Rebuilding Iraq's Counterterrorism Capabilities

by Michael Knights **(/experts/michael-knights)**

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Brief Analysis

Although Washington can help boost the capabilities of Iraq's counterterrorism forces, Baghdad cannot kill its way out of the current security crisis, so sectarian reconciliation remains a priority.

The July 21 jailbreak at Abu Ghraib prison freed hundreds of inmates, including numerous al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) fighters who will not be quickly recaptured. This success caps a banner year for the Salafist terror group, which has enjoyed a remarkable resurgence since reaching its lowest ebb in 2010. In response, U.S. policy advisors will no doubt counsel greater security cooperation with Iraqi counterterrorism forces, which would be helpful. But resolving the crisis requires a far broader perspective than tactical improvements in Baghdad's ability to capture and kill terrorists. Three years of poisonous political infighting laid the groundwork for AQI's partial recovery, and only politics can undercut the movement once again.

AL-QAEDA'S REBIRTH

By the end of 2010, AQI seemed dead in the water, attempting an average of only ten mass-casualty attacks per month, most of which failed (compared to around sixty or seventy per month in 2006, with a higher success rate). The organization had lost its senior leadership to U.S. strikes, and coordination between cells was so dangerous that only one or two multi-city coordinated "spectaculars" could be undertaken per year. Accordingly, AQI had begun to disintegrate into independent quasi-criminal networks focused on robbery and extortion.

But by the end of 2012, the organization had rebounded, mounting over forty mass-casualty attacks per month along with regular multi-city strikes. And today, tribes in remote areas abutting Syria are once again signing nonaggression deals with the group and cutting it into local contracts. How did this recovery occur, and what does it tell us about the Iraqi government's counterterrorism needs?

The U.S. decision to withdraw its forces from Iraq by the end of 2011 was clearly one factor in AQI's rebound, since it

removed a devastatingly effective arrangement of intelligence assets, Special Forces, and aerial strike teams. This gave the movement the ability to coordinate again, resulting in increased multi-city strikes. The transfer of AQI prisoners from U.S. to Iraqi custody was another important factor; hundreds of these prisoners were subsequently released, putting a massive amount of skilled terrorist manpower back into circulation. Syria's war has been a driver as well, serving as an example for Iraq's Sunni insurgents while providing the logistical advantages and new sanctuaries inherent in two Sunni insurgencies fighting back-to-back.

Yet the decisions taken by AQI and Baghdad were at least as important in breathing life back into the group. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Suleiman al-Nasser -- AQI's new leader and military chief, respectively -- emphasized the movement's Iraqi leadership and focused its propaganda on issues that mattered to Iraq's Sunnis: namely, the fate of Sunni prisoners, the scope of Iran's influence over Baghdad, and the collective punishment of Sunnis through indiscriminate counterterrorism operations and undifferentiated de-Baathification efforts. AQI attacks increasingly targeted Shiite and Sunni collaborators with the government, though care was taken not to alienate the general Sunni population with indiscriminate strikes or restrictions on their daily lives.

Meanwhile, Baghdad has played right into AQI's propaganda. Since the U.S. drawdown began in 2009 and the partnering of U.S. and Iraqi forces degraded, the Iraqi military has abandoned the successful model of population-focused counterinsurgency efforts (COIN). The *sahwa* (awakening) groups -- Sunni police paramilitaries hired by the government -- were gradually ostracized: their pay became intermittent, their right to carry weapons for self-defense was restricted, and their leaders were frequently arrested. Now the *sahwa* are on the run; they have become easy targets for AQI assassins and are increasingly seeking to cut deals with the terrorists.

Iraqi security forces have also abandoned many other basic principles of population-focused COIN. Troops now live apart from local communities; due in part to growing absenteeism, they have withdrawn from the dense network of neighborhood combat posts to larger bases that are easier to man and sustain logistically. In many places, they have adopted the same undifferentiated view of local populations that coalition forces had in 2003, but with an important difference: the coalition initially could not tell insurgents from civilians out of genuine ignorance, while Iraqi units (taking their lead from feuding national politicians) often intentionally lump them together because of sectarian bigotry and an unwillingness to commit to the hard work of COIN. As a result, whole Sunni neighborhoods in western Baghdad have become walled-off ghettos for years now, subject to economic blockade and periodic raids on the whim of local military commanders. The military is now attempting large-scale clearance operations -- again reminiscent of coalition efforts in 2003-2004, with similarly unimpressive or even counterproductive results.

REBOOTING IRAQI COUNTERTERRORISM

Fixing Iraq's counterterrorism forces is a priority, and some of this work is no doubt already being done through covert CIA channels (as opposed to visible Defense Department cooperation). Washington can also help reduce strain on the country's main counterterrorism unit, the 4,100-strong Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF).

Currently, ISOF works under the command of the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), an agency that has no legal basis because parliament has repeatedly failed to pass the draft counterterrorism law first submitted in 2007. This has left ISOF in legal and financial limbo, neither part of the Defense Ministry chain of command nor assigned to an agency approved and funded by parliament. In 2010, it received only $170 million in funding, compared to its annual operating costs of around $350 million. It has also faced severe difficulties in obtaining replacement personnel from the Defense Ministry. In 2009, ISOF was manned to only 67 percent of its authorized level, and the figure is likely even lower today, further straining the organization.

Therefore, one of the most urgent near-term requirements is to reset ISOF's place in the Iraqi security forces by supporting the passage of a counterterrorism law and placing CTS under parliamentary scrutiny as a new ministry.

Iraqi opposition factions regularly pull together supermajorities in the parliament, and the counterterrorism law should square with their desire to normalize command-and-control of the special forces and solve the AQI problem. Accordingly, Washington should use its good offices to encourage a new attempt to pass this legislation.

Yet even if ISOF returns to form, Iraq cannot kill its way out of the current security crisis. AQI's recruitment environment is currently so favorable that Baghdad cannot rely on hard counterterrorism alone, which it might try if Washington lets it. Broader national reconciliation, a reformed de-Baathification process, a return to population-focused COIN, and strengthened parliamentary and local government powers would all strike powerful blows against the group. Although Washington can help by offering more professional military education on the technical aspects of COIN, the wider strategy requires Iraqi political decisions that undermine the radicals through compromise.

There are signs that the most senior Iraqi politicians -- Shiite prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and Sunni parliamentary speaker Usama al-Nujaifi -- recognize the need to step back from the sectarian brink, if only to ensure their own political futures. If Washington wants to shrink AQI, it should focus on fostering an integrated national reconciliation strategy that can be implemented before, during, and after Iraq's vital 2014 elections. As the group grows in the meantime, it will probably outlive its welcome in Sunni communities once again. Iraq's U.S.-supported counterterrorism strategy should prepare to exploit that day when it comes.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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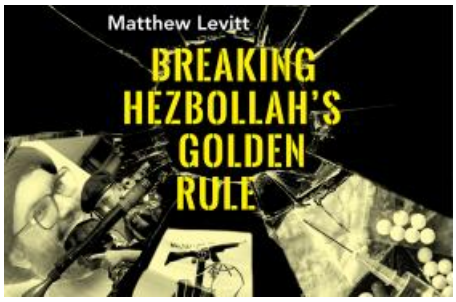

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