

## Co-ordinated bloodshed



WITH American soldiers increasingly rare on the streets of Iraq, suicide bombers have developed a dark attachment to serial attacks with distinctive local themes. Last year they targeted government ministries. Earlier this year they turned to upmarket hotels, then embassies. Now it is the turn of the police. At least 21 explosions ripped through a dozen cities from north to south across the country on the morning of August 25th. Using cars and roadside devices, they hit police stations and areas patrolled by local security forces. At least 56 people were killed and about 300 injured.

The attacks can be read as al-Qaeda's response to the announcement by American commanders the day before that all their combat troops are now out of Iraq, leaving behind a training-only force of 50,000 for another 16 months. The message from al-Qaeda seems to be that it is going nowhere. The insurgent group has not given up, and as with so many of its attacks, this one was, in part at least, a bid for more recruits. Unemployed and angry Iraqi youths are reminded that there is an alternative to joining the ranks of the police.

The security forces appear strong enough for the moment to withstand the uptick in violence over the last few weeks and months. But al-Qaeda has correctly identified at least one weak spot in the arrangement left behind by the Americans. If the group keeps hitting the police as politicians dither over the formation of a new government, leaving the country rudderless, the insurgents stand a chance of picking up momentum once again.

American commanders were quick to remind Iraqi and American audiences this week that their troops could still return to patrolling the streets if needed. That is meant to be reassuring, and to a growing number of Iraqis it is. But it does not address the underlying problem, namely the inability of the Iraqi state to function effectively, including running the police. Many Iraqis expect the police to respond to the latest attacks by hiding behind even more sandbags and blast walls.

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