

Commentary: Use of Sticky Bombs Increases in Baghdad

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Introduction

In *Iraq Report XI*, ISW predicted the increased use of sticky bombs as a result of a shift in the tactics of insurgent groups.¹ In the past month, it appears that this prediction has proven correct, with increasing attacks on Coalition and Iraqi Forces and Iraqi civilians. The weapon used in these attacks is commonly referred to as an adhesive IED, magnet bomb, or sticky bomb. The bombs offer the attacker an opportunity to fix the bomb (using either adhesive or magnets) to a specific car quickly and without detection, and to detonate the explosive charge remotely.² The increased use of sticky bombs represents a devolution in the sophistication of attacks on Coalition and Iraqi military personnel, police, and Iraqi civilians. It also represents a shift in tactics from large-scale attacks to more targeted operations.³

Opinions are mixed as to whether the increased use of sticky bombs is the work of the Sunni insurgent group Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), or Iranian-backed Shi'a militias.⁴ This commentary briefly examines the recent use of sticky bombs and offers analysis on those behind these attacks.

November 2008 – Attacks in Baghdad Escalate

On November 4, 2008, seven bombs exploded in several neighborhoods of the Iraqi capital, a relatively high number given the security improvements of the last few months. Three of these attacks were confirmed sticky bombs. Two of them targeted public areas, a fish stand and a bus station in the Mashtal district of Baghdad.⁵ Together these sticky bomb attacks killed twenty-two people and injured forty-seven. The third sticky bomb targeted police chief secretary Ali Jameel in Karada, wounding three people.⁶ The day before, a sticky bomb wounded Oil Minister Abdul-Sahib Salman Qutub and seriously

injured his driver.⁷ It thus appears that the attacks are targeting both the Iraqi population at large and government officials, though in both cases casualties from sticky bombs are usually low.⁸

Other attacks occurred throughout the month, including a November 8 attack on a car belonging to the Iraqi Ministry of Health, and a November 24 attack on a bus transporting Trade Ministry employees.⁹ The Iraqi Ministry of Defense claims that in November 2008, a total of twenty-eight sticky bombs struck Baghdad.¹⁰ The lethality of these attacks is on the rise. Compared to the thirteen deaths in the November Trade Ministry attack alone, only nine people were killed in total by sticky bombs in October, and only three in the month of July.¹¹ The attack indicates a shift in tactics to targeting specific individuals, and a rise in the overall level of attacks. As predicted, it appears that insurgent groups are attempting to regain some of the ground lost since 2006 to Coalition and Iraqi Forces.

AQI-affiliated groups or Shi'a Militias?

Conflicting reports exist surrounding who is responsible for the increase in sticky bomb attacks. In many cases, the reporting on these incidents is unclear as to the specific nature of the attack, making the study of sticky bombs difficult. Correctly identifying the perpetrator, however, is essential for successfully combating the attacks and identifying existing threats against Coalition and Iraqi Forces, and Iraqi civilians. Reports suggest that responsibility lies with AQI (or AQI affiliates) or with Shi'a militias.

Identifying those responsible by tracing where the sticky bombs are produced is difficult. Insurgents may be purchasing them on the black market, or two different groups using sticky bombs may obtain them from the same source. A third possibility is that AQI or Shi'a militias are making the bombs themselves rather than buying them from a provider. The construction of sticky bombs is relatively simple, as Lt. Col. Steven Stover explained to the New York Times on November 13: "You take a bit of C4 or some other type of compound...you can go into a hardware store, take the explosive and combine it with an accelerant, put some glass or marble or bits of metal in front of it and you've basically got a homemade Claymore."¹² These varied possibilities demand that analysts look for other indicators in determining who is responsible for the recent sticky bomb attacks.

In this light, motive is one strong indication that AQI may be behind the recent violence. The major targets of sticky bombs are civilians, anti-AQI Sons of Iraq (SOI), and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In the past, AQI has been known to use spectacular attacks to intimidate civilians and assassinate both

SOI and ISF. Additionally, AQI does seek to stir sectarian violence prior to the upcoming provincial elections. In recent months, such sticky bomb attacks by AQI have been reported in Ninewa, Diyala, and Babil provinces.¹³

Coalition Forces seem to agree with this analysis. At a press conference November 20, Brigadier General David G. Perkins explained that representatives of progress in Iraq, including government leaders, are “threats to al-Qaeda.”¹⁴ Finally, an AQI operative described as a sticky bomb “facilitator” was arrested in Anbar province September 21, 2008.¹⁵ Ramadi, the city in which the arrest took place, was an Al-Qaeda stronghold prior to clearing operations by Coalition Forces in 2006. Additionally, in the first week of November alone, twelve militants attempting to smuggle sticky bombs into Ramadi were captured.¹⁶ This evidence indicates that AQI has the supplies, motive, and network to carry out sticky bomb attacks.

However, though AQI is often the first to be blamed for sticky bomb attacks, it is possible that other actors, Shi’a militias, are responsible. Evidence suggests that Shi’a militants were obtaining training in Iran in the use of sticky bombs.¹⁷ In a twelve week program, at least one hundred militants were trained in the use of “new types of arms and explosives,” including “small bombs which are attached under cars.”¹⁸ The training was provided by the Iranian Quds Force (a branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, which oversees Iranian militant activity in Iraq).¹⁹ While the camps were situated in Iran and run by Quds Force, Lebanese Hizbullah, whose fighters speak Arabic, carried out most of the training.²⁰ Additionally, many of the sticky bombs previously used in Baghdad have been Iranian-made.²¹ They are also being used in mostly Shi’a areas, which would be where a Shi’a militia would be able to operate more freely.

Despite the tendency to place blame for these attacks on AQI alone, Shi’a militias are also motivated to use sticky bombs. Like AQI, Shi’a militias are interested in destabilizing Iraq prior to provincial elections. They also have the capacity to conduct these attacks, meaning that it is unlikely AQI alone is responsible for the recent violence.

An examination of the location of recent attacks also supports the conclusion that Shi’a militias have a hand in the violence. Out of about thirty-two car bomb attacks in Baghdad in November 2008, about twenty-two of them were in the predominantly Shi’a area of East Baghdad. Of the roughly eleven sticky bomb attacks in Baghdad that were confirmable in the open source, seven occurred in East Baghdad.²² Coalition Forces have also been arresting Shi’a operatives in the same areas of East Baghdad

in which attacks have been occurring.²³ Those arrested have been members of Iranian-backed Special Groups, including Katai'b Hizbullah which is supported by the Quds Force.²⁴ While no confirmed link between Katai'b Hizbullah and sticky bomb attacks exists in the open source, in many areas in which attacks have been occurring, these groups have a strong presence.

Both Groups Bear Some, Though not Equal, Responsibility

As mentioned above, AQI has an interest in promoting violence, and the September 21 arrest in Anbar demonstrates that AQI is actively involved in the use of sticky bombs. As Coalition Forces explain, this is a logical response by AQI to the present security environment. However, the recent attacks have mostly taken place in areas of Baghdad which are heavily Shi'a, and to which Sunni groups would have little access. It is unlikely, for example, that Al-Qaeda is behind a November 6 car bomb attack inside Sadr City, an overwhelmingly Shi'a neighborhood in East Baghdad.²⁵ Additionally, it is clear that Shi'a militias were receiving training in Iran. Their bombs are Iranian-produced and a resurgence of their activity has been widely predicted. Finally, AQI's capability has been degraded since the Sunni awakening and the Surge. Their capacity to carry out such attacks has been compromised and their network is weakened. This reduces the likelihood that AQI would be able to carry out a significant number of well-coordinated attacks, especially complex operations like the planting of sticky bombs in Shi'a neighborhoods.

It appears that both AQI and Shi'a militias have a hand in the recent rise in the use of sticky bombs. This was also the assessment of General Raymond Odierno, Commanding General of Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I), who identified a change in both AQI and Iran-backed Shi'a militia tactics to include assassinations, the type of attack for which sticky bombs are generally employed. As provincial elections draw near, assassinations are more likely to be the method by which both AQI and Shi'a militias try to disrupt the political process.²⁶

Implications

The use of sticky bombs represents a change not only in tactics, but in the security environment in Baghdad. Security offensives in 2007 and 2008 have targeted the networks of militias and terrorist groups and limited their ability to carry out attacks. While the threat of sticky bombs remains, their use

indicates a reduction in the enemies' capacity to carry out large-scale, complicated attacks. The use of sticky bombs also indicates the rising importance of the Iraqi political process. The recent targeting of government employees and officials indicates the priorities of those perpetrating the attacks, demonstrating their perception of a functioning political process as a threat.

The sticky bomb trend must be monitored closely. As provincial elections near, the assassination of government and military leaders will become more likely. While sticky bomb attacks are relatively small-scale, the targeting of high profile individuals could have serious consequences. Analysts also need to pay close attention to emerging patterns in attacks in order to best identify those responsible.

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- ¹ Marisa Cochrane, "Special Groups Regenerate," Iraq Report XI, Institute for the Study of War, August 29, 2008.
- ² Katherine Zoepf And Mudhafer Al-Husaini, "Militants Turn to Small Bombs in Iraq Attacks," *New York Times*, November 13, 2008.
- ³ Leila Fadel, "Assassinations Replacing Car Bombs in Iraq," *Knight Ridder News*, October 9, 2008.
- ⁴ See Also: Claire Russo and Marisa Cochrane, "Recent Attacks in Iraq: Al-Qaeda or Special Groups?" Backgrounder #35, Institute for the Study of War, October 6, 2008.
- ⁵ Riyadh Mohammed and Katherine Zoepf, "New Blasts in Uptick of Iraq Violence," *New York Times*, November 4, 2008; "14 Killed in Separate Bomb Blasts in Baghdad," *Voice of America*, November 4, 2008.
- ⁶ "Security Official Wounded in Baghdad Blast," *Aswat al-Iraq*, November 4, 2008.
- ⁷ Hamid Ahmed, "Bombings kill 6, wound at least 25 in Baghdad," *Associated Press Worldstream*, November 3, 2008.
- ⁸ "Militants Turn to Small Bombs in Iraq Attacks."
- ⁹ "3 People Wounded in Bombing in Baghdad," *Aswat al-Iraq*, November 8, 2008; Bushra Juhi, "2 Deadly Bombings in Baghdad Kill at Least 18," *Associated Press*, November 24, 2008.
- ¹⁰ "NPR Journalists Narrowly Escape Car Bombing." Need the full citation here.
- ¹¹ "Militants Turn to Small Bombs in Iraq Attacks."
- ¹² "Militants Turn to Small Bombs in Iraq Attacks."
- ¹³ See: "Iraqi Al-Sharqiyah TV Rounds up Security, Political Developments in Country," *BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political*, November 9, 2008; "Iraqi Kurd parties reject support councils, constitution change; update 10 Nov," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, November 11, 2008; "Sticky IED Kills Civilian in Babil," *Aswat al-Iraq*, December 2, 2008.
- ¹⁴ See: MNF-I Press Briefing, "Operational Update: Brig. Gen. Perkins, Nov. 20," November 20, 2008; Richard Tomkins, "Analysis: Car Bombings Return to Baghdad," *United Press International*, November 28, 2008; "Assassinations Replacing Car Bombs in Iraq."
- ¹⁵ MNF-I Press Release No. 20080924-07, "ISF Disrupt Terrorist and Insurgent Activities, Uncover Weapons Cache," September 24, 2008.
- ¹⁶ "Alarm Over Growing use of 'Sticky Bombs' in Iraq," *Reuters*, November 7, 2008.
- ¹⁷ "Special Groups Regenerate."
- ¹⁸ "Official Warns of 'Special Groups' Returning to Iraq; Al-Sharqiyah Update," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, June 18, 2008.
- ¹⁹ "Iranian Backed Terrorism Suspects Captured," *American Forces Press Service*, October 30, 2008; "Special Groups Regenerate," p. 7.
- ²⁰ "U.S.: Iraq Hit Squads Being Trained in Iran," *Associated Press*, August 15, 2008; "Hizbullah Training Us: Mehdi Army," *The National*, August 24, 2008.
- ²¹ "Front Page: Government Acts to Limit Targeting of its Staff by 'Smart' IEDs," *Al-Mada*, July 11, 2008 (Translated from Arabic).
- ²² The Iraqi Ministry of Defense reports a total of 28 sticky bomb attacks in November 2008. See: "NPR Journalists Narrowly Escape Car Bombing." ISW independent research in the English and Arabic open source was only able to reliably confirm 11 specific attacks as sticky bombs. However, tabulations indicated that both these attacks and all confirmed car bomb attacks occurred more in East Baghdad than West Baghdad.
- ²³ "Coalition forces kill suspected Katai'b Hizbullah Gunman," *Aswat al-Iraq*, November 11, 2008; "US Military Arrests Suspected Militants in Baghdad," *Associated Press*, November 23, 2008; MNF-I Press Release No. A081129a-123, "Coalition forces continue to target Katai'b Hizbullah (Baghdad)," November 29, 2008.
- ²⁴ For more on these militias, see: Kimberly Kagan, "Iran's Proxy War Against the United States and the Iraqi Government," Iraq Report VI, Institute for the Study of War, August 20, 2007; Marisa Cochrane, "Special Groups Regenerate," Iraq Report XI, Institute for the Study of War, August 29, 2008; Bill Roggio, "Coalition forces target Iranian-backed Hizbullah Brigades in Baghdad," *Long War Journal*, December 3, 2008.
- ²⁵ See: "Separate Blasts Kill Three in Baghdad," *United Press International*, November 6, 2008.
- ²⁶ "Assassinations Replacing Car Bombs in Iraq."