

## Partner or Spoiler: The Case of the Islamic Army in Iraq

By Pascale Combelles Siegel

THE ISLAMIC ARMY IN IRAQ (IAI) is often referred to as an Islamist-nationalist organization fighting to secure a space for Sunnis in the post-Saddam political era. The subtext of this view is that the IAI is an insurgent organization with which the U.S. and Iraqi governments can possibly reconcile to move toward a peaceful post-Saddam era. Recurring rumors of informal negotiations between the IAI and U.S. government representatives and evidence of IAI military engagement against al-Qa`ida in Iraq have reinforced the image of the IAI as a “reasonable insurgent.”

This image, however, does not comport with the group’s public statements. Through a series of pronouncements during the past year, the IAI does not appear as a moderate Islamist-nationalist organization willing to compromise in order to be reintegrated into the post-Saddam political system, but rather as a rejectionist group seeking to make a blank slate of the current system in favor of a new political arrangement solely designed by the Iraqis based on Shari`a. These tenets of the IAI’s ideology have become those of the larger fronts in which the IAI is participating: the Reformation and Jihad Front (RJF) and the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance (PCIR).

### A Rejectionist Political Platform

In a string of statements released during the past few months, the IAI (like the fronts it joined, the RJF and the PCIR) has repeatedly reaffirmed its opposition to the presence of coalition forces in Iraq, the Iraqi government and the post-Saddam political system. The IAI decries the occupation of Iraq as an “act of aggression,” both “illegitimate and unjust.”<sup>1</sup> The group argues that the ultimate goal of U.S. policy in Iraq is to plunder Iraq’s wealth and advance the “Crusader-Zionist” plot to divide the umma and subdue the great nation of Iraq. As a result, the IAI consistently

claims that “repelling the Western Crusader-Zionist campaign” is its top priority. To illustrate its commitment to this proclaimed goal, the IAI releases daily rosters of attack claims against coalition forces.

The IAI is no less harsh on the current Iraqi government. Applying its own version of the fruit of the poisoned tree, the IAI unequivocally opposes the Iraqi government. Indeed, because the current government was established under rules decided by the United States, it has no legitimacy. In May 2007, the IAI subscribed to the political program of the RJF, which states:

We do not recognize the constitution which was written during the time of the occupiers... We do not recognize any political games starting [sic] by the ill-reputed Bremer’s council up to his sectarian agent, al-Maliki... We do not recognize the sectarian elections or what it was based on... We do not recognize any treaty or any agreement held by these consecutive governments.<sup>2</sup>

The IAI also accuses the Iraqi government of being sectarian and serving the interests of Iraqi Shi`a at the expense of Sunnis. Therefore, in October 2007, the IAI characterized the Iraqi government as “bringing to the Sunni nothing but misery, torture and displacement.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, the IAI routinely accuses the Iraqi government of covering the nefarious activities of Shi`a militias (the Badr Corps and the Mahdi Army) and of using the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) for campaigns of Sunni brutalization. As a consequence, the IAI proposes to “reconstruct the Iraqi government on a just basis with a government of professionals.” In short, the IAI argues for a coup d’état against the elected government.

Additionally, the IAI rejects the current body of legislation that underpins the present political system. The IAI put it plainly in May 2007 when it pledged:

We do not recognize any treaty or any agreement held by these consecutive governments... We do not recognize the constitution which was written during the time of the occupiers and we do not recognize any bill that opposes the Shari`a of Allah.<sup>4</sup>

The IAI went even further in its rejectionist approach in the PCIR political platform, stating: “There is no Shari`a legitimacy for any constitution, any ruling regime or law which was legislated during the occupation.”<sup>5</sup> Practically, these statements deny the democratic legitimacy of the current political process. They also imply that there is an inherent and irrepressible contradiction between Shari`a-based and Western-based legislations. Pushed to its logical conclusion, the IAI stance means that what comes from the West must be, by definition, anti-Islamic.

The IAI does not limit itself to criticizing the current political system. To demonstrate its commitment to changing that system, the IAI routinely attacks Iraqi government targets, principally ISF members and facilities. It also encourages Sunni politicians who have opted for a reintegration strategy to withdraw their support. The IAI’s stance regarding those Sunnis involved in the political process only confirms this hypothesis. The IAI praised the Iraqi Accordance Front for leaving the government in July, but condemned Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi for meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

### A Radical Discourse

The IAI does not shy away from using Salafist fundamentalist and sectarian references, akin to those used by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), al-Qa`ida’s affiliate in the country. The IAI castigates the Shi`a as “polytheists,” calls Shi`a political leaders “Safawis” and characterizes the ISF as “apostates.” All of these references are negatively connoted. In Islam, polytheists are considered infidels because their venerating multiple divinities directly contradicts with the Islamic principle of the unicity of God. Salafi-jihadi

2 Ibid.

3 Islamic Army in Iraq, “Press Statement on the Statement of a Member of al-Maliki’s Government,” press communiqué, English version, September 17, 2007.

1 Islamic Army in Iraq, “Jihad and Reformation Front Establishing Statement,” press communiqué, English version, May 3, 2007.

4 Islamic Army in Iraq, “Jihad and Reformation Front Establishing Statement,” press communiqué, English version, May 3, 2007.

5 The announcement was reported by al-Jazira.

ideologues have argued that the Shi`a are polytheists because they venerate the twelve imams. The term Safawi refers to the Persian empire of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that extended well into modern Iraq (Basra, Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad). The connotation here is that Iraqi Shi`a are outside the bounds of both the Islamic and national (Iraqi) community. The characterization of bona fide Iraqi Shi`a political parties as "Safawis" is intended to cast doubt on the legitimacy and allegiance of millions of Iraqi Shi`a, intrinsically suspected of betraying Iraq's best interests to further their supposed sectarian interests.

More generally, IAI propaganda is replete with Salafist references. French journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot, who were taken hostage by the IAI in 2004, testified to the radical ideology underpinning the group. "References to 'Chief Osama' abounded...and there was much talk of living by Muslim law," said Chesnot upon returning from 124 days in captivity. His colleague, Malbrunot, concurred:

They are adamant jihadists, convinced that they are waging war to defend the Muslim faith against the West. There was a lot of talk about Chief Osama, references to Chechnya and how the Muslim world is fighting the Western world in Chechnya, Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, these references are also those of the ISI and the Salafi-jihadi community that support al-Qa`ida and its affiliates around the world.

#### Divergences Between IAI and ISI

Nevertheless, the IAI could be using this ideological framework to gain and maintain support for its actions as the IAI retains very different political goals than the ISI. The IAI does not, for example, claim to have an internationalist agenda. It has been regularly rumored that the IAI has established contacts with U.S. representatives and that it has engaged in informal talks with the U.S. government. In addition, the group has seemingly been endeared to

U.S. goals by publicly and physically clashing with the ISI since mid-2007. Indeed, the IAI publicly denounced the ISI for committing crimes against other mujahidin and for trying to submit other groups to its control. Subsequently, IAI members have attacked ISI strongholds in Anbar Province and Baghdad.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that if the IAI were able to achieve power, it would adopt a more secular and non-sectarian approach to governing.

The significance of these developments, however, should not be overstated. First, the informal talks have not borne fruit. According to public accounts of the discussions, the IAI posed unacceptable conditions for engaging in official negotiations. These include setting a timetable for a U.S. troop

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withdrawal, the recognition of the Iraqi Islamic resistance as the sole legitimate representative of the Iraqi people and the trial of all officials involved in murders or corruption since the occupation. Second, the IAI's conflict with the ISI should not be misconstrued and it seems that it does not mean a complete rejection of the tenets of the ISI. In the past few months, the IAI has called on "all those who believe...[who] conform to Islamic rule...[and] who do not wage war against others" to unite and work together.<sup>8</sup> Considering its past expressed positions against the Shi`a, it is not a stretch to hypothesize that the IAI is actually offering an olive branch to the ISI if it stops coercing other insurgent groups under its control and killing other mujahidin.

#### Conclusion

The radical Islamism rhetoric that the IAI uses might have a long-term pernicious effect. Whether or not the IAI leadership adheres to or simply uses

the radical Islamism rhetoric to gain exposure and support, its mere use may facilitate IAI's foot soldiers passage to international jihadism in the future. The IAI's followers will have received in Iraq an ideological formation into Islamist radicalism, accepting some of the fundamental premises of al-Qa`ida's ideology. Among these premises are the belief that the Sunni community is being wronged and under threat from a supposed "Crusader-Zionist" complot; that those declared non-believers can and should be attacked; that armed struggle is the way to redress these torts; and that the Qur'an and sunna provide the answers to most questions.

Even if the IAI does not seek to export its jihad outside of Iraq officially or does not seek to restore the caliphate in the Middle East (key strategic differences with the ISI), its demobilized foot soldiers, rich of battlefield experience and molded into a rather radical brand of Salafism, might be primed for rolling over into international jihadism. The IAI might not be using the terms "Zionist-Crusader complot" or "takfiris" or "Shari`a" in exactly the same sense as al-Qa`ida's Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri, but by using a similar vocabulary the IAI might ultimately facilitate the passage to a more extreme interpretation. In the end, al-Qa`ida is likely to be the benefactor of this confusion.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the relationship between the ISI and the IAI, see Evan F. Kohlmann, "State of the Sunni Insurgency in Iraq: August 2007," The NEFA Foundation, August 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Islamic Army in Iraq, "A Call to the Honorable Nation," press communiqué, October 19, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Jody K. Biehl, "Four Months on Planet Bin Laden," *Spiegel Online*, January 21, 2005.