Taming Iranian-backed Special Groups in Maysan Province

By Michael Knights

ON MAY 6, 2009, Iraqi Army and police auxiliary units supported by U.S. advisers discovered a cache of weapons hidden along the banks of the Tigris River in Amara, the capital of the majority Shi`a Maysan Province. The hoard included 150 copper plates for use in Explosively-Formed Projectile (EFP) roadside bombs, which have the highest per-incident lethality rate of any explosive device used in Iraq. Along with the professionally milled copper cones were 70 passive infrared firing switches used to precisely detonate EFP devices as vehicles enter the killing zone. Fifty rocket launching rails were also located, composed of modified carjacks designed to elevate 107mm and 122mm rockets for relatively accurate long-range attacks.[1]

The May 6 incident underlines the ongoing sophistication and scale of so-called "Special Groups" in Maysan Province. The Special Groups consist of Shi`a Arab militants that draw on Iranian cross-border logistical support, training, shelter and funding to continue the struggle against U.S. and Iraqi government security forces. Maysan's long and largely unguarded border with Iran, its ungovernable marshlands and the province's historic record of militancy and disorder have turned the governorate into the central front in the proxy war between the U.S.-Iraqi coalition and Iranian-backed militants. Moreover, the difficulties of rural counterinsurgency are often overlooked in favor of the counterinsurgency challenges in Iraq's urban areas. For these reasons, the United States may face one of its longest mentoring challenges in Maysan.

This article will examine Maysan's historical record of resistance, show how insurgents have reacted to the increased U.S. military presence in the province, and finally outline Maysan's prospects for enhanced stability.

Maysan's Record of Resistance

Maysan is Iraq's "wild east," notorious throughout the country as an unruly bastion of poverty and banditry. The province's population is approximately 900,000, including nearly 300,000 living in the capital, Amara.[2] The population is young (with 50% under the age of 16) and extremely poor.[3] Alongside a small population of long-term city-dwellers, the vast majority of Maysan is comprised of ex-farmers and Marsh Arabs who left or were forced off the province's large farming estates and marshes.[4]

The province is suffering major shortfalls in electricity, potable water, sanitation and fuels. It will take considerable assistance from the federal government and international donors to fix its economy. As the province's state-owned industries (sugar cane, vegetable oils, paper and plastics) cannot compete with foreign imports, the Maysan Provincial Development Strategy stresses the importance of agriculture. Regardless, a return to an agrarian society will be difficult. Anecdotal evidence from development workers suggests that most young Marsh Arabs want a government job in a city or in the local security forces.[5]

The scars of war and rebellion are apparent across the province. Even during Saddam Hussein's era, Maysan's tribes were difficult to control, resulting in serious uprisings in 1991 and 1999, and an ongoing campaign to clear the marshes of rebels and bandits during the 1980s and 1990s. From 1983-1988, major battles in the Iran-Iraq war were fought along the Tigris south of Amara and in the oilfields in the northeastern arc of the city. Enormous amounts of unexploded ordnance, abandoned munitions and minefields are present east of the Tigris, particularly to the southeast of Amara. From 1991 onwards, the regime continued to seed rural areas with landmines, and in 2003 during the U.S.-led invasion the Iraqi Army IV Corps abandoned thousands of tons of munitions throughout the province when it dissolved without a fight. These conditions led to nearly unlimited quantities of military explosives.

Crackdown on Militias

These factors made Maysan difficult to administer following the fall of Saddam's regime. In June 2003, barely two months into the occupation, six British military policemen were killed in a brutal mob attack in the southern Maysan city of Majar al-Kabir. Repeated cycles of anti-occupation violence spiraled upwards throughout 2004 and 2005, culminating in an apparent victory for the Sadrist militias and Iranian-backed networks when the British largely withdrew from the province in the summer of 2006. When provincial governor Adil Radhi Mohader, a member of Moqtada al-Sadr's political movement, was elected in 2005, militia influence quickly spread throughout the security forces and local government technical directorates.

Original research undertaken by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and The Long War Journal shows that Amara was the central hub in the network that sent Shi`a militants to Iran (and Lebanon via Iran) for training, as well as a distribution point for weapons and returned fighters.[6] Advanced insurgent capabilities are apparent in a range of incidents witnessed in Maysan. In 2005, a British patrol in Kumayt (in northern Maysan) was engaged with a "daisy-chain" of 15 EFP devices that used previously unseen telemetry to trigger the array at the optimal moment.[7] In February 2007, a British

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1 "Large Cache Uncovered, More Than 300 Munitions Found Multi-National Division – South," Multinational Force Iraq, press release, May 7, 2009.

2 "Maysan Provincial Development Strategy, 2006-2008," Maysan Provincial Development and Reconstruction Committee, 2006, p. 12.

3 Ibid., p. 16.

4 This process started in the 1950s, when the farming industry slowly collapsed and the workforce migrated to find jobs in industrial centers such as Baghdad and Basra. During the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq war and subsequent Shi`a uprisings saw the marshes destroyed and many farmers and Marsh Arabs were forced to live in semi-urban shantytowns along the Tigris River.

5 Personal interview, non-governmental organization worker, Basra Province, January 2009.

6 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means"* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008). The report includes three sets of appendices that comprise declassified translated Ba`athist-era and post-2003 intelligence materials on Iranian-backed groups in Iraq. Also see Bill Roggio's pioneering work on Special Groups at "Iran's Ramazan Corps and the Ratlines into Iraq," The Long War Journal, December 5, 2007. The Long War Journal's articles described the logistical structure of the Special Groups as early as December 2007.

7 Personal correspondence, UK intelligence officer, February 2008.

Hercules airplane was destroyed by a sophisticated EFP array as it landed at a remote northern Maysan airstrip, the first use of such a device against a fixed-wing aircraft.[8]

Coordination of attacks has often been impressive. In August 2007, a 13-vehicle logistical convoy protected by a multi-vehicle private security detail was split up by three sequential ambushes in northern Amara, causing the loss of all vehicles, and the deaths of multiple U.S. contractors.[9] As recently as the summer of 2008, Multinational Force Iraq (MNF-I) issued a special fragmentary order warning against the risk of kidnap attempts against Western personnel.[10]

In June 2008, the strengthening of Iraqi security forces began the process of rebuilding central government authority within the province. The government security offensive, called Operation Promise of Peace, exposed the Special Groups to the loss of major arms caches, denial of transshipment infrastructure (e.g., safe houses and travel agencies) and the capture and scattering of leadership figures and financiers. Perhaps most importantly, many sympathetic figures at the head of the provincial government were removed in June 2008. These included the provincial council chairman, the provincial police chief and the mayor of Amara, plus advisers to the provincial council and senior representatives of branch ministries. The young Sadrist governor of Maysan, Adel Mahdoor Radhi al-Maliki, was unseated in the subsequent January 31, 2009 provincial elections, which ushered in a more balanced council split between the major mainstream Shi`a political factions. Strong recruitment to nine new Emergency Battalions (police auxiliaries) and a new Maysan-based 15-battalion Iraqi Army division has had significant impact on security forces' capabilities as well as the numbers of unemployed young men available to undertake paid-for insurgent attacks. Even more significantly, MNF-I committed the bulk of three U.S. Army battalions to mentor the Iraqi security forces in the province from the summer of 2008 onwards.

Reaction to U.S. Presence
The Special Groups' reaction to the extension of the U.S. military presence in Maysan has highlighted the problems posed by rural counterinsurgency in Iraq, a topic that is easy to overlook in favor of the more visible challenges of urban counterinsurgency in Mosul, Baghdad, Ba`quba and other inner-city settings. Beginning in the early summer of 2008, militants began to target remote U.S. Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) whenever they have been extended into rural areas. Utilizing selective and often highly-sophisticated attacks, militants have sought to re-create "no-go" zones around their logistical lifelines to the Iranian border as well as the "rear areas" within Maysan where Special Groups' caches and personnel are hidden and moved.

The militants now active in Maysan represent a blend of foreign-trained and financed professional insurgents alongside financially-motivated criminals. High-Value Individuals (HVI) are slowly re-emerging after almost a year of self-imposed exile in Iran in rural parts of Maysan and in other parts of Iraq.[11] In some cases, individuals have long records; for instance, individuals directly connected to the murder of British military policemen in 2003 have been firmly linked to lethal roadside bombing attacks on U.S. servicemen in Maysan in October 2008.[12] Special Group cells in Maysan confirm to the broad types outlined in the Combating Terrorism Center's research.[13] Caches and arrest patterns suggest that the three categories of Special Groups identified roughly correspond to operational groupings. First, there are highly-specialized "engineers" whose use of EFP munitions appears to be strongly influenced by Lebanese Hizb Allah techniques. Second, there are the "commandos" trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hizb Allah to undertake advanced rocket, sniping

and kidnapping missions. Finally, there are the rank-and-file mujahidin, which can be classified as non-specialized combatants with rudimentary training in personal fitness, small-arms, countersurveillance and small unit tactics. Units of three to six men of each type tend to combine to undertake missions.[14] These groups work with drug smugglers, "normal" commercial smugglers and bandit groups (carjackers and kidnappers) to move people and goods and even to undertake simple types of paid-for attacks.

A good example of the reaction of militants to the deployment of new U.S. FOBs was seen in the remote Buzurgan area, a northeastern Maysan location that is now of high interest to the international oil industry. According to the geolocated incident archives of private security provider Olive Group, the establishment of a new U.S. and Iraqi FOB on the Iranian border has resulted in three waves of attacks in an area that was formerly devoid of incidents.[15] In June 2008 and October 2008, the FOB was probed by multiple small-arms attacks and an escalating pattern of roadside bombs on access roads. In the most recent sequence of attacks on the FOB in April 2009, the FOB was struck by a roadside bomb and a 107mm rocket attack. The incident occurred in the same district as the February 2007 EFP attack on a British aircraft at a Buzurgan dirt airstrip, itself a reaction by Special Groups to UK long-range patrolling of the Iranian border.[16] This part of the border is increasingly the scene of U.S. and Iranian countermoves to support their proxies and patrol the frontier; Iranian intelligence gathering takes place using National Iranian Oil Company helicopters and border guards,[17] while U.S.-Iraqi helicopter-borne joint patrols provide moral and material support to isolated Iraqi border

8 Ibid.

9 Personal correspondence, U.S. intelligence officer, March 2009.

10 Personal correspondence, U.S. intelligence officer, August 2008.

11 Personal correspondence, U.S. intelligence officer, March 2009.

12 Ibid.

13 "Appendix A: Intelligence Summaries," in Felter and Fishman.

14 This rough average figure is derived from Olive Group's database of captures reported by the Iraqi security forces in Maysan Province.

15 Olive Group was the first private security company to be licensed in 2003 and has been collecting geolocated incident data for 2,000 days of consecutive operations in Iraq. All geolocated data used in this article is drawn from Olive Group's dataset of 120,000 incidents.

16 Personal correspondence, UK intelligence officer, February 2008.

17 Personal correspondence, U.S. intelligence officer, March 2009.

posts and local communities.

The Hawr al-Howeiza marshes further to the south offer another clear example of insurgent groups seeking to defend their lines of communication and supply to sanctuaries and logistical networks in Iran. The Hawr al-Howeiza has long been a major smuggling route between Iran and Iraq due to the difficulties of policing the maze of waterways that permeate the border. U.S. and Iraqi Army forces have strung a line of border forts across the Hawr al-Howeiza, supported by FOBs north and south of the marshes at Musharrah and Qalit Salih, respectively. U.S. forces met resistance as soon as the process began in the autumn of 2008. Large Iranian-made 240mm rockets were used to attack U.S. FOBs around Qalit Salih, and the frequency of mortar and rocket attacks increased against the U.S. FOB in Majar al-Kabir.[18] Each month since September 2008, two to four EFPs have been laid on U.S. access routes to the marshes.[19] These attacks have borne the classic hallmarks of Lebanese Hizb Allah training in terms of configuration of passive-infrared telemetry, remote-control arming switches and encasement in molded insulation foam "rocks."[20] Other roadside bombs included 10 well-concealed daisy-chained 155mm artillery shells on the access roads between the FOB in Qalit Salih and the Hawr al-Howeiza field.[21] These attacks confirmed to patterns previously noted by UK explosives ordnance technicians when British forces last patrolled the areas in 2005.[22]

In Amara, the Special Groups have focused on indirect fire attacks on the main U.S. base at Butaira airport, west of the city. Escalating rocket fire against MNF-I bases is a familiar part of the Iraqi Shi`a insurgent playbook, as seen in Basra, Baghdad and Amara during 2004-2006. The new rocket campaign began on October 30, 2008 with the disrupted launch of two Iranian-made 240mm rockets against the airbase. During January, security provider

Olive Group identified 17 rocket and mortar rounds launched at the airbase, mostly Iranian-made 107mm rockets. Twenty-three 107mm rockets were launched against the FOB in February 2009. Following aggressive U.S.-Iraqi reactions and a consequent slackening of fire in March, insurgents sought to regain the initiative in April by using heavier 122mm and 240mm rockets from more distant firing points north of the Tigris River and on the far side of Amara city.[23] Although inaccurate at present, such long-range attacks allow Special Groups to avoid coalition counterbattery fire. Additionally, the distance between point-of-origin and point-of-impact slows reaction and can even channel MNF-I forces into associated roadside bombing attacks. No injuries or deaths were caused by the April attacks, but it is likely that casualties will rise as insurgents successfully adjust the aim of their long-range rocket fire.

Future Prospects
Many parts of Maysan are stabilizing quickly as a result of the surge of forces into the province that began in June 2008. Even as U.S. forces thinned out in other parts of Iraq during 2008, MNF-I decided to allocate first a U.S. Army battalion and later most of a brigade combat team to Maysan. At least one U.S. battalion and probably two will still be in Maysan in one year's time, according to U.S. officers.[24] In that period, the Iraqi garrison in the province will expand significantly. At present, there are eight battalions of Iraqi Army forces, eight battalions of paramilitary police auxiliaries, six battalions of border guards, specialized SWAT-type forces and around 15,000 traffic and patrol policemen.[25] Tip-offs, closed-circuit television surveillance and government intelligence capabilities are also developing quickly. Within a year, a new 15-battalion Iraqi Army division will be raised in Amara for service along the border. Oilfield police forces will also be established to patrol border oilfields such as Halfaya, Buzurgan, Abu Ghurab and Jabal Fauqi. In tandem

with ongoing U.S. mentoring, growing Iraqi forces will further constrain the operating environment of Special Groups along the border.[26]

In the interim, the Special Groups will likely escalate activity in a desperate effort to maintain their logistical, rest and recruitment areas. Reconciliation efforts with Special Group movements such as Asaib Ahl Haq and smaller local splinters such as al-Qadiyah and Abwat Aasiqa[27] have been complicated by the political upheaval of the provincial elections and the extension of central government control throughout the province. Money is also flowing to militant recruits from Iran via mosques such as the al-Sadr Mosque in Amara and *hussainiyyas* further south in Majar al-Kabir.[28] The ability of insurgents to bring large 122mm and 240mm rockets into Amara via boats and trucks reflects similar trends in Basra, where the Basra Air Station has once again been brought under indirect fire attack since March 2009. Likewise, there will continue to be highly-sophisticated EFP attacks in Amara, just as there are in Basra and Baghdad, including new EFP tactics to skirt MNF-I countermeasures.[29] Maysan remains the heart of the Special Groups' efforts in Iraq, pumping the lifeblood of the movement—men, arms and money—to the various operational limbs in Baghdad, Basra and beyond.

It is within sparsely populated rural areas such as Maysan that the Iraqi insurgent community will last the longest. In such areas, insurgents

18　All data points were derived from interviews with U.S. and UK intelligence officers and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technicians in 2007-2008.

19　Ibid.

20　Ibid.

21　Ibid.

22　Ibid.

23　Olive Group data, provided by permission of Olive Group's Analysis and Assessments cell, May 15, 2009.

24　Personal correspondence, U.S. Army planners, April 2009.

25　Personal correspondence, U.S. intelligence officer, March 2009. Also see DJ Elliott's reporting for The Long War Journal.

26　DJ Elliott of The Long War Journal is the foremost source on Iraqi order of battle. For U.S. deployments down to battalion level, see Wesley Morgan's page on the issue at the Institute for Studying War.

27　More granular information on these active sub-groups was deemed too sensitive to be discussed and could not be developed in recent interviews.

28　Personal correspondence, U.S. intelligence officer, March 2009. For the best open source overview of Asaib Ahl Haq and other Sadrist splinters, see Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement," Institute for the Study of War, January 2009.

29　Discussion of enemy tactics, techniques and procedures for circumventing U.S. countermeasures is a sensitive issue. In general, insurgents have sought to place passive infrared firing switches in positions that would prevent their premature initiation by countermeasures carried on U.S. vehicles. All data points derived from interviews with U.S. and UK intelligence officers in January-May 2009.

will exploit cross-border sanctuaries, lurking in areas of weak government control and seeking to perpetuate such weakness. Even committed insurgents will eventually dissolve into the general criminal population in time, but it may take longer than expected and the United States may face one of its most difficult mentoring challenges in Maysan. Although cities present particular challenges in counterinsurgency, their population density becomes a distinct advantage once the people begin to swing behind the counterinsurgency campaign; every person becomes a potential sensor and the operational space of insurgents contracts dramatically. In isolated and sparsely settled rural areas—particularly those with a history of cross-border crime, limited alternative employment and weak rule of law—the local community is more exposed to intimidation and cooption by militants. This makes rural counterinsurgency potentially much slower and characterized by fewer dramatic tipping-points such as those that appear to have occurred in many of Iraq's cities.

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