

Fact Sheet on Shi'a Militia Actors

April 2008

Jaysh al-Mahdi

- The Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) is the militia wing of the Sadrist Trend, the Shi'a political faction that is led by Muqtada al-Sadr. JAM first became prominent in April 2004 when it fought against US forces in East Baghdad and in Najaf. From 2006 to mid-2007, JAM militias engaged in a territorial struggle with al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni groups for control of the Baghdad. During this time, JAM expanded its territorial control of Baghdad, moving into mixed or predominantly Shi'a neighborhoods and forcefully displacing or killing the local Sunni population. JAM was able to gain initial control in many of these neighborhoods of Baghdad by offering the Shi'a population protection and social services. At the height of JAM's expansion, in late 2006 and early 2007, militiamen were increasingly reliant upon corruption, intimidation and extortion of the Shi'a population to enhance their power and wealth. It was also evident at this time that Sadr's control over his militia was diminishing and the movement was beginning to splinter.

In 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr twice instructed his militia to stand down, first at the beginning of the Baghdad Security Plan began in February 2007, and later in August 2007 when he declared a six-month ceasefire in the wake of the Karbala violence. Many JAM loyalists heeded Sadr's calls; however, JAM splinter groups, criminal elements, and Special Groups have continued their violent activities.

Mainstream Jaysh al-Mahdi members and Sadr loyalists responded to the recent offensive in Basra with large protests and civil disobedience movements in the neighborhoods of Sadr City, Shula, Hurriyah, Aamel, Shurta, and Abu Disheer. JAM militias have also constructed checkpoints. In certain areas, JAM militias have attacked Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces with small-arms fire and rocket propelled grenades. These militiamen

have likely done so in conjunction with Special Groups and other Shi'a criminal elements.

JAM Splinter Groups, Rogue Jaysh al-Mahdi

- JAM splinter groups are those groups that have broken off from the mainstream JAM, particularly in the wake of Muqtada al-Sadr's August 2007 ceasefire. They are not responsive to the directives of Muqtada al-Sadr and they have continued to carry out attacks against Coalition and Iraqi forces, extra-judicial killings and kidnappings of Iraqi civilians, and other criminal activities. Some of these JAM splinter groups receive support from Iran and are known as Special Groups.

Special Groups

- Special Groups are Shi'a militia groups that receive funding, training, and weapons from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Iranian-backed Special Groups have become increasingly active in Baghdad and central Iraq since mid-2007. While Special Groups are not responsive to the directives of Muqtada al-Sadr or mainstream JAM leaders, there is some overlap in the constituencies of these groups. Special Groups principally target US forces operating in the area, in the hopes of prompting their eventual withdrawal. They also actively seek to undermine the Maliki government with attacks on the Iraqi Security Forces. The hallmark weapon of Special Groups is the explosively-formed penetrator (EFP), an especially lethal IED capable of penetrating heavily-armored vehicles. Special Groups also use advanced weapons provided by Iran, including light and heavy mortars, 107-mm rockets, and 240-mm rockets, to launch indirect fire attacks on Coalition and Iraqi bases.

Special Groups operate throughout central and southern Iraq. Within Baghdad, Special Groups extremists have been found to operate in many of the JAM-dominated areas, primarily in the districts of Sadr City, 9 Nissan, Kadhimiyah and West Rasheed. South of Baghdad, Special Groups have been active in Karbala, Hillah, Diwaniyah, Kut, Nasiriyah and Basra.

While Special Groups activity been on the rise in recent months, the response by Special Groups to the Basra offensive has been most evident in Baghdad. The Green Zone in Baghdad, Iranian-backed groups have repeated

Secret Cell

- The term secret cell was used throughout much of 2007 to describe splinter militia groups who had received Iranian support. The nomenclature for Iranian-backed Shi'a militias in

the Multi-National Force-Iraq press releases has largely been replaced with the term Special Group.

Criminal, Terrorist, or Extremists Elements

- These general classifications are often used to describe elements in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad, involved in violence against civilians and members of the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces. Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) also uses these terms to designate groups engaged in organized crime; indeed, some claiming to operate under the JAM banner are engaged in mafia-style criminal activities. In recent MNF-I press releases, these general terms have been used almost exclusively to describe the targets of Coalition and Iraqi operations and engagements. This likely does not mean that the violence in central and southern Iraq (and most importantly, Baghdad) is being carried out by unaffiliated criminal gangs and mafia-like groups. Rather, it may instead suggest that for political or security reasons, MNF-I does not wish to name those behind the recent uptick in violence.