

## After Action Report: An Army Lieutenant's View of AQI's Operations in al- Khidr and Hanaswa

By First Lieutenant Jon Patrick Cheatwood

THE IRAQI VILLAGES OF al-Khidr and Hanaswa are located immediately east of the Euphrates River. They are simple, small towns, similar to what one would find driving through Kansas. On December 10, 2007, elements from Berserker Company and attachments began operations aimed at clearing 4.7 kilometers north along the Euphrates to al-Khidr, an area controlled completely by al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), according to intelligence estimates. The purpose of this report is to highlight operations undertaken against al-Qa`ida in Iraq and to add substantively to recent academic discussions regarding AQI from analysis derived at the tactical level.

### The Move North

Moving into al-Khidr immediately after seizing a foothold south of the town was an eerie experience. The bombed-out remnants of houses in the area displayed little to no signs of life as the vast majority of the town had been reduced to rubble. It was a matter of days before we encountered the first residents of the village (all of whom were returning to al-Khidr from towns to the north and east). Flatbed trucks carried the lives of families displaced as social networks slowly filtered back into the area. Elements of AQI who had inhabited al-Khidr when we began our operations were not present; it was clear that they had vacated and left little behind for coalition forces to find aside from the emptiness caused by their prior residence.

A line in the sand existed subsequent to the arrival of Berserker Company. Prior intelligence assessments had clearly defined the communities to our north as safe havens for AQI since a coalition presence did not exist north of a small school known as OP3. The areas our operations were designed to clear allegedly contained between as many as 30-50 active AQI members or sympathizers. Estimates at the time asserted that AQI had taken over

the towns of Hanaswa and al-Khidr through intimidation, harassment and murder. Families from those areas were forced to choose between retaining their homes while supporting AQI, relocating elsewhere, or not supporting AQI and accepting the risk associated with such a decision. Established and with unmitigated control, AQI planned operations against coalition forces and the government of Iraq, and Shari`a law was reportedly imposed. As best understood, this was the portrait of areas to our north.

For approximately eight days, U.S. forces, in conjunction with the Iraqi Army and Concerned Local Citizen (CLC) groups, worked to clear north along a stretch of road parallel to the Euphrates. Exceptional air strikes preceded the beginning of the operation, totaling 2,500 pounds in close air support munitions alone.<sup>1</sup> Moving north, soldiers took limited small-arms fire and were hit by three Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), thanks in large part to the route clearance team attached to Berserker Company that was able to find multiple IEDs along routes in the area.<sup>2</sup> Operationally, the movement north also focused on the emplacement of CLC locations. Similar to the *sabwa*, or "awakening councils," witnessed in other provinces, the partnership between Sunni Iraqis and U.S. forces called for groups of locals to join in defense of their communities against extremist elements. As we moved, emplacing CLC locations became a key task, with the goal of securing lines of communication along the Euphrates River Valley being critical to our success.<sup>3</sup>

Offensive operations ended with the establishment of Patrol Base Kelsey just south of the Iskandariyya Canal.<sup>4</sup> In the

coming months, Berserker Company will attempt to maintain security and build in the areas cleared of AQI. To date, local leaders have signed eight contracts employing approximately 2,500 local nationals in the CLC program.

### Defining al-Qa`ida in Iraq Today

One of the more interesting topics of contemporary debate focuses on the significance and status of AQI. Some scholars have been quick to proclaim the defeat of AQI, and while evidence to support such conclusions does exist, careful analysis remains to be completed. What follows is an assessment of AQI in our area of operations, which ideally will add to further discussions occurring throughout Iraq.

The strength of the ideology underpinning AQI is perhaps the first and most important measure needing assessment when addressing the state of the group today. The extent with which ideology played in the al-Khidr and Hanaswa areas remains ambiguous. As is often the case, identifying the true motivations of those associated with extremist groups can often be a complicated matter. Nevertheless, interactions with locals—many of whom were previously displaced—often reveal an image of AQI that appears largely criminal in nature. Members of AQI in al-Khidr and Hanaswa received support from families through coercion. They conducted recruitment in a similar manner; the decision not to join AQI carried great risk. Intimidation trumped ideology; power often meant more than political change. If this representation is accurate and jihadist tenets have taken a backseat to simple gang behavior, we indeed face a much different threat.

Composition is another factor deserving consideration when assessing the current condition of AQI. Operations undertaken to clear AQI were unable to discover significant evidence that would reveal the identities of key leadership in the area or profiles of the enemy. Based off interviews, however, it appears that the vast majority of individuals affiliated with AQI were Iraqi. The majority of these personnel also hailed from the al-Khidr and Hanaswa areas. It does appear that the composition of AQI has been degraded both by the emergence of the Sunni *sabwa* and infighting with

1 These figures were confirmed by ILT Marshall Tucker, Fire Support Officer for B/3-7 IN. Army aviation and field artillery assets also provided critical fire support leading up to and during operations in the area, destroying safe houses while also providing immediate support to soldiers on the ground.

2 Route Clearance Team and soldiers from B/3-7 IN found 22 different types of IEDs or assorted caches during the same period.

3 Total amount of U.S. dollars spent on CLC programs in our area of operations currently stands at \$1,770,750.

4 The patrol base established was named after SGT Samuel Kelsey, E/3-7 IN, who tragically lost his life during operations on December 13, 2007.

other insurgent groups.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the difficulties associated with “pragmatic considerations” highlighted by Dr. Mohammed M. Hafez seem to factor into the failure of AQI here as well.<sup>6</sup> Strategic missteps have disabled AQI at the tactical level.



ILT Jon P. Cheatwood, SGT Thomas Putnoky, SSG Robert Korish and SSG Brian Spera (left to right) at the location of a cache found east of Hanaswa - January 2008.

The elements of AQI that existed in the al-Khidr area seem to have been homegrown; however, the extent that ideology actually influenced these individuals remains up for debate. Although it appears the jihadist leadership vacated the area, the localized nature of the threat points to a support network that has likely gone underground. It is possible that in the near future elements of AQI will attempt to re-infiltrate. Today, however, relative peace characterizes the area.

#### **Moving Forward: Potential and Problems**

The push to al-Khidr was an operational success, and today AQI is largely defeated in our sector. Counter-insurgency now demands taking requisite actions to ensure that operational success leads to greater overall victory. In the coming months, the goal must be to capitalize on the current situation, while attempting to resolve outstanding problems in AO Berserker.

Vigilant patrolling will likely keep a defeated AQI in check. There is a strong sense that significant numbers of individuals formerly aligned with AQI

currently form the ranks of recently developed CLC programs. In our case, the question of whether this current alignment constitutes an ideological victory is questionable. Also troubling is the fact that the CLC program has made the U.S. military a primary means of employment in the region; this is a burden that is likely to be unsustainable and adds little to the region’s long-term economic infrastructure.

Following operational success with small victories is the best way to benefit from the promise currently in place. These small victories should first be visible, demonstrating to the population the positive change occurring since the move north to al-Khidr.<sup>7</sup> Second, every effort should ensure that the programs undertaken actually add to basic infrastructure needed throughout the region. Creating these victories will be no small task.

As with most counter-insurgency struggles, creating durable accomplishments from operational successes remains the fundamental, outstanding question. Capitalizing on the promise currently in place, while also ensuring security, will likely offer the best chance for coalition success.

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<sup>5</sup> Arguments from Mohammed M. Hafez’s “Al-Qa`ida Losing Ground in Iraq” analysis in the December 2007 issue of the *CTC Sentinel* hold true in our area of operations. Specifically, the discussion of conflicting agendas between AQI and more nationalistic Sunni insurgent groups holds true.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> One of Berserker Company’s first small victories occurred when it hosted a MEDCAP in al-Khidr on January 28, 2008, which treated more than 200 individuals from the local area.