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Death Squad Operations in Iraq

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Key Points

* This paper outlines the affiliations and tactics of groups in the Iraqi insurgency.

* If the country degenerates further into civil war, particularly one with an Islamic revolutionary element, such groups are likely to play an increasing role

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In the harsh Iraqi insurgency which started immediately after the unseating of Saddam Hussein, several types of operations were adopted by many forces engaged in the conflict. A death squad operation type grew steadily in use until it became a common practice of all of the Iraqi factions – insurgents, militias and possibly certain parts of the Iraqi government as well. Each side in the conflict developed its own death squads to serve its motives, which differ greatly. Therefore, their techniques, targets and the way they cover themselves are different as well. So, in parallel with the guerilla war led by insurgents against the occupation forces and Iraqi government forces, there is something that can be accurately called a death squad war inside Iraqi society.

Throughout 2005 there were so many indications of growing use of death squads that questions arose as to whether the US command had devised a "Salvador solution". That would mean that the occupation forces themselves trained or helped to train professional death squads from among the local population to ensure the success of the occupation. Not only is this unlikely - there are no signs of such practices being encouraged by US personnel - but it would also be only a small part of the whole situation if it really occurred. The diversity of all the players in the Iraqi arena ensures that everyone pursues only their own interest. Alliances are fragile and shifting. In fact, the use of death squads by many different factions against each other has sparked extremist sectarian, political and ideological tensions among the local population. That is very dangerous for the occupation forces, who might be dragged into a high-intensity civil war, as well as Iraqi citizens.

Operation types

There are many ways in which death squads from different backgrounds operate. They differ in size, techniques used to reach their objective, means of covering or promoting their activities, motivations, selected targets and use of weapons and equipment. Unlike in many other insurgencies, death squads in Iraq do not carry out pogrom-like attacks on villages or city quarters, nor do they practise open mass murder operations against certain sects (they are conducted by suicide bombers who cannot be counted among death squads in the Iraqi conflict). Iraqi-type death squads rather carry out operations aimed at slow, gradual eradication of a certain group, or they directly attack individuals in pre-planned assassinations. They seldom try to cover their actions completely, instead they often count on the possible side effects of their operations and certain groups even boast of their operational successes. Death squads in Iraq are involved in 4th generation warfare, which has public and political effects, in pursuit of their goals.

Extrajudicial arrest is the operation which has attracted the greatest media, public and political attention and it usually ends in the execution and disposal of the victim's body. These operations are carried out by relatively large squads which drive around in cars. Victims are usually rounded up either directly from their

homes or on a street on their way to work or other place they frequent. The first technique is used particularly for rounding up more than one victim from a certain area at once. Targets are usually selected on the basis of sectarian or political motives. Members of religious or national minorities, tribes or former officials or armed forces personnel from the Saddam era are commonly targeted. Typically, this kind of operation involves the rounding up of victims by men wearing Iraqi police or army uniforms, carrying equipment, ID cards and riding in vehicles. The death squad is either a part of a police or army force or it is disguised. The process of rounding up then looks like an arrest rather than kidnapping, which it actually is. It leaves behind direct witnesses such as the victims' family members or friends. Another typical feature is the disposal of bodies. The bodies often show signs of torture – drill holes in soft body parts, joints and face, burns, acid burns and heavy beating. Victims have often been handcuffed and/or gagged. The style of killing itself is usually like an execution, for example by shooting the victim in the temple or the back of the head. However, special killing techniques, such as strangulation, suffocation or throat-cutting have also appeared. Bodies are often left in urban or suburban areas in large numbers so they can be easily found. There is no doubt that this kind of operation aims not only at eliminating its targets, but also at creating public and political side-effects such as terrorizing those who sympathize with the victim and other people.

The other two types of operation are similar to the first in locus delicti, which is a home or a public place a victim often frequents, like mosques. There have been assaults on homes, drive-by shootings. Small arms have been used in such cases. These attacks target specific persons or gatherings of people from certain groups, but they usually also cause casualties among family or staff members. Death squads made up of several men break into a house by force and kill selected victims using machine-guns, killing anyone whom they might see in the house. There have also been drive-by shootings in public places and victims, along with anyone who is with him (like bodyguards), have been killed by machine-gun fire. This type of attack is more crude than an extrajudicial arrest. Members of death squads involved in these kinds of operations usually do not wear armed forces' uniforms and they are quick to avoid identification. The most notable difference is that a killing by drive-by attack is usually carried out in day time, but assaults on homes are usually carried out at night, thus killing a victim in his sleep. These types of operation are quite bold and therefore highly intimidating, drastically reducing the sense of public safety. Targeted victims are either people of some importance – political or local, like tribal sheikhs, clergy, political party members and professionals, or they are members of a certain group which death squads try to eliminate gradually in this way.

Assaults on victims' homes seem to be a favourite option for groups which carry out ethnic cleansing of a certain area where the population is too ethnically mixed for mass public killings without killing members of one's own sect or group. In such cases, a warning to leave the area often precedes a direct assault, which might be a warning to other members of a given group. Assaults on homes are also carried out against discovered hide-outs of an "enemy" group's armed forces or offices. In all these cases, the technique was also used to kidnap the target – the victim was dragged into a car after being threatened with death or through the direct use of force. As a result, victims can be interrogated and they are often executed afterwards. On the whole, these types of operation attract a lot of attention and are often used, and later officially proclaimed, as revenge killing, thus creating a chain of revenge killings between certain groups.

Another type of operation is the use of explosives, especially improvised devices (IEDs). These are used in several ways, but they always target a specific person or a specific gathering of people from a certain group. They may be left along the route a victim is expected to take and then set off by remote control. Such events usually occur near the victim's home. Booby traps have been used in cars or houses and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) have been used to target cars or houses of victims. All these types of attack do not need the attacker to approach a victim directly or even appear on the scene at the time of the explosion. They target almost exclusively individuals of some political or local importance and, therefore, they differ from bombings arranged to kill masses of people in public places like suicide bombings.

In one case, there was a suicide bombing during a funeral. Such an operation is carried out by a suicide bomber to inflict further damage on the family of a victim who was killed by an ordinary death squad attack before. A special operation type is the use of snipers. Snipers are commonly used by insurgents against occupation forces and command staff in Iraq, but they were also used to carry out political assassinations. Seldom operating in a squad (they operate as a solitary sniper or a pair of operatives) these professional killers are used by different groups to carry out targeted killings against important and well-protected individuals of other groups. This does not create a feeling of public insecurity as much as other types of death squad operations. Yet it still serves the purpose of harming other groups and can exert heavy psychological pressure on its influential members who cannot be reached easily in their homes, offices or public places.

Special Police Commandos and Badr brigades

Throughout year 2004, Special Police Forces were created under the government of Iyad Allawi as a part of the new Iraqi police. Originally these paramilitary forces consisted of approximately 5,000 troops that were divided into three divisions: the commandos, the public-order brigades and the mechanized brigades which were later to be transformed into a military unit under the Iraqi army leadership. Many Special Police Commandos personnel, unlike those from ordinary police ranks and the Public Order Brigades, were recruited from former Ba'ath armed forces' officers and soldiers brought back to duty by the then Sunni minister of interior, Falah al-Naqib, without the knowledge of US advisers, who later approved them nevertheless for their experience on the ground.

General Adnan Thatbit, also a former high-ranking Ba'ath Party officer, was chosen as the leader of the Special Police Commandos. In late 2004 the Commandos were sent to frontline fighting and the Public Order Brigades were officially applied as a second wave force in battles for rebellious cities led by the occupation forces assisted by the new Iraqi army (Mosul, Ramadi, Samarra). They were both then practically put in charge of operations to cleanse the city after military units did the fighting. Along with street gunbattles and search and destroy operations which targeted insurgents' hide-outs, the Special Police Commandos ran death squad operations in reconquered cities – to root out the remainder of local insurgent networks and their suspected supporters. Sometimes they engaged in such activities for their own personal motives.

Classical extrajudicial arrest scenarios have taken place in reconquered cities. Some victims were later found dead or taken to custody in secret prisons run by the Ministry of the Interior. The Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), a powerful body organizing the Sunni clergy, was the first group to openly claim that the Sunni

population and Sunni mosques in conquered cities had been targeted by US forces in late 2004 and Iraqi police forces in an extrajudicial manner.

In January 2005, a new government was established by the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) – a political body consisting of several Shia religious parties - led by Ibrahim al-Ja'fari. The Ministry of the Interior came into the hands of SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq), a major party in the UIA which came to Iraq from Iran, where it had been in exile during the Saddam era. SCIRI has its own militia – the Badr Organisation, established in 1982 in Tehran under the name of the Badr Corps. Members of the Badr Corps were trained by the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) to battle the regime of Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and later to infiltrate Iraq. They operate mainly in the Shia south – the IRGC set up a special security/intelligence unit for that purpose. In 1983, the Badr Corps established its own paramilitary units, called the Badr Brigades, to carry out special operations.

Before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Badr Brigades consisted of 10,000 – 15,000 men, 3,000 of them being professionally trained with a core unit of 1,500 ideologically committed fighters trained further by IRGC. After the invasion proved successful, the Badr Corps (Organisation) entered Iraq along the long Iraqi-Iranian border as a militia and took control of several Shia cities. It has never fully disarmed. Many Badr personnel officially entered Interior and Defence ministries and took part in security planning and counter-insurgency operations in 2004. Several analysts claimed throughout 2003 and 2004 that the Badr Organisation continued to receive secret financial and military support from Iran.

After the January elections, the Ministry of the Interior fell completely under Badr control with Bayan Jabr, a former SCIRI official and Badr Organisation commander, appointed as minister. Soon afterwards, 140 high-ranking security officials were replaced by ideologically committed personnel and political allies of SCIRI, according to several former ministry officials. Since then, the Badr Organisation has taken control of counter-insurgency operations and in early May 2005, it unleashed new squads of well-trained counter-insurgency commandos consisting almost entirely of members of the Badr Brigades. The most notorious of these commando units were the Wolf Brigades and the Volcano Brigades (paramilitary counter-insurgency squads) and Scorpion brigades (intelligence search and destroy force).

The Wolf Brigades, which have been trained since Autumn 2004 and sent to rebellious cities, allegedly operate as death squads. They have never denied allegations that they use harsh methods and torture techniques in their struggle against suspected insurgents. In late June, 474 people were seized from their homes during one Wolf Brigade sweep in the Abu Ghraib area of Baghdad and suffered systematic abuse at the hands of the brigade. A programme also ran on al-Iraqiyah US sponsored television where abuses and forcible interrogation of suspected insurgents by members of Wolf brigades were publicly depicted as a part of 'psychological warfare' operations against the insurgents by Special Police Commandos.

Along with this major takeover of Special Police Commandos by Badr forces, the intelligence apparatus of Badr Organisation remained fully independent from the new Iraqi state intelligence service (which works closely with the US). Badr intelligence service is focused on gathering intelligence on six different subjects: (1) former regime loyalists (mainly Saddam's secret police Mukhabarat members), (2) insurgents, (3) the Sunni clerical establishment (mainly AMS), (4) Sunni political

parties and personnel, (5) the new Iraqi intelligence service and (6) US forces and their facilities in Iraq.

Badr Organisation was also involved in threatening Palestinians. Palestinian refugees in Baghdad received death threats via letters and e-mails from the Badr Organisation and were told to leave Iraq. They were accused of spreading Wahhabism. AMS publicly accused the Wolf Brigades of targeting Palestinian refugees. In March 2006, directly after the Samarra bombing, several abductions and killings of Palestinians took place in Baghdad.

Throughout 2005, death squads operating with Special Police Commandos' uniforms, ID cards and equipment began to appear in major cities, mainly in Baghdad and the so-called Sunni triangle. Entire neighbourhoods were run down in a single night – with death squads abducting mainly young Sunni men. They tried to legitimize their activities to their victims' relatives by introducing themselves as Special Police Commando officers or intelligence agents. Several of the victims' relatives claimed that these squads were operatives of Wolf, Volcano and Scorpion brigades. Almost none of the abducted men returned alive; most of them were later found dead. There were signs of torture and they were killed execution style.

Some of the abductees turned up later when the occupation forces discovered three secret prisons (Baghdad, al-Kut, al-Zuber) run by the Ministry of Interior's forces, where detainees were kept without being sentenced. They were abused and interrogated under torture.

Amnesty International claims that the Wolf Brigades have been heavily involved in prisoner abuse cases. The Iraqi government and the Ministry of Interior initially downplayed all signs of possible death squad operations carried out by Special Police Commandos on local militias and insurgents but later along with US army and police trainers it acknowledged that death squad operations might be run by Special Police Commandos unofficially. When in August 2005 a new type of death squad appeared – using police cars, equipment and ID cards but wearing civilian clothes under police vests, the Interior Ministry hardly made any effort to investigate the matter. On the other hand, Sunni political leaders and the AMS for months alleged that Sunnis and their mosques and clergy were being attacked by Shia led forces of the Ministry of Interior and in February 2006 they claimed that there had been an increase in kidnappings. After the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra, gunmen dressed in Special Police Commandos uniforms allegedly attacked Sunni mosques, especially in Baghdad. The AMS compiled a list alleging hundreds of extra-judicial killings, disappearances, illegal raids, and instances of torture of Sunnis by individuals linked to Shia militias operating in police forces. Investigation into the matter by the Ministry of Interior found nothing and it again blamed "rogue elements".

The US command had not taken serious steps to investigate reports of abuse until early 2006, when its political leaning towards Shia fundamentalist parties began to wane. Until then, the Wolf Brigades enjoyed full support from the command, which officially appreciated their effectiveness in fighting the insurgency. There were several claims that Wolf Brigades made several arrest raids by directly cooperating with US forces. In late January 2006 a squad of 22 men dressed in Special Police Commando uniforms was caught by US soldiers in north Baghdad. They had a young Sunni male in their car. This squad was arrested by US forces and investigations are still under way.

The great rise in numbers of extrajudicial arrest operations from mid-2005 to early 2006 is certain. There are many witnesses and many bodies were found every week. Whether these operations were carried out by masked gunmen able to obtain complete Special Police Commandos equipment, as well as cars, or whether the Special Police Commandos run by Badr Brigades personnel carry out these operation themselves – either officially or unofficially, is still not clear. All of these scenarios are probable. On the whole, mainly Sunni young men or former regime loyalists, operatives and armed forces personnel from large cities are targeted by this type of death squad operation. This suggests that revenge is one possible motive and extreme measures have been taken to prevent the mainly Sunni-led insurgency in government controlled areas, bordering on gradual ethnic cleansing.

Local Shia militias, the al-Mahdi Army and Kurdish peshmerga

As early as spring 2003, the Provisional Authority in Iraq ordered all militias except for the Kurdish peshmergas to disarm and disband. It never happened and most of the militias have remained armed and practically in charge of many cities, towns and villages mainly in the Shia south. In some towns militias rule the streets and control local politics. The occupation forces never really pressed hard for their disarmament and it was practically impossible in the first year of the occupation to convince the Iraqis to do so. With constant brutal attacks by Islamist Sunni terrorists on Shia civilians and religious places, which began shortly after the first chaotic months, as well as occasional clashes along sectarian borders, Shias demanded the right to defend themselves.

As a secondary solution to dismantling militias, which quickly developed their own ethnic, sectarian, political and even separatist agenda, the US administration decided to recruit militia members into the new Iraqi army and the police. In 2004, nine militias with over 100,000 fighters agreed to disband and join the new security forces or return to civilian life. Other militias which did not choose to disband let their members join the armed forces as well, thus infiltrating both the army and the police with their loyal members. Some of these were created alongside certain political parties to strengthen the party itself – there were claims by several political figures that there is no chance for a party to enter the political struggle without its own armed militia. In the Shia south, local police was infiltrated by militia members in particular to retain control of the area. Many militias further remained active outside the armed forces and became more like criminal groups. Thus they exist both as marauding gangs and as sanctioned members of the Iraqi army and the police. Some militia members were even able to infiltrate higher command posts and finally ministries of interior and defence, particularly when Shia fundamentalists took control of the government.

The al-Mahdi Army became the largest militia in Iraq, consisting of several thousands of mainly poor Shias loyal to young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who officially created it in June 2003. From the outset, it was mainly involved in providing security in the streets of Shia areas. Concrete numbers are unavailable, due to the very loose organisation of this militia – some experts say that the Mahdi Army is more like a social movement than an organisation. Its two main centres of influence are in the Shia holy city of Najaf and the large Shia slum in Baghdad called the Sadr city. The Mahdi Army did not disarm, and in 2004 it led two major uprisings against the occupation forces throughout the Shia south and Baghdad. Both of them calmed down later after widespread street battles. Since then the Army has not engaged in hostilities against the allied forces, which have not challenged the Army's de facto control over a number of areas in southern Iraq.

The Army continues to provide security in a number of southern cities where it enforces its own rules, especially the shari'ah (Islamic law), if it is able to do so. In autumn 2005 its members were discovered using police cars to enforce rulings of the so-called Islamist punishment committees. The Army further supports Sadr's political party and is under his direct influence. In early 2006 Sadr pledged the Army's support to any Islamic country, mentioning in particular Iran and Syria, if it comes under attack by western forces. The movement is believed to have infiltrated the Iraqi police and armed forces. Its members are most often found in Baghdad among the city police and a paramilitary force called the Public Order Brigades, as well as in police units in the south.

The Mahdi Army has been repeatedly accused of abducting and killing Sunnis, members of rival militias, journalists and even British troops, as well as of raiding Sunni villages and neighbourhoods in the Shia south and along Iraq's borders. Its members allegedly ran death squad operations both with and without the use of Iraqi police and army equipment. In 2005, the Army clashed with members of the Badr Organisation in Basra and undertook revenge killings of Badr troops after its headquarters in Najaf was set aflame. The Badr Organisation denied any involvement in the matter. After the bombing of al-Askari shrine in Samarra, much of the ensuing violence and attacks on Sunni mosques and private property were blamed on members of the Army. In fact, the Badr Organisation and Mahdi Army officials were accusing each other of attacking Sunni mosques and sending death squads to operate in Iraqi mixed areas against Sunnis.

One armed group which has been accused of running death squads almost as often as the Special Police Commandos are the Public Order Brigades. Created in 2004 under the government of Iyad Allawi as a paramilitary police force, these units now consist of about 9,000 personnel, 1,100 of whom were recruited only in early 2006. Unlike Special Police Commandos these brigades were from the beginning trained and supervised by US trainers and advisers. They were sent to rebellious cities in late 2004 as a second wave force to cleanse those cities of remaining pockets of insurgency and networks and to secure the city until local police could retake it. In 2005 and early 2006, they were further used as a counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism force, applied mainly to areas where local police could not handle the situation or where intensive insurgent activity was underway. These were mainly Sunni-dominated areas in the so-called Sunni triangle. During these missions, there were many allegations that the Public Order Brigades were running death squad operations and maintaining secret prisons for their own personal motives. The second Public Order Brigade has a particularly bad reputation - it was accused of torturing and executing its victims. Its ranks were recruited in eastern Baghdad Sadr city. Like ordinary police, the Public Order Brigades were recruited largely from among members of Shia militias and their commanders either had ties to militias or they at least tolerated them.

In early 2006, after US authorities claimed that they had largely purged them of Shia militia elements, their ranks still consisted of about 80% Shias, 20% Sunnis and a small number of Kurds and Christians, although the command changed dramatically and new recruits were more mixed. The US command supervised many activities of the Public Order Brigades, despite accusations made by mainly Sunni political parties and the public - claiming that they were not officially engaged in death squad operations. Yet US advisers admitted that the group's tactics can be heavy-handed and that they may be able to run death squads unofficially.

Shia militias were accused of running death squads not only under the cover of the Public Order Brigades. With their control of streets and local police forces they are able to run local death squads in Shia areas and to persuade them to follow their goals. They operate both against suspected insurgents and former regime elements on their own without acknowledging government or occupation authorities. Both these groups consist mainly of Sunnis. Militant Shias regard all Sunni political leaders and AMS as being aligned to Sunni insurgents, whom they claim to be terrorists - not resistance fighters. The police forces often owe their allegiance to their commanders or local communities, rather than to the state and its apparatus, according to the allied leadership, and they also allegedly ran ethnic cleansing and revenge operations on their own, mainly in mixed areas like Baghdad.

Militias also infiltrated the Iraqi army and although these were better trained and under constant US observation, there were allegations by Sunni civilians that Iraqi army troops were involved in illegal killings and raids in re-conquered Sunni cities in 2004 and 2005. The most confusing is perhaps the infighting between Shia militias themselves. Strong rivalry developed between the Mahdi Army and Badr Organisation on a general level. The political situation in Iraq in the stalemate following the December 2005 elections clearly showed how much the Badr Organisation and the Mahdi Army, the two largest Shia militias in the country, differ from each other on many key political issues. This has made them direct enemies in the Shia south.

The main issue is probably Shia federalism. While the Badr Organisation supports SCIRI's idea of loose federalism in the Shia south, Mahdists are extreme nationalists who follow Sadr's idea of establishing a strong central government. There have also been many clashes between different militias on local issues. In such cases, classical revenge killings appeared. According to US command statements, the Shia death squad activity in armed forces is hard to track but it admits that, especially in police ranks, death squad operations were carried out without direct US knowledge.

In early 2006, after disputes over who would control the Ministry of Interior, the US embassy pressed hard on Shia fundamentalists who won the December elections to abandon the post to secularists, thereby changing US policy towards the Shias. Shia fundamentalists were directly blamed by the US embassy of allowing militias to infiltrate the armed forces and attack the Sunnis. The Ministry of Interior has long denied any allegations that death squads operate in police forces, although the commander of the Volcano Brigade, Brigadier General Bassem Al Gharbawi, claimed that in the autumn of 2005 his brigade arrested three terrorist networks, two of them led by officials in the Interior Ministry. The ministry did not confirm the announcement. In March 2006, senior Iraqi officials confirmed for the first time that death squads composed of government employees had operated illegally from inside the Ministries of Interior and Defence. The investigations were still open.

Militias may also prove to be a great threat in the event of a revolution after the coalition's withdrawal from Iraq. Many major political figures and parties have ties with Iran (mainly SCIRI and al-Sadr), and there is a danger that an Islamic revolution might take place in the country. In such a scenario, militias will most likely play a major role, directly forming armed forces in Iraq afterwards. The cleansing of rival militias now might prove useful to anyone who sees a revolution as a likely scenario after the coalition withdrawal.

Kurdish peshmergas, a militia affiliated to the Kurdish nationalist parties KDP and PUK, were already active before the war, prepared to defend Kurdish territories

against Saddam's army and aid the coalition forces in liberating northern Iraq. The peshmerga in fact took control of Iraqi Kurdish areas. Although the peshmerga was not dissolved during 2003, its members entered the new Iraqi armed forces throughout 2004 and 2005 as part of a plan by the US command to dissolve it. Thus the peshmergas' role as the official defender and public force of the Kurdish north was weakened, but they remained in charge through their infiltration of the local police force, which, in fact, was almost entirely made up of their members.

In late 2004, the peshmergas fought alongside US forces in rebellious Mosul. There were allegations that Kurdish units were running death squad operations after the battle, before local police regained control. Kurds also entered the Public Order Brigades in small numbers. The peshmergas were repeatedly accused of conducting ethnic cleansing in the areas controlled by the Kurds, as well as in Kirkuk and its surroundings. In Kirkuk, which the Kurds sought to control, the peshmergas clashed with the local, mainly Shia Turkmen minority. Turkmen authorities and the public claimed they were being pushed from Kirkuk and Kurdish areas by force and that Kurds were pressuring them to leave by threatening to kill them. Entire villages were allegedly raided by Kurdish death squads and the local authorities in Kirkuk were assassinated.

Islamic fundamentalists, nationalist insurgency and Sunni tribal militias

Waging a guerilla war against the occupation forces and the new Iraqi government, both these groups are parts of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. Allied against the common enemy, these groups cooperated throughout 2003 and 2004. But throughout 2005, there was a major split between Islamic fundamentalists headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda Organisation in Iraq and Sunni tribal authorities and the tribes involved in the insurgency. While maintaining death squads to follow their external goals, these groups also formed death squads to fight each other.

On 14 September 2005, Zarqawi posted a public statement on the internet declaring all-out war against Shia "infidels". In this statement, he also warned Sunni tribes not to collaborate or even negotiate with the Shia-led Iraqi government. This surely was not the beginning of mass killings and death squad operations targeting Shias. Yet it led to a sharp escalation of the ongoing sectarian conflict. Islamic fundamentalist groups, also called foreign jihadists although they are not composed entirely of foreigners, were running death squad operations against Shia populations in mixed Iraqi cities and in largely Sunni cities where they gained a foothold. While suicide bombing was used in Shia cities and neighbourhoods, house attacks, abductions and public assassinations took place in mixed areas, usually following threats to leave the area. Leaflets demanding an expulsion of Shia citizens were distributed in towns infiltrated by jihadists. Thus "their" cities were ethnically cleansed. Another typical target of Islamic fundamentalists are people whom they see as collaborators with the occupation and the new Iraqi government. This includes new Iraqi armed forces personnel – mainly police chiefs and army commanders who were assassinated both on and off duty. Political party members were assassinated publicly and there were several raids on different parties' offices. Local authorities who entered negotiations with occupation or government forces were also assassinated. Opposed to any kind of public elections, the Islamic fundamentalists typically tried to kill anyone who was encouraging the Sunni population to vote. Al-Qaeda in Iraq directly threatened Sunni religious authorities not to support the new constitution under pain of death. During and after the

elections in December 2005, many local authorities and clergymen were killed by jihadist death squads. These were mainly members of the AMS who openly encouraged Sunnis to vote. A typical feature of death squad operations carried out by Islamic fundamentalists is that they use their attacks to the greatest possible public effect. They explain their motivations and targets clearly and publicly, thus instilling fear in anyone who disagrees with them or who would not play by their rules. Threats used before and after attacks are very common.

On 6 July 2005, before the declaration of war on Shias, in a public statement posted on the Internet, Zarqawi announced the establishment of the Umar Brigade. The sole duty of the Umar Brigade is to track down and assassinate members of the Badr Organization. According to Zarqawi, the brigade would deal with them in order to let other al-Qaeda members operate more freely and focus on fighting occupation forces. The Umar Brigades have been allegedly recruited entirely from Iraqis. The group claims to have assassinated dozens of Badr members since the announcement was made, and other groups affiliated with Zarqawi, including the Ansar Al-Sunnah Army and the Army of the Victorious Sect claimed similar assassinations of their own making. The Umar Brigade claimed that it had also killed two members of the Shia Islamic Al-Da'wah Party. There were many allegations that the Brigade even began assassinating other political figures and members of the Mahdi Army. Whether this is true or not, Zarqawi's group surely clashed with the Mahdi Army and apparently assassinated some of its members. The Umar Brigade's tactics are also used to strengthen the threatening effect of their attacks. They usually kill a selected victim with his entire family, turning the killing into a massacre. The Brigades probably have their own suicide bomber force. They use suicide bombers to target weddings, processions and funerals of Badr members' families to maximize damage and terror.

Since September 2005 there have been reports that local insurgents in Sunni areas have clashed with Islamic fundamentalist groups. There were allegedly disputes over tactics, territorial claims and money. The tactics adopted by Zarqawi's affiliates also alienated many local forces and populations from them as the fundamentalists apparently shifted from targeting the occupation forces more towards targetting Shias and "collaborators". Local support for foreign Islamic fundamentalists began to fade away. AMS officially condemned the assassinations and mass killings perpetrated by Zarqawi's group and its affiliates and retribution from these followed.

In late 2005, al-Qaeda death squads assassinated several important tribal and religious figures as the diversion grew larger and more tribal insurgents became willing to enter negotiations with the new Iraqi government and the occupation forces. In response, several nationalist groups offered to exterminate foreign jihadists in Iraq in return for setting a timetable for the withdrawal of occupation forces. After the Cairo conference in November 2005 - where the Iraqi government agreed that there is a difference between insurgent groups and claimed the nationalist insurgency has a right to resist the occupation with arms and approved negotiations with them - the split between nationalist and fundamentalists grew larger. Accepting the term 'rightful resistance', the nationalists and tribal groups largely condemned the foreign jihadists and started to push them from their territories, mainly by means of street gunbattles and an exchange of death squad operations against each other. Sunni tribal militias and nationalist insurgency groups formed their own death squads to hunt down the operatives and to disrupt the local networks of al-Zarqawi's affiliates. Since September 2005, these groups have claimed that they have killed at least 6 major leaders of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In January 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq attacked Sunni police recruits in Ramadi and killed

a large number of them. This action stirred up massive demonstrations in Sunni areas under the patronage of the AMS. The al-Anbar Revolutionaries' Militia was raised by local tribes in Ramadi to protect the population from al-Qaeda attacks and finally to drive its operatives from the area. On 15 January 2006, in response to fading support and breaking with nationalist insurgents, Zarqawi officially created the Mujahideen Shura Council which comprises the al-Qaeda in Iraq Organisation, the Army of the Victorious Sect, the Islamic Jihad Brigades and two other lesser known groups.

The Mujahideen Shura Council was created in order to better coordinate the Islamic jihadist groups to fight "the occupation" and "the infidels". Henceforward, any operation, be it military, suicide or death squad was officially claimed by the Council as a whole. The Ansar al-Sunnah fundamentalist group, also one of the major groups, remained allied to Zarqawi but it did not join the Council. Against the Council officially spoke the Islamic Army in Iraq, 1920 Revolution Brigades, the Mujahideen Army in Iraq and the al-Anbar Revolutionaries and they declared war on its members. In early 2006, the Mujahideen Shura Council was forced out of several major Sunni cities (Samarra, Ramadi, Fallujah) by local tribal militias and nationalist insurgent groups.

The main tactics used by both sides in these 'small city wars' were apparently armed raids on houses and abductions. Victims were tortured before death to obtain information from them. This type of inner conflict within the insurgency seems ideal for death squad operations as it is dominated by 'search and destroy' tactics, assassinations and raids by small armed groups or cells of operatives. The occupation command and the new Iraqi government have been aware of the conflict, but they have not officially given tribal militias any support in their war on Islamic fundamentalists. Yet they both gave them a free hand to purge their own areas. Negotiations with US forces throughout late 2005 and early 2006 to set a withdrawal timetable failed and the occupation forces are still seen as "an enemy" by tribal and nationalist insurgent groups.

In early April 2006, there were reports that al-Zarqawi was demoted as the leader of the al-Qaeda Organisation in Iraq and the Mujahideen Shura Council. This was reportedly mainly due to 'political' mistakes he made and heavy handed tactics which alienated many Iraqis from fundamentalist groups. He was replaced by Iraqi national Abdullah bin Rashed al-Baghdadi. Although guerilla warfare and suicide bombings by the Mujahideen Shura Council have not ceased, the demotion of Zarqawi might soften or even change its tactics as it probably realises that it is besieged on all fronts, with few allies left inside Iraq.

Criminal gangs and other groups

In the extremely chaotic situation in Iraq, many elements took advantage of conflicts between different groups. There were allegations that criminal gangs were acting like militias or that they were able to acquire police equipment to carry out raids on houses for money. Kidnappings by armed groups, which claim to be insurgents, for ransom are widespread in large cities. Armed robberies are common and the Iraqi police is often unable to prevent them. The Interior Ministry made an announcement, saying that many arrested individuals, who later turned out to be common criminals, had claimed that they were insurgents to politicise their cases. Death squad-style assassinations were carried out by local mafias which grew strong in an Iraqi environment where public order is non-existent and smuggling and black market activities are widespread. US army officers reported that a large

number of bodies which had been collected in Baghdad from a sewage works later turned out to be employees of a company targeted by a rival businessman.

There are also groups which follow their own goals, which are broadly similar to those of other groups, but do not fit their pattern entirely. In late 2003, a group called Tharallah claimed that it was hunting supporters of Saddam's regime, specifically intelligence and security members. This group ran death squads in Baghdad and Tikrit. Members of the group allegedly came from "all factions". Not much else is known about this group, but it obviously is not a local or sectarian militia.

Another special case in Iraq is the growing number of professionals being assassinated or kidnapped. At least 80 university professors have been assassinated but different groups, AMS among them, claim the real number is much larger, exceeding 200. The university staff is under pressure and many professors tried to leave the country with their families, thus causing a substantial brain drain. It is not officially known who is responsible for the killings.

All-in-all, it is very difficult in the Iraqi case to blame anyone for anything and if the offenders are known, it is hard to find them and/or catch them. The fact that there are large numbers of different actors who have similar motives and/or targets means that everyone has a chance to downplay everything or blame somebody else. The security situation has deteriorated almost everywhere. This makes it easy for any death squad to move, operate and leave the scene without being captured. Local militias and insurgents hold large areas where they can operate freely and they still have means by which they can operate outside the areas under their control. In many cases, they have been supported by the local population, with large and sophisticated networks of informants and clandestine cells of operatives and their agents who have infiltrated the Iraqi armed forces.

While the insurgents might be showing signs of weakening in their fight against the coalition forces after large military operations carried out by US forces and the new Iraqi army to remove the insurgents' hideouts and outposts, the evidence shows that there is a growing use of death squads, to such a level that there is a complex official discussion about whether there is a civil war under way in Iraq. The activities of death squads and sectarian tensions have increased the public's feeling of insecurity. And if there really is a civil war, then it is being fought by the death squads.

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