

Vigilantes Take on the Resistance

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"Black Flag" group says it will take on the job that Coalition troops or Iraqi police can't.

Twenty men slinging Kalashnikovs, Sterling sub-machineguns, and an assortment of pistols saunter down a main street in the Baghdad neighbourhood of al-Adhamiya one Friday afternoon.

As locals watch anxiously, the men tear down pro-Baathist and anti-Coalition posters, which are a common sight in this predominantly Sunni district.

They replace the posters by sticking up leaflets of their own, which vow attacks on "terrorists" and their allies in the name of a militia called the "Black Flag".

Group members say they will act against suspected insurgents in place of the United States-led Coalition and the Iraqi police, who they say lack the street-level intelligence to deal with their enemies effectively.

The militia's chosen symbol – a black banner combined with the double-bladed sword called Zulfikar which belonged to the seventh-century Imam Ali – is one that is otherwise associated with Shia demonstrations. But the group claims to have Sunni Arabs and Kurds as well as Shia in its ranks.

Although the Black Flag movement is still relatively obscure compared with Iraq's more established parties, its statements echo a general lack of confidence in the Coalition to provide security.

That sense of distrust has become particularly acute since the March 2 attacks on Shia shrines in Karbala and al-Kadhemiya, which killed some 200 people and injured hundreds more.

The group also has its supporters in the local population. "This militia seems more serious about dealing with the terrorists than the Americans, GC [Governing Council] and Iraqi police," said Majid Harith, a teacher from al-Hurriya district.

Black Flag claims 5,000 members across the country – including adherents in half-a-dozen Baghdad neighbourhoods. Although this claim is impossible to verify, IWPR has met members of the groups in three different locations across west Baghdad. As well as al-Adhamiya, IWPR has seen Black Flag leaflets in al-Karkh, a west Baghdad neighbourhood that is a centre of Baathist activity, the outlying mixed Sunni-Shia neighbourhoods of al-Bayaa and al-Adel, and the central Bab al-Sharji market.

Half a dozen militia members, who met an IWPR contributor in a west Baghdad mosque on condition of anonymity, said the recent explosions had increased their determination to act against "terrorists" in their neighbourhood.

Accompanied by a Shia cleric and an officer from the local police department, the militiamen said they would provide the names of suspects to the police – but would take independent action if the police did not react.

"We keep an eye on the suspicious persons – Iraqis and foreigners – who we think may be responsible for attacks, robberies and chaos," said a man who claimed to be the organisation's security head.

The man met with the IWPR on condition that he was identified only by the initials H.A.

"We will target the symbols of terrorism, who are known to everyone except the police and the Americans," he said. "We will target those who assist them in person, or through satellite channels like al-Arabiya."

Al-Arabiya has been accused by both Iraqis and US officials of cooperating with anti-Coalition guerrillas, either by filming their operations or broadcasting their manifestos.

H.A. claims to have a list of 21 names of people it suspects in the al-Hurriya district alone, most of them from two predominantly Sunni tribes.

"We will make war against the terrorist leaders, [and] we have much information and evidence proving their involvement with some tribal leaders allied with them against the democratic, patriotic forces," said one Black Flag flyer posted in al-Hurriya.

H.A. claims his group has evidence these people were involved in an attack on a local Shia mosque, as well as in the murders of translators working for the Coalition. The militia concluded that the 21 were participating in anti-Coalition activities after monitoring their movements. Meetings between members of the suspect group and people from outside the neighbourhood were followed by attacks, said H.A.

The militia investigated an abandoned lot where its suspects used to meet, and found some Katyusha rockets buried close by.

Once the group concludes more research, said H.A., it will pass the names to the Americans. "However, we are sure that they will do nothing. They do not respect our information, and they do not show us respect," he said.

Iraqis frequently complain that US troops do not respond to information about resistance activities.

US troops, for their part, say they have difficulty distinguishing between genuine intelligence, denunciations sparked by local disputes, or even misinformation.

If the US military does nothing about the people named on the list, the militia official said, "we will warn them [the suspects], and if they do not stop, we will kill them."

H.A. claims the organisation receives no aid from any political party or other organisation. Instead, he says, militia members finance it themselves, with additional support from some wealthy religious clerics.

Apart from its counter-insurgency operations, HA said the militia also provides security for schools and religious centres, and takes a stand against crimes such as kidnapping and blackmail in many areas of Baghdad.

Members of several more established movements said that they had heard of the militia, but condemned it as a threat to stability.

"We are against the idea of militias, as they carry weapons," said Salah al-Taher, an official of the Iraqi National Accord, the group led by Governing Council member Ahmed Chalabi. "Ordinary citizens cannot distinguish them from saboteurs and thieves, and it will be difficult for the police to avoid clashing with them."

Sheikh Abbas al-Rabei, representing the Sadrists, a radical Shia movement, agreed, saying that armed militias "open the door wide to other organisations and armed movements to settle accounts and impose their own private law.... These organisations help stir up chaos and trouble."

The Sadrists still maintain their "Army of the Mahdi", a force which many Iraqis regards as a militia although it does not bear arms in public.

But some members of the public interviewed by IWPR took exception to such dismissive comments about the Black Flag, and commended the group for doing a job no one else seems ready to tackle.

"I would like to join this organisation, as no one [else] can control the violence," says Khaled Nusaif, a resident of the west Baghdad neighbourhood al-Karkh, sitting in a coffeehouse where one of the militia's statements was posted.

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