

Al-Qa`ida Losing Ground in Iraq

By Mohammed M. Hafez

AL-QA`IDA IN IRAQ (AQI) has snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by turning nationalist insurgents and tribes against it. AQI made two mistakes that might prove fatal. The first was its encroachment on tribal interests, and the second was its attempt to monopolize leadership in the insurgency by declaring an Islamic state in Iraq. The first mistake compelled the tribes to terminate their welcome of foreign jihadists and violently expel the extremists, while the second turned nationalist insurgents into fierce critics of AQI's "alien" agenda.

Al-Qa`ida vs. Iraqi Tribes

Tribes in Iraq, generally speaking, are known for being socially conservative, but they are not given to ideological projects promoted by radical Islamists. AQI alienated the tribes of western Iraq by imposing on them an oppressive fundamentalism, infringing on their economic turf, preventing them from establishing their own police forces and engaging in coercive extraction of "war taxes." As early as 2004, foreign jihadists—mainly from Saudi Arabia—began to impose puritanical rules on already religiously conservative tribes. These edicts, for example, outlawed music and satellite dishes, and demanded that women in public be covered in black from head to toe.¹

Iraqi tribes also resented AQI's infringement on their livelihood. A good example is AQI's conflict with the Albu Risha tribe in Anbar Province. This tribe has long benefited from its proximity to the international road leading from Baghdad to Amman, passing through Anbar. The road is used by travelers, traders and transporters. During the sanctions years (1991-2003), Albu Risha tribesmen provided many of the smugglers and transporters who used the road. They also engaged in extortion and outright thievery against

businessmen and transport drivers.² The presence of many insurgent groups, including AQI, on important portions of the international road had cut into the business and profits of the Albu Risha tribe. Insurgents used this vital road to extract fees from transporters, kidnap individuals for ransom and even kill people based on their identity. The Albu Risha tribe had much to lose if AQI remained in control.

In addition to being affected financially, AQI prevented the Albu Risha tribe from receiving contracts and bidding for local development projects from coalition forces. It also challenged the decision of tribes to send their sons into the local police forces. AQI guaranteed a death sentence to anyone who cooperated with the occupiers. Whereas some insurgents

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would allow individuals to contract with Americans in exchange for a share of the revenues, or allowed some to enter the police to provide local security and possibly spy for the insurgents, AQI rejected any forms of collaboration with the occupation and harshly treated tribesmen seeking to make a living through such cooperation.³

In 2004, AQI killed Albu Risha tribesmen that took contracts from coalition forces, including Shaykh Bazi`a al-Rishawi, the father of Shaykh `Abd al-Sattar Abu Risha, the future founder of the Anbar Salvation Council (ASC). It also killed `Abd al-Sattar's younger brother, Muhammad, and kidnapped two of his brothers, Abdullah and Ali. These transgressions required vengeance in the Arab tribal code.⁴

Shaykh `Abd al-Sattar formed the ASC with approximately 100 men and started detaining and killing several AQI commanders and cadres. The ASC attracted money from U.S. forces in order to build up a local police force to combat AQI. It was easy for the ASC to hunt down AQI because the latter operated in the open. It was equally easy, however, for AQI to identify members of the ASC to carry out assassinations and bombings against them.⁵ AQI assassinated key figures such as Shaykh Hikmat Mumtaz al-Bazi, head of the Samarra tribal council, and Shaykh Kamal al-Nazzal, head of the local council in Falluja, for brokering dialogue with the government.⁶ Ultimately, AQI succeeded in killing Shaykh `Abd al-Sattar himself. By sealing his fate, AQI may have sealed its own as well.

Killing these individuals, and the escalating fight with the ASC, had three effects. First, tribal heads had to seek revenge against the killers in accordance with their tribal customs. Second, it gave the United States an opening to reach out to the tribes against a common enemy. The United States was willing to give money and material support to anyone who fought AQI. The tribes, in turn, were looking for a pretext to benefit from coalition money without appearing as illegitimate collaborators with the occupation. Today, there are "awakening councils" in nearly all provinces and cities in which AQI operates.⁷

The third, and perhaps most important, effect of AQI's war on the tribes is that it has forced nationalist insurgents to choose sides. Many of the nationalist insurgents are from the tribes and depend on them for protection, shelter and political support. While they may have wished to stay neutral, AQI's brutal treatment of tribal dissenters

5 Ibid.; Khloud al-Aamiri, "The [al-Qa`ida] Organization is Declining and Armed Men are Joining Us to Avenge their Relatives: Interview with Abu Risha" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, March 19, 2007.

6 "American Officials Hold Secret Talks with Tribal Leaders" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, February 10, 2006; "Killing of [Tribal Head Hikmat] Mumtaz Precipitated Open War on al-Qa`ida" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, February 18, 2006.

7 "Awakening councils" have formed in al-Azamiyah in Baghdad, Diyala, Samarra, Ninawa, Salah al-Din and southern Baghdad.

1 Karl Vick, "Insurgent Alliance is Fraying in Fallujah; Locals, Fearing Invasion, Turn Against Foreign Arabs," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2004; Ellen Knickmeyer, "Zarqawi Followers Clash with Local Sunnis," *Washington Post*, May 29, 2005.

2 Mushriq Abbas, "Mutual Political and Tribal Interests Coincided with His Struggle with al-Qa`ida and al-Maliki: A Short and Murky Journey Led [`Abd al-Sattar] Abu Risha to George Bush...and Few Days Later to His Death" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, September 16, 2007.

3 Hamam Hassan, "Saddam was the First to Attract Islamic Organizations and Later Regretted it" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, February 25, 2006.

4 Abbas, "Mutual Political and Tribal Interests."

meant that the Iraqi nationalists had to protect their base of mass support.

AQI vs. Nationalist Insurgents

In many ways, AQI's agenda was always in conflict with the nationalist-leaning insurgents represented by groups like the Islamic Army in Iraq and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. While these nationalists use Islam as the vocabulary of resistance to the occupation, they are, generally speaking, not interested in establishing an Islamic state or pursuing a global jihad. They want to remove the predominantly Shi'a government that has deprived them of power and privilege. They cooperated with AQI because it was in their interests to sustain attacks on the new Iraqi government and its emerging security forces. Keeping the existing government and the coalition forces preoccupied with extremists takes the military pressure off the nationalist insurgents.

AQI was aware of this marriage of convenience and sought to benefit from it. By 2006, however, AQI began to pose as the leader of the Iraqi jihad, no longer satisfied with the role of an equal partner. AQI had two concerns in mind: one ideological and the other practical. The ideological related to AQI's ambition to reap the benefits of its struggle by establishing a permanent presence in Iraq and fulfilling its desire to establish "true" Islam even within a small territory. This emirate would be the launching point for future jihads just as the Prophet Muhammad and his companions used their tiny state in Medina to conquer the rest of the Arabian Peninsula and, eventually, expand the Islamic empire from Spain to China. AQI recognized that the history of Islamic activism is replete with episodes in which alliances with non-Islamist forces ended up with the latter marginalizing the jihadists. It does not want to lose the opportunity that was denied to Islamist movements in the past.

As for the practical concern, AQI feared any side deals between nationalist insurgents and the Iraqi government that might sell it out in exchange for a share of political power. To prevent such a possibility, AQI sought to encourage—and later compel—other groups to follow its lead. In January

2006, it declared the formation of the Mujahidin Shura Council, uniting several insurgent groups, including AQI, into one organization. Later that year, as tensions with the tribes intensified, it declared the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and demanded that all other insurgent groups and Sunni tribes pledge allegiance to its leader, Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi.⁸

Iraq's nationalists rejected this state on several grounds. First, no one had heard of Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi or had seen his face. There is even speculation that he is a fictional character masking the foreign leadership behind ISI. Second, the Sunni nationalists reject the idea of federalism in Iraq, which would deprive them of oil wealth and, they believe, would be a step toward the break-up of Iraq into three separate states. ISI as a state for Sunnis in western and central Iraq plays directly into the hands of the federalists and paves the way for the Kurds to declare their state in the north and the Shi'a in the south. Third, Iraqi nationalists constitute the majority in the insurgency and they carry out the most attacks. It is they who should be in the lead because they give shelter to AQI and allow it to thrive.

Criticism of the newly formed Islamic state may not have amounted to much had ISI not proceeded with killing several commanders of the insurgent groups that refused to pledge loyalty to Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi. In March 2007, Harith Dhahir Khamis al-Dari, commander of the 1920 Revolution Brigades in the Abu Ghurayb sector, was killed along with three family members by two car bombs near his home. His father, Thahir Khamis al-Dari, blamed the bombings on AQI. Al-Dari previously criticized ISI and claimed that its objective is to break Iraq into separate states.⁹ In April

8 Video message by unknown representative of the Media Commission of the Mujahidin Shura Council distributed through the al-Tajdeed Forum of the Islamic Renewal Organization (www.tajdeed.org.uk/forums), October 15, 2006; Audio message entitled "I Am Aware of My Lord," by Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, leader of the ISI, distributed through the World News Network (www.w-n-n.com), March 13, 2007.

9 Communiqué by the 1920 Revolution Brigades announcing the "martyrdom" of its leader distributed through the al-Firdaws online forums (www.alfirdaws.org/vb), March 28, 2007; Karin Brulliard, "Dozens Die

2007, the Islamic Army in Iraq dropped a bombshell when it accused AQI of killing 30 of its members.

Since then, many of the Iraqi nationalists have taken a more or less hostile position to AQI. Some have openly cooperated with the United States and formed Sunni militias to clear neighborhoods and cities of AQI fighters.¹⁰ The war against the tribes, conflict with the nationalist insurgents and the surge of U.S. forces has driven AQI northward toward Mosul—and it is not clear if it will survive there either.

Exploiting the Errors of their Ways

In a recent audiotepe recording entitled "A Message to Our People in Iraq," Usama bin Ladin urged all the insurgents and tribes to reconcile their differences, and he acknowledged that "errors" had been made.¹¹ He advised followers to avoid "fanatical loyalty

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to men" and reminded them that what unites Muslims is their adherence to Islam, not their "belonging to a tribe, homeland, or organization."

The errors of AQI are not incidental; they are hardwired in the genetic code of global jihadists. This type of movement attracts militants from around the world by inspiring them with a virulent ideology that demonizes enemies, venerates self-sacrifice and conjures up illusions of a utopian world.

Such a movement finds it exceedingly difficult to balance pragmatic considerations with the fanatical doctrine that brings it to the land of jihad in the first place. The focus on jihad and martyrdom carries with it an impatience for gradual political and

In 2 Truck Bombings in the North," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2007.

10 Michael R. Gordon, "The Former-Insurgent Counterinsurgency," *New York Times*, September 2, 2007.

11 The audiotepe was released on the Ana al-Muslimin website (www.muslim.net) by al-Sahab Media Production, October 23, 2007.

social work necessary to build up a mass base that can sustain a movement over time. As a result, global jihadists rely on coercive extraction to meet the needs of their jihad; therefore, they become a heavy burden on their host communities.

The extreme jihadists make too many enemies, kill more Muslims than they kill alleged enemies of Islam and coerce local populations into complying with their interpretation of orthodoxy. They emphasize an all-or-nothing politics that conflicts with the needs of building effective coalitions. Their outrageous tactics may inspire fear, but not admiration. When communities have an opportunity to turn their back on these extremists without fear of reprisals, they seize it.

Yet, despite these vulnerabilities, AQI could still survive in Iraq if:

- Sectarian killings against Sunnis by Shi'a militias and government death squads re-escalate in the near future.

- Sunni insurgents see the United States as abandoning their goal of pressing the current government to compromise on including Sunnis in the security forces and fostering an inclusive political process.

- Coalition forces begin to dismantle Sunni militias and awakening councils out of fear that they will attack the central government in the future. Such a move must be preceded by national reconciliation that guarantees the security and reintegration of Sunnis in the Iraqi polity.

What is happening in Iraq might be replicable elsewhere. U.S. strategists have to recognize the enduring vulnerabilities of global jihadism, exploit the rifts between nationalists, tribes and global jihadists, magnify the mistakes of the extremists toward their own host societies, and avoid making political and military blunders that rescue the extremists from their own.

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