

Iraq: Just Another Milestone in the War against al-Qaeda

Yoram Schweitzer and Gaia Sciaky

Over the past few months senior US officials have claimed that the campaign against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is coming to a successful head, thanks to more effective US military operations in collaboration with Iraqi Sunni tribesmen, generally known as the “Anbar Awakening.” CIA director Michael Hayden announced the “near strategic defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq,” while President George W. Bush, assessing the progress in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), stated that recent gains in Iraq deflate the al-Qaeda myth about the inevitability of its victory, and that “defeating al-Qaeda in Iraq...will show the world that al-Qaeda is the weak horse.”¹ For his part, however, General David Petraeus, the former commander of the campaign against AQI, has adopted a more cautious stance, urging that it would be best to “avoid premature declarations of success.”²

The list of AQI’s defeats, however, is not necessarily indicative of results in the struggle against the global jihad in general or al-Qaeda (al-Qaeda Central, or AQC) in particular. The impression that gains against AQI have direct implications for AQC stems from the tendency to overstate the connection between the two. In fact, the overall war against AQC extends far beyond Iraq, and thus the question is whether the cumulative success against AQI will affect the strength of AQC and its affiliates, and if so, to what degree. A close inspection of the role the Iraqi campaign plays in AQC’s strategic plan can shed light on

Yoram Schweitzer, senior research associate and director of the Program on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict at INSS

Gaia Sciaky, MA student at Georgetown University’s security studies program and an intern at INSS

the weight of the accomplishment of the Americans and their allies in Iraq, and even more, on the impact these accomplishments have upon AQC.³ Is a victory in the war against AQI a watershed in the greater war against the global jihad, or is it just one step, significant as it may be, in a longer, continuous effort to deal with the challenges posed to the West by the global jihad movement.

This essay analyzes AQC's overall strategic balance sheet in its campaign in Iraq over the last five years. It argues that AQC will continue to boast major achievements in its Iraqi campaign even if it eventually endures a sweeping defeat there. Indeed, AQC leaders placed great emphasis on the Iraqi campaign but did not invest the bulk of the organization's resources in it. Instead, they used the time to reinforce their power and infrastructure where they are now operating, primarily in the federally administered tribal areas (FATA) along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Thus, it is to be expected that the organization's base along this border will collaborate with Iraqi alumni and constitute an infrastructure for future terrorist activities.

AQI: Achievements vs. Failures

Claims as to the decline of AQI's power began with the first signs of its dimming popularity both in Iraq and among the wider Muslim public, and was eventually dramatized by the rebellion of Iraq's Sunni clans against AQI. Their rebellion was sparked by the brutality of AQI's showcase attacks, as well as the organization's authoritarian tack and its attempts to impose a rigid lifestyle upon the local population.

A close examination through the prism of AQI's strategic goals suggests that the organization enjoyed considerable success in Iraq alongside its failures. On the one hand, some of its long term goals in the country were attained and will remain part of the legacy of AQC and the global jihad. On the other hand, the organization's losses seriously damaged the operational capabilities of local jihadist elements as well as the efforts to champion the pan-Islamic initiative to create a Muslim caliphate in the heart of the Levant. Ultimately, though, the overall effect of the damage done in Iraq to the battle strategy of the organization as a whole will depend upon the ability of the West to build upon its success in Iraq and channel its achievements toward other areas where the organization is active, primarily the Afghani-Pakistani arena.

Al-Qaeda's perception of its struggle is that of an ongoing war, where every step forward is taken gradually and incrementally paves the way for future measures. This struggle will be protracted for generations. The US-led invasion of Iraq presented a window of opportunity that the organization seized successfully. Al-Qaeda's own perception of its recent setbacks in Iraq within the framework of its comprehensive ideology is therefore that of tactical shifts, and not one of permanent defeat. The fundamental principle of temporary adjustment to changing circumstances is based on interpretations of the Qur'an and the history of Muslims' struggles against the enemies of Islam. Muhammad's flight from Mecca, which started the Hijra, is considered the beginning of the Muslim victorious path. Therefore, the current hardship experienced by al-Qaeda in Iraq does not necessarily translate into a substantial lowering of the organization's morale or its commitment to the jihadist cause that, like in the past, has now progressed through the waging of a decades-long or even centuries-long war against Western crusaders and collaborating "apostate" Muslim regimes.

As such, the intervention of Western military forces in Iraq provided the organization an excellent opportunity to fight the "far enemy" on its home turf and revitalize the spirit of the heroic Islamic resistance that figured so prominently in the 1980s during the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan, in which the mujahidin defended Muslim turf from a superpower. The narrative surrounding the jihadist struggle in Iraq facilitated the recruitment of Muslim youth to fight the infidel enemy currently contaminating ancient Islamic soil, and helped both tarnish the US reputation and fuel anti-Western, particularly anti-American, sentiments within the broad Muslim public (as well as the wide non-Muslim public that took exception to the war in Iraq).

The struggle in Iraq helped the organization promote the narrative that it has attempted to impart to its supporters. During the five years of fighting in Iraq, AQC's sophisticated propaganda apparatus accumulated significant amounts of raw material for its media campaign and psychological operations. Videotaped material was translated into other media formats, mainly clips that idealize

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terrorist and guerilla activity against the foreigners. AQC has tapped this raw material to weave the narrative of the heroic battle of the jihad fighters who are willing to sacrifice themselves unhesitatingly for the divine cause and defend the honor of the Islamic nation (the *umma*), which are, according to AQC, under coordinated attack by the West. Clips produced by AQC highlight both the brutality and the vulnerability of the West: coalition forces are depicted injuring innocent Muslims indiscriminately and taking over their land, and joined with images of their repeatedly suffering fierce blows from jihadist fighters. The immense amount of raw footage that has been produced in Iraq and disseminated through the organization's websites among its online supporters is one of AQC's salient accomplishments. The organization will unquestionably make major use of it so as to maximize its effect and leverage future struggles.

Moreover, even preventing the emergence of the putative Iraqi Islamic caliphate and weakening AQC's power base in Iraq are unlikely to prevent the radicalization of certain elements of the Muslim public that opposed the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. The chances of the US restoring its damaged reputation in the Muslim world in the near future are at best tenuous, and it seems likely that the impression left by the Iraqi terrorist and guerilla uprising will be etched deeper

by an AQC propaganda campaign in an effort to ensure that it will never depart from the collective jihadist memory and will influence the movement for generations to come.

The invasion of Iraq gave AQC a chance to restore its reputation and its operational infrastructure, both of which were damaged in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan that dealt AQC and its Taliban patrons a swift and severe defeat and denied them their operational bases. Furthermore, in addition to being a magnet for Muslim youths around the world eager to pursue

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the jihad actively, Iraq also commanded the attention and resources of the anti-terrorist coalition, which threw the majority of its weight into a new arena in the Middle East. This gave the AQC leadership, under the distraction of the fighting in Iraq, a chance to develop its operational

bases in the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan, where leaders of AQC took refuge. From an operational standpoint, the Iraqi arena was an important platform for AQC to train and prepare new recruits. The flexibility that characterized AQC's modus operandi gives AQI's trained operatives the opportunity to disperse and regroup in other areas if the situation in Iraq becomes untenable.

Despite the temporary success that AQI achieved in Iraq, the organization did not achieve some of its loftier goals. At this stage, control of the state has passed to the Shiite majority at the expense of Sunni hegemony. AQC's attempt to prevent the Shiite rise has failed, as has its bid to eject the American forces from Iraq through armed struggle. The declaration of Zawahiri, Bin Laden's lieutenant and chief spokesman for AQC in recent years, that AQC's purpose is to disrupt American and Iranian plans in Iraq (odd as this combination might sound, yet reflects AQC deep suspicions and resentment of Iran's ambitious pretensions), indicate that the organization did not achieve its goals, even if the Americans do end up withdrawing most of their forces.⁴

AQI, and certainly while under the command of Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, tried to inflame the internal, ethnic fault lines in the country and intensify sectarian animosity. This further deepened the instability of the Iraqi government, making it very difficult for the coalition to operate. Consequently, there were often severe reactions against the local population with major harm sustained by uninvolved civilians, which thus estranged them from the allied forces. At the same time, while AQI made it difficult for the Western coalition and reconstruction forces to operate, this strategy backfired on the terrorist organization. Its especially violent methods, the mass killings it authored, and its attempt to impose its religious worldview on the civilian population mobilized this very sector against the organization.⁵ AQI's attempt to co-opt the Iraqi resistance and establish a Muslim caliphate in the country, a move defined by CIA director Hayden as a "strategic mistake,"⁶ was unsuccessful.

The Current Terrorist Threat

AQC devoted significant attention to the struggle in Iraq, given its sense that the massive numbers of foreign troops deployed in a nation

in the heart of the Arab Levant and the newly created political and security vacuum presented it with a rare opportunity and particular room for maneuver. Nonetheless, the leadership did not dispatch its leading fighters and forces to the area. It settled for remote guidance and for encouragement of AQ supporters and fighters to go to Iraq, while refraining from investing its own funds or personnel and opting to concentrate these resources in the central operations arena on the Pakistan-Afghan border.

The organization's operational infrastructure in this area was rebuilt and redeployed after the severe setbacks it suffered mainly between the years of 2001-2003. Beyond this, the activity of the organization's foreign operations division, responsible for the murderous showcase attacks that have given AQC its global reputation for ferocity, continued. Thus, along with the actions of the organization in Iraq and along with its move to entrench its infrastructure in the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan, AQC has executed suicide attacks such as those in Turkey in 2003 and London 2005, and tried (albeit unsuccessfully) to carry out an extensive air terrorism campaign in London in 2006. In other words, while various AQC offshoots in Arab countries, especially Iraq, suffered serious damage, this did not have a decisive impact on the terrorist threat posed by the organization to the West and its Arab allies. AQC is still capable of executing mass-casualty attacks, training new warriors in the tribal areas along the Pakistan-Afghan border, and supporting the terrorist and guerilla operations of its organizational affiliates.

Even if AQI loses its powerbase in Iraq entirely, it is now capable of effectively deploying fighters who gained experience in Iraq. Thus, Iraqi alumni are likely to disperse along the lines witnessed after the 1979-89 Afghan war.⁷ Some may return to their countries of origin and will join local, fundamentalist terror organizations. Some may create ad hoc terrorist cells and will act independently, according to their reading of the global jihad. The cream of the crop will be snapped up, after careful screening, by AQC's foreign operations mechanism, to execute showcase attacks in the West. Some might gradually find their way to other jihad arenas, and the remainder will likely stay in Iraq so as to continue to undermine Shiite hegemony and attack foreigners in the area.

The Meaning of Victory or Loss in Iraq

The value of preventing AQI from acquiring further momentum and a heightened sense of triumph in the Islamic resistance camp is not in dispute. At the same time, it is important to examine critically the relevance of these achievements to the overall campaign against AQC and its affiliates. Given the role of the Iraqi arena in AQ's greater strategy, the West's feeling of triumph over AQI and hence of AQC is not necessarily matched by a sense of defeat among the ranks of the global jihad. These jihadists consider the Iraqi campaign just one of many fights, arguing that the struggle has merely been postponed and will resume in other arenas. The current defeats do not necessarily impact upon the operational potential of the Iraqi alumni who have acquired extensive combat experience as well as terrorist and guerilla warfare savvy that will accompany them in the years ahead. Likewise, they do not impact upon the central organization's determination to keep fighting.

The recent improvement in Iraq's security situation can still be reversed, and it would appear that the forces aligned with AQC retain the ability to deliver heavy blows to their opponents in Iraq, including the foreign forces. In the case of a new wave of sectarian violence, AQC could take advantage of the situation, as it has in the past. A Shiite Iraq that discriminates against the Sunni minority will continue to be a target for Sunni factions, and AQC will almost certainly cooperate with dissatisfied local elements, including those that have recently turned their backs on AQI. Thus, the central challenge facing the Western coalition remains to continue to strike AQC and its Iraqi affiliates, so as to ensure that they cannot reconstitute themselves in the country.

It may very well be too early to eulogize the activities of the organization in Iraq, or to overestimate the ramifications of its defeat in Iraq. Whether or not AQC reconstitutes its operations in Iraq or manages to export its operations to another arena, this will not suffice to undermine its strength in its current headquarters on the Pakistan Afghan border.

Notes

1. "President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror," March 19, 2008, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/03/print/20080319-2.html>.
2. Rod Nordland, "Avoiding the V Word," *Newsweek*, August 21, 2008.

3. The jihadist forces in Iraq were named “al-Qaeda in Iraq” only after the official acceptance of al-Zarqawi, the leader of these forces, into Bin Laden’s organization in 2005. Jihadist elements have been operating in the country since shortly before the US-led invasion in 2003, but only subsequently did they decide to join al-Qaeda officially. Today, the Iraqi jihadist network is considered one of the local branches of AQC. It is a mature network that shares AQC’s Salafi ideology, supports AQC’s aims and tactics (primarily suicide attacks and bombings), and receives funding and strategic guidance from the central organization.
4. Selected questions and answers from Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri – Part 1,” NEFA foundation, April 17, 2008.
5. Michael Ware, “Papers Give Peek inside al-Qaeda in Iraq,” CNN, June 11, 2008.
6. “Al-Qaeda Contained,” Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Center, August 4, 2008, www.janes.com.
7. Yoram Schweitzer, “Middle East Terrorism: The ‘Afghanistan Alumni,’” in Shlomo Brom and Yiftah Shapir, eds., *The Middle East Military Balance 1999-2000* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 200), pp. 121–33.