

Iraqi insurgents regrouping, says Sunni resistance leader

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Iraq's main Sunni-led resistance groups have scaled back their attacks on US forces in Baghdad and parts of Anbar province in a deliberate strategy aimed at regrouping, retraining, and waiting out George Bush's "surge", a key insurgent leader has told the Guardian.

US officials recently reported a 55% drop in attacks across Iraq. One explanation they give is the presence of 30,000 extra US troops deployed this summer. The other is the decision by dozens of Sunni tribal leaders to accept money and weapons from the Americans in return for confronting al-Qaida militants who attack civilians. They call their movement al-Sahwa (the Awakening).

The resistance groups are another factor in the complex equation in Iraq's Sunni areas. "We oppose al-Qaida as well as al-Sahwa," the director of the political department of the 1920 Revolution Brigades told the Guardian in Damascus in a rare interview with a western reporter.

Using the nom de guerre Dr Abdallah Suleiman Omary, he went on: "Al-Sahwa has made a deal with the US to take charge of their local areas and not hit US troops, while the resistance's purpose is to drive the occupiers out of Iraq. We are waiting in al-Sahwa areas. We disagree with them but do not fight them. We have shifted our operations to other areas".

Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, has seen some of the heaviest fighting since the 2003 invasion but has become conspicuously calmer in recent months. "There is no resistance at the moment in Ramadi," Omary said. He described the tribal Awakening movement as "good for pushing al-Qaida out but negative for the resistance". "There are no armed clashes between us and them but they prevent us working in their areas," he added.

Omary's group is named after a Sunni uprising against British occupation forces in 1920. The group recently joined seven other Sunni-led armed resistance organisations to form the Front for Struggle and Transformation, a political committee aimed at drawing up a programme for national unity and hastening a US withdrawal.

Besides Ramadi, the Awakening movement was also operating in Sunni-majority districts of Baghdad, such as Ameriya, Adhamiya, and parts of Ghazaliya and Jihad, Omary said. He predicted it was unlikely to last for more than a few months. It was a "temporary deal" with the US and would split apart as people realised the Americans' true intentions.

He cited last week's announcement that the Bush administration plans to work with the Shia-led government of Nuri al-Maliki on arrangements for long-term US military bases and an open-ended occupation in Iraq.

Operating in small cells, Sunni resistance groups have been responsible for most of the roadside bomb attacks on US vehicles in western Iraq. While they are starting to unite at the political level, their suspicion of Iraq's Shia militias shows no sign of abating. "We helped [Shia cleric] Moqtada al-Sadr in 2004 when the Americans attacked Najaf, but see no point in dialogue with him now," Omary

said.

Although Sadr presented himself as a nationalist and was unusual among Shia politicians in calling for an early end to the US occupation, Omary added: "He's still supporting this sectarian government in Baghdad. When his militias attack the United States they do it for their own political reasons and not to liberate Iraq".

Sadr's militia, the Jaish al-Mahdi, had killed too many innocent Sunni civilians, he went on.

Sadr's supporters often claim he is not in control of most of the militants who have abducted and murdered Sunni civilians in the spate of tit-for-tat sectarian violence provoked by the bombing of the golden-domed shrine in Samarra last year. The shrine is particularly sacred to Shias.

"He never says they are not under his control, so we have to assume they are, said Omary. "He should denounce them. Every Sunni family in Baghdad has had someone killed by Jaish al-Mahdi. They have destroyed around 300 mosques in Baghdad. If you want us to negotiate with al-Sadr, you have to ask us to negotiate with al-Qaida. We consider al-Qaida is closer to us than Jaish al-Mahdi."

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