

Iraq's Enduring al-Qaeda Challenge

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Brief Analysis

Since the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities last June, Iraq has experienced a series of high-profile attacks by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its affiliates that raises questions about the durability of its stabilization process. Last week, Iraqi authorities arrested 73 people related to AQI and suspected of involvement and complicity in the pair of suicide bombings that targeted the Ministry of Justice and the provincial council in Baghdad on October 25, killing 147. AQI also claimed responsibility for the two suicide attacks on the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance that killed 132 people last August. Mosul has suffered major security incidents and assassinations with an average of 100 deaths per month, while the al-Anbar governorate, which had been relatively quiet until now, has likewise seen increased levels of violence. With elections on the horizon, further violence appears likely.

AQI's Actions and Words

Since its emergence in 2003, AQI's strategy in Iraq has been to use spectacular attacks in order to promote sectarian and ethnic division while destabilizing the governing authorities, either American or Iraqi. In a clear attempt to discredit and destabilize Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his government, the organization since 2008 has shifted the focus of most of its operations from U.S. forces to attacks on Iraqi institutions -- police stations, military headquarters, security forces, and federal ministries. The recent suicide bombings have again demonstrated that even if AQI remains unable to maintain a full-blown armed insurgency, it retains a residual capability to wage high-profile attacks and represents an ongoing obstacle to the country's long-term stability.

AQI's propaganda on Islamist forums and websites confirms this evolution and reflects the "Iraqification" of the organization. Following its proclamation of an "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) in 2006, AQI has gradually reduced its reliance on foreign fighters while recruiting local Iraqis to replace them. In this regard, reports about the reactivation of AQI's networks through Syria must not be overstated. According to the Multinational Force in Iraq, in the last three years the number of foreign jihadists entering Iraq has declined from a high of 120 each month in 2007, to 40 in 2008, and 20 in 2009.

This change in AQI composition has been accompanied by a shift in objectives. Today, AQI's goals have become primarily political, and its propaganda focuses on delegitimizing the democratic process initiated by the United States and the Iraqi government -- referred to as a "bastion of faithlessness and citadel of atheism" -- and confronting Sunni nationalist insurgents and rival political forces, including the Tribal Awakening, that reject AQI's aim to set up a transnational pan-Islamic caliphate that would threaten Iraq's territorial integrity.

Last July, an audio recording released by AQI's media wing al-Furqan sought to claim victory for the U.S. decision to withdraw from Iraqi cities and the impending drawdown by recalling the steadfastness of jihadists who "have made the U.S. Army taste death and the bitterness of defeat." Seeking to discredit the Iraqi government after the U.S. withdrawal, AQI openly mocked al-Maliki for failing to maintain security in urban areas. So far, the attacks claimed by AQI have been used to reinforce this propaganda line. Making clear the Iraqi military was its target, an AQI "news report" released just last month announced that most of its attacks have targeted Iraqi officers, convoys, and patrols

of the "apostate army" in various neighborhoods of Baghdad.

The ISI also continues its propaganda efforts against those who would usurp what it perceives as its rightful leadership of the Sunni Arab community. In communiques issued on behalf of its reputed leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi -- whom the Iraqi government maintains it captured earlier this year -- AQI criticizes Sunni entities and parties, such as the Iraqi Islamic Party, for participating in the political process and advocating tolerance and national unity, both of which "distort the true identity of jihad." Against these forces, AQI casts itself as the only legitimate political representative of the still marginalized Sunni Arab community. To demonstrate its seriousness, the group killed two moderate Sunni imams in October who had been opposing its extreme methods and political views, Jamal al-Humadi in Baghdad and Bashir al-Juhaishi in Mosul.

Explaining AQI's Resilience

Several factors account for AQI's resilience. First, the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities has increased AQI's margin of maneuver in these areas. Another factor has been the release of several Iraqi detainees this year who apparently became radicalized during their incarceration and have made contact with AQI. Since January, nearly 1,200 detainees have been transferred to the Iraqi authorities, and 5,300 have been released from prisons. While the U.S. military contends that detainee releases have been conducted in an orderly manner in compliance with the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement and that recidivism rates are low, sources from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and police indicate a worrying number of Iraqi detainees returning to the struggle. Given the large number of released detainees, even a small percentage returning to jihad would be sufficient for a significant number of attacks.

Examples of detainees who have returned to insurgency and who are alleged to have developed ties with AQI before or during their detention include Iraqis held at the U.S. military base Camp Bucca, which was closed down in September. Among them is Muhammad Ali Murad, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's former associate in Falluja, suspected of running an armed cell in Baghdad that has been behind several suicide bombings targeting police stations. In October in Daquq, the Iraqi military and U.S. forces caught another AQI member and former detainee, Yasser Gafur, who had stored improvised explosive devices intended for use to attack Iraqi security forces. In Kirkuk, the Iraqi police captured nine Iraqis in possession of explosives -- including Abdallah Abd al-Qadir, AQI's facilitator in Baghdad -- some of whom had formerly been detained.

The withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities has not fundamentally altered AQI's "occupation narrative." The group has simply changed its propaganda to suggest Iraq's "illegitimate" armed forces are the new "occupiers." This line provides the organization and affiliated radical groups -- Ansar al-Islam, for instance, still active in the northern provinces -- with a new justification for their activities and a stream of new recruits.


The faltering Iraqi economy likely exacerbates matters. Despite improved living conditions at the local level, Iraq has been hit hard by the global downturn. The country still depends on oil exports for 90 percent of its income, and the fall in oil prices has drastically reduced government revenues. Al-Maliki's cabinet was forced to slash its budget for this year from \$79 billion to \$59 billion due to declining oil prices, which has affected the defense sector in particular. Baghdad has frozen hires in key sectors like the police and the military. In Mosul, the budget cuts have had an evident effect on levels of violence. The city's police force is short by 5,300 men -- more than half of its assessed requirements -- and the Iraqi army has only three brigades deployed in the area.

Economic hardship has worsened already endemic corruption, raising new security threats in Iraq, according to an internal report issued in October by the Ministry of Interior. In addition to sponsored attacks undertaken by unemployed men or mere opportunists, the report highlights instances in which radical groups such as AQI have bribed Iraqi police and security officers. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, in the August attacks on the

ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance, the organization paid up to \$10,000 in bribes to guards and other accomplices to allow the suicide bombers to go through security checkpoints. The report also sheds light on how bribes have secured the release of some AQI affiliates from prisons. Last month, Iraqi security forces arrested a lawyer in Mosul allegedly linked to AQI for bribing prison guards to release jihadists and expunge their criminal records.

Conclusion

Despite dramatic improvements in security and the fact that AQI is not currently a strategic threat, the job of securing Iraq is far from finished. AQI's radical message does not currently resonate with most Iraqis -- who abhor its extreme methods and reject its pan-Islamic agenda -- but the jihadist organization retains its ability to conduct high-profile attacks. While AQI is unlikely to be eliminated in the near term, ways must be found to keep it marginalized. At present, the main challenge is to ensure that the Iraqi government continues to improve its delivery of public services, grows the Iraqi economy, and successfully manages (if not resolves) heightening Kurdish-Arab tension. Finally, ensuring the credibility and legitimacy of the upcoming elections will be critical for defusing the AQI threat to Iraq's stability. Of these priorities, the last is most urgent. The lesson from Afghanistan would indicate that elections perceived to be illegitimate are a propaganda gift to rejectionists -- a gift that is easily exploited.

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