

COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

DYSFUNCTION AND DECLINE:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM INSIDE AL QA'IDA IN IRAQ



HARMONY PROJECT

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Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned From Inside Al-Qa`ida in Iraq

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THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa`ida in Iraq is based in part on newly declassified documents drawn from the Department of Defense's Harmony database. Most of the documents released with this report have never been seen before; a few have been previously released by media organizations partially redacted, still others are versions of messages released publicly by al-Qa`ida or other insurgents. The documents released with this report are being released in their entirety.

Readers should be aware that analyzing such data is fraught with risk. Documents in the Harmony database were collected on the battlefield unscientifically. There is no way to know how representative documents captured by U.S. forces are of the larger body of information produced by al-Qa`ida or other insurgents. Likewise, the vast database in which they are stored is imperfect and virtually impossible to search systematically. Readers and researchers should therefore be wary of conclusions drawn solely from these documents. Captured documents offer unique insight into al-Qa`ida's decision-making process, but they are most valuable when contextualized with information drawn from open sources. *Dysfunction and Decline* is the latest Combating Terrorism Center report to do just that. The documents that informed this report are available on the CTC's website at: www.ctc.usma.edu.

The CTC cannot vouch for the authenticity or accuracy of these documents, except to confirm that they have been authorized for release by competent authorities of the U.S. government. The documents are being released in both the original Arabic and in English.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) is a shadow of its former self, primarily because broad sectors of Iraq's Sunni population rejected it after more than three years of active and tacit cooperation. Anger over AQI's brutal radicalism infused the Sunni backlash against jihadists, but AQI also made two fundamental strategic overreaches that exacerbated its alienation from Sunnis in Iraq. First, it incited a sectarian backlash from Iraqi Shi'a without the means to defend Iraq's Sunnis from the onslaught it provoked. Second, AQI created a formal political entity, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), to dominate Iraq after a U.S. withdrawal without adequate support from Iraq's Sunni population.

These strategic missteps angered and frightened Sunni tribesmen, but the mechanisms of AQI's decline were even more mundane. Pressure from U.S. and Iraqi forces compounded the group's endemic operational weaknesses to create a self-reinforcing cycle of command and control failure, tactical mistakes and logistical disconnect that hastened the group's descent into simple thuggery, which reinforced AQI's alienation from local populations.

During AQI's decline, one of its commanders produced a detailed "lessons learned" document to capture the mistakes AQI made in Iraq. The most important were:

- Failure to understand the Iraqi people,
- Use of unreliable smugglers in Syria,
- Unrealistic expectations of foreign fighters created by al-Qa`ida propaganda,
- Poor cooperation between Emirs,
- Tension between foreign fighters and Iraqi members of AQI,
- Suicide bombers reneging,
- Command structure that diluted authority,
- Bureaucratic stovepiping, and
- Poor use of financial resources.

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq squandered a tremendous opportunity to build a safe-haven in Iraq, but the organization is unlikely to be completely destroyed. Political tension between Sunni and Shi'a, Arab and Kurd, will continue and is likely to create social space for radicals like al-Qa`ida. AQI will likely remain capable of intermittent terrorist attacks and could strengthen in the future if Iraq's tribal Sunnis remain politically marginalized. There are still many barriers to a secure, sustainable Iraq, but the most

important involve power politics and local Iraqi players. In Iraq today it is more likely that dysfunctional politics will create space for al-Qa`ida than that al-Qa`ida will unilaterally upset the political process.

AQI's setbacks have created a strategic problem for al-Qa`ida's global movement because their decline illustrated that average Muslims reject jihadist ideas when applied on the battlefield or offered as governing principles. Al-Qa`ida's effort to create or co-opt "franchise" organizations such as AQI creates the impression of global reach, but it also exposes the entire movement to the missteps of a local command.

Despite these important setbacks for al-Qa`ida, the U.S. presence in Iraq—and al-Qa`ida's confrontation with U.S. forces there—has greatly benefited the jihadist movement. AQI's campaign enabled al-Qa`ida writ large to maintain media presence, distract U.S. attention from Afghanistan, gain tremendous tactical expertise, and participate in a very popular fight. Furthermore, the central organization based in Pakistan invested very little in its relationship with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and the jihadists that became AQI—offering little more than its reputation and brand name.

The lessons of AQI's failure are only partially applicable elsewhere. In Afghanistan and Pakistan there are several circumstances that mitigate the types of weaknesses that made AQI vulnerable. First, al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan has a relatively secure safe haven in parts of Pakistan, which both makes it more difficult to target directly, but also allows al-Qa`ida to build systems that are more resistant to disruption even when leadership strikes are effective. Second, al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan has subtly infiltrated tribal groups over twenty years and generally eschews the imperious leadership style that turned so many Iraqis against AQI. Third, al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan has used far fewer large-scale attacks on civilians.

Despite the differences between AQI and other al-Qa`ida elements, there are important lessons to learn from AQI's decline, including the need to target al-Qa`ida's indoctrination capacity in combat environments, the value of recognizing rivalries between al-Qa`ida leaders, the need to set realistic expectations among political parties in Iraq, and the utility of assessing our enemies' goals objectively and then explaining those goals without hyperbole.

INTRODUCTION

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) is a shadow of its former self, primarily because broad sectors of Iraq's Sunni population rejected it after more than three years of active and tacit cooperation. That AQI's ideological extremism alienated many Iraqis is well understood, but radicalism alone does not fully explain AQI's decline: poor leadership, vulnerable communication mechanisms, tension between Iraqi and foreign members, and weak indoctrination efforts contributed to strategic and tactical blunders that alienated even other Sunni insurgents. In lieu of major social and political shifts (which are possible) that offer AQI a sustained safe-haven, these dynamics are unlikely to change dramatically; they serve as important obstacles to AQI's resurrection. Conversely, al-Qa`ida elements elsewhere, primarily along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, are hindered less by these weaknesses. There are lessons from the fight against AQI that are applicable in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but al-Qa`ida's operations there are likely to be much more durable than those in Iraq.

Section I of this paper traces al-Qa`ida in Iraq's transition from welcome partner to mortal enemy of Iraq's Sunni insurgents, focusing particularly on the Islamic Army of Iraq. Section II draws on declassified internal AQI correspondence and open sources to describe how external pressures—from U.S. forces and tribal sources—exacerbated AQI's fallout with other insurgents while rending the movement from within. Section III assesses AQI's prospects in Iraq and the impact of AQI's failure on the future of the global jihadist movement. Section IV offers recommendations for containing AQI in the future and for applying the lessons of AQI's demise to other elements.

I. STRATEGIC OVERREACH AND SUNNI REJECTION

Al-Qa`ida and Secular Resistance

On October 23, 2005 in the Iraqi city of Taji two fighters from the Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI), one of Iraq's most powerful Sunni insurgent groups, were gunned down by AQI fighters.¹ It was not the first time that AQI had targeted other Sunni insurgent groups, which were composed largely of former Iraqi Army officers, tribal gunmen, and angry Iraqi nationalists. Fighters from the 1920 Revolution Brigade had complained about murderous attacks on civilians to the jihadist Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in 2003, a year

¹ Sabrina Tavernise and Dexter Filkins, "Local Insurgents Tell of Clashes with Al Qaeda's Forces in Iraq," *New York Times*, 12 January 2006.

before he established AQI.² Thus, although Iraqi Islamist groups and Sunni nationalists partnered with AQI against the U.S. occupation from 2003 through most of 2006, the tension—and occasional violence—between jihadists and tribal and nationalist Sunni insurgent groups was in place long before the first Awakening Councils were established in September 2006.

Much of the tension resulted from AQI imposing its will in traditionally tribal areas.³ Nevertheless, the shared interest in expelling the United States and resisting Shi'a political control compelled most tribal leaders and nationalists to tolerate AQI's indiscretions. AQI was brutal and imperious, but its successful attacks against U.S. forces, Shi'a militias, and the Iraqi government were useful. Zarqawi's attacks on U.S. troops and the Iraqi government were welcomed by other Sunni insurgents, even as many were appalled by the mass slaughter of innocent Iraqis and angered by attacks on members of their own group.

Strategically, however, AQI's threat to the Sunni nationalists was clear from early 2004. Zarqawi's strategy was fundamentally designed to assert control over Sunni groups and replace tribal loyalty and Iraqi nationalism with an ideological commitment to jihadi-salafi ideological goals. Murdering Shi'a was just the means to Zarqawi's end. He hoped to create a sectarian crisis gigantic enough to demonstrate that only jihadist extremism and brutality could keep Sunnis safe. Total sectarian war was to be the justification necessary to convert Sunnis to AQI's absolutist ideology.

The February 2006 bombing of the Askariya mosque in Samarra unleashed the brutal sectarian war AQI had sought since its founding. Shi'a militias, some operating from inside Iraqi government agencies, attacked Sunni communities across Iraq. Despite this operational success, AQI was unable to capitalize on the sectarian violence to radicalize Iraq's Sunni population. Despite its ability to mount destabilizing attacks across much of Iraq, AQI did not have the manpower, expertise, or predilection to safeguard Sunni populations as they demanded. Unable to protect the Sunni population from Shi'a retribution, AQI was blamed for the violence being perpetrated by Shi'a groups against Sunnis. AQI's violence was not nihilistic; rather it had an image of the society it hoped to create. AQI's strategic sin was arrogance; the jihadist group had the power to tear society apart but was not strong enough to pull it back together again in its own image.

² Ibid.

³ Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-637951, *CTC Harmony Collection*.

Zarqawi's union with al-Qa`ida in October 2004 had created al-Qa`ida in Iraq, but it did not substantially change his strategy or the fundamentals of his relationship with other Sunni insurgents. The cooperative, but often antagonistic, relationship between Zarqawi and other insurgents was reflected in statements made after Zarqawi was killed in June 2006. When interviewed by al-Jazeera, the IAI's spokesman praised Zarqawi as a martyr but staunchly defended his organization's independence from al-Qa`ida:

This incident is grievous and pleasant at the same time. It is grievous because we lost a dear brother and hero mujahid who engaged in battle fields. I am happy because he will be rewarded for the good deeds he has done... we have no organizational relations [with the al-Qa`ida Organization]; rather it is a relation of brotherhood by religion and unity of ranks.⁴

The IAI was not the only group tending a delicate relationship with al-Qa`ida. Tribal groups in Anbar were angry with AQI's zealous ideology, intrusion on their traditional smuggling routes, and determination to uproot traditional tribal political structures.⁵ These tribal groups overlapped with many of the insurgent organizations in Iraq. In some cases, self-described insurgent groups with names plastered across the internet were simply the public face for essentially tribal behavior.⁶ In other instances, tribes used insurgent infrastructure to pursue parochial interests, including chasing lucrative reconstruction contracts.⁷

Tribal Warnings and the Islamic State of Iraq

On September 17, 2006, several tribes in Iraq's Anbar Province held a conference entitled "The Day of Awakening" to publicly denounce AQI. One Sheikh at the conference explained its purpose in blunt terms:

We all say to the terrorists, leave because you do not have a place in Al-Anbar Governorate after now. We have discovered from where you get financed and

⁴ Ibrahim Al-Shammari, Interviewed by Al-Habib al-Ghurayb, *Al Jazeera*, 6 June 2008.

⁵ Anonymous, "Smuggling, Syria, and Spending," in *Bombers, Bank Accounts and Bleedout*, ed. Brian Fishman (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, NY, 22 July 2008).

⁶ David Kilcullen, "Field Notes on Iraq's Tribal Revolt Against al-Qa`ida," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 11 (October 2008); Lin Todd, *Iraqi Tribal Study: Anbar*, (study conducted under contract with the U.S. Department of Defense, 18 June 2006), <http://www.comw.org/warreport/fulltext/0709todd.pdf>.

⁷ Harmony Document: 100607-Jaysh al-Muj, 100607-Sheikh Ltr.

who orders you to kill our Iraqi cousins. Leave now or you will be killed in an ugly way. We are determined to fight you face to face. God is great.⁸

AQI did not readily abandon its safe havens, funding, or position of authority. One month after the first public Awakening meeting, AQI established the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and declared it the sole legitimate ruling institution across much of Iraq, including Anbar.⁹ The ISI immediately called for tribes and Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq to unite under ISI leadership and for foreign fighters from abroad to continue immigrating to Iraq. To illustrate the seriousness of the new institution, the ISI subsequently released information about its “cabinet” officials and a long explanation of the new state’s religious and political obligations.¹⁰

Establishing the ISI was a dramatic shift in strategy for AQI, which under Zarqawi’s rule had been more focused on violence and purifying the practice of Islam than establishing true political control. Two calculations motivated the shift. First, al-Qa`ida’s leaders were concerned that the United States might leave Iraq suddenly, leaving behind a political vacuum that AQI would be ill prepared to fill. Al-Qa`ida’s leaders were particularly influenced by the aftermath of the great anti-Soviet jihad when jihadists were unable to adequately capitalize on the Soviet Union’s withdrawal. Rather than the flowering of an Islamic state suitable to al-Qa`ida, the Soviet withdrawal led to *fitna* [disagreement, chaos], and rampant warlordism. This concern was first expressed by Ayman al-Zawahiri in his famous letter to Zarqawi in the summer of 2005. After first ordering Zarqawi to establish an Islamic state capable of uniting Iraqis, Zawahiri explained that the purpose of building a political institution “in the din of war and the challenges of killing and combat” is to ensure that jihadists, not more moderate militants, would be ready to control the territory and build the institutions and mechanisms needed to govern according to Sharia when the fighting ended.¹¹ He continued:

⁸ *Al-Iraqiyah Television*, 18 September 2006.

⁹ Statement by Islamic State of Iraq Information Minister (released 15 October 2006).

¹⁰ Brian Fishman, “Fourth Generation Governance: Sheikh Tamimi Defends the Islamic State of Iraq” (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point: NY, 23 March 2007); Uthman bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq* (released 7 January 2007 on World News Network).

¹¹ Ayman Al-Zawahiri, *Letter to Zarqawi*, 12 July 2005, http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/harmony_docs.asp.

... the mujahedeen must not have their mission end with the expulsion of the Americans from Iraq, and then lay down their weapons, and silence the fighting zeal. We will return to having the secularists and traitors holding sway over us.... Things may develop faster than we imagine. The aftermath of the collapse of American power in Vietnam—and how they ran and left their agents is noteworthy. Because of that, we must be ready starting now, before events overtake us, and before we are surprised by the conspiracies of the Americans and the United Nations and their plans to fill the void behind them. We must take the initiative and impose a fait accompli upon our enemies...¹²

Zawahiri's concerns were echoed after the establishment of the ISI by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the group's alleged Emir:

When we proclaimed the State of Islam, a state of migration [hijrah] and jihad, we did not lie to God and to the people, and we were not talking about dreams.... What happened after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the scattering of Muslim peoples far from the communist center? They fell prey to communism and secularism. What happened after the mujahidin, migrants and supporters, stopped at the gates of the Serbian capital in the Bosnia war? Simply it is the Dayton Agreement for an alleged peace. What happened after the fall of the fruit in Afghanistan, and the enemy's defeat at the time of the parties? Killing, ruin, and destruction which remain a stigma for all those who took part in it.¹³

Zawahiri's analysis that AQI should prepare for a quick U.S. exit from Iraq seemed prescient in the fall of 2006 when the ISI was established, but the analysis proved premature and contributed to a political strategy that ultimately undermined al-Qa`ida's position in Iraq. At the time, the U.S. mission in Iraq seemed extraordinarily fragile. Early efforts to surge troops into Baghdad were not limiting the car bombs or sectarian killings. Even early hints of the new "surge" strategy stated that the number of U.S. troops would increase and then decline. In his quest to prepare AQI for a post-American Iraq, Zawahiri advocated the creation of a political institution that alienated the Iraqis it would supposedly govern.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, *The Harvests of the Years in the Land of the Monotheists* (Al-Furqan Media Center, 17 April 2007).

AQI's second key reason for establishing the ISI was to bully those tribal and insurgent "constituents" to submit to its leadership. By establishing a concrete political institution supposedly dedicated to Islam, AQI hoped to coerce tribal and insurgent groups, particularly those in the new Awakening Councils, from rebelling against its dictates.¹⁴ After all, rebellion against true Islamic rule is generally prohibited among Muslims.¹⁵

AQI's calls for unity under its command fell on deaf—and angry—ears in Iraq. The anti-AQI sentiment expressed in the Awakening tribal councils was exacerbated by AQI's unjustified claims to political leadership and was almost immediately reflected in angry remarks by formal Sunni insurgent organizations. Some of these groups started using their propaganda mechanisms to condemn AQI and, in some cases, signal that they were willing to coordinate with the United States to attack AQI. Just ten days before the ISI was established, the IAI's Ibrahim al-Shammari was asked what his "red lines" were with regard to other insurgent groups and what the IAI would do if al-Qa`ida in Iraq created an Islamic state.<sup>16</sup> Shammari's response reflected the frustration of many Iraqi tribal and insurgent leaders who felt al-Qa`ida was too violent and had little respect for Iraqi customs and culture:

The Muslim blood is the red line.... A Muslim is a brother of another Muslim; he neither oppresses him nor does he lie to him nor does he look down upon him or humiliate him. Piety is here [pointing to his chest]. It is evil enough for a Muslim to humiliate his brother. All things of a Muslim are sacred for his brother-in-faith: his blood, his property, and his honor. Other than that, we do not have any reservations or red lines in cooperating with our brothers in supporting the religion in Iraq.¹⁷

It is likely that Shammari's statement was intended as a warning to AQI not to actually declare the ISI. Other insurgent groups seemed to have similar concerns and were actually reaching beyond AQI and appealing directly to Usama bin Ladin. On October 12, 2006, a man calling himself Abu Usamah al-Iraqi released a video online

¹⁴ Fishman (2007).

¹⁵ Ironically, a central feature of jihadist ideology is the religious justification for *takfir*—excommunicating a Muslim ruler believed to fail in his duties to impose Sharia.

¹⁶ "Interview with Dr. Ibrahim al-Shammari" (released online at Al-Boraq Islamic Network, 5 October 2006).

¹⁷ Ibid.

condemning AQI and asking bin Ladin to disown the organization's branch in Iraq. His complaints are worth quoting at length:

At the beginning, the organization [AQI] did not do anything wrong and the factions used to rally behind it and bless and help it. Then the organization suddenly, and in a weird manner, began to behave strangely. It began to liquidate scholars—scholars of Shari'ah and others. It began to say that they are affiliated with the [Iraqi] Islamic Party and began to kill them based on suspicions.... This was followed by attacks on the very livelihoods of Muslim Sunnis—they planted charges in front of houses, schools, and hospitals, and under electric generators without any consideration for the importance of [these facilities] for the society.... They also went too far in the issue of *Al-Tatarrus* [killing of fellow Muslims in the pursuit of infidel casualties], exceeding all limits....¹⁸

Abu Usamah al-Iraqi did not state that he was representing a specific organization, but he repeatedly mentioned crimes AQI had allegedly committed against the 1920 Revolution Brigades, a large, religiously motivated insurgent group with ties to one of Iraq's most prominent Sunni religious movements, the Association of Muslim Scholars. It seems likely that AQI shirked warnings from both the IAI and the 1920 Revolution Brigades not to establish the ISI. In doing so, AQI had picked a fight with two large groups with deep ties into Iraqi society.

Importantly, AQI's squabble with other Sunni insurgents played out in public, where it could be monitored globally by both proponents and opponents of the U.S. presence in Iraq. Whereas anti-AQI statements from U.S. or Iraqi government sources had limited credibility among opponents of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, groups like the IAI and the 1920 Revolution Brigades had developed a strong reputation among global supporters of the Iraqi insurgency. Their public denunciations of AQI are particularly damaging to an organization like al-Qa`ida, which desperately tries to portray itself as the vanguard of resistance for all Muslims.

Al-Qa`ida's Isolation

¹⁸ Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, *A Word of Truth—A Message to the Lion Leader Usamah bin Ladin, May God Protect Him*, 12 October 2006.

AQI's excesses alienated even its closest allies. In 2003, Ansar al-Sunnah embodied unity between jihadists and nationalists when it was created by a union of Kurdish jihadists and, generally speaking, more nationalist Sunni Arabs. But in April 2007, a group of less jihadist-friendly members resigned Ansar al-Sunnah and took the title Ansar al-Sunnah Legal Commission.¹⁹ Ansar al-Sunnah's dissolution was prompted by disagreements within the group over how to respond to AQI attacks on its members. Although the organizations were allies, AQI members apparently targeted some Ansar al-Sunnah members, presumably those that were more nationalist. In late 2006 and early 2007, Abu Ayyub al-Masri (AQI's one-time Emir and, officially, the ISI's Minister of War) and members of Ansar al-Sunnah corresponded about the growing tension between their groups.²⁰ The first letter, addressed to Abu Hamza (Abu Ayyub al-Masri's nom de guerre is Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) is relatively polite:

Dear Brother, the mistakes in the field of fight came to the point [where we are] fed up. And I am sorry to say that your team has the bigger share... This issue has become very important and critical especially when it comes to the bloodshed. My assumption [is] that those issues are not acceptable by you, and our hope [is] that you can [do] something at these final stages.²¹

Other letters seem to indicate that AQI and Ansar al-Sunnah had been in discussions about joining al-Qa`ida's ISI, which is reasonable considering AQI's determination to unite the Sunni insurgency under the rubric of the ISI.²² AQI may have tried to strong-arm Ansar al-Sunnah by killing off its more secular members. Whatever the rationale, the relationship between AQI and the less jihadist elements in Ansar al-Sunnah seem to have come to a head in January 2007, when the previously unknown Ansar al-Sunnah Legal Commission released a letter online demanding that AQI explain the killing of several of its members:

¹⁹ Shaykh Abd-al-Wahab Ibn Muhammad al-Sultan, *Ansar al-Sunnah Group and All Who Are Affiliated with it Announce Their Resignation From the Group*, 9 April 2007.

²⁰ See Harmony Documents: NMEC-2007-636885, NMEC-2007-636880, NMEC-2007-636888, NMEC-2007-636892, MNFT-2007-636898.

²¹ Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-636885. Some of these correspondences are dated; others are not. The final letter from the Ansar al-Sunnah Legal Commission to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir describes the scope of the private correspondence that took place previously so it is possible to recreate the order of events. Nevertheless, the timeline is not completely clear.

²² Harmony Documents: NMEC-2007-636880, NMEC-2007-636888, NMEC-2007-636892.

Individuals from your group have conducted operations of kidnapping, torture, and the killing of people from our group and in a number of regions, with their (full) knowledge that they were from the al-Ansar [al-Sunnah] group.... The most recent incident of this nature was when a group from your organization spilled the blood of three of the best cadres of the mujahidin and those who had prior jihad experience in the battlefields who had many witnesses of them in operations in which they inflicted great injury upon the enemy time after time and repeatedly in the city of Mosul.²³

The letters to Abu Ayyub al-Masri are written to suggest that he is not personally responsible for the violence, but that he should still take action to end it. This was probably a tactic to give Abu Ayyub al-Masri a face-saving way to rectify the situation, but also suggests that al-Masri could not completely control his organization. The letters to al-Masri are interesting for another reason; they are addressed to him rather than Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the persona named as the emir of al-Qa`ida's Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006. American forces in Iraq have accused AQI of fabricating al-Baghdadi, an assertion that may be reflected in the fact that the letters were addressed to al-Masri rather than al-Baghdadi.

The conflict must have shaken the ISI's leadership because its efforts to reassure Ansar al-Sunnah quickly went from urgent to pathetic. In January 2007, Abu Ayyub al-Masri wrote a groveling note to Abdallah al-Shafi'i, the emir of Ansar al-Sunnah's jihadist elements, that illustrates just how weak al-Masri's position was becoming:

... let me say on behalf of myself and [the] Amir of the believers [Abu Umar al-Baghdadi] we are willing to hand over any person have (sic) committed a crime of blood or took your money, we will hand him over, we will not attend his judicial proceeding or object to his judgment, and if he found guilty according to Shariea (sic) and deserve beheading, you shall do so and will not ask for anything but the evidence of his judgment.... I pledge to become a faithful servant and a loyal guard to you. I would carry your shoes on my head and kiss them a thousand times...²⁴

²³ Ansar al-Sunnah letter to Abu Hamzah al-Masri, http://ctc.usma.edu/publications/aas_aqi.asp.

²⁴ Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-636898. The translation included in the text of this analysis is slightly different from the translation released with this report. The text used herein is more literal on the critical point of Abu Hamza carrying and kissing al-Shafi'i's shoes.

Abu Ayyub al-Masri's begging suggests that he understood how critical Ansar al-Sunnah was to the ISI's political position in Iraq. Abdallah al-Shafi'i's wing of Ansar al-Sunnah contained the ISI's closest ideological allies in Iraq. If the ISI lost them, it would truly be on its own. Ansar al-Sunnah's jihadi element (now called Ansar al-Islam) never abandoned AQI completely, but it did not side with AQI in its disputes with other insurgents either, opting instead to try to mediate the growing dispute.

By late 2006, AQI's demons were coming home to roost. Brutal tactics, the murder of Muslim civilians, and unrealistic efforts to dominate the political environment in a nation of well-armed tribes had put the group in an untenable position. By declaring the ISI, AQI claimed responsibility for political leadership over much of Iraq, but had neither the will nor the capability to actually provide for the population's basic needs. Meanwhile, as Sunni groups began to confront AQI more directly, they began to see the United States and Iraqi government as useful partners. In the West, this movement was often interpreted as the United States-allied Sons of Iraq (SOI) movement finally taking on al-Qa`ida, but Sunni insurgent groups described the fight against AQI differently—either as tribes reasserting their authority or a function of intra-insurgent warfare. For these former insurgents, the SOI was a way to get paid for a fight that was already ongoing against AQI.

Worse, AQI's failures were terribly transparent. Even as would-be allies with deep links to the people of western Iraq turned against AQI, the group made ever more ostentatious demands that others submit to its will. Such bold, unrealistic propagandizing had worked for jihadists in the past, but Iraq was different because AQI was not the only armed group with a media wing and a website. Iraq's tribes had internet campaigns as well, not to mention easier access to Arab satellite television media than did their jihadist counterparts. Not only was AQI starting to lose ground on the physical battlefield in Iraq, it was losing ground on the global media battlefield as well.

SECTION II: THE INSURGENT WAR

Strategic Disconnect

The friction between AQI and its nationalist and tribal counterparts remained largely private until spring 2007 when the tactical fights in Iraq erupted into strategic communications warfare online. On April 5, 2007, the IAI responded to accusations of

collaboration with the United States and unwillingness to submit to ISI rule by accusing Abu Umar al-Baghdadi of “transgressing Islamic law.”²⁵ The powerful statement definitively ended the era when Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq restrained their public denunciations of al-Qa`ida. The IAI listed al-Baghdadi’s offenses, including “leveling a variety of false and unfair charges against the [IAI],... threatening some members of the group with death if they do not swear allegiance to [al-Qa`ida],... wrongly killing some mujahideen brothers[,]... permitting [the] kill[ing of] a group of Muslims[,]... accusing people of unbelief and apostasy[,]” and prohibiting women from walking around without a *niqab* (full veil over the face) and modern amenities such as satellite TV.²⁶

AQI quickly tried to limit further publicity. Although ISI public statements had been critical of the IAI, that tone changed quickly. On April 17, 2007 ISI “Emir” Abu Umar al-Baghdadi appealed to a variety of Sunni insurgent groups to forgive the ISI’s mistakes:

O brothers in the Ansar al-Sunnah Army and in the Mujahidin Army: The friendship between us is deep. The bonds of faith and love are too great and strong to be harmed. O my sons in the Islamic Army, know that I am prepared to shed my blood to spare yours, and offer my honor to protect yours. By God, you will hear from us only what is good, and you will see from us only what is good.... O soldiers of the 1920 Revolution: Yes, the devil has resorted to sowing discord and incitement between us and you, the devil of the Islamic Party and its henchmen.²⁷

AQI’s efforts failed, in no small part because the public and private efforts at conciliation were inconsistent with AQI’s continued tactical violence. Effective insurgent and terrorist campaigns depend on tight coordination between political goals, tactical violence, and strategic communications. In the spring of 2007, the ISI’s fighters were brazenly continuing the fight against all who opposed them, whereas its political leaders were trying to halt the political tidal wave that threatened to bury them. Indeed, the second public communiqué from an IAI-led insurgent umbrella group called the Jihad and Reform Front (JRF) threatened retaliation for an AQI attack that killed twelve members of another insurgent group, Jaysh al-

²⁵ Islamic Army of Iraq, *Reply of the Islamic Army in Iraq to the Speeches of Brother Abu Umar al-Baghdadi* (Al-Boraq Media Center, 5 April 2007).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Al-Baghdadi (2007).

Mujahidin (JM).²⁸ That violence set off a wave of private communications as local ISI commanders explained the origins of the crisis to their leadership and the ISI tried to mend fences with the JRF.²⁹

The ISI commander's rationale for the violence—accurate, exaggerated, or fabricated—illustrates the complexity of political and military relations in Iraq. According to the local commander, the ISI had assassinated a leader of the Rabi'i tribe and sixty-five other people for working with the Iraqi government.³⁰ The Rabi'i tribe was closely connected with JM, particularly after the tribe's emir became JM's chief Sharia advisor. The Rabi'is used JM to demand retribution from the ISI and set up roadblocks to capture ISI members. Afterward, the ISI ordered a curfew and established a "court date" to resolve the issue. According to the local commander, JM attacked the ISI instead of resolving the problem through negotiation and lost twelve of its members.³¹

The disconnect between public statements and ISI actions also suggests that the ISI's leadership did not fully comprehend the nature of the Sunni backlash against them. There are several explanations for these problems. First, the U.S. and tribal net was tightening around ISI fighters, which must have made clear communication much more difficult. The mere fact that internal ISI documents from this period are now in U.S. databases rather than al-Qa`ida hands is testament to that fact. Second, Abu Ayyub al-Masri had a more conservative leadership style than his predecessor Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who had a famously hands-on approach to his organization and was a constant presence in the media. In early 2008, the Qatari newspaper *Al-Arab* conducted an interview with Abu Turab al-Jaza'iri, the Algerian leader of the ISI in Samarra in which he explained why the ISI was losing support and seemed to blame the group's current leadership:

[Al-Jaza'iri] ...I prefer not to go into it, but I can tell you that several mistakes were made in those areas by our members there that led to that situation, which

²⁸ "BBC Monitoring: Counterterrorism Digest 13-14 May 2007."

²⁹ Harmony Document: 100607-Jaysh al-Muj, 100607-Sheikh Ltr.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

we were not expecting, and regrettably this would not have happened if Shaykh Abu-Mus'ab [al-Zarqawi] were still alive.³²

Abu Turab al-Jaza'iri subsequently denied that he meant to imply that the ISI's current leadership was responsible for the group's failures, but he acknowledged that there had been a "splurge in blood" caused by the ISI and that the inability to communicate guidance effectively contributed to the unchecked violence:

Unfortunately yes, by driven young men who were not controlled by any Islamic law restraints. This was supported by the difficulty in communication between the cells and the factions...³³

The Amiriyah Battle

Abu Turab al-Jaza'iri's discussion of leadership problems and communication difficulties are illustrated by a series of correspondence written by an ISI commander in Baghdad's Amiriyah district, Abu-al-Hasan Safir, to his leadership during a bout of fighting between the ISI and the IAI. The fighting lasted several days in late May and early June 2007 after ISI fighters confronted an IAI leader at a local mosque and killed him.³⁴ In turn, the IAI killed several ISI fighters but did not immediately turn over their bodies to the ISI leadership when the fighting stopped.³⁵ The perceived insult set off a furious negotiation in which a fighter from the JM, an ally of the IAI in the Jihad and Reform Front, tried to mediate between the ISI and the IAI.³⁶ But when the interlocutor asked for two days to get the bodies back; the ISI leader offered thirty minutes.³⁷ Abu al-Hasan Safir's first letter to his commanders, dated May 31, 2007, demonizes the IAI and tries to justify the violence. He also plays the classic card of an on-the-ground commander who understands the situation better than his leadership:

³² Uthman Al-Mukhtar, "What is going on in Algeria is stupid and the Al-Qa'ida Organization in the Arab Maghreb is controlled by teenagers," *Al-Arab* (posted on the Al-Hanein website, 12 February 2008).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Richard Oppel, "Number of Unidentified Bodies Found in Baghdad Rose Sharply in May," *New York Times*, 1 June 2007.

³⁵ Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-637011. This document contains three separate notes, only the last of which is signed, by Abu-al-Hasan Safir. It is likely that he was responsible for coordinating the Amiriyah cells' activities with the ISI's higher commanders, but it is not conclusive that he wrote all three letters.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

We, in Baghdad, are aware of the true nature of the Islamic Army and its leadership, and how they perform open conspiracies and scandalous ambushes.... We, in Baghdad, wish to show the blessed Emirate that we understand the Islamic religious law policy of our state in dealing with the other groups.... They didn't conform to religious law. They didn't seek peace. They didn't confess of their crimes. Instead, they sat in their houses after their despicable actions and atrocities, so all we can do is to seek help—God's help. We discussed our situation with each other and took matters into our own hands.³⁸

According to the ISI letters and media reports, the ISI was initially successful against the IAI in Amiriyah, forcing them out of several mosques. Several media outlets reported that the IAI fighters were reinforced by militants from the 1920 Revolution Brigades, which is possible.³⁹ It is also possible, however, that these reinforcements were more loyal to the 1920s breakaway group, HAMAS-Iraq, which was allied with the IAI in the JRF.

The ISI seems to have believed that HAMAS-Iraq rather than the 1920 Revolution Brigades was responsible, even praising the 1920 Revolution Brigades in a pamphlet circulated in Amiriyah on June 2, 2007.⁴⁰ The pamphlet, signed by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, was prompted by a late request from Abu-al-Hasan Safir to clarify the ISI's approach to the IAI. In other words, after fighting had roiled the streets of Amiriyah for days, al-Qa'ida's on-the-ground commander finally asked whether the battle was consistent with the ISI's overall strategy:

Honorable Sheikh, I would like to request from you the big picture [general policy] of dealing with the Islamic Army, knowing that they didn't release the dead [bodies] and the prisoners they hold. I want a quick response to [the questions] I asked you. What is the guidance from the leadership about this issue, and may God bless you.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Oppel (2007).

⁴⁰ "Al-Baghdadi Orders His Soldiers to Stay in their Strongholds, Issues Fatwa Calling Islamic Army Elements 'Inviolable,'" Quds Press, 2 June 2007; Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-639155.

⁴¹ Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-637011.

Abu Umar al-Baghdadi's response, distributed by pamphlets distributed across Amiriyah indicated that Abu-al-Hasan Safir's operation was not helpful. Al-Baghdadi ordered ISI fighters to stay in their homes, indicated that he would approach the IAI's senior leadership to rectify the mistakes in Amiriyah, and recommended a joint Sharia committee to investigate the violence.⁴²

Al-Baghdadi did not move fast enough to preclude a damning backlash in the media from the Amiriyah battle. Al-Qa`ida is often praised for its effective media operations, but there are serious limitations on its ability to drive media reports, including that it can only rarely offer commanders to do interviews with traditional media organizations. The IAI was not hampered by such restraints and its spokesman used the opportunity to tie AQI's bad behavior in Amiriyah to its relatively new political institution, the Islamic State of Iraq:

Al-Qa`ida Organization has been acting strangely for a long time. However, these actions have lately escalated considerably since the announcement of their alleged state.... They killed whoever refused to pledge allegiance to them.... They started to kill mosque imams.⁴³

The Amiriyah battle illustrates several fundamental problems with al-Qa`ida's operation in Iraq. First, poor command and control from higher-level commanders to their underlings. Some ISI documents refer to a "postal service" capable of moving communications around Iraq, but the system did not offer commanders the ability to respond in real-time to fast-moving events.⁴⁴ Electronic communications are subject to surveillance and human systems were likely some of the first mechanisms to be disrupted by the tribal and insurgent awakening.⁴⁵ Second, the local commander was insufficiently aware of the ISI's overall strategy. Even months after the ISI's relationship with the IAI turned sour, ground commanders were unsure whether they should aim to confront or conciliate with the IAI. In lieu of a proper system to communicate during the battle, Abu-al-Hasan Safir was unable to make a clear strategic judgment to determine if fighting the IAI supported ISI

⁴² Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-639155.

⁴³ Ibrahim Al-Shammari, Interview with Abd-al-Samad Nasir, Al-Jazeera, 1 June 2007.

⁴⁴ Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-637927

⁴⁵ See: *Harmony and Disharmony* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point) December 2005; Jake Shapiro, *Chapter 4: Smuggling, Syria, and Spending*, in *Bombers, Bank Accounts and Bleedout*, ed. Brian Fishman (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, NY, 22 July 2008).

strategy. Third, the local commander likely had insufficient training. In the face of an insult from the IAI (admittedly, a severe one—unwillingness to hand over the bodies of dead fighters), the commander based his response on emotion and his limited understanding of Islamic law rather than a more complex strategic calculation. Fourth, AQI was vulnerable to criticism from a respected, local, Sunni organization.

From Strength to Weakness: Foreign Fighters and AQI's Bureaucrats

Command and control breakdowns, loss of public support, and weak leadership were not the ISI's only problems. The tribal and insurgent rejection of al-Qa`ida exacerbated the deleterious effect of ISI's organizational problems, many of which were related to difficulty integrating foreign fighters into the group's Iraqi infrastructure. Ultimately, those problems became so important that, according to a document captured in 2008, al-Qa`ida's leadership made the strategic decision to reject foreign fighters trying to enter Iraq.⁴⁶ The human resources critical to AQI's brutal military campaign had become such a political liability to the organization that they were no longer welcomed.

As in past jihads, some of the ISI's fighters created a lessons learned document to understand al-Qa`ida's failures in Iraq.⁴⁷ The document is not nearly as well composed as similar documents produced in the past, most notably Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's study of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Syria. Nonetheless, the document seems to accurately capture many of the issues illustrated by Abu-al-Hasan-Safir's letters from Amiriyah and persuasively describes numerous key failures related to AQI's foreign fighters, logistics, and organization. According to the anonymous author, these problems were:⁴⁸

1. Failure to Understand the Iraqi People. The ISI's primary problem was its failure to understand the Iraqi people. Many jihadists arrived completely ignorant to basic conditions in Iraq, including the simple fact that many Shi'a live there. The author of the lessons learned document writes:

⁴⁶ Harmony Document: NMEC-2008-612449.

⁴⁷ See Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's rehashing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in the early 1980s for comparison. Harmony Document: AFGP-2002-600080.

⁴⁸ Harmony Document: NMEC-2008-612449.

It's very important to notice that we can't utilize any jihadists' work in any country without analyzing the population's structure and looking deep into their social and religious sentiments. Before anything we need [to] collect information about the percentage of workers, religions, sects, ethnicities, political affiliations, resources, the income per capita, available jobs, the nature of existing tribes and clans, and the security problems. It's impossible for any Jama'ah (TC: Group of brothers) to continue jihad and rule if they don't analyze the citizens' structure and know if they will be able to accept the Shari'ah for the long term, and live this life and the after-life in this manner.

2. Unreliable Smugglers in Syria. The ISI depended on two types of unreliable human smugglers in Syria: would-be jihadists that had never actually fought, and disgruntled (and presumably secular) former Iraqi Army officers. The former could not be trusted because of their inexperience and the latter because they were ideologically uncommitted and financially motivated. The ISI's work with financially motivated smugglers expanded the network's capacity, but created security problems, in part because groups disposed to compete for payment had an incentive to reveal their competitors to security forces. Just as private security contractors such as Blackwater were integral to U.S. operations in Iraq—yet posed unique problems because of their independent command structures and financial motivations—the ISI's use of mercenary smugglers made the group reliant on actors they could not completely control.⁴⁹
3. Propaganda Created Unrealistic Expectations among Foreign Fighters. Globally distributed jihadist propaganda created unrealistic expectations among arriving jihadists. Many incoming jihadists arrived unprepared for the hardships and frustrations of insurgency, expecting instead to participate immediately in glorious attacks like those illustrated in al-Qa`ida propaganda. These lofty expectations often led to rifts with local fighters more accustomed to the careful planning, logistics problems, and general drudgery of insurgency.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the impact of smugglers see Harmony Document: NMEC-2008-658086.

4. Bureaucratic AQI Emirs Failed to Coordinate. Many capable, dedicated fighters were not used effectively because of poor coordination between AQI emirs. Foreign fighters in rural areas were not moved to urban centers where they were needed, and individuals with unique capabilities, such as language or martial arts skills, were not used effectively. The author of the lessons learned document blames bureaucratic AQI emirs more concerned with protecting their own human and material resources than distributing people and funds where they were needed most. For instance, the author points to an Italian foreign fighter with strong links to counterfeiters outside Iraq that loitered for months before growing so disillusioned he decided to leave Iraq and join Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon. He was killed while waiting to leave.⁵⁰
5. Tension between Foreign Fighters and Iraqi Members of AQI. Many foreign fighters had unrealistic expectations of the Iraqi jihad and a sense of moral superiority relative to their Iraqi counterparts, who tended to be less ideologically motivated. The differences created deep tensions with local fighters frustrated by the imperious foreigners. According to the author of the lessons learned document, local fighters were particularly annoyed because they never studied al-Qa`ida's ideology and therefore did not understand the foreigners' motivations—a failure of al-Qa`ida's usual indoctrination practices that the author suggests was caused by the pace of military operations in Iraq. This failure to indoctrinate local fighters ensured that their motivations remained tribal, nationalistic, and financial, which hastened their clash with more ideological foreign fighters. Meanwhile, some local fighters considered jihad an “Additional Duty,” rather than their core life's mission, an attitude that grated on foreign fighters who had arrived in Iraq expressly to die for the cause. For their part, local fighters resented the foreigners' inability to do things for themselves. The foreigners did not understand the terrain, Iraqi culture or dialect, and created security hazards for the locals because of their inability to blend in.

⁵⁰ For more of foreign fighters' frustration, see Harmony Documents: NMEC-2007-657700, NMEC-2007-657739, NMEC-657959, etc. See also <http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/Sinjar2.asp>.

6. Suicide Bombers Changed Their Mind. Many would-be suicide bombers were not utilized quickly when they arrived in Iraq, and became frustrated. Furthermore, because foreign fighters stood out to the local population, they were kept secluded, a process that grew onerous when dragged out over several months. In the opinion of the author, many bombers lacked deep religious knowledge and thus their commitment wavered over time, especially when they became frustrated by the unprofessionalism and criminality of their local hosts. Many would-be bombers therefore wanted to become regular fighters, despite little or no training, or to leave Iraq.
7. Too Many Leaders Diluted Command Structure. As AQI cells proliferated across Iraq, the group's experienced leadership cadre was diluted and communication became more difficult, to the point where the strategic intent of AQI's high command was not clear to local cells. The problem became more acute as less qualified people rose to positions of authority after local emirs were killed or captured. Many of these leaders actually weakened their fighters' commitment by exaggerating the power and authority of U.S. forces to their cells. Moreover, in defiance of direct orders, local leaders sometimes failed to take action against U.S. and Iraqi forces—adopting a “garrison” attitude to conserve their forces and ensure that their position of authority was not threatened. In some cases, emirs could not project authority even when they wanted because their influence was diluted as fighters created bureaucratic “emir” slots for themselves. As the lessons learned document notes:

The number of Emirs increased and every specialty began having its own Emir such as the Emir of Mortars, Emir of Administration, Emir of Booby-trap, Emir of Support, Emir of Gas, Emir of Tents, Emir of Kitchen and the General Emir and his deputy and others that were the reason behind the cessation of reverence from the hearts of the brothers toward their Emirs.

8. Bureaucratic Stovepiping. Regardless of the grandiose titles they invented, ISI leaders were effectively divided into four specialties within a cell: Military

Officer, Security Officer, Sharia Officer, and Administrative Officer. In an echo of standard complaints about U.S. bureaucratic structure, the author argues that these officials did not collaborate effectively. He is worth quoting at length:

The Sharia officer, if he exists, you will see him isolated with his books and computer away from the people and fighters' reality... not knowing the terrain, the nature of the people and of apostate tribes, the benefits and the inconveniences resulted from his fatwa, so you will see the Sharia officer isolated and marginalized. On the other hand you will see the military officer attached to security. The military officer can't plant explosives without security information.... The four specialists listed above represent why there is a noticeable delay of military and security operations. Because there is little cooperation between the four elements whether at the ground level where they work together or at the destroyed infrastructure of the division.... The military officer can't plan without the security information, the Sharia officer can't judge the guys without interacting with the public and having a good knowledge of the reality of the environment; the Administrative officer can't satisfy all needs because of overwhelming past, present, and likely future requests.... The Military officers found themselves isolated [and] unable to operate without security operations due to the large number of spies, sources and apostates. The Sharia officers went through certain misunderstanding that made them come up with some ridiculous fatwas [because of] lack of information or incomplete ideas in many cases, so they come up with these fatwas which have a negative impact on al-Jama'a [the group].

9. Poor Use of Financial Resources. The ISI did not distribute funding effectively, favoring some cells over others without proper analysis of their needs. The author laments the fact that the ISI did not have a regular funding source and points to groups like the Islamic Army of Iraq that he claims received money from a foreign power.

Many of AQI's self-criticisms are not unique to either jihadist experiences in Iraq, or to jihadist organizations more generally. The author's lamentations about administrators more focused on protecting bureaucratic turf than winning a war are more commonly heard in Washington, DC and Baghdad's Green Zone than AQI safe-houses. Similarly, AQI's problems building an effective multi-national fighting force in a tribal society should be no surprise to U.S. commanders that have struggled to understand tribal societies in Iraq or make the NATO command structure functional in Afghanistan.

Al-Qa`ida's Goals

AQI's problems are particularly interesting and important because of the nature of the Islamic State of Iraq and its stated purpose. Al-Qa`ida's ideology is often described as almost nihilistic or anarchic, but in Iraq AQI demonstrated a clear intent to transition into a group capable of governing—which would require a modicum of bureaucratic efficiency.<sup>51</sup> Like al-Qa`ida's broader goals, true governance was unachievable, but it illustrates the importance of understanding al-Qa`ida's real objectives.

The lesson for U.S. strategists is to avoid mistaking the United States' inability to achieve its goals as evidence that al-Qa`ida is achieving its own. Al-Qa`ida's senior leaders do not want to be a permanent opposition movement. Their purpose is not just to kill Americans; that is a means to an end. Al-Qa`ida terrorists did not declare the ISI solely to disrupt the U.S. mission in Iraq, but rather because they wanted to graduate from terrorist organization to political establishment. Al-Qa`ida has a vision for the future, albeit one that very few people want them to achieve.

This is an important ontological concept. Failure to acknowledge al-Qa`ida's substantive goals leads to an inability to understand its failures, or capitalize on them. Iraqi insurgents, including AQI, were considered "dead-enders" and were generally portrayed as simply disruptive forces in Iraq rather than groups competing to impose their own vision of governance. Certainly, AQI's particularly brutal violence alienated tribal leaders, but it was only after Iraqi tribal leaders recognized that U.S. failure and withdrawal might mean AQI governance that they turned on the group. Similarly, U.S. commanders had to carefully assess the

⁵¹ Fishman (2007).

strategic intent of Sunni insurgents in Iraq to discern that not all were as irreconcilable as al-Qa`ida, despite their attacks on U.S. troops.

Understanding al-Qa`ida's goals in its own terms is important, in part because that understanding is critical to determining who *should not* be considered al-Qa`ida. There are many dangerous people in the world willing to kill to achieve their goals, but not all of them are al-Qa`ida and not all of them are implacably hostile.

SECTION III: THE LEGACY AND FUTURE OF AQI

AQI no longer controls territory and cannot threaten the fundamental integrity of the Iraqi state. Its capacity to inflict violence has been dramatically curtailed and is unlikely to be regained. Nonetheless, AQI remains an important terrorist actor inside Iraq and will remain a critical part of al-Qa`ida's global political and logistics network. Under the right conditions, AQI could even make a limited comeback, though the group's ability to produce that situation on its own is limited. AQI will have to hope that political conditions evolve to exclude and frustrate Iraq's Sunnis and thereby create social space for extremism. AQI no longer commands its own destiny. The group is most likely to struggle along as a deadly fringe group rather than a catalyst for dramatic social change or a serious threat to the political status quo. At the same time, however, AQI is likely to remain an important piece of al-Qa`ida's global operation. The foreign fighter networks that serviced AQI will likely be redirected to support other jihads and AQI will retain enough operational capability to support a continued media campaign.

Iraqi Elections and Al-Qa`ida

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq's hopes for returning to prominence depend on whether or not Iraq's Sunnis continue to be politically isolated. The successful January 2009 provincial election suggests that total breakdown of the Iraqi political system is increasingly unlikely. Even in Anbar, where the process was initially disputed, there has been only limited violence tied to the election. In Mosul, Arab victories over Kurds will likely stabilize the region and weaken social support for AQI. Overall, the election was a success.

Nonetheless, accusations of vote rigging and the immaturity of new Sunni political parties highlight the internal tensions, and inherent fragility, of a new democracy.

Iraqi politics are likely to be marred by violence for the foreseeable future. The upcoming national elections scheduled for December 2009 will be an even more critical test than the January election, and the fractious Iraqi political environment still contains potential spoilers that could contribute to social and political turmoil that might offer AQI a path back to prominence.

AQI will try to use violence to disrupt Sunni integration into the Iraqi political system. The group is too weak to violently disrupt political participation on a wide scale, but is likely to use isolated violence as a means to threaten the wider population. Rather than attempting to depress Sunni turnout, AQI will likely try to incite sectarian fears so that Shi'a political parties and militias are reticent to allow fair Sunni participation in the political process. AQI cannot threaten the government directly, nor the viability of the December 2009 elections, but by raising Shi'a fears of Sunni political aspirations, it may contribute to the slow degradation of the Iraqi political process.

There are many potential spoilers within the Shi'a political parties with whom Prime Minister Maliki governs Iraq. Maliki himself has a very mixed record of cooperation with the Awakening councils, though he has grown more accepting of Sunni-Arab participation in the government as Arab-Kurd tension over Kirkuk and Mosul has increased.⁵² But Maliki's actions need not be egregious from a Western perspective to produce dangerous political results. Sunni leaders may respond with violence if technical or bureaucratic mechanisms are used to limit their participation or political influence. Meanwhile, infighting among Shi'a groups may weaken the government and allow for coups or ineffectiveness that discredits the government.

Meanwhile, high expectations among Sunni tribal leaders, even those that honestly embrace a pluralistic Iraqi political system, may be unrealistic. Sunni tribal leaders are extremely unlikely to control Iraq's government even if they participate fully, which may ultimately induce resentment among leaders used to getting their way. This is particularly worrisome in the next few elections, because nascent Sunni political parties are poorly organized and unaccustomed to electoral politics, both of which will limit their prospects for electoral success.

Iraq's greatest challenges no longer involve al-Qa`ida, rather they are more traditional disputes over resources, budgets, power, and autonomy—ultimately

⁵² Richard Oppel, "Iraq Takes Aim at U.S.-Tied Sunni Groups Leaders," *New York Times*, 21 August 2008.

these political challenges will prove much more difficult to overcome than to defang a terrorist organization despised by virtually all Iraqis. Iraq is not poised to become a model democracy, but its trajectory is at least positive, in large measure because Iraq's major political players seem now to fear the costs of continued warfare more than the frustration of power sharing. Indeed, one critical legacy of AQI's violence is the memory of pain it left on Iraq's other political factions—giving them a reason to cooperate even when other political issues drive them apart. Whether or not that fear continues to motivate these parties during emotional debates over the distribution of oil revenue or Kirkuk remains to be seen.

AQI's Foreign Fighter Networks

Foreign fighters continue to support AQI's operations in Iraq, but the bulk of AQI's logistics network outside Iraq is most likely being used to move people, goods, and money to other jihad locations.

The northern city of Mosul is AQI's last major bastion in Iraq, where it is bolstered by simmering tension between the Sunni-Arab community and Kurds.⁵³ From August 2006, AQI's foreign fighters have crossed into Iraq west of Mosul, near Sinjar, traveled to Mosul, and were deployed onward from there.⁵⁴ AQI capitalizes on Mosul's proximity to the Syrian border to import resources, and garners a modicum of social support because of bitter tension between Sunni Arabs and Kurds, who share Mosul. The political fight between Kurds and Arabs over control of Mosul and Nineveh Province means that the citizens of Mosul are not reaping the economic benefits of integration with either the central Iraqi economy or the Kurdish regional economy, which creates even more opportunities for AQI.⁵⁵

Outside of Iraq, AQI's logistical networks are likely to foster violence in growing jihad arenas. AQI's resources are most likely to be distributed where they can be moved efficaciously rather than strictly according to the strategic needs of al-Qa'ida's senior leadership. Obvious possibilities include Lebanon, Yemen, and Somalia, which are relatively accessible from the Middle East and North Africa locales from which most foreign fighters originate. Travel to Pakistan is likely much

⁵³ "Al Qaeda a Threat to Iraq Vote: General," Agence France Presse, 28 January 2009.

⁵⁴ Anonymous.

⁵⁵ Sam Dagher, "U.S. Sees Long Fight to Oust al Qaeda in Mosul," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 March 2008. (JR)

more difficult and requires much different networks than those used to facilitate travel to Iraq. Nonetheless, the fight in Pakistan is so central to al-Qa`ida's long-term fight that it will undoubtedly receive some of the foreign fighter flow previously dedicated to Iraq.

AQI and the Media

Even as al-Qa`ida in Iraq suffered dramatic setbacks at the hands of tribal insurgents, the Iraqi army, and U.S. forces, it retained the ability to project its message via the internet. Nevertheless, AQI's media operations did suffer as the group weakened, and it faced much more competition online from other Iraqi insurgent groups. The challenge from other insurgents to AQI clearly differentiates the fight in Iraq from previous jihadist experiences when local fighters felt no need to tell their own story to the rest of the world. This was critical in the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan. In lieu of local storytellers, jihadists such as Usama bin Ladin and Abdullah Azzam were able to create a myth of jihad in Afghanistan that emphasized ideological conviction and underplayed the role of domestic Afghans. Modern communication technology, which has been used deftly by jihadists for a decade, was ultimately used against AQI by local insurgent organizations. This dynamic creates both opportunities and dangers for al-Qa`ida. The ability of local groups to operate effectively online creates opportunities to empower allies, but it also means that AQI is no longer the only militant group speaking to a global audience. That is critical because jihadists have long been able to tell the story of jihad even when they had minimal battlefield impact. The plurality of propaganda weakens al-Qa`ida's storytelling ability, and that undermines al-Qa`ida's overall message of trans-national struggle.

SECTION IV: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though dramatically weakened, AQI will impact the future of Iraq and will play a role in al-Qa`ida's global campaign. There are many lessons to be learned from AQI's decline that are relevant to both the fight against AQI in Iraq and the fight against al-Qa`ida operations elsewhere. The recommendations below not only seek to illuminate opportunities to weaken AQI in Iraq, but also to target other al-Qa`ida elements. Al-Qa`ida will learn lessons from Iraq to apply elsewhere; the United States should as well. However, it is dangerous to apply lessons from Iraq to fights

against al-Qa`ida elsewhere without considering the context and the unique dynamics of the local organization. Cultural and political environments set the parameters for both U.S. goals and the tools that can be used effectively to achieve those goals. Furthermore, AQI was not a prototypical al-Qa`ida franchise; in general it was far more ambitious than other al-Qa`ida cells. Whereas AQI tried to create and dominate a new political system, most al-Qa`ida franchises are better at shaping society and learning to work within established political and tribal systems.

Apply the Right Lessons and Set the Right Expectations in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Many of the dynamics that undermined AQI will have less of an impact in Afghanistan—which will make al-Qa`ida there much more durable. First, and most importantly, the group has a relative safe-haven in Pakistan and has been embedding itself into the social fabric there for twenty years. Second, al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan seems content to allow its partners—friendly Taliban and tribal groups—to take leading roles. Third, al-Qa`ida has generally eschewed mass casualty attacks against non-combatants in the region.

1. ***The Security of the Pakistani Safe Haven.*** Obviously the limited capacity of Pakistani security forces and minimal U.S. access to facilities and individuals in Pakistan inhibits their ability to weaken al-Qa`ida with direct military force. But the relatively low operational pace is important in other ways as well; it allows better training and indoctrination of al-Qa`ida cadres and offers critical opportunities to build redundant communication systems. Both capabilities mean that al-Qa`ida in Pakistan is likely better able to replace leadership than AQI was. Leadership strikes in Iraq played a critical role undermining AQI and drone attacks against al-Qa`ida's leadership in Pakistan are important tools to pressure the movement in a constrained operational environment. But in lieu of the comprehensive campaign against AQI that was coupled with similar targeting in Iraq, the Pakistan strikes are unlikely to have a comparable strategic impact.

The slower operational pace not only creates better training opportunities, it means that local leaders make fewer critical operational decisions under pressure, reducing the opportunity for mistakes. Moreover, whereas AQI's ambitions tended to grow in lockstep with its power—which inhibited the

development of a dependable strategic reserve—al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan is more careful to harbor resources. AQI always fought a “total” war that demanded absolute exertion, thereby constraining its ability to flex when pressured. Al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan is much more capable of reallocating resources and responding to “surges” in U.S., Afghan, or Pakistani pressure.

2. ***The Islamic State of Iraq vs. Subtle Power Projection.*** While AQI demanded that competing power centers, whether insurgent or tribal, submit to the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan has largely deferred to Taliban and tribal leaders to organize using traditional means. Whereas AQI tried to impose a foreign structure on the people of Iraq, al-Qa`ida’s willingness to defer leadership to its local allies is critical. Rather than force, al-Qa`ida has used ideological indoctrination, inter-marriage, persuasion, and the provision of unique military, financial, and technological tools to infiltrate tribes and familial networks. Unlike AQI, al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan understands the population on which it depends. That does not mean such networks cannot be influenced by the United States or its allies; as in Iraq, local leaders will make compromises to control smuggling routes and local economies.
3. ***Fewer, More Targeted, Civilian Attacks.*** Massive attacks against civilians alienated Iraqis upset by both U.S. occupation and the presence of al-Qa`ida’s imperious foreigners. Al-Qa`ida and its allies in Pakistan have not been shy about killing civilians, whether in targeted assassinations against political opponents or in large-scale attacks like the Marriott Hotel bombing. Nonetheless, such attacks have been far more targeted in Afghanistan and Pakistan than in Iraq, limiting public backlash. It is worth noting that this may change, particularly if al-Qa`ida and its allies make a concerted effort to undermine the Pakistani government.

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq’s Decline Hurts al-Qa`ida’s Reputation not its Operational Capacity

AQI’s setbacks create a strategic problem for al-Qa`ida’s global movement because average Muslims rejected jihadist ideas when they were applied on the battlefield and

offered as governing principles. Moreover, those ideas were rejected while the entire world watched. Al-Qa`ida's effort to create or co-opt "franchise" organizations creates the impression of global reach, but it also exposes the entire movement to the missteps of a local command, which is what has occurred in Iraq since late 2006.⁵⁶

Despite these important setbacks for al-Qa`ida, the U.S. presence in Iraq—and al-Qa`ida's confrontation with U.S. forces there—has greatly benefited the jihadist movement. AQI's campaign enabled al-Qa`ida writ large to maintain media presence, distract U.S. attention from Afghanistan, gain tremendous tactical expertise, and participate in a very popular fight. Furthermore, the central organization based in Pakistan invested very little to initiate its relationship with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and the jihadists that became AQI—offering little more than their reputation and brand name. Not surprisingly, that is what has been put at jeopardy by AQI's missteps.

Target AQI's Indoctrination Process

Al-Qa`ida's struggle to produce cohesive—and durable—command and control mechanisms illustrates the importance of ideological and strategic training to its success. Without clear, focused ideological training, AQI commanders were prone to mistakes that tended to be excessively violent, and thereby alienated local populations. There is no doubt that al-Qa`ida's core ideas justify extreme violence, but those concepts are even more brutal when they are understood superficially. Sophisticated al-Qa`ida leaders, like those in Pakistan, understand that patience is critical and that short-run ideological compromises are sometimes necessary; poorly trained commanders generally do not and trend toward extreme violence in the name of ideological purity. Strikes against al-Qa`ida training centers are always valuable because they directly undermine the movement's ability to disseminate ideas, but they are particularly important in difficult operational environments in which al-Qa`ida is prone to operational mistakes.

Capitalize on Superior State Resources to Pressure Al-Qa`ida across its Networks

Because al-Qa`ida's internal systems are mutually reinforcing, sometimes in unpredictable ways, it is important to target many simultaneously. For example, targeting al-Qa`ida leadership nodes is less valuable if al-Qa`ida can effectively train

⁵⁶ Brian Fishman, "Using the Mistakes of al Qaeda's Franchises to Undermine its Strategies," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (July 2008), 46-54

new leaders and communicate steady guidance from senior commanders to new operational leaders. Isolated acts against specific functions and systems in al-Qa`ida's network, even if they are forceful and effective, are unlikely to achieve strategic impact. Coordinated action is critical.

Despite al-Qa`ida's wide reach and impressive capabilities, it remains a sub-state actor with limited resources. It is worth remembering that AQI's successes occurred as it fought a "total" war while the U.S. fought a "limited" one. The United States had the ability to "surge" resources of all sorts—troops, focus, and strategic creativity—and when it did AQI could not match the new approach. The resource discrepancy also meant that the United States and its allies could pressure AQI for a sustained time period in multiple arenas simultaneously—punishing them tactically, undermining their social support, striking leadership targets, undermining financing, and disrupting media operations. Such an approach is more damaging to al-Qa`ida franchises than strategies that sequentially prioritize specific systems of an al-Qa`ida operation.

Emphasize Realistic Political Expectations for All Parties in Iraq

Although a success in general, the January 2009 election in Iraq illustrates the dangers of electoral processes in an incomplete and fragile democracy. As the Iraqi electoral process matures, the United States should project realistic expectations for political parties, particularly those in the opposition. Democracy depends on the willingness of parties to lose peacefully.

Tell AQI's Story Honestly and Comprehensively

Al-Qa`ida's pretension to political leadership is its own worst enemy. Rather than minimize al-Qa`ida's aspirations or characterize them in relationship to U.S. goals, the United States is well-advised to treat them as honestly and directly as possible. Instead of reciting bromides about what al-Qa`ida wants to destroy, the United States should spend more time describing what al-Qa`ida wants to build: a religious dictatorship that squashes local customs and power structures, suffers no dissent, and imposes its will by brutally killing those who oppose it. Truth is the first casualty of war, and it is sometimes inconvenient to U.S. short-term interests, but it is al-Qa`ida's worst enemy.

American commentators tend to exaggerate the central role of U.S. troops in destroying AQI. This is a mistake. U.S. troops did play an important role destroying AQI. Nonetheless, the story of AQI's demise is more practical and mundane than usually described, and it is mostly the story of local tribes getting fed up with outsiders dictating to them. U.S. troops did exactly what they should do in such circumstances; they facilitated AQI's decline by killing and capturing key leadership, disrupting communications and logistics processes, and giving the local tribes a legitimate path to political participation. But it was the rejection of AQI by local Sunnis that discredited and degraded the organization. Their concerns were both profound and banal: ranging from anger over AQI's ideological extremism to frustration that AQI monopolized local smuggling networks. Most importantly, the truthful story of local Sunnis rejecting al-Qa`ida is far more valuable to the United States in its long-term fight against jihadists than the immediate benefits gained by claiming an American victory over AQI.

Enable anti-al-Qa`ida Insurgents to Compete with al-Qa`ida's Media Operations

Iraqi Sunnis' Internet presence dramatically damaged not just AQI, but the larger al-Qa`ida network that was invested in AQI's success. By illustrating AQI's ideological and practical failings, these insurgents undermined al-Qa`ida's core arguments to be defending true Muslims everywhere. The United States should acknowledge that insurgents, even those fighting U.S. troops, are potentially useful in the larger fight against al-Qa`ida because their interests diverge dramatically from global jihadists. In regions where the United States is unlikely to completely destroy al-Qa`ida, it is important to bolster the ability of competing groups to compete with al-Qa`ida on all levels, not just on the physical battlefield.

Identify Why U.S. Foes are Fighting

In insurgent environments, the United States should endeavor to understand its enemies' motivations, rather than judge opponents based on their tactics. AQI and tribal insurgents used very similar tactics against the United States—and for years these similarities prevented the United States from recognizing that the tribal insurgents' interests diverged dramatically from AQI's. U.S. commanders and policymakers should aim to understand the ends their opponents seek—and judge policy on that basis—rather than just the tactics they use to achieve those ends.



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