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Backgrounder

Baghdad Neighborhood Project: Rusafa

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Overview

The Rusafa security district provides an interesting look at a complex Baghdad neighborhood with strategic significance and changing demographics; it is an area in which U.S. and Iraqi forces have sought to revive and stabilize the political and economic life, while combating extreme violence caused by Jaysh al-Madhi (JAM) militias and al-Qaeda insurgents. Rusafa is a mix of large markets, government ministries, bus stations, educational institutions such as Mustansiriya University, hotels, hospitals, and the Rule of Law Green Zone. Yet, the district has also been plagued by sectarian violence and deadly car bombs, which often target Rusafa's markets and bus stations.

Rusafa has, since February, become a focal point for Coalition clearing and reconstruction efforts and this work has continued over the last eight months.¹ Currently, U.S. soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 2nd Combined Arms Battalion, 69th Arms Regiment, both attached to the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, are responsible for Rusafa.

Situated on the eastern bank of the Tigris River in the heart of the city, Rusafa, together with areas of the Kadimiya district opposite the Tigris, comprise what is also known as Old Baghdad, the historic capital of the Abbasid Empire. Thus, the area along the river is composed of narrow and winding lanes, bustling intersections, and historic sites. The district of Adhamiyah neighbors Rusafa to the north, and the districts of Karadah and 9 Nissan border to the south and southeast. The most important neighboring district is Sadr City, which is situated opposite the Army Canal that runs along the northeastern border of Rusafa. The strong influence of Shia militias that arises from such proximity is therefore no surprise. Other neighborhoods within Rusafa include: Abu Nuwas, Fadhil, Idrissi, Keeylani, Medical City, Mustansiriya, Neel, Nidal, Saadoun, Sheik Omar, and 14 July.

Rusafa is and was primarily a working-class neighborhood. Although it was once a mixed neighborhood, with Shia, Sunni, and even Christian populations, the demographics have greatly shifted in recent years on account of increased sectarian violence. Today, Rusafa is

predominantly Shia, with a Sunni enclave in the Fadhil neighborhood, located in northern Rusafa near Adhamiyah.ⁱⁱ The district is heavily infiltrated by Shia militias. Sunni insurgents and al-Qaeda have continued to target Coalition forces and (predominantly Shia) Iraqi civilians in the area. Car bomb detonations have persisted, despite targeted and successful raids aimed at shutting down the Rusafa car bomb network.

Rusafa's Strategic Significance

Located in the heart of the Iraqi capital, Rusafa naturally has a strategically significant role in the security and stability of Baghdad. Bisected by a major thoroughfare, Khalid Bin Al Walid Street, and containing a number of bus stations, Rusafa is an important transportation hub for buses traveling to Sadr City and those entering or leaving the capital for other parts of the country.ⁱⁱⁱ With important bridges across the Tigris leading directly into Rusafa, much of the traffic from western to eastern Baghdad, and vice versa, passes through the district. Yet these key transportation routes have also enabled Shia militias to flow easily from Sadr City, into a number of majority Sunni areas of western Baghdad to conduct sectarian cleansing.

Rusafa's strategic significance extends beyond its importance as a major transportation hub and channel; indeed, Rusafa is a center of commerce and governance. There are numerous markets in the district, selling a variety of goods including clothing, food, pets, books, hardware, and auto parts. Baghdad's largest and oldest bazaar is the Shorja market;^{iv} although the market once drew both Sunni and Shia populations, "amid the violent division of Iraq's religious communities it is now mostly a Shia Muslim area, and a target for Sunni extremist groups."^v Other markets include the Bab al-Sharqi market, the Sadriya market, the recently restored Abu Nuwas fish market, the al-Ghazil pet market, the Nadha area market, and the Palestine Market. The markets of Rusafa are continual targets for Sunni insurgent attacks. In an effort to stem such violence and revive the once-thriving markets, Coalition and Iraqi forces have sought to create 'safe markets' by erecting concrete barriers to prevent car and suicide bombs.^{vi} Barriers have been constructed around areas of the Shorja and Palestine markets under the 'safe markets' project.

A number of government ministries are also based in Rusafa, including the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior, both of which have strong links to Shia militia groups.^{vii} The Ministry of Interior is most rife with sectarianism, making reform of the body a necessary endeavor. Efforts to improve governance and strengthen the rule of law have resulted in the construction of the Rusafa Rule of Law Complex, also known as the Rule of Law Green Zone. The heavily-fortified and arms-free complex houses legal facilities and a courtroom, judges, jurists, and their families, a detention center containing about 4,000 detainees awaiting processing, and the Baghdad police college. The Rule of Law Complex seeks to enhance and expedite legal processes, while ensuring the security of judges and jurists.^{viii} According to *The New York Times* Chief Military Correspondent, Michael R. Gordon, "The Rusafa complex is still in its early days. Since the court began hearing cases in June, it has tried only 43 defendants, a rate of about one suspect a day."^{ix}

Various other factors account for the strategic significance of Rusafa. First, most foreign reporters are based out of hotels in Rusafa, primarily the Ishtar Sheraton Hotel, Baghdad Hotel, and the Palestine Hotel, all of which are located on the Abu Nuwas pedestrian street. Second, Rusafa contains a number of educational institutions, the most prominent of which is Mustansiriya University. Although the university is located in a majority Sunni area of Rusafa, students at Mustansiriya are primarily female and Shia; the university has therefore become a

target for suicide bomb attacks and sniper fire.^x Third, the Rusafa district also houses a number of medical facilities, including Baghdad's largest hospital, located in the area of northwestern Rusafa known as Medical City.^{xi} Fourth, Rusafa is important for securing Baghdad's supply of energy. The district contains a one of Baghdad's power control stations and what is more, oil pipelines that carry fuel from elsewhere in Iraq to the power plants in the Karkh district of Baghdad pass through Rusafa.^{xii} Vandalism of these pipelines, especially in the Rusafa district, has "greatly affected the [equal] distribution of power."^{xiii}

Ultimately, Rusafa is important because it contains many key economic, political, educational, and medical institutions, the stability and security of which are critical to the success of the Baghdad Security Plan and the greater Coalition operations in Iraq. Rusafa also straddles a sectarian fault-line, where the Shia militias that dominate the district face violent resistance from Sunni insurgents and al Qaeda strongholds. As a result of this ongoing territorial war, both Sunni and Shia civilians have fallen victim to sectarian cleansing, forced displacements, rocket attacks, mortar fire, and car bombs.

Sectarian Conflict and U.S. Operations in Rusafa

Because of Rusafa's unique strategic significance and demography, sectarian conflict has remained a critical and complex problem for the district. Following the Samarra mosque bombing of February 2006, forced displacement and cleansing by Shia death squads and persistent car bombings and sniper attacks by Sunni insurgents created a cycle of violence that U.S. forces sought to halt with Operation Together Forward I and II, which commenced in July and August 2006, respectively.^{xiv} Despite these operations, spectacular rocket, car and suicide bomb attacks on civilians in Rusafa's markets, bus stations, and crowded squares continued, and were especially lethal during the months of August and December, 2006.^{xv} In early December the 9th Iraqi Army Division and Coalition troops began operations "aimed at capturing and denying a safe haven to terrorist forces responsible for planning and executing violence against the Iraqi people."^{xvi} Additionally, the Iraqi Police and U.S. troops conducted a joint operation, termed Operation Armadillo, aimed at a car bomb cell in the area.^{xvii}

A string of vehicle and suicide bombs in January and February 2007 again targeted Rusafa's main markets and intersections, killing roughly 250 and wounding over 500.^{xviii} As the Baghdad Security Plan began in early February, Coalition and Iraqi forces continued operations against Sunni extremists and Shia insurgents in the area. On February 8, 2007, the Deputy Minister of Health and secret cell leader, Hakim al Zamili, was captured by Special Iraqi Army Forces at the Ministry of Health in Rusafa.^{xix} A few days later, on February 11, 2007, a combined Iraqi Army and Coalition task force conducted operations targeting car bomb networks in Rusafa.^{xx}

In February and March, as part of Operation Safe Market and the Baghdad Security Plan, temporary barriers were erected around an area of the Shorja market to control vehicular traffic, reduce the likelihood of car bombings, and revive the flagging economy.^{xxi} While improvised explosive device (IED) attacks continued throughout March, they were less deadly than the attacks of the previous two months. Moreover, on March 21, 2007, Coalition forces rolled up the Rusafa car bomb network, capturing its leader and three other key members.^{xxii} In April, Coalition and Iraqi forces continued cordon and search operations, particularly in the turbulent Fadhil neighborhood. Again, Sunni insurgents continued vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks. Unable to penetrate market protective barriers, these attacks detonated elsewhere. On April 12, 2007, a truck bomb detonated on Sarafiyah Bridge, killing ten as

vehicles fell into the Tigris.^{xxiii} The Sarafiyah Bridge was widely used by Shia death squads running from Sadr City to western Baghdad, and this bridge bombing was widely seen as further al Qaeda retaliation. Six days later, a car bomb detonated in a parking lot near the Sadriya market; while nearby concrete barriers remained intact, the VBIED still managed to kill a staggering 115 and to wound 137 more.^{xxiv}

In mid-June 2007, as the corps-offensive, Operation Phantom Thunder, commenced, Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces launched large clearing operations aimed at reducing sectarian violence and bringing increased security to Rusafa. U.S. and Iraqi forces also commenced a six-week project to construct barriers around the Palestine Market, again as an effort to boost security and promote economic revitalization.^{xxv} The court at the Rusafa Rule of Law Complex also began to hear cases in June, marking significant progress toward processing the large number of detainees that have resulted from increased Coalition and Iraqi operations.

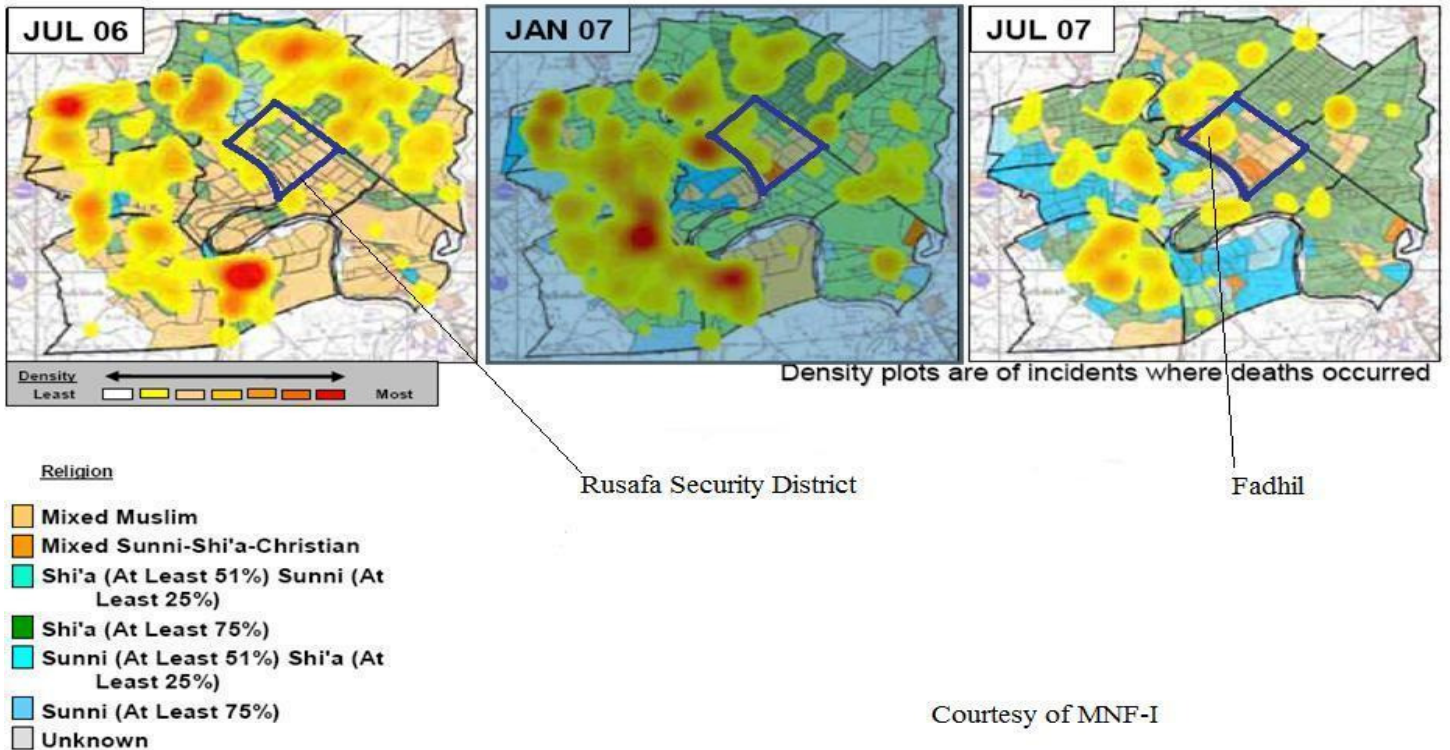
July and August 2007 also showed signs of a continued turnaround in the district, with the exception of the Fadhil neighborhood, which remains a strongly-held enclave of the Sunni insurgency. On July 16, 2007, U.S. Soldiers came under attack by small arms and rocket propelled grenade fire from the Islamic Bank Building in Fadhil.^{xxvi} In all, roughly 12 insurgents were killed in the three-hour long firefight.^{xxvii} Although fifteen car bomb attacks occurred in Rusafa in July 2007, the number of fatalities from the attacks decreased significantly, indicating that the 'safe markets' project has deterred the deadly attacks that plagued Rusafa's markets months before. Reconstruction efforts have also continued; by the end of August, the historic Abu Nuwas market was close to completion, following "five months of clean up, revitalization, and barrier emplacement."^{xxviii} On September 4, 2007, four suspected Sunni insurgents, including a suspected al Qaeda weapons facilitator and another key leader known as "the monster," were detained in Rusafa.^{xxix}

Ultimately, Coalition and Iraqi forces have made significant gains in the Rusafa District, particularly since mid-June. The measures taken to protect and revitalize Rusafa's markets have met with initial success. The emphasis that has been given to clearing Rusafa since the start of the Baghdad Security Plan has also brought a degree of stability to a complex and important district. Also, the construction of the Rule of Law Green Zone marks another key advance in rebuilding stable and functioning legal institutions. The Rusafa district has come far since the fall and winter of 2006; however, the Sunni insurgency in the Fadhil area remains a destabilizing force in the district. The persistence of car bomb attacks, albeit less lethal than before, evidences the need for continuing operations in Rusafa targeting violent elements in the area.



A Soldier from the 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment fastens a hook to a barrier during emplacement operations Feb. 16 in the Al Shorja market in the Rusafa security district of eastern Baghdad. (U.S. Dept. of Defense Photo)

Ethno-Sectarian Violence: Rusafa Security District



Timeline of sectarian violence and Coalition and Iraqi operations in Rusafa:

December 1, 2006	9 th Iraqi Army (IA) begins an operation to deny safe havens to those perpetrating violence.
December 2, 2006	Operation Armadillo is launched to search for a car bombing cell.
December 3, 2006	Morning rocket attacks where two rounds impacted buildings next to detainee facility. Midday rocket attack on an Iraqi school.
December 6, 2006	IED explosion near the old Ministry of Defense building. 15 killed, 25 wounded.
December 11, 2006	5 suspects arrested near Pharmacy College by the IA.
December 12, 2006	Car bomb detonates in al-Taiaran Square targeting day laborers.
December 27, 2006	Car bomb detonates near an IA checkpoint in an intersection linking Rusafa, Sadr City, and Adhamiyah.

January 22, 2007	Two car bombs detonate targeting Iraqis at a local market near al-Tair'rah Square. 60 killed, 152 wounded.
January 25, 2007	Motorcycle bomb detonates in Shoula Market, 13 wounded.
January 26, 2007	Bomb detonates in al-Ghazil pet market, 15 killed, 35 wounded. ^{xxx}
February 3, 2007	Truck bomb detonates targeting civilians at busy intersection, 105 killed, 251 wounded.
February 5, 2007	Car bomb detonates, 4 killed, 15 wounded.
February 8, 2007	Ministry of Health official implicated with rogue JAM captured today at Ministry building.
February 11, 2007	Raids conducted targeting Rusafa car bomb network; Rusafa a focal point in clearing operations.
February 12, 2007	Four bombs detonate near al Shorja and Bab al-Sharqi markets, 67 killed, 155 wounded. ^{xxxi}
March 11, 2007	Insurgents launch several attacks, including a suicide bomb attack at Mustansiriya University and a car bomb, at least 20 killed, 1 wounded.
March 19, 2007	Suicide bomb detonates at Shiite mosque near Shorja market, at least 4 killed, 30 wounded.
March 20, 2007	Car bomb explodes in crowd in the Sheik Omar area, at least 4 killed, 14 wounded.
March 21, 2007	Leader of Rusafa car bomb network captured. Three others also detained.
March 26, 2007	Car bomb detonates near Shorja market, 2 killed, 5 wounded. ^{xxxii}
April 10, 2007	MND-B and IA troops engage and kill three insurgents while conducting a routine cordon and search operation in Fadhil. 2 IA soldiers killed, four IA wounded, and sixteen U.S. troops wounded on during the small arms fire attack.
April 12, 2007	Operation Dixon, aimed at targeting VBIED networks in Rusafa, results in seizure of large Nitric Acid cache, three suspects also detained. Truck bomb destroys Sarafiyah Bridge, 10 killed as vehicles fell into the Tigris. ^{xxxiii}
April 18, 2007	Car bomb detonates in parking lot near Sadriya market, barriers emplaced around market not penetrated, 115 killed, 137 wounded. One of four

	bombs that detonated around Baghdad.
April 19, 2007	Car bomb detonates, 5 killed, 10 wounded.
April 28, 2007	MND-B Soldier killed when combat patrol attacked by small arms fire.
May 23, 2007	U.S. State Department convoy attacked by insurgents.
June 16, 2007	U.S. and Iraqi Forces begin 6-week project to emplace barriers around Palestine Market.
June 17, 2007	Coalition Forces (CF) and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) launch clearing ops to reduce sectarian violence and bring increased security.
June 20, 2007	2 suspects detained, 70 lbs of explosives recovered.
July 7, 2007	Car bomb detonates at IA checkpoint, 23 wounded (11 IA troops, 12 civilians).
July 8, 2007	Two car bombs detonate,
July 9, 2007	Bomb detonates in morning attack, 2 wounded; car bomb detonates in afternoon attack, 4 wounded.
July 14, 2007	Car bomb detonates, 2 killed, 5 wounded.
July 15, 2007	Car bomb detonates, 3 killed, 15 wounded. Five indirect fire rocket attacks cause minor damages to a building. One mortar round hits neighborhood, no damage or injury reports available.
July 16, 2007	12 insurgents killed during firefight in Fadhil. MND-B soldiers came under attack by small arms fire and RPGs received from Islamic Bank Building. Two car bombs detonate, 2 killed, 3 wounded.
July 18, 2007	Single rocket impact wounds 3 and causes minor damages to hospital.
July 28, 2007	Car bomb detonates, 2 killed, 5 wounded.
August 1, 2007	Four suspected insurgents detained, IED materials recovered.
August 6, 2007	IED explodes near bus, 20 wounded.
August 16, 2007	Car bomb explodes in parking garage, 3 wounded, 38 vehicles destroyed.

August 17, 2007	Roadside bomb kills 1 U.S. Soldier, wounds 2.
August 28, 2007	15 suspects detained and later released, including 8 Iranian nationals at a checkpoint in Abu Nuwas.
September 4, 2007	4 suspects detained, including suspected AQ weapons facilitator and another key leader known as "the monster."

Useful Links:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/baghdad_navigator/

http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2007/02/13/world/13iraq_map.ready.html

ⁱ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070211-09, "Operation targets car bomb manufacturers in Rusafa neighborhood," February 11, 2007; Oppel and Cave, "U.S. soldiers begin sweep in eastern Baghdad."

ⁱⁱ Richard A. Oppel Jr. and Damien Cave, "U.S. soldiers begin sweep in eastern Baghdad," *International Herald Tribune*, February 13, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kirk Semple, "Bombings kill at least 171 Iraqis in Baghdad," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2007; Alisha Ryu, "Suicide Bomber Blows up Crowded Bus in Baghdad," *Voice of America*, December 8, 2005.

^{iv} Damien Cave, "Bombs strike Baghdad market, killing dozens," *The International Herald Tribune*, February 12, 2007.

^v "Dozens killed in Baghdad Bombings," BBC News, February 12, 2007.

^{vi} Master Sgt. Dave Larsen, 1st Cavalry Division Public Affairs, "Plus-Up Improving Security, Quality of Life in Baghdad," U.S. Army News, June 5, 2007.

^{vii} Kimberly Kagan, "Iran's Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government, May 2006-August 20, 2007" Iraq Report (www.understandingwar.org), August 29, 2007: 15-16.

^{viii} Michael Gordon, "To shield justice, U.S. sets up court fortress," *The International Herald Tribune*, July 31, 2007; Michael Gordon, "In Baghdad, Justice Behind the Barricades," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2007; Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable with Army Colonel Mark Martins, Staff Judge Advocate for Multi-National Force-Iraq and Legal Advisor to General David Petraeus, Topic: Progress in Iraqi Rule of Law and the Baghdad Sniper Case, August 2, 2007.

^{ix} Michael Gordon, "To shield justice, U.S. sets up court fortress."

^x Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Zeena Kareem, "The World; Degrees of peril at a Baghdad university; Sectarian attacks have altered demographics at a co-ed campus. Now, even its mostly female student body isn't safe." *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 2007; Joshua Partlow, "Bombings kill 60 at University in Baghdad," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2007.

^{xi} Ned Parker and Ali Hamdani, "How violence is forging a brutal divide in Baghdad," *The Times (London)*, December 14, 2006.

^{xii} Press Conference by Dr. Karim Wahid, Iraqi Minister of Electricity, Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, MNF-I Spokesman, and Brigadier General Michael Walsh, Commanding General of the Gulf Region Division, Topic: Efforts Underway Specific to Electricity, Location: Combined Press Information Center, Baghdad Iraq, August 22, 2007.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} "Phase 2 of Operation Together Forward Kicks Off in Baghdad," Armed Forces Press Service, Washington, August 8, 2006.

^{xv} "Baghdad bomb hits shopping area," BBC News, August 3, 2007; "Baghdad blasts kill at least 19," BBC News, August 8, 2006; "Baghdad bomb attack kills eight," BBC News, August 16, 2006; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20061204-18, "Iraqi Troops Respond to Rocket Attacks in Central Baghdad," December 4, 2006; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20061206-10, "Iraqi Troops Respond to IED Blast in Central Baghdad," December 6, 2006; "Baghdad suicide bombing kills 70," BBC News, December 12, 2006; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20061228-01, "Car bomb detonates near Iraqi Army checkpoint," December 28, 2006.

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- ^{xvi} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20061201-03, “9th Iraqi Army Leads Operation in Baghdad,” December 1, 2006.
- ^{xvii} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20061202-13, “Iraqi Police Search Karrada Kharij,” December 2, 2006.
- ^{xviii} ^{xviii} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070122-09, “Al-Tair-rah Square targeted by double car bombs,” January 22, 2007; ^{xviii} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20070126-03, “Motorcycle bomb strikes Iraqi shoppers,” January 26, 2007; “Many die in Iraq pet market blast,” BBC News, January 26, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070204-04, “Truck Bomb Blast Rocks Rusafa,” February 4, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070206-06, “Nine Iraqis killed in two car bomb attacks in eastern Baghdad,” February 6, 2007; Damien Cave, “Two Markets Bombed in Central Baghdad, Killing at least 67 and Wounding 155,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2007.
- ^{xix} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release A070208c, “IA Captures Corrupt Ministry of Health Official,” February 8, 2007. For more information on Hakim al Zamili and his secret cell activity, see Kimberly Kagan, “Iran’s Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government, May 2006-August 20, 2007” Iraq Report (www.understandingwar.org), August 29, 2007.
- ^{xx} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070211-09, “Operation targets car bomb manufacturers in Rusafa neighborhood,” February 11, 2007.
- ^{xxi} Sudarsan Raghavan and Saad al-Izzi, “Visiting Iraq, McCain Cites Progress on Safety Issues,” *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2007; Department of Defense Special Briefing with General David Petraeus, Commander, Multi-National Force-Iraq, Topic: Update on Security Operations in Iraq, Location: Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, VA, April, 26, 2007.
- ^{xxii} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release A070322c, “Network leaders captured over last three days,” March 22, 2007.
- ^{xxiii} Brian Bennett, “Al-Qaeda Sends a Message,” *Time*, April 12, 2007.
- ^{xxiv} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070418-22, “131 dead, more than 160 wounded by multiple car bomb attacks in Baghdad,” April 18, 2007.
- ^{xxv} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070617-18, “Coalition forces, Iraqis team up for security clearing mission, barrier emplacements in Rusafa,” June 17, 2007.
- ^{xxvi} Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20070717-14, “Insurgents killed during Rusafa District firefight,” July 17, 2007.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxviii} Maj. Sean Ryan, “Restaurants opening on Abu Nuwas Street: revitalization efforts extend to surrounding areas,” Multi-National Corps-Iraq Press Release No. 20070828-07, August 28, 2007.
- ^{xxix} Multi-National Corps-Iraq Press Release A070904c, “Coalition Forces destroy explosives, kill two terrorists, detain 10 suspects,” September 4, 2007.
- ^{xxx} “Many die in Iraq pet market blast,” BBC News, January 26, 2007.
- ^{xxxi} Damien Cave, “Two Markets Bombed in Central Baghdad, Killing at least 67 and Wounding 155,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2007.
- ^{xxxii} “Factbox—Security developments in Iraq, March 26,” Reuters, March 26, 2007.
- ^{xxxiii} Brian Bennett, “Al-Qaeda Sends a Message,” *Time*, April 12, 2007.