



WHO'S BEHIND THE VIOLENCE IN IRAQ?

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Though Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, was killed by coalition forces this month, violence has continued in Iraq because of the complexity of insurgent groups.

When Operation Iraqi Freedom began in early 2003, few expected Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's military to pose much of a threat to the U.S.-led forces.

But soon after, coalition forces faced hostility from a variety of local and foreign insurgent groups using roadside bombs, sniper attacks and abductions to disrupt the process of rebuilding Iraq.

Tactics and ideologies

The fighters are a wide array of people with very different ideologies.

Some groups are "former regime elements" -- Sunni Muslims loyal to Saddam's Baath Party, which ruled the country until 2003, who fight for the reestablishment of a Sunni government.

Others groups are tribal leaders who fear a Western-style democracy would take away their power.

Still others are motivated by religious extremism.

Baathists and nationalists

Though the country's population is predominantly Shiite Muslim, the Washington Post reported that 90 percent of the insurgents are Sunni Muslims who lost political power when the United States invaded.

The Baathist insurgents are former military officers displaced after the Coalition Provisional Authority disbanded Iraq's Army.

One of the largest of these "Saddamist" groups is the Islamic Army in Iraq, which, according to Ahmed Hashim's book "Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq," could have up to 17,000 members.

Three-quarters of the group's attacks have been against U.S. forces and non-Iraqi contractors, the Washington Post reported.

Mahdi Army and tribal groups

The Mahdi Army is a militant tribal Shiite group based out of Sadr City (near Baghdad) and led by Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite cleric whose father was the most powerful Shiite cleric in Iraq before he was assassinated along with two sons in 1999.

On March 28, 2004, the U.S. occupation authorities closed a newspaper published by al-Sadr because it incited violence against Americans. The newspaper was later reopened.

Several days later, al-Sadr urged his followers to "terrorize" their enemy, and the ensuing battle resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Shiite fighters and dozens of Americans.

Al-Sadr agreed to a truce in June 2004, but violence continued later that summer in Baghdad and Najaf, a holy Shiite Muslim city south of Baghdad.

The number of attacks by the group has decreased significantly since then.

Religious extremists

One of the "largest and deadliest" insurgent groups, according to Hashim, is a radical Kurdish group formed in late 2003, Ansar al-Sunnah, determined to create an Islamic state in Iraq.

The group is responsible for one of the deadliest insurgent attacks: a roadside bomb that killed 14 Marines in August 2005.

According to various reports, Ansar al-Sunnah is responsible for a number of abductions and executions.

Al-Qaida in Iraq

Perhaps the best known group, al-Qaida in Iraq, is a foreign terrorist organization driven by Islamic fundamentalism.

The group, part of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, was lead by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi until he was killed in an air strike on June 7.

In a letter to al-Qaida, Zarqawi vowed to expel the United States from Iraq, establish a Sunni Muslim state, and spread conflict to Israel and other countries.

Al-Qaida in Iraq is "responsible for the most horrific events like kidnapping, beheadings, and suicide attacks specifically aimed at intimidating the public," according to a 2005 report from the U.S. Department of State.

One of the group's first attacks was the bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad in August 2003 which killed the top U.N. representative in Iraq.

In February 2006, al-Qaida in Iraq may have been responsible for the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque, one of the holiest Shiite shrines, leading to a spike in violence and retaliation from Shiite Muslims.

Al-Zarqawi openly stated one of his goals was to incite a civil war between Iraq's Shiites and Sunnis.

Securing Iraq

In June, a milestone for restoring national security was reached when the newly chosen prime minister named new interior and defense ministers.

However, it is still unclear when the United States will be able to withdraw the more than 125,000 troops still in Iraq.

"We are beginning soon a discussion with them on a road map, in terms of conditions and the level of support that they would need," U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad said on the June 9 NewsHour with Jim Lehrer.

"I think we will reach an understanding with them in the course of the coming months."

--Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra

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