



8 November 2006

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Al-Qa'ida Secedes From Iraq: Implications for Bleedout and U.S. Policy

On 15 October, 2006 the Al-Qa'ida in Iraq-led Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC) announced that it had seceded from Iraq and declared an independent state in the country's Sunni-dominated Western regions. This new political entity—the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)—has yet to demonstrate a significant administrative capability, but recent jihadi propaganda has sought to assure observers that Abu Ayyub al-Masri (Abu Hamzah-al Muhajir) plans to develop those tools. The new strategy reflects the long-running strategic thinking of Al Qa'ida's senior leadership in Waziristan, particularly Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is very concerned with control over physical space.

Declaring an independent state is a major strategic shift for Al-Qa'ida in Iraq that carries serious risks. Already some in and outside of the MSC have condemned the decision as anti-Iraqi, but others have welcomed the change as the only way Sunnis will be able to protect themselves during a period of rampant sectarian violence.

Declaring a "counter-state" is a classic insurgent technique designed to legitimize the resistance and discredit the central government. Although the ISI does not yet have a real administrative capacity, it has completely replaced the MSC as a propaganda outlet and reportedly is taking over former regime installations in al-Anbar province.

The new strategy implies that ISI/AQI will protect and defend Sunnis throughout the new "state." Thus far they have been unable to do so, most notably during recent violence in Balad where ISI/AQI fighters reportedly stood by as Sunni and Shiite militias tore the city apart. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq likely declared independence because they anticipate that the U.S. and Iraqi government will increasingly be unable to control Sunni areas in Iraq, but they risk raising expectations that they cannot meet.

Despite jihadi propaganda arguing that Abu Ayyub al-Masri had long prepared for declaring independence, the decision appears to have been a hasty response to the U.S. repositioning troops from Sunni areas into Baghdad. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq is trying to take advantage of this weakly controlled territory, but they are clearly not in a position to "govern" across so wide an area. Although al-Masri did not establish a bureaucratic structure before seceding, he has since called for professionals and scientists to come to the ISI to administer the new entity. This is the clearest example of a jihadi leader trying to execute the ideas of Abu Bakr Naji, who called on jihadis to acquire and use Western management skills.¹ Developing this capability will also require more funding, which will offer U.S. forces new avenues to disrupt the network.

BLEEDOUT: FLAMMABLE SOCIETIES VS. UNGOVERNED STATES

It is doubtful that AQI's former Emir, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, would have supported secession. He was more concerned with purifying the practice of Islam by individuals than building an Islamic political entity. Al-Qa'ida's Central Command is exerting substantially more influence (whether directly or ideologically is unclear) in Iraq today than during Zarqawi's reign. This trend will likely continue as Iraqi jihad veterans leave Iraq. Indeed, the ISI may be the first in a series of would-be Islamic "states" established by Al-Qa'ida supporters. Already, the outlines of such an entity exist in Somalia.

Zarqawi's vision for bleedout was focused on infiltrating and exploiting countries with latent sectarian tension—flammable societies. He hoped to recreate the sectarian violence strategy that he used in Iraq and likely sought to initiate violent operations in the near-term. Although Zarqawi was attracted by weak governments, he was willing to confront strong ones so long as there was social tension to exploit. That is why he was so interested in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

The new AQI strategy is more concerned about weak governance than societal tension. Zawahiri's strategy focuses on the long-term growth of the movement rather than the immediate gratification of violence. He is also far more concerned with gaining political control over discrete territory, hence secession from Iraq. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq's new bleedout strategy will focus attention on areas of weak governance, not flammable societies. We should expect an increased focus on places like Afghanistan, the Afghan-Pakistan border region, Somalia, and Sudan. These regions have long been AQ focus areas; now that the AQ Central Command's strategy is being implemented in Iraq we are likely to see sophisticated Iraqi veterans joining those fights.

¹ Naji, Abu Bakr. The Management of Savagery. <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/naji.asp>