

Backgrounder # 25

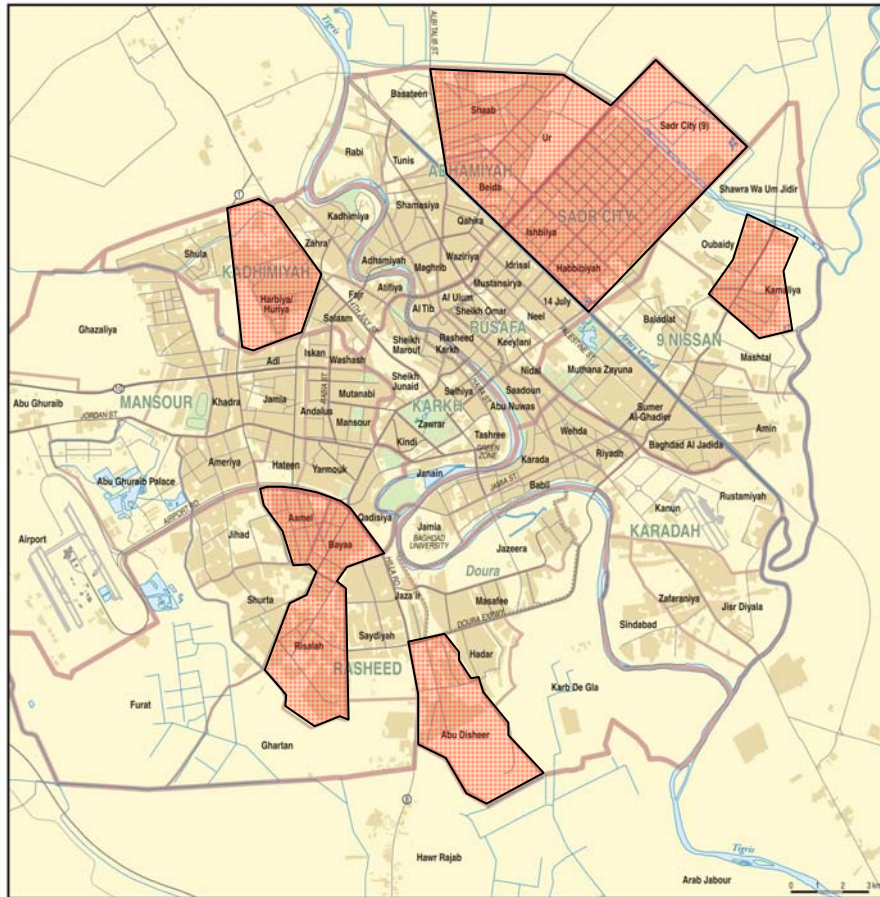
The Growing Threat of Special Groups in Baghdad

Marisa Cochran, Research Coordinator, Institute for the Study of War

While al-Qaeda in Iraq remains the primary threat in northern Iraq, violence by Special Groups—Shi'a extremist elements funded, trained, and armed by Iran—remains a key challenge to stability and security in central and southern Iraq. Despite reports in late 2007 that Iranian sponsorship of Special Groups had declined,¹ the trend in Special Groups activity in January and February 2008 suggests otherwise. In a recent briefing, Admiral Gregory Smith, the Deputy Spokesman for Multi-National Force-Iraq, explicitly stated, “The Special Groups’ activity has not decreased in recent months. They continue to be probably the most violent of the extremist groups that we’re seeing from Shi’a sects. [The] intent of Iran in supporting the training and financing we believe continues.”² Other officials from both the Departments of State and Defense have also cited an increase in Special Groups activity since the beginning of 2008.³ The use of highly-lethal explosively-formed penetrators (EFP), a hallmark of Iranian-backed groups, has risen since the start of 2008.⁴ Indeed, the month of January saw twelve EFP attacks, which was the highest monthly total of such attacks in over a year. This meant that, on average, from early January to early February, there was an EFP attack every three days.⁵

Special Groups activity in Baghdad is particularly troubling, as it threatens to undermine many of the security gains of the past year. In recent interview, Lt. General Ray Odierno stated his belief that Special Groups extremists are attempting to reinfiltrate into Baghdad, seeking to destabilize the Iraqi government and security forces and “create some chaos.”⁶ Special Groups in southern Baghdad have launched numerous indirect rocket and mortar fire attacks on the government and Coalition buildings in the International Zone and on Coalition bases in the southern part of the capital.⁷ Yet, Special Groups activity in northern Baghdad is especially of note. In the last few weeks, there has been a marked spike in Special Groups activity in Shaab

and Ur, in northwest Baghdad. According to Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), this area “has recently emerged as a safe haven for Special Groups.”⁸ Special Groups criminals in these northeast Baghdad neighborhoods have conducted acts of intimidation, kidnapping, and murder of local civilians, as well as attacks against Coalition Forces, Iraqi Police (IP), Iraqi National Police (INP), and Sons of Iraq (SOI).



Map 1: Areas of Special Group Activity in Baghdad, January–February 2008 (Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping)

A Special Groups cell, led by Arkan Hasnawi, is responsible much of the violence in Shaab and Ur and in the last two months, the cell has become increasingly active. In January, the Hasnawi cell was responsible for an EFP attack that killed an Iraqi woman and child; the attack was meant for Coalition Forces in the area.⁹ In the first week of February alone, these Special Groups criminals kidnapped three INP officers and six SOI security volunteers from checkpoints in Ur.¹⁰ While the exact reasons for the spike in activity are unknown, according to officials from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, the Hasnawi cell carried out these kidnappings because they felt their operations and control of the population were threatened by the increased presence of SOI forces in the neighborhood.¹¹

Links between Special Groups in Baghdad and Diyala

Special Groups cells in northeast Baghdad are closely linked to the Special Groups facilitation and financing networks in Diyala Province. Diyala is located northeast of Baghdad province and it shares a long eastern border with Iran. Key routes from Baghdad to Special Groups' strongholds in the Khalis corridor, Khan Bani Saad, and elsewhere in Diyala run through Shaab and Ur. Therefore, it is especially important to maintain a Special Groups safe haven in the northeast part of the capital. Additionally, given the number of Special Groups' weapons caches found north of Baghdad in the last few months, particularly in the cities of Husseiniyah, Jadidah, and Khan Bani Saad, Diyala it seems clear that the province functions as a weapons depot for Special Groups operating in northeast Baghdad.¹² What is more, a number of Special Groups members involved in weapons facilitation and training have been captured in Diyala.¹³ In mid-January 2008, Coalition Forces captured a Special Groups member who was responsible for the training of extremists in Khan Bani Saad and Baghdad, as well as the transfer and storage of weapons used by Special Groups.¹⁴ Special Groups in Diyala are also closely linked with the financial facilitation networks in Baghdad.¹⁵ In the last two months, Coalition Forces operations against Special Groups members in Baghdad revealed further evidence of the ties between Baghdad and the northeast belt. In late February, Coalition Forces detained another Special Groups leader in Shaab, who is a known financier believed to use Iranian money to support Special Groups in Diyala.¹⁶



Map 2: Diyala Province (Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping)

Operations against Special Groups in Northeast Baghdad

In response to the uptick in activity, Coalition and Iraqi Forces have conducted a number of intelligence-driven operations targeting Special Groups in northeast Baghdad. While Coalition Forces conducted several targeted raids in the month of January, the largest operations against Special Groups occurred in February. In a series of coordinated operations on February

11, twenty-five suspected Special Groups criminals were detained in the Sabak Sur neighborhood of Shaab and Ur.¹⁷ Days later, Coalition Forces captured another key Special Groups leader in Shaab, who was involved in weapons smuggling, IED attacks, and murder, as well as the planning and kidnapping of four INPs and three SOIs in the first week of February.¹⁸ The successful raids against the Hasnawi network continued into late February, when a top lieutenant of Arkan Hasnawi was captured by Multi-National Division-Baghdad (MND-B) Soldiers.¹⁹ The intelligence generated from these important captures aided Coalition efforts against the Iranian-backed groups in late February. MND-B Soldier conducted Operation Red River, targeting Special Groups in Shaab. Nineteen Special Groups suspects were captured during the day-long operation and local residents provided tips about and identification of each of the Special Groups members. It should be noted that while his network is being targeting in Baghdad, it is likely that Hasnawi himself is in Kermanshah, Iran.²⁰ It was recently reported that Hasnawi was instructed to leave Iraq prior to the distribution of a list individuals most wanted by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior.²¹

What is crucial to note, is that *all* of the aforementioned operations were driven by intelligence from local Iraqis. As more and more residents of Shaab and Ur were affected by the Special Groups violence, they increasingly offered tips to Coalition and Iraqi Forces.²² The cooperation of local Iraqis in targeting Special Groups is not limited to northeast Baghdad. Indeed, on February 15 and 16, SOI groups in Risalah turned several suspected Special Groups criminals into Coalition Forces.²³ In Aamel, Bayaa, Abu Disheer, and Kamaliya, tips from local Iraqis have led MND-B soldiers to a number of Special Groups' weapons caches.²⁴ Special Groups rightly feel threatened by the partnership between SOIs and Coalition Forces. Indeed, Iraqi intelligence chief, Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahwani, has seen evidence confirming that Iranian Qods Force operatives are seeking to "sabotage" the SOI movements across Iraq.²⁵

Conclusion

Special Groups remain the primary threat to stability in Baghdad. Much of the current violence in Baghdad is conducted by these Iranian-backed groups. It is no surprise, therefore, that the quietest day in Baghdad in the last four year coincided with the recent visit of the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.²⁶ The Qods Force reportedly instructed Special Groups to cease all activities during his visit, prompting the noticeable quiet.²⁷ Hence, it is clear that Iran exerts a great influence on security in Iraq, with its ability to direct Special Groups activity.

Coalition Forces have largely defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq in Baghdad, and therefore are now aggressively targeting Special Groups in the capital. Operations against Special Groups over the last few months have generated a great deal of intelligence as to the nature of these criminal networks, which suggests that the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces will continue to rack up successes. Nevertheless, there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding the extent of Special

Groups' networks. Given this uncertainty and the increasing Iranian influence in Iraq, it is likely that the fight against Special Groups will continue long after the battle against al-Qaeda in Iraq. What is clear from the last two months is that local Iraqis and SOI groups will continue to be proven weapons in the fight against Special Groups in Baghdad.

¹ Andrew Gray, "US sees decline in Iran-linked bombs found in Iraq," *Reuters*, November 1, 2007; Ann Scott Tyson, "U.S. Sees Decline in Bombs in Iraq; Fewer Projectiles Linked to Iran, but Officials Are Wary," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2007.

² Multi-National Force-Iraq Operational Update with Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, February 17, 2008.

³ Multi-National Force-Iraq Operational Update with Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, February 17, 2008; "Iranian-backed attacks in Iraq on the up: US official," *Agence France Presse*, February 15, 2008.

⁴ Explosively-formed penetrators (EFPs) are made from special copper disks manufactured with highly-calibrated machine tools. They have been used by Hezbollah in Lebanon, with Iranian military assistance. Many of the EFPs found in Iraq have the markings that indicate that they were manufactured in Iran.

⁵ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20080205-09, "Special group cell continues attacks on Coalition Forces," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 5, 2008.

⁶ Alexandra Zavis, "Iran puts off talks with US; The move comes as American military in Baghdad says Tehran is stirring violence there," *Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 2008.

⁷ Multi-National Force-Iraq Operational Update with Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, February 20, 2008.

⁸ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20080213-01, "Paratroopers target criminal elements, detain 25," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 13, 2008.

⁹ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20080120-03, "Baghdad woman, child killed by extremists," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 5, 2008.

¹⁰ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20030205-06, "Three Iraqi National Police officers abducted in Ur," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 5, 2008; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20080208-11, "Iraqi National Police disrupt kidnapping attempt on Sons of Iraq," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 8, 2008.

¹¹ Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No.20080208-11, "Iraqi National Police disrupt kidnapping attempt on Sons of Iraq," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 8, 2008.

¹² Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No.20080212-19, "Local tip yields cache," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 12, 2008; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No.20070226-01, "Iraqi Police, Coalition Forces Discover Large EFP Cache," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 26, 2007; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. 20071024-09, "Tip from Concerned Iraqi Citizen leads to large EFP, explosives cache," Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, October 24, 2007; Staff Sgt. Russell Bassett, 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, "Concerned Local Citizen Tip Leads Coalition Troops to Explosives Factory," Multi-National Force-Iraq Daily Stories, Sunday, November 4, 2007.

¹³ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A071117b, "Coalition forces kill one terrorist, target criminal element networks," November 17, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A071129a, "Coalition forces

detain five suspects, two armed men killed,” November 29, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A071204c, “Coalition forces detain two suspected criminal element members,” December 4, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A071031b, “Coalition forces capture targeted Special Groups member, eleven others detained,” October 31, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A071125b, “Coalition forces capture targeted criminal, detain one other suspect,” November 25, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A071108a, “Coalition forces capture Special Groups leader, five others detained,” November 8, 2007; Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A071027a, “Coalition forces capture extremist splinter group leader,” October 27, 2007.

¹⁴ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A080111a, “Coalition forces capture Special Groups facilitator, disrupt criminal networks,” January 11, 2008.

¹⁵ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. A080105a, “Coalition forces capture Special Groups facilitator; disrupt criminal network,” January 5, 2008; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. A080105c, “Coalition forces capture Special Groups leader; detain nine suspects,” January 05, 2008.

¹⁶ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20080221-1, “Paratroopers capture Special Groups criminal leader,” Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, February 21, 2008.

¹⁷ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No. 20080213-01, “Paratroopers target criminal elements, detain 25,” Multi-National Division-Baghdad PAO, February 13, 2008.

¹⁸ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20080216-05, “Paratroopers capture key Special Groups leader in Shaab,” 2nd BCT, 82nd Abn. Div., Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, February 16, 2008.

¹⁹ Multi-National Force-Iraq Press Release No.20080218-01, “Paratroopers capture Hasnawi lieutenant,” Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, February 18, 2008.

²⁰ Al Sharqiyah, “Baghdad Green Zone comes under mortar attack, other Iraqi events 23 Feb,” Supplied by BBC Monitoring Middle East, February 23, 2008.

²¹ Al Sharqiyah, “Baghdad Green Zone comes under mortar attack, other Iraqi events 23 Feb,” Supplied by BBC Monitoring Middle East, February 23, 2008.

²² Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No.20080223-03, “Operation Red River nets 19 detainees in Shaab,” Multi-National Division – Baghdad, February 23, 2008.

²³ Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. 20080217-06, “Sons of Iraq detain, turn over suspected criminal,” Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, February 17, 2008; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No.20080217-04, “SOI hand over two suspected criminals; MND-B Soldiers seize munitions,” Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, February 17, 2008.

²⁴ Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. 20080110-04, “Citizen tip leads Coalition to cache (Baghdad),” 4th IBCT PAO, 10th MTN DIV, Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, January 10, 2008; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. 20080119-09, “MND-B Soldiers discover EFP, arrest 3,” Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, January 19, 2008; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. 20080119-13, “MND-B Forces seize enemy rockets,” 4IBCT, 1ID Public Affairs, Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, January 19, 2008; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. 20080221-06, “MND-B Soldiers find EFP cache,” 4th BCT PAO, 1st Inf. Div., Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, February 21, 2008; Multi-National Force Iraq Press Release No. 20080217-04, “SOI hand over two suspected criminals; MND-B Soldiers seize munitions,” Multi-National Division – Baghdad PAO, February 17, 2008.

²⁵ Liz Sly, “Ahmadinejad's visit to Iraq worries some U.S. analysts,” *Chicago Tribune*, McClatchy-Tribune News Service, February 28, 2008; “Iran agents 'sabotaging' anti-Qaeda groups: Iraq intel chief,” *Agence France Presse*, February 27, 2008.

²⁶ Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, Commanding General, III Corps, “The Surge in Iraq: One Year Later,” Speech at the Heritage Foundation, March 05, 2008; Al-Sharqiyah Television, “Iraq roundup: Iranian president's visit boycotted; security update”, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, March 3, 2008.

²⁷ Al-Sharqiyah Television, “Iraq roundup: Iranian president's visit boycotted; security update”, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, March 3, 2008.