

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq: Lessons from the Mosul Security Operation

By Michael Knights

THE DEMISE OF al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI)¹ has been heralded on a number of occasions during the past five years, only to witness the movement adapt to survive by shifting to new safe havens. Following the conclusion of the latest phase of Operation Za'ir al-Assad fi Sawlat al-Haqq (Lion's Roar in Rightful Assault), or the Mosul security plan, the subject of al-Qa`ida in Iraq's fortunes is once again in the headlines. The 10-day push by security forces into insurgent neighborhoods between May 10-20, 2008, witnessed very low levels of violence, with the number of recorded incidents dropping by 85%.² As the result of leadership targeting and the loss of safe havens, Multinational Force Iraq (MNF-I) spokesman Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll characterized AQI and other insurgent groups in Mosul as being "off-balance and on the run."³

Conversely, there is also a degree of caution based on AQI's proven tendency to relocate, lay low and reemerge in a new area months later. A late May video recording released by the al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, the media production unit most closely associated with the Islamic State of Iraq or ISI umbrella movement,⁴ saw a spokesman claiming to represent ISI

in Ninawa Province warning that "until now, we have not been engaged...because we are the ones who control the hour to start the initiative and we will choose the time for retaliation or engagement."⁵ The communiqué suggested that AQI elements had dispersed before the 10-day security push began and that the vast majority of arrests had fallen on the Iraqi population of Mosul instead of AQI/ISI leaders.

The true picture lies somewhere between these two images. The only way to get closer to an accurate assessment is to get into the weeds of the Mosul security operation and to blend street-level tactical data with the overarching strategic context of AQI's nationwide reverses and growing Iraqi government sensitivity to the Sunni Arab community's needs. This article draws on a database of 5,984 geo-located incidents reported in Ninawa Province from April 2007 to April 2008, itself a sub-set of a data set of more than 100,000 geo-located incidents recorded across the whole of Iraq during the last 18 months.⁶ Geospatial intelligence is then combined with MNF-I, Iraqi and open source media reportage plus direct commentary from embedded reporters in Iraq. As always, the key to understanding a terrorist group is to look closely at its actions.

Mosul's Importance

The center of gravity for the Sunni Arab resistance has been inexorably shifting northwards during the past year. Southern and western AQI operating areas have been seriously constrained by counter-insurgency approaches and the surge of forces developed by MNF-I. According to Olive Group's databases, Anbar Province saw reported incidents drop from 976 in January 2007 to 158 in January 2008. Babil, likewise, witnessed a drop from 544 monthly incidents in January 2007 to 180 one year later. Baghdad is no longer the epicenter of the insurgency; in pre-surge March 2007, MNF-I estimated that 80% of the violence in Iraq occurred in the

region within 19 miles of Baghdad. By January 2008, this figure had dropped to around 25%. Iraq's capital witnessed a decline from 1,259 reported incidents in January 2007 to 425 incidents a year later.⁷

Sunni Arab areas north of the capital now contain a far larger share of violent incidents than Baghdad, Babil and Anbar. Yet, the most stubborn holdout has been Ninawa, where incidents actually increased from 463 per month in January 2007 to 685 per month in January 2008 and later to an all-time high of 747 incidents in February 2008.⁸

Within the north, the city of Mosul has consistently been an area of strength for *takfiri*⁹ and Islamist-nationalist resistance groups in Iraq. Mosul is home to a high proportion of the Saddam-era Iraqi officer corps, and the post-war looting of a number of major Ammunition Supply Points in and around the city left the metropolitan area seeded with thousands of tons of munitions. Mosul was also a major center of Saddam's "Return to Faith" campaign in the 1990s, and the city's position astride roads headed toward Turkey and Syria made it a transshipment point for *takfiri* groups moving through Iraq during that decade, including Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi's people-moving networks and the Ansar al-Islam movement. Since 2003, the direct connection to Syria via Tal Afar and Sinjar means that Mosul is a key hub in the northern "rat-line" bringing foreign volunteers into Iraq via the al-Rabi'a area, which is arguably the only fully functional line still processing significant numbers of foreign volunteers.¹⁰

As the capital of Ninawa Province, some consider Mosul as a new center of gravity for Sunnis in Iraq, with Sunni Arabs representing approximately half

1 AQI has become a catch-all phrase used to describe any Sunni Arab diehard militant who has not integrated into the Awakening (*sabwa*) movements or their associated police auxiliary units, the so-called "Sons of Iraq." For the purposes of this article, however, AQI refers to the terrorist group that has been allied with and subordinate to al-Qa`ida since 2004. It is led by Abu Ayyub al-Masri (an Egyptian also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir).

2 This information was from a statement made by then Multinational Division North (MND-N) commander Major General Mark Hertling.

3 Gerry J. Gilmore, "Al-Qaida in Iraq Is On the Run, Officials Say," American Forces Press Service, May 27, 2008.

4 Since the inception of the ISI umbrella movement in October 2006, there have been strong indications that AQI is the dominant force within the ISI, which is notionally led by Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi (also known as Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi), an Iraqi spokesman that the U.S. government claims is a fictional figure designed to give the movement an Iraqi face.

5 Bushra Juhi, "Militant Group Warns of Mosul Retaliation," Associated Press, May 27, 2008.

6 The database is maintained by private security company Olive Group and represents information gained through more than 1,800 days of consecutive on-the-ground operations in Iraq. For more details, please contact mknights@olivegroup.com.

7 These figures were derived from Olive Group's database.

8 Ibid.

9 The term *takfiri* in this article refers to Sunni insurgent groups that justify violence against some Muslims and all non-Muslims because their religious beliefs are not compatible with the group. *Takfiri* groups in Iraq include al-Qa`ida in Iraq and its affiliates, plus Ansar al-Sunna/Ansar al-Islam.

10 Personal interview, U.S. military intelligence officer, May 2008.

of its 1.4 million residents, the balance comprising approximately 500,000 Kurds and 200,000 Turkmen (Shi'a and Sunni), Assyrian Christians and other groups. The ethnic tension caused by this diversity has worked in the favor of *takfiri* groups because it has constrained the development of *sabwa* and Sons of Iraq movements, at least until recently. Kurdish-dominated Iraqi Army forces garrison most areas, and Sunni fears of "reverse-Arabization" (ethnic cleansing) by Kurdish forces have proven particularly beneficial to *takfiri* elements all along the multi-ethnic swathe bordering the Kurdistan Regional Government zone. Furthermore, Mosul and its environs have seen a very sparse level of garrisoning by MNF-I troops since early 2004, with large tracts of the city ceded to the insurgency for 12-18 months at a time.¹¹

"Routine" AQI Activity in Mosul

It is worth examining the types of activity undertaken by AQI and similar movements in Ninawa Province during the last 12 months. Mosul sits at the center of a number of conflict zones; to the west are Tal Afar and Sinjar, large towns strung along the *takfiri* "rat-line" to Syria, as well as rural staging posts that fan out from the main road into the desert along the border. To the south, a range of rural farming communities along the Tigris River is a crossroads for *takfiri* elements moving up and down the river and interacting with other important AQI operating areas such as Hawija; the Jazira desert areas around Lake Tharthar and stretching to the Syria border; the Saddam-era "presidential security triangle" cities and towns in Salah al-Din province; and the Hamrin mountain "switch-line" (linking Hawija to Tuz Khurmatu and the Diyala River Valley).

AQI plays a major role in seeking to maintain Mosul as a lawless environment in which such movements can operate freely. According to MNF-I and Iraqi military intelligence officers in Mosul, AQI and other *takfiri* groups behave differently in Mosul than they have in areas such as Anbar in the past; specifically, there has been notably less animus between *takfiri* elements and the

local Sunni Arab community and fewer attempts to impose Shari'a codes or take over leadership of communities from local Iraqis. Individual neighborhoods bear the graffiti of multiple movements, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Reform and Jihad Front (the Islamic

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Army in Iraq front movement). A complex mesh of affiliations means that Mosul's *muballa* (blocks), *nabiya* (sub-districts) and *qada'a* (districts) are often shared between Ba'athist, Islamist-nationalist and *takfiri* groups. There is considerable blurring between cells, and the most important feature connecting individual attacks to specific groups is financial sponsorship of the action.

Until preparation for the current security operation began, offensive military activities sponsored by manpower-lite funding heavy groups such as AQI mainly focused on the Main Supply Routes running through Mosul. On the west bank, military traffic on Highway 1—the trucking road running along the Tigris River all the way to al-Rabi'a—has been a consistent target of roadside Improvised Explosive Device (IED) crews. On the eastern side, Highway 2 links Turkey to the Tigris River Valley cities and later Baghdad and has also consistently been attacked by IED crews. With MNF-I units relatively thin on the ground in 2007, sponsoring paid-for IED attacks on strategic road systems remains the best way of predictably acquiring targets and a means by which AQI/ISI and other movements can "keep the flame of resistance alight."

Takfiri groups operate in somewhat different ways in western Mosul and eastern Mosul. Western Mosul is old Arab Mosul and even though the city's ethnic and sectarian communities are densely interwoven in almost all districts, the west is considered to

have a higher proportion of Sunni Arabs. In western Mosul, AQI and other movements used the relative thinness of MNF-I presence in 2007 to attempt to drive out non-Sunnis from their neighborhoods, particularly Christians and Shebaks, a community of Shi'a Kurds. In eastern Mosul and in the government district west of the Tigris, AQI and other groups tend to launch three to five suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attacks per month against provincial government, security forces and particularly Kurdish political party offices.¹²

Takfiri groups became major players in organized crime in western Mosul. In addition to the usual AQI fundraising activities such as ransoming kidnapped people and reselling hijacked fuels (gasoline, cooking gas and diesel) and consumer goods, AQI has become involved in considerably more complicated criminal endeavors in Mosul. These schemes involve extorting hundreds of thousands of dollars from larger businesses ranging from soft drink manufacturers to cell phone companies by levying up to 20% of the value of contracts as protection money. Cell phone towers have been destroyed when vendors failed to pay sufficient bribes to *takfiri* elements. In real estate, AQI insurgents stole 26 ledgers that contained the deeds to almost \$90 million worth of property and then resold them.¹³

AQI Defensive Operations

Many of the terrorist attacks in Mosul in 2007 were aimed at preventing the establishment of government institutions in insurgent neighborhoods, typically involving the murder of individual policemen or Iraqi Army personnel, as well as the destruction of vehicle checkpoints or recruiting stations. As with most violent activity undertaken by *takfiri* groups, intimidation is the mechanism. This effort was kicked up a notch when it became clear that the Iraqi government was planning a major

¹¹ See the March 2003 coverage provided by independent embedded journalist Bill Roggio at The Long War Journal, available at www.longwarjournal.com.

¹² These figures were derived from Olive Group's database.

¹³ This information was according to Lieutenant Colonel Eric Welsh, a U.S. Army battalion commander in Mosul. For more details on the criminalization of AQI, see Michael Knights, "Endangered Species - Al-Qaeda in Iraq Adapts to Survive," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 2008.

security operation in Mosul.

It was the response of local *takfiri* and Islamist-nationalist insurgent groups to these actions that caused the spike of 747 reported incidents in Ninawa Province in March 2008. A range of vehicle checkpoints were attacked with suicide vest bombs. Large suicide VBIED were employed to physically shatter new Combat Outposts. On March 23, for instance, Combat Outpost Inman in western Mosul was breached by a suicide truck bomb loaded with an estimated 5,000-10,000 pounds of homemade explosives. The dump truck, armored against small-arms fire, detonated mid-point in the facility, killing 13 Iraqi soldiers, wounding 42 and leaving a crater 15 feet deep and 25 feet wide. Four other VBIEDs in the 2,000-5,000 pound range were used or discovered in Mosul in March alone. Insurgents likewise breached the Riyadh Line—the berms built around Mosul—with explosives on a number of occasions, sometimes seeding the gaps with IEDs to kill repair crews. On the eve of the Mosul security operation, Iraqi Army troops foiled a suicide VBIED attack against the 2nd Iraqi Army Division headquarters at the Ninawa Oprawi hotel.¹⁴

Once the government operation began, however, Mosul's *takfiri* groups went largely passive, resulting in a reduction of reported incidents by 85%.¹⁵ A tight curfew and driving ban and the berming of the city had an immediate effect on the ability of *takfiri* groups to deploy car bombs, underlining the value of mobility to such cells. Almost no suicide vest operations were launched either, potentially pointing to a more general lack of available personnel for martyrdom operations. Although 125 roadside IEDs were defused and 1.5 tons of C4 and TNT were recovered during the May 10-20 period, roadside IED crews were also largely ineffective in blunting the Iraqi security operation, with a notable lack of effective attacks.¹⁶

14 The attacker drove a Volkswagen Passat, a common brand of car used by the Ba`athist regime to reward military service.

15 "Operation 'Lion's Roar' Reduces Insurgent Attacks in Mosul," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 22, 2008.

16 "125 Bombs Defused in Mosul," *Voices of Iraq*, May 22, 2008.

Leadership disruption probably also played a role in the muted response. AQI/ISI in Mosul had been under intensive attacks for months. According to MNF-I spokesmen, the number of senior AQI leaders killed or captured in the months of October to December 2007 topped 130, including individuals from almost all levels of the organization, such as regional *amirs*; facilitators involved in transporting leaders, foreign fighters or cash; and specialist cells involved in the development and employment of suicide car bombs and roadside IEDs.¹⁷ In early 2008, another 30 leadership targets were killed or captured in Mosul alone, including eastern Mosul *amir* Ibrahim Ahmad `Umar al-Sabawi, northeastern Mosul *amir* Ayyad Jassim Muhammad `Ali, and southeastern Mosul *amir* Abu Yasir al-Sa`udi. Halfway through the May 10-20 operation, a further 200 Tier 1 and Tier 2 AQI/ISI commanders were captured.¹⁸ On May 20, MNF-I reported that the purported overall AQI *amir* of Mosul, `Abd al-Khaliq Awad Ismail al-Sabawi, had been captured with his son in Tikrit.

The State of AQI/ISI

The location of `Abd al-Khaliq al-Sabawi's detention is an important pointer that AQI/ISI leadership had already left Mosul by the time the operation was underway or were largely based in outlying rural villages to begin with. Indicators of migration to a predominately rural-based movement have been visible for some time. AQI/ISI no longer stands and fights to control urban terrain, although the movement certainly tried to prevent some neighborhoods from being penetrated by government forces in the run-up to the Mosul operation. Whereas the downscaling of local coalition force levels and AQI resurgence historically followed security operations, the "Iraqi surge" means Iraqi Army neighborhood presence is more permanent. AQI/ISI are learning that urban populations

17 Figures conglomerated from U.S. Department of Defense briefings on al-Qa`ida in Iraq leadership targeting.

18 "Security Improves in Iraq's Ninevah Province, General Says," American Forces Press Service, May 22, 2008. According to Ma. Gen. Mark Hertling, Tier 1 operatives are operational leaders who finance operations or provide ideological guidance. Tier 2 operatives are "battalion commanders" commanding groups of 5-30 fighters. Hertling described Tier 2 operatives as "the ones that put up IEDs, VBIEDs, sniper cells."

cannot be controlled indefinitely and that city streets cannot be held against Iraqi forces.

This is particularly true in Mosul, where the multiethnic neighborhoods are difficult to operate in once security forces have established a permanent presence and can collect tip-offs from the public. The government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has backed the current Mosul operation with a range of political concessions designed to swing the bulk of the Sunni Arab population in Mosul away from the insurgency. Senior

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Kurdish figures have been removed from the provincial council, the Ninawa Operations Center and the 2nd Iraqi Army Division and have been replaced with Sunni Arabs from Mosul families. Provincial elections in November should further strengthen Sunni Arab influence in provincial governance. *Sabwa* and Sons of Iraq movements are being established, and fast-track judicial proceedings are increasing the pace at which Sunni males are released from government detention. Perhaps most importantly to the military families of Sunni Arab Mosul, there is genuine anticipation that military age males will again be able to take up their traditional profession of service in locally-raised Iraqi Army units.¹⁹ In other words, General David Petraeus' surge strategy has finally returned to Mosul where the general initially tried many of its components during his tenure there in 2003-2004.

The Petraeus strategy and the Iraqi surge have made AQI/ISI leery of major population centers. It is not in such a

19 Personal interviews, Mosul-based U.S. and Iraqi military intelligence officials, May 2008. There are also a number of useful Mosul bloggers who report on local views, such as "A Star from Mosul" at www.asterfrom-mosul.blogspot.com.

movement's nature to fight in an entirely clandestine nature, and they tend to seek operational spaces that they can control, if only for short periods of time. AQI would rather be a big fish in a small pond; the alternative—a small fish in a big pond, classic urban terrorism—is increasingly difficult to execute.

Constant relocation is one of the factors driving AQI/ISI to decentralize and dissolve into the broader pool of Iraqi-led insurgent movements. Centralized control of funding is one of the defining characteristics of AQI/ISI and a key source of influence for the foreign leadership cadre of the movement. The criminalization of the movement combined with MNF-I attacks on leadership and funding have loosened the ties between the foreign *amirs* and their Iraqi foot soldiers, the latter of which are often attracted by financial inducements.

The picture that emerges is that of an organization that is moving away from centralized control by a national *amir*, underlined by the reduction of the reward offered for AQI/ISI leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri.²⁰ Indeed, there are strong signs that the al-Qa`ida leadership in Pakistan has deliberately sent seasoned fighters to bolster the foreign fighter element in the hope of maintaining some measure of control over the organization; on March 2, 2008, Rear Admiral Gregory Smith noted that Abu Yasir al-Sa`udi and Hamdan al-Hajji, two Saudi *amirs*, were drawn from the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict zone to Mosul in November 2007 by AQI commander Abu Ayyub al-Masri.²¹ Foreigners stand out, however, making imported leaders vulnerable to coalition attacks; Abu Yasir al-Sa`udi and Hamdan al-Hajji, for example, were killed on February 27.

The "Iraqification" of AQI

Combined with a reduced flow of foreign volunteers, decentralization could see other Iraqi-led movements such as Ansar al-Sunna/Ansar al-Islam eclipsing AQI/ISI. It is not hard to imagine a declining role for the foreign elements of AQI, with

international jihadists falling back into their more typical role of bankrolling native elements of insurgent operations to keep the flame of resistance alight. According to this scenario, increasingly Iraqi- and foreign-led *takfiri* groups would use criminal fundraising to finance insurgent operations long after any popular base for resistance had eroded, with money greasing the wheels of the "professional resistance"—those Sunni Arab IED cells undertaking paid-for attacks throughout the Saddam-era "presidential security triangle" formed by Beyji, Baghdad and Ramadi.

Major General Mark Hertling and his Iraqi counterparts are confident that about half of the paid-for Tier 3 elements of AQI—known as the "pipe swingers"—could be detached from terrorism by political and economic engagement.²² With the extension of the Petraeus doctrine to Mosul, the less committed insurgents are finally being boiled away to reveal the skeleton of the "professional resistance." In Mosul, as in the rest of Sunni Iraq, reducing this hardcore cadre and making the next major step-charge in improved security may take far longer than the year-long "surge."

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20 Lennox Samuels, "Al Qaeda Nostra," *Newsweek*, May 21, 2008.

21 See statement from Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Director of Communications, Deputy Spokesman, Multi-National Force Iraq, March 2, 2008.

22 This information is according to Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, speaking at a Department of Defense news briefing in Iraq on June 9, 2008.