

Iraq and the Problem of Militias

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During the last month, the problem of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian militias has gained more and more attention. Some articles have claimed they have become as serious a problem as the insurgency, or an even more serious prelude to civil war.

There is no doubt that Iraq's ethnic and sectarian tensions have continued to grow since late 2004, and accelerated during 2005. The failure to form a government of any kind, more sectarian and ethnic violence in virtually every mixed area in Iraq, and a lack of local security in much of the country have all increased the risk of civil conflict.

No one can really quantify the number of force relocations, killings, kidnappings, extortions, and other acts that are pushing Iraqis apart. No one, however, doubts that thousands of Iraqis have died, and ethnic cleansing, mixed with crime and local feuds, have affected the lives of tens of thousands. The true total to date may be in the hundreds of thousands, and certainly is if Iraqis who have moved or fled from fear are included.

This cannot, however, be blamed simply on the militias. The dividing lines in Iraq are far more complex. Crime is a constant problem and a threat to security, and is often mixed with ties to sectarian groups or local political factions. If there are no local militias or security forces, there almost always are criminals. In many areas there are both, and sectarian and ethnic forces can extort while criminals can claim to serve an ethnic or sectarian cause.

The more mixed a neighborhood or area is, the more the lines are blurred. In general, the more homogeneous the area, the better organized local security forces are, although sometimes at the cost of more sectarian and ethnic "cleansing." In many such areas, however, it is not some party militia in the national sense that really is involved, but a local security force or element loyal to a local leader. In a number of areas, the police are also loyal to a given leader and there are no clear lines of demarcation. In others, the police simply do not act.

Crime is a constant problem in every troubled area, and this is much of urban and sometimes rural Iraq. Ordinary criminals, part-time criminals, and "gangs," are all a threat, and they can easily be part of the local security force, a militia, police, or ex-police with IDs and uniforms.

As was the case in the Balkans, so many young men are out of work that the term "criminal" or "gang member" doesn't mean much. "Crime" is often the key to income of any kind. The irony is that the security services, military, and police are often the only major new source of real jobs in such areas, other than the paid militias (generally paid much lower), local security forces (very low pay), security guards or protection forces (often paid even less), and insurgency (paid sometimes).

The end result is not a militia threat per se, but rather an increasingly blurred mix of all of the security elements in Iraq, of which the militias are only a part. The Iraqi forces are all plagued by desertions and AWOLs that can go into the militias, local security forces, crime and the insurgency. In addition to the actual use of militias, sects and ethnic factions make use of police and security services. The end result is a virtual "stew" of factional forces with different recruiting bases and cross-membership.

This is compounded by the real-world nature of today's militias. Today's militias are not the militias of 2003. The military, security services, and police all recruited extensively from the pre-invasion militias once they began to form in 2003, and have drawn on them ever since. Many of the best elements of the militias were blended into the Iraqi forces from the spring of 2004 onwards, although best does not mean loyalty to the nation versus sectarian or ethnic faction.

If one looks at today's militias, SCIRI's forces are often new or lower grade older personnel which generally are much better suited to sectarian and ethnic struggles than the SCIRI forces trained by Iran through 2003 as regular forces. They are often more loyal to local leaders than any given national leader, and it is often difficult to distinguish between true militia, associate, and someone in the security services that may support the SCIRI militia. Some are getting training in Iran, but it seems more paramilitary than military. The 25,000 figure is the worst of WAGs.

Sadr's "militia" has little real training and a comparatively loose organization and hierarchy. In some areas, like Basra, it may be more a matter of loose affiliation than real control. In others, it is often nothing more than local volunteers, many who only serve on a part-time basis. The cadres with real discipline and training seem to be small, although the "Mahdi Army" is still a very real force and the fact they can draw on so many local supporters and volunteers in areas with a high percentage of Sadr loyalists can make them even more dangerous. The 10,000 figure quoted for this force another WAG, but it may understate popular support in pro-Sadr areas. They can easily assemble instant mobs of young men.

Other militias are smaller, like Dawa, and are often more leadership security forces or local security forces than real militias. They too have elements more loyal to a given local, tribal, or religious leader than a national leadership. Only

the Kurdish forces seem to have a clear hierarchical structure tied to one leader, but they are still split between Talibani and Barzani, and have tribal elements.

No one, however, can really tell the difference between such forces and the police in a number of areas. The police mix the "trained and equipped" police that are in the MNF-I totals -- a mix of local police and security forces -- with various other protection and guard forces. They too can include criminals and gang members, particularly since criminal prosecution has often been negligible and record checks of behavior since 2003 can be meaningless.

The lines between gang member, criminal, sectarian or ethnic force, insurgent, and security force are often tenuous, and the difference between criminal and corrupt is even harder to determine.

The worst examples of this "blurring of all the lines" are the exception, and not the rule. There are many parts of Iraq with reasonable security at the local level. However, the quality of Iraqi forces in those areas with high levels of sectarian and ethnic tension has been hurt. The mix of Iraqi forces, militias, local security, insurgents, and criminals in these high-tension areas could also lead to the same extreme violence and criminal behavior in a major civil war that occurred in the Balkans and Africa when factional forces had strong criminal elements.

On the other hand, if the new Iraqi government takes hold, many of these elements might well turn back towards a far more normal way of life, the moment that there are real jobs and careers and most of the various factions see there is a better future in living together than fighting.

Solving the problem doesn't mean pushing low quality and factional militias into the regular Iraqi forces. It means creating a national government and a national political compromise that removes much of the cause for sectarian and ethnic strife. If Iraq's political leaders can do this, many of these problems can gradually be solved. If they fail, spotlighting the militia simply ignores the real nature of the problem and the scale of its complexity.