

Sunni Militia's Struggle for Relevance

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Recent deadly bombing underscores fraught future of Iraqi tribal force that fought insurgents.



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The latest attack on the Sahwa was grisly even by Iraq's standards, and grimly symbolic of the militia's precarious position.

The Sunni Arab tribal force that helped turn the tide against the insurgency has long warned that its fighters are under fire from their former allies in al-Qaeda.

Sahwa leaders have also constantly complained that the government is backtracking on promises to pay their men on time and integrate them into the state's security forces.

On July 18 in the town of Radwaniya outside Baghdad, a suspected al-Qaeda bomber killed some 40 Sahwa militiamen as they queued for their salaries outside a military base.

The men died in a manner that seemed to embody their leaders' concerns: picked out by vengeful insurgents while awaiting their dues from an institution that remains wary of them.

The attack was the bloodiest the Sahwa has faced this year. On the same day, another three militiamen were killed in Qaim, a town bordering Syria in the western province of Anbar, a former insurgent stronghold. Several smaller assaults against militia members were also reported in other parts of the province.

The violence was reminiscent of the peak of the insurgency four or five years ago, when militant tactics were geared towards undermining recruitment and morale among Iraq's fledgling security forces.

The latest attacks are unlikely to turn the clock back to that period. Most observers believe the domestic franchise of al-Qaeda is in a tailspin, capable only sporadically of mounting its signature spectacular strikes.

Meanwhile, Iraq's military and police have grown in size and proficiency, successfully taking over duties once handled by the United States military.

The latest attacks on the Sahwa may be more troubling for their timing than their scale.

Four months after a tightly contested parliamentary election, Iraqi politicians have been unable to agree on who will form the next government.

The dispute has deepened fissures among the powerful parties backed by the Shia Arab majority, while unsettling the Sunni Arab minority. A bloc backed by the Sunnis won the single greatest number of seats but has failed so far to attract enough allies to lead a governing coalition.

While the stalemate continues, the US is pushing ahead with plans to withdraw the bulk of its troops within five weeks' time.

In interviews with IWPR in May, Sahwa leaders said they feared violence would fill the void created by the political deadlock and the departing American troops.

Warning that their men were on high alert, they listed a range of factors that might prompt them to consider fighting in defence of their community.

These included fresh attacks by al-Qaeda; the re-emergence of Shia militias hostile to Sunnis; and the government's failure to meet the Sahwa's demands for jobs and wages.

The Radwaniya bombing prompted another round of complaints from the Sahwa leaders, accusing the government of leaving them exposed to al-Qaeda.

If such attacks continue, the militia's anger at the authorities may become a call to arms. The irregular tribal force numbers some 90,000 men – enough to pose a threat to stability, particularly in areas where al-Qaeda still has a presence.

But even if further such strikes are averted, the militia's other grievances are unlikely to be resolved easily.

Iraq's political establishment is dominated by Shia Arab parties, some of whom would prefer to see the Sahwa's remaining fighters disarmed rather than given formal roles in the security apparatus.

Some analysts argue that the militia's insistence on gratitude from the government is disingenuous, given that its motives for turning the tables on al-Qaeda were primarily selfish. They say the tribes fought the insurgents mainly to regain control of their turf, rather than to protect national security.

Observers also say some of the promises that were made to the militia may also prove to be impractical. It is unclear, for instance, whether Iraq's security forces actually need, or can afford, the extra capacity an influx of tribal fighters would provide.

Whatever the validity of the Sahwa leaders' demands, their fears are in many ways justified.

The future of their militia seems uncertain in an Iraqi state that is no longer at the mercy of Sunni Arab insurgents, and whose politics and security are dominated by Shia Arab parties.

Their grievances against the government can be seen as part of a struggle for relevance in an altered Iraq.

The militia's best hope for survival is to highlight the tragic irony of attacks such as the one at Radwaniya. Though it revealed its weakness, the bombing also underscored the group's importance in the fight against al-Qaeda.

As long as the insurgency continues to draw blood, the Sahwa can insist its original function has not been blunted.

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