in Summer 2006.

murder, ‘ordered’ or ‘sanctioned,’” by local JAM and other Shi’a militias.<sup>38</sup> The progression of an ‘EJK’ as they are commonly known is simple: “JAM/Shi’a militia group kidnaps a Sunni male from a mixed-sect market [or other public venue]; takes [the] Sunni male to the edge of a Sunni dominated neighborhood; Sunni male taken from the vehicle and shot in the back of the head with a pistol; Shi’a militia drives off.”<sup>39</sup> Other variants existed, typically involving sadistic torture utilizing home use power tools and other commonly owned items. On one occasion in August or September the US infantry Battalion operating in the area rescued a group of Sunni men who would most likely have suffered such a fate from a Shi’a Huseniyah. Unfortunately, these crimes became devilishly hard to stop, and often the only evidence was a body near a Sunni neighborhood. Saydia experienced principally kidnapping at this point in time; nearly every street had a story of at least one man who had left for food, work, or pleasure never to return.

Another technique of intimidation and militia expansion began to develop at this time as well. In October, US patrols prevented a house eviction. Upset Sunni residents who had been forced from their home at gun point by unknown men flagged down a US patrol. This family fortunately maintained the presence of mind to take their property ownership paperwork with them and the patrol was able to assist the family in regaining their house and detaining the men. The most commonly reported technique for JAM involved the delivery of letters with threat notes and a single bullet inside with a timeline to depart and “anyone that was left was shot, tortured, or scared into leaving (i.e. grenade over [a] wall).”<sup>40</sup> In the fall of 2006, these home evictions predominately occurred in the neighborhoods of Jihad and al’Amel, where JAM possessed a decisive lead in the indigenous balance of power when no US forces were present. Once the militia cleared a neighborhood block of unwanted Sunni residents, JAM sanctioned a re-housing of poorer Shi’a families and “there were reports of having to pay the controlling faction a ‘tax’ to live there.”<sup>41</sup> JAM then consolidated its hold over the larger area by “provid[ing] resources (electricity, food, water, health care) to only Shi’a... they also ensured all of their men protected the [local] gas station, so as to control the distribution and funds from it.”<sup>42</sup>

The systematic process of driving the Sunni population of Saydia away accelerated in the winter of 2006/07. Initially this took the form of intimidation. “Shi’a militias started infiltrating Sayidia from adjacent areas under their control. According to U.S. military officials, their movements were often aided by the Shi’a-dominated Iraqi police. ‘We were surrounded,’ [said] Omar Mohammed, a local Sunni resident. Iraqi police started setting up a maze of checkpoints throughout Sayidia. Shi’a militants would often be lurking nearby. Reports of kidnappings of Sunnis in the vicinity of checkpoints started piling up in the spring.”<sup>43</sup>

The ultimate goal of this campaign was resource control and the permanent expansion of militia support among the local populace. As described by the intelligence officer of the 1-18 IN

---

<sup>38</sup> CPT Makay, interview via email.

<sup>39</sup> CPT Haas, interview via email.

<sup>40</sup> CPT Makay, interview via email.

<sup>41</sup> CPT Robinson, interview via email.

<sup>42</sup> CPT Robinson, interview via email.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Shishkin, “In Baghdad Neighborhood, a Tale of Shifting Fortunes,” [The Wall Street Journal](#), 31 October 2007, accessed online.



battalion, “We’ve noticed a trend used by Shi’a terrorists that I refer to as “reverse SWEAT (Sewer, Water, Electricity and Trash).” The intent is to attack key infrastructure and facilities to decrease the quality of life for the people living there. In a simplified version, this technique would include attacking the power supply, shutting down sewage pumps, conducting attacks in economic hubs such as markets, and blowing up mosques. With no social, economic, or religious support base, many residents move out. Those unwanted people who remain are intimidated to leave through kidnappings, threats, and straight up murder. Once a neighborhood is cleansed of the undesirables, a group such as Jaesh al’Mahdi comes in and restores the essential services and brings in displaced families to live in the homes left behind. These displaced families are charged rent which finances the organization, and are made to participate in a ‘neighborhood watch’ to provide early warning for any opposing factions or CF entering an area.”<sup>44</sup> By 2007, the infiltration of Saydia by JAM and affiliated Shi’a militias had become a cold hard reality for residents there, and their activity continued to show a striking similarity to organized crime: “The Shi’a affiliated gangs/militias operating in Saydia traffic and sell weapons, [they] involved in the operation of whore houses, murder, intimidate and extort [residents] for support and money, steal, kidnap, torture, extort store owners for money, make explosives, and have successfully corrupted INP so that they provide active and passive support to their operations.”<sup>45</sup> Based on interviews with the unit responsible for Saydia, roughly 1-2 mosque attacks occurred per month in 2007; all attacks were targeting Sunni mosques, and roughly 1-2 known forced house evictions occurred per month.

Shi’a militias subverted the local security forces in two ways. The first more directly affected the Iraqi residents of the area. Simply put, by the INP Transition Team Intelligence Team advisor, “facilitated by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) intelligence services and the INP, Shi’a militia presence has reinforced sectarian boundaries and led to forced emigration of Sunni residents from Saydia and Baya’a.”<sup>46</sup>

The second form of subversion aimed at sowing distrust between US forces and the INPs. This subversion was deadly for the US forces responsible for Saydia, taking the form of EFP emplacement. “[T]hey are emplaced near INP positions and triggered by INP, or emplaced near INP positions in order to discredit INP and create distrust between American and Iraqi National Police.”<sup>47</sup> Although exact details on how this type of insurgent activity unfolds can easily vary by locale, and specifics are most likely classified, one technique to accomplish this would be for an INP shift being relieved to change out of uniform and emplace an EFP from a prepositioned cache- perhaps dropped by their relieving comrades who might also provide overwatch throughout the operation- and then occupy a building near an INP checkpoint and await a US patrol to approach before activating the EFP’s passive infrared sensor to enable the device’s deadly warhead. In any case, the goal of such activity strove to instigate a direct fire fight between US Forces and their Iraqi counterparts. As LT Noyes continues, “the desired goal [was] creating distrust between INP and American forces Catastrophic Success being Americans firing on INP.”<sup>48</sup> Fortunately throughout 2007 this technique “seems to have either failed in achieving

---

<sup>44</sup> CPT Dan Kuehl, interview by author via email.

<sup>45</sup> LT Matt Noyes, interview by author via email.

<sup>46</sup> CPT Josh Francis, interview by author via email.

<sup>47</sup> LT Noyes, interview via email.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

its desired goal. . . or has been successfully deterred by SOI<sup>49</sup> engagements with INP leadership leading to the establishment of a policy to arrest all personnel at the checkpoint that an IED goes off near.”<sup>50</sup>

Earlier, in 2006, sectarian propaganda was sparse and this author only observed political billboards for Shia parties hanging above the Shia dominated security checkpoints. However, as the militia expanded into Saydia the propaganda followed quickly. Propaganda spread throughout Saydia and “Banners [were] strewn across the muhallas, as well as flags and graffiti to designate which neighborhoods [were] Sunni or Shi’a. Both the Sunni and the Shi’a elements use fliers to notify a resident that they are to vacate the Muhalla or they will be murdered within 48 hours. . . the IO<sup>51</sup> message is broadcast as clearly as if it were posted on a bill-board. Leave, join or die.”<sup>52</sup>

In an example of how events in an area of interest geographically close can effect operations, as the US Surge began in earnest the nearby neighborhood of Doura became one of Baghdad’s focus areas. The effects were profound. Doura, a Sunni & AQI insurgent dominated area east of Saydia long remained one of Baghdad’s most violent neighborhoods. As increased US forces in the area flushed out AQI insurgents, the combatants fled to Saydia where local Sunnis saw them as salvation from the ever encroaching Shi’a militias. These militants “began attacking Shi’as. It was not long before Shi’a militias, including the Mahdi Army (JAM) responded in kind.”<sup>53</sup> In July of 2006, a complex vehicle borne IED (car bomb) attack struck the previously mentioned Hussiniyah/Badr Corps office in northeastern Saydia. The car bomb attacks bear the signature of Sunni insurgent groups, AQI in particular. Shi’a militias retaliated by utilizing the local security force: “INP occupied positions in the Al Sadiyah apartments [near a local Sunni] Mosque and began a campaign to force all families out.”<sup>54</sup> Sunni insurgents struck back; during this local campaign several high ranking INP Brigade and Battalion commanders struck an IED while leaving an abandoned apartment laden with furniture.<sup>55</sup> Sunni residents spoke with LT Noyes, the US Platoon Leader in Saydia at the time, and reported forced evictions by armed men, and extortion requiring the fleeing residents to pay the militia to move their own household goods away.

Meanwhile, north in Baya’a and al’Amel the JAM campaign shifted from cleansing to consolidating gains. As one company commander reported, “this whole area is just absolutely

---

<sup>49</sup> Sphere of Influence engagement: when a local US Military representative attempts to illicit cooperation from local population leadership which can include but is not limited to military, civil, commercial or religious leadership. This example is military in nature, through the Iraqi National Police leadership.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Military-speak for Information Operations: shaping the perceptions of the battlefield. IO can be conducted by US or hostile forces.

<sup>52</sup> CPT Francis, interview via email.

<sup>53</sup> Damien Cave and Stephen Farrell, “At Street Level, Unmet Goals of Troop Buildup,” [The New York Times](#), 9 September 2007, accessed online.

<sup>54</sup> LT Noyes, interview via email.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

dominated by Jaish al'Mahdi. . . They control the power distribution.”<sup>56</sup> Here, the ‘reverse SWEAT’ was nearly complete, “the Mahdi Army (JAM) has transformed the composition of the district’s neighborhoods by ruthlessly killing and driving out Sunnis and denying basic services to residents who remain. “GEN David H. Petraeus, [having recently assumed duties as] the top U.S. military commander in Iraq, described the area as ‘one of the three or four most challenging areas in all of Baghdad.”<sup>57</sup> US forces noticed certain areas with a much better standard of basic services and cleanliness and correctly observed the correlation between material favors and militia activity saying, “It would be cool if it was a positive thing, but it’s not.”<sup>58</sup> JAM’s support zone effectively completed its spread from Jihad and al’Amel into Baya’a, and with the expansion came control of local resources. US forces in the area were able to mitigate some of these affects and as the local Battalion Commander stated, “Jaish al’Mahdi, from our sources, is extremely upset that we’re putting so much pressure on the gas stations. It’s common sense. We’re shutting down the cash flow.” However, JAM was achieving its goal and as the intelligence officer stated, “now that the Sunnis are all gone, murders have dropped off, one way to put it is they ran out of people to kill.”<sup>59</sup> JAM quickly turned these support areas into launch points for incursions into Saydia, “militiamen in BMWs rode around the neighborhood with megaphones, demanding that residents evacuate. Mortar rounds launched from nearby Baya’a, a Mahid Army stronghold, began crashing down regularly in Sadiyah.”<sup>60</sup>

Moktada al’Sadr’s JAM forces began to splinter as the cleric had reportedly moved into hiding in Iran to avoid the full brunt of the Surge, and recommended to his forces to lay low and avoid confrontation; “American commanders attribute[d] much of the current violence to what they are now calling ‘special groups’ or ‘secret cells’ of Iranian-backed militia men who may be acting independently of, or against, Sadr and his followers.”<sup>61</sup>

In August of 2007, with the neighborhoods north of Saydia firmly under its heel, JAM began its cleansing efforts in Saydia proper in earnest. The neighborhood now became “strategically important because it represented a fault line between militia power bases in Al’Amil to the west and the Sunni insurgent stronghold of Dora to the east.”<sup>62</sup> In one instance, this cleansing was halted by US forces and as described by LT Noyes, “we interrupted a joint JAM-INP sectarian cleansing in Muhallah 827 (south western Saydia). INP established cordon positions and JAM moved in and forced Sunni families out of their homes, [and] once the families were out [the] INP moved in Shi’a Iraqis. . . the INP claimed [these families] were displaced Saydiyah residents, but under questioning were obviously not.”<sup>63</sup> In two separate mosque attacks, the Imam of the Al Sadiq Mosque (Sunni) was killed and the Ibrahim al’Khalil Mosque’s minaret “was attacked and destroyed by a JAM group who used the adjacent school, in cooperation with

---

<sup>56</sup> CPT Sean Lyons, quoted by Joshua Partlow in “Mahdi Army, Not Al-Qaeda, is Enemy No. 1 in Western Baghdad,” [The Washington Post](#), 16 July 2007, accessed online.

<sup>57</sup> Joshua Partlow, “Mahdi Army, Not Al-Qaeda, is Enemy No. 1 in Western Baghdad,” [The Washington Post](#), 16 July 2007, accessed online.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Joshua Partlow, “I Don’t Think This Place is Worth Another Soldier’s Life,” [The Washington Post](#), 27 October 2007, accessed online.

<sup>61</sup> Partlow, 16 July 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Partlow, 27 October 2007.

<sup>63</sup> LT Noyes, interview via email.

the Shia guard at the school, to infiltrate the Mosque and plant the ordnance they used to destroy the minaret.”<sup>64</sup> Two other Sunni mosques “were rigged with explosives and destroyed.”<sup>65</sup> The terrified Sunni population continued to embrace the ‘protection’ of Sunni insurgent groups fleeing US operations in Doura, “The Sunnis had no choice but to receive al-Qaeda, because nobody else was protecting them’ [said] Mr. Ibrahim, the Sayidia dentist.”<sup>66</sup>

This problem of providing effective protection from warring militias turned Saydia from a mixed neighborhood in 2003 into a wasteland of sectarian violence by the fall of 2007. The local residents soon found that the solace provided by al’Qaeda to be short lived as “Sunni extremists embarked on a simple but brutal strategy: kill any Shi’a they could get their hands on.”<sup>67</sup> At this time, attempting to end the spiraling violence, the US Battalion commander completed an “eight month campaign to kick out the corrupt INP ‘Wolf Brigade.’”<sup>68</sup> In October the Iraqi Army began conducting operations in Saydia, occupying the al’Fatima Hussiniyah and the al’Taqla Mosque. Residents of the neighborhood became disillusioned with the militia violence, and the US forces, taking heed of success in the westward al’Anbar Province began to enlist local citizens into volunteer battalions known as the Saydiyah Guardians. These developments proved to be the first positive signs of improvement in Saydia in years. However, tensions between the Saydiyah Guardians and the Shi’a dominated Iraqi government remain high, and accusations of abuse by security forces and local guards come from citizens of either sect.<sup>69</sup> GEN Petraeus upped his assessment of the area’s challenges and “said [that] he [saw] uneven progress in terms of stopping Shi’a militia violence. He mentioned Baya’a and al’Amil, two neighborhoods in southwestern Baghdad where the Mahdi Army. . . has emerged as a dominant force, as among the more difficult. He described another nearby area, Sadiyah, as probably ‘the toughest that is out there now.’”<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, we have seen how JAM utilized and will continue to use several identifiable techniques to spread their influence through four neighborhoods of Baghdad, and it is highly likely that a militia in other insurgent battlefields will utilize similar tactics, adapting the specifics to each new environment. In Saydia, the fight is not over. Since the developments of September/October, Baghdad has experienced a welcome respite in the form of reduced violence. The neighborhoods of Jihad, al’Amel, Baya’a and Saydia are no exception; however the fight is not over yet and they are included in the “wide swaths of middle-class western Baghdad [that] remain locked down amid uncertainty over whether progress is lasting or is the result of a brief cease-fire between sectarian militias.”<sup>71</sup> The current success of the Surge

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Partlow, 27 October 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Shishkin, 31 October 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Partlow, 27 October 2007. In West Rasheed the Wolf Brigade was renowned for its corruption, Shi’a militia infiltration and has since been removed from the area.

<sup>69</sup> Anna Mulrine, “Quieting Mean Streets,” US News and World Report, 12 October 2007, accessed online.

<sup>70</sup> Joshua Partlow, “Petraeus Says Al-Qaeda in Iraq Strongholds are Cleared, but Insurgents Remain ‘Lethal,’” The Washington Post, 28 October 2007, accessed online.

<sup>71</sup> Sam Dagher, “How Much Safer is Baghdad Now?,” The Christian Science Monitor, 27 November 2007, accessed online.

Strategy, combined with Moktada Sadr's 'freeze' on militia attacks<sup>72</sup> has created a window of opportunity to roll back the militia's gains. Disturbingly, there are no reports of the militia's stranglehold over resources being broken, Sadr's future intentions once the 'freeze's' six month shelf life has expired cannot be known; in sum, it cannot be accurately determined at this time whether or not the Shi'a militia campaign for Baghdad has been checked, has been put on pause, or already achieved its goals in Saydia and Baghdad at large. Perhaps the greatest test to Iraq's stability will come as surviving residents who fled during the years of 2003-2007 begin to return home; how will the Iraqi government handle these refugees? Can they return to the previous homes, will they try and take them back with militias of their own perhaps with the help of the Saydiah Guardians? In Saydia, the fight is not over.

*J. Michael Comstock is a US Army Captain currently assigned to a MITT preparing for deployment to Iraq. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, having served in the District of Saydia during the spring and summer of 2006.*

SWJ Magazine and Small Wars Journal are published by Small Wars Journal LLC.

COPYRIGHT © 2008 by Small Wars Journal LLC.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – Share Alike 3.0 [License](#) per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: [comment@smallwarsjournal.com](mailto:comment@smallwarsjournal.com)

Visit [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)

---

<sup>72</sup> Bassen Mroue, "Iraq Cleric: Militia in 'Freeze,'" [Associated Press](#), 29 August 2007, accessed online via Lexis Nexis November 2007.