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Backgrounder #13

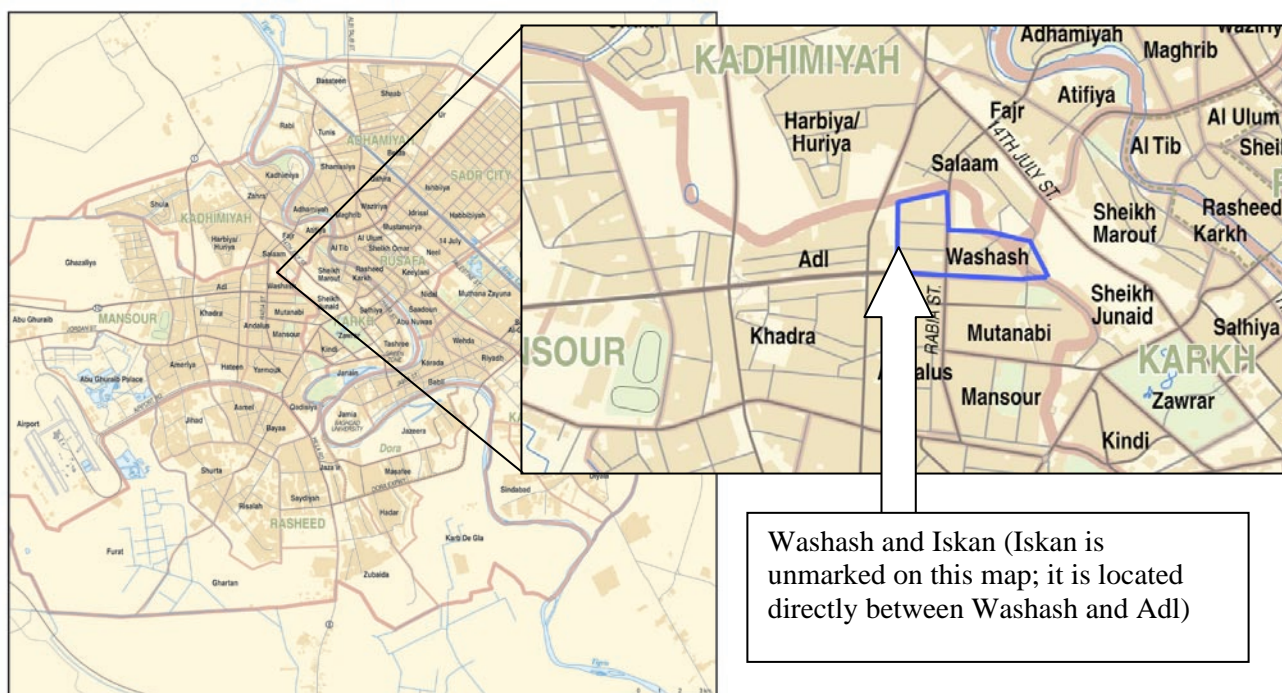
Baghdad Neighborhood Project: Washash and Iskan

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Overview

The neighborhoods of Washash and Iskan are located in the northeast corner of the Mansour Security District in Baghdad. These historically mixed areas lay on the fault line between Shia-dominated neighborhoods to the north in Hurriya and Kadhimiyah and Sunni-dominated neighborhoods to the west and south, including the Sunni strongholds of 'Adl, Jamia, Khadra, and al-Mutanabi. As such, they have witnessed vicious sectarian cleansing by Shia militias and reprisal operations likely conducted by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) or other Sunni insurgent groups.

The fight in Washash and Iskan has been three-cornered: Shia militias, including regular Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), rogue JAM, and the Badr Organization, have pressed to clear the



neighborhoods of Sunni residents. Sunni insurgents, including AQI, have struck back against Shia civilian targets in the area. At the same time, the Shia community itself has been divided by a struggle between the Badr Organization, which is the militia of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC/SCIRI), and Jaysh al-Mahdi, Muqtada as-Sadr's militia. Until recently, this area had no persistent US force presence and the Iraqi forces in the area were ineffective.

Sectarian violence began in Washash and Iskan in 2003, when four Sunni worshippers were killed in December after evening prayers at a local Washash mosque. Sunni leaders accused unspecified Shia militias of assassinating these figures, but the killings did not trigger widespread violence in the area, perhaps because the targets may have been former Ba'athists or members of the security sources under Saddam.¹ Following the killings in December 2003, Sunni and Shia clerics gathered at a conference organized by the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party and issued statements forbidding sectarian cleansing.² A popular Shia cleric in Washash made special efforts to promote tolerance and amity between sects.³ These clerics were able to prevent the emergence of a destructive security dilemma in the area, in which each sect, fearing for its safety, saw an incentive to kill or cleanse the other from the area. With the exception of a few attacks against Iraqi police patrols in 2004, Washash and Iskan were relatively quiet for much of the year.⁴

A new phase of violence, considerably more sectarian, began in December 2004 and ran through fall 2005. In December 2004, several members of a Sunni salafist group in Washash were killed, prompting a mob to go to the house of a local Shia cleric. The cleric escaped alive, but his wife, Um Husayn, was killed.⁵ In January 2005, a suicide bombing targeted a polling place in Iskan. The January 2005 elections brought to power a transitional Iraqi National Assembly, charged with the task of writing Iraq's new constitution. They were boycotted by Sunni political groups and fiercely opposed by Sunni insurgents and Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Iskan suicide attack was followed by the attempted assassination of the Chief Judge of the Iraqi Higher Judicial Council, the most senior element of the Iraqi judiciary.⁶ Insofar as Sunni groups routinely targeted Iraqi judges as part of a strategy of delegitimizing the state and impeding the imposition of law and order, it is likely this attack was also carried out by Sunni insurgents. In April, a major in the Iraqi police commandos was killed,⁷ and in May, a senior official in the Ministry of Trade was assassinated.⁸ The Ministry of Trade was taken over by 'Abd-al Basit Karim Mawlud, a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), in spring 2005. These attacks were also likely perpetrated by Sunni groups.

Following the election of the National Assembly in 2005, the Civilian Provisional Authority developed the new institutions of Iraqi government and attempted to bring the militias under government control. The Badr Organization was the militia wing of the largest Shia party, the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC/SCIRI). Badr elements, including the much-despised Wolf Brigade, were incorporated into the Ministry of the Interior in April 2005. After Bayan Jabr, a SIIC/SCIRI stalwart, took control of the Ministry of the Interior in February 2005, these forces – first as Badr Corps, and then as Ministry of Interior troops – became even more intimately involved in targeting Sunnis in West Baghdad. The Sunni attacks against new Iraqi officials thus occurred just as the Badr Organization was being incorporated into the Ministry of the Interior.

Shia forces held back until summer 2005, when militias working in conjunction with the Shia-dominated security forces began targeting Sunni residents. This cooperation was likely driven by the aforementioned Bayan Jabr, the SCIRI-affiliated Minister of Interior. As he consolidated his control over the MoI over the course of 2005, MoI forces and Badr worked closely together in targeting and detaining Sunnis. By July, the raids were so frequent that the Sunni Waqf, responsible for the management of Sunni mosques and religious endowments, complained to the government about the detention of Sunni residents of Iskan, and their subsequent deaths while in government hands.⁹ Although the neighborhood remained mixed, observers began referring to Washash as “mostly Shia.”¹⁰

This campaign reached its peak in August 2005, when somewhere between 22 and 36 Sunni men were detained in Iskan by Interior Ministry forces working directly with the Badr Organization.¹¹ Since much of the Badr Organization was incorporated directly into the Ministry of the Interior, it is likely that they were former colleagues. These Sunni men were later found dead and abandoned near the Iranian border. Specific documentary evidence obtained by Western media pointed to the complicity of senior figures in the Ministry of the Interior, including the Minister himself.¹² Interestingly, the Sunni targets were all married to Shia women. Lacking families in Sunni neighborhoods to the south and west, such as al-Mutannabi or ‘Adel or Ghazaliyah, they could not flee Iskan. Instead, they turned to JAM for protection from Badr and Iraqi security forces.¹³ At no time during this period did US forces maintain a persistent presence in Washash or Iskan. While Sunni groups attempted to respond by carrying out a car bomb attack in Iskan in December, there was nevertheless a lull in violence in late 2005.¹⁴

The bombing of the Al-Askariyah Mosque in Samarra in February 2006 marked the beginning of a new round of violence that accelerated over the course of the year. US forces patrolling in Iskan were attacked in February 2006, followed by a wave of car bombings targeting both Washash and Iskan in June and July, likely perpetrated by Al-Qaeda in Iraq or other Sunni insurgents.¹⁵ There were specific reports of Ansar al-Sunnah activity in Washash in this period.¹⁶ The SCIRI offices in Iskan were targeted by two car bombs in August, likely by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, given that the car bomb was the group’s signature weapon by this point, but also possibly by other Sunni insurgent groups or SCIRI’s Shia rivals.¹⁷

Shia residents of Washash and Iskan demanded protection, and death squads began vigorous operations against Sunnis in the area. After kidnapping and torturing Sunni targets, the death squads dumped the bodies in the street. This dumping became so frequent by September that one street became known as “Body Street,” as bodies literally piled up.¹⁸ US forces moved into Washash in October as part of Operation Together Forward II (OTF II) and discovered evidence that JAM death squads had undertaken the systematic cleansing of Sunni families from the area. The documentary evidence seized by US forces included lists of residents, addresses, and target markers.¹⁹ The JAM death squads targeted Sunni heads of household in particular, leaving the family with no means of support, forcing them to flee Washash to Sunni areas.²⁰ Sunni notables in Washash accused Shia militias, working with Iraqi security forces, of expelling hundreds of Sunni families and of kidnapping, killing, and dumping sixty Sunni men in October alone.²¹

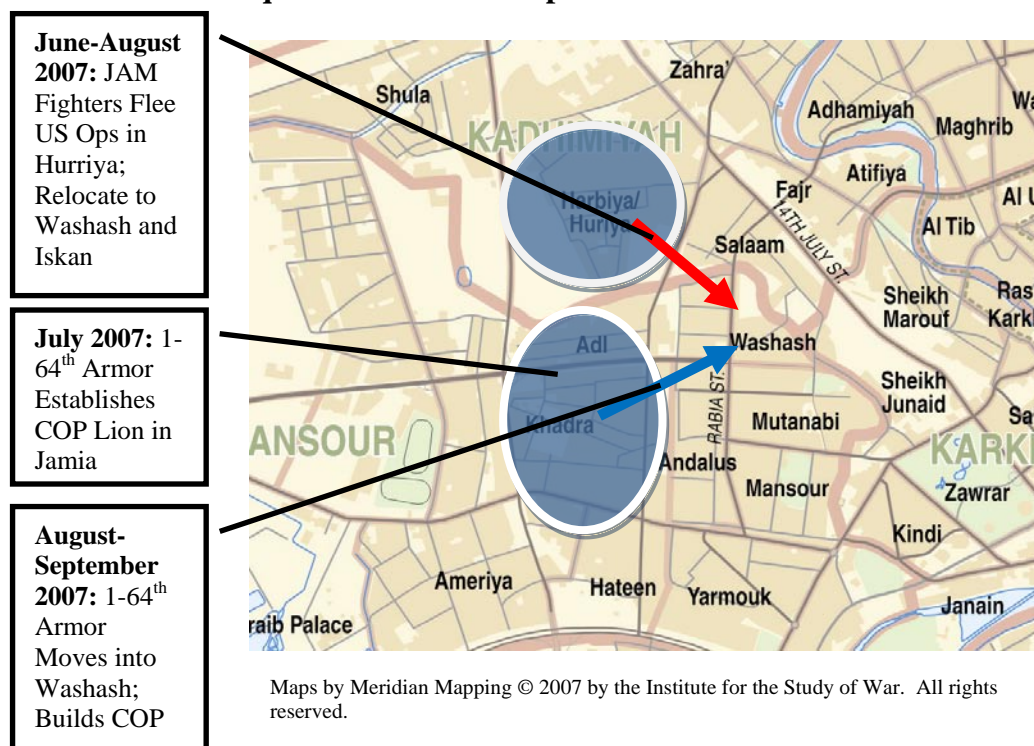
This wave of Shia violence did not go unmet. In December 2006, a car bomb killed two and wounded eight near the entrance to the Pediatric Teaching Hospital in Iskan.²² Two months later in February 2007, a massive car bomb targeted the distribution center in Iskan for subsidized food rations, killing 18 and wounding over forty, mostly poor Shia.²³ This attack was conducted, likely by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, in conjunction with several other car bombs targeting markets across Baghdad. In May, a car bomb exploded across from the offices of the Badr Organization (SCIRI/SIIC) in Iskan.²⁴

US forces put considerable pressure on JAM in Washash in February 2007 as part of the beginning of Operation Fardh al-Qanoon, although it appears they did not brief these operations publicly. Targeted raids against JAM members pushed the organization underground and it was temporarily unable to impose itself upon the citizenry.²⁵ US forces did not, however, establish a permanent presence in the area.

As US attention shifted, the summer of 2007 witnessed a renewed Shia offensive to clear Washash and Iskan of Sunnis. In July, Adnan Dulaymi of the Sunni Iraqi Accordance Front accused Shia militias in Washash of expelling at least 200 Sunni families, while local Sunni residents accused Iraqi police forces of complicity in the sectarian violence.²⁶ According to Dulaymi, soldiers of the 6th Iraqi Army division told Sunni residents that they should leave the neighborhood, arguing that Sunnis brought these problems on themselves by remaining in a predominantly Shia area.²⁷ Although he did not specify the unit, the 1-5-6 IA battalion and the 3-5-6 IA battalion have operated in and around Washash and Iskan, and Dulaymi has previously clashed with Col. Raheem, the commander of the 3-5-6 IA. Dulaymi accused Raheem over the summer of attempting to assassinate him. The sectarian tensions in Washash rose to the national political level in July when Tariq al-Hashemi, the Sunni Vice-President, complained to Interior Minister Bolani that Shia militias were being allowed to operate unopposed in the Washash neighborhood.²⁸ This Shia offensive prompted several retaliatory operations by Sunni groups, including the car bombing of a coffee shop in a Shia area on August 22nd.²⁹

The rise in violence in summer 2007 may have been the result of renewed US operations against JAM and rogue JAM units to the north in Hurriya. According to a US company commander in Hurriya, and a JAM company commander operating in the same area, JAM elements relocated from Hurriya south to Iskan and Washash during this time period.³⁰ US forces still lacked a permanent presence in Washash and Iskan. By this point, both Iskan and Washash were characterized as predominantly Shia.³¹ The map that follows depicts these operations.

Sequence of Summer Operations in Central Mansour District



In response to this dynamic, US forces established their first permanent presence in the area in late August, with the construction of Combat Outpost (COP) Washash.³² The American unit that built the outpost, the 1-64th Armor, has long experience in the Mansour District, having established a joint COP with the Iraqi Army to the southwest in Jamia.³³ The COP was intended to serve as a base for patrolling the area, providing economic assistance, and training IP and IA units. Shortly after the construction of COP Washash, US and Iraqi special forces conducted an operation against rogue JAM elements in Washash that was so intense that US forces called in close air support to destroy an enemy fighting position.³⁴

Muqtada as-Sadr made a “pledge of honor” to stand down operations in early September, which the regular JAM units in Washash continued to observe until the killing of a local senior leader on September 21st prompted JAM members to go on a rampage.³⁵ Hamoudi Naji, the JAM leader in Washash, had brokered a local ceasefire with the Sunni Ugaidat clan that controlled a small corner of Washash of the same name.³⁶ Naji was gunned down while walking near Ugaidat territory, and while the Ugaidat clan blamed JAM’s Shia rivals, Badr, local JAM members placed the blame squarely on the Ugaidat, and in a fit of rage, began expelling Sunni residents from Washash, killing them, and torching their houses. Estimates of the dead ranged between 5 and 20, and somewhere between 50 and 100 Sunni families fled the area within hours of the violence.³⁷ US forces apparently arrived after the violence subsided, and they escorted many of these families to safety in the Sunni neighborhood of ‘Adel.³⁸ JAM fighters continued to target Sunni residents of the area in the following weeks, establishing checkpoints and killing an additional 10 civilians, mostly Sunni, despite orders from Muqtada as-Sadr to stand down.³⁹

In order to counter this violence, the 1-64th Armor imposed a temporary cordon around Washash. The Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars consequently argued that US forces had worked with the Shia militias to consolidate a new status quo in the area, similar to what occurred in “Hurriya and Amal and Shula and Bayaa.”⁴⁰ Yet after imposing the temporary cordon, the 1-64th began a program of barrier emplacement, intended to control the flow of people and cars in and out of the neighborhood. This operation prompted a “peaceful demonstration” by local residents, possibly motivated by genuine concern about the economic impact of the barriers and possibly organized by either Sunni or Shia militias in order to facilitate movement into the neighborhood.⁴¹ According to press reports, short concrete blocks have been placed on several key roads thus far, and protestors allege that US forces intend to replace these short blocks with higher barriers in the near future.⁴²

Looking Forward

US forces have employed similar tactics in at least five other neighborhoods in Baghdad that faced high levels of violence, including Ameriyah, Ghazaliyah, Adhamiyah, and Doura.⁴³ In at least some of these areas, ethno-sectarian violence has fallen dramatically since the beginning of the Baghdad Security Plan and the construction of security barriers. Along with Saydiyah in East Rashid, Washash remains one of the few remaining “hotspots” for ethno-sectarian violence in the capital. By controlling access to the population, US forces hope to tamp down JAM activity in the area, protect remaining Sunni residents, and close off a key access route for JAM fighters into central Mansour.

These tactics are well-suited to controlling the sectarian violence witnessed over the summer. Unfortunately, if violence does fall in Washash, it may be difficult to adjudicate between the impact of new US tactics and the changing sectarian demographics of the area; Washash is now overwhelmingly Shia as a result of JAM and Badr operations, differentiating it from the aforementioned neighborhoods that are overwhelmingly Sunni. Since levels of ethno-sectarian violence are sometimes driven by the degree to which each community feels threatened by the other, higher levels of sectarian homogeneity may be linked with lower levels of sectarian violence. But the violence in Washash has not arisen simply from local tensions, but rather from deliberate decisions by militias and security forces to compete for control of neighborhoods. As a result of these changing demographics, the fight in Washash may become a Shia-on-Shia fight, an extension of feuding between the Sadrist Trend and SIIC/SCIRI/Badr across southern Iraq. The violent JAM and Iraqi Security Force elements in Washash illustrate that al Qaeda is not the only enemy preventing political settlement within Baghdad and within the Iraqi government, but rather, that there is still a struggle for power and influence within the Shia political community that hampers Maliki’s control over his ministries and prevents reconciliation efforts.

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⁷ Al-Sharqiyah TV. "Iraqi Police Officer, Army Major Gunned Down in Mosul." April 17th, 2005. Via BBC Media Monitoring - BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political.

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¹⁵ Al-Sharqiyah TV. "Iraqi TV Reports Security Developments." February 14th, 2006. Via BBC Media Monitoring Middle East – Political; Agence France Presse. "Seven Killed in Two Baghdad Car Bombs." July 12th 2006; Al-Jazeera TV Urgent Report. "Iraq Booby-Trapped Cars Explode in Baghdad." July 6th, 2006. Via BBC Media Monitoring.

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