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U.S. Shifting Focus to Foreign Fighters in Iraq

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BAGHDAD, IRAQ -- Senior U.S. commanders say their view of the Iraqi insurgency has begun to shift, with higher priority being given to combating foreign fighters and Iraqi jihadists.

This shift comes in response to the recent upsurge in suicide attacks and other developments that indicate a more prominent role in the insurgency by these radical groups, the commanders say.

Previously, U.S. authorities depicted the insurgency as dominated largely by what the Pentagon has dubbed "former regime elements" -- a combination of one-time Baath Party loyalists and Iraqi military and security service officers intent on restoring Sunni rule.

Since the Jan. 30 elections, this segment of the insurgency has appeared to pull back from the fight, at least for a while, reassessing strategies and exploring a possible political deal with the new government, senior U.S. officers here say.

Acting on the assumption that foreign fighters and Iraqi extremists might now pose the greater and more immediate threat to security in Iraq, U.S. commanders have given orders in recent days to reposition some U.S. ground forces and intelligence assets in northwestern Iraq to further fortify Iraq's border with Syria and block suspected infiltration routes. They are also stepping up efforts to go after leading bomb-makers and key organizers of suicide attacks.

In interviews, several commanders and intelligence officers cautioned that their shift was still tentative and based more on fragmentary information than on solid, specific evidence. They said assessments differ among U.S. intelligence specialists.

Lending support, they said, to the notion of a harder-core insurgent element has been the increase in suicide missions and the greater ruthlessness of the attacks, many of which have been positioned and timed to kill civilians as well as Iraqi security forces.

U.S. and Iraqi authorities say suicide drivers are invariably foreign fighters. Officers here said they knew of no documented case in which a suicide attacker turned out to have been an Iraqi.

With Baathist-led Sunni groups appearing to sit on the sidelines for now, some senior officials say the insurgency seems to have shrunk as its tactics have become more vicious. The generals allow for the possibility that the apparent change in the nature of the insurgency may be temporary. They noted, for instance, that a failure to draw the Sunnis into the new political process could drive the Baathists into more violent opposition.

Even with the reported rise in foreign fighters, several senior officers said, the number estimated to be coming into the country each month is still relatively small -- in the neighborhood of several score. In numerical terms, they said, the insurgency remains essentially homegrown. Iraqi members of such extremist Islamic factions as the Ansar al Sunna Army and the 20th Revolutionary Brigade continue to account for many insurgent attacks.

In terms of overall effect, the foreign fighters who serve as suicide bombers and cause high casualty tolls are having a disproportionate impact, the officers said. The most prominent foreign fighter -- Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi -- has become Iraq's best-known insurgent, leading a network that has claimed responsibility for some of the bloodier attacks.

Further, like al-Zarqawi, a number of foreign fighters are said to be forming tactical partnerships with Iraqi extremist groups to carry out attacks. While foreigners, for instance, might be driving the suicide cars, Iraqis are frequently behind the scenes operating the networks that provide safe houses, assemble the explosives and arrange other support.

By Bradley Graham
Washington Post

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