

Pursuing Al-Qa`ida into Diyala Province

By Michael Knights

REPORTED VIOLENT INCIDENTS across Iraq are a third of their pre-surge levels. Diyala Province, however, has proven to be particularly difficult to pacify. Whereas reported incident levels in places such as Baghdad, Anbar and Babil provinces are now a sixth of what they were pre-surge, Diyala has witnessed the slowest reduction of violence in Iraq. Statistics derived from Olive Group's database of more than 100,000 geo-located incidents suggest that reported incidents have decreased from 539 in January 2007 to 252 in July 2008,¹ and even this reduction might not have been possible without the commitment of substantial U.S. forces since 2007. As the first phase of the Diyala security operation concludes, what is it that makes Diyala Province so troublesome?

Sectarian Conflict

With mountains to the north, farmlands in the center and deserts to the east, Diyala is described by some as "little Iraq." Geography aside, Diyala is also a microcosm of the ethnic and sectarian make-up of Iraq. The majority are Sunni Arabs, possibly as much as 60-70% of the population. The remainder is split between Feyli (Shi`a Kurds), Shi`a Arabs and Turkmen, and their numbers may be gauged from the fact that 114,658 votes were cast in the 2005 local election for Shi`a and Kurdish candidates at a time when the Sunnis boycotted the election.² Hundreds of years of settled cultivation have resulted in a complex tribal fabric with large numbers of densely interconnected smaller tribal groupings. The Saddam regime "Arabized" the *qada'a* (district) of Khanaqin in northern Diyala, removing Feyli and other Kurds in favor of Sunni Arabs. The Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG) has made claims on lands in the Khanaqin area and as far south as Mandali, citing the need to effect "reverse-Arabization" in such areas. Kurdish claimants have already begun to return and establish mud and cinder block villages in claimed areas, sometimes with a degree of protection from peshmerga militiamen.³

Sunni communities are also threatened by the minority Shi`a community in Diyala, which was gifted with a disproportionate role in provincial politics by the Sunni Arab boycott of the January 2005 local elections. This resulted in a Shi`a-led provincial council, a Shi`a governor and a Shi`a-led and largely Shi`a-manned police force. Diyala was also significantly affected by the sectarian fighting that followed the February 22, 2006 bombing of the Askariyya Shrine in Samarra. Intense sectarian cleansing by Shi`a police forces and Sunni insurgent groups took place in 2006 and 2007. The Shi`a-led provincial council failed to administer more than one or two percent of its budget in 2006 and abandoned both fuel and Public Distribution System (PDS) food rations in October 2006.⁴ In many areas in late 2006, al-Qa`ida in Iraq and related movements successfully evicted the Shi`a police forces, who were undermanned and not locally recruited.

The Geography of Threat in Diyala

With complex physical and human terrain, the difficulty of operating in Diyala Province can be readily appreciated. To complicate matters further, different zones of insurgent activity in Diyala present distinct operational challenges. Setting aside Khalis, an important operational area of its own, there are four main zones.

Ba`quba City

Some western Ba`quba residential neighborhoods such as Ghatun and Mufrik have periodically become al-Qa`ida in Iraq⁵ and Ansar al-Sunna

strongholds, with roadside Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) used to deter coalition and Iraqi patrols. Although such attacks have dropped to around five per month, some indicators suggest an effort to ramp up offensive operations. Thirteen IEDs were used against Iraqi Army patrols during July 2008. Since April, three high-profile suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attacks occurred in central and eastern Ba`quba, including strikes on the provincial courthouse and the Popular Committee headquarters (the "Sons of Iraq" equivalent in Ba`quba). Four other suicide vest attacks targeted Popular Committee headquarters in pedestrian areas of the city during the same months.

The Lower Diyala River Valley

On the west bank of the river, Route 5 links Ba`quba and Baghdad. As recently as January 2008, a battalion-size operation removed 70 IEDs from the 19-mile road. Buhriz and the east bank farming communities between Ba`quba and Baghdad have proven similarly hostile due to the presence of large numbers of former regime elements. Despite the integration of some elements of the nationalist 1920 Revolution Brigades in local *Sabwa* (Awakening) initiatives, the road systems along the east bank have grown noticeably more dangerous in 2008 than they were even in the spring of 2007. For example, by analyzing one six mile stretch of the east bank between Jarimat and Umm al-Khuways and counting all reported IEDs within three miles of the river, the total for January-June 2007 is four IEDs compared with 56 in January-June 2008.⁶ Increased patrolling by the two Iraqi Army battalions based south of Ba`quba is one cause of the increase.

Balad Ruz District

The threat to the lower Diyala River Valley is likely linked to the recurrent establishment of insurgent training and basing areas among the canals and marshlands of southern Diyala. Indeed, the start of security operations in this area in July saw IEDs in the lower Diyala

1 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.

2 See annex five on 2005 provincial election results in Michael Knights and Eamon McCarthy, *Provincial Politics in Iraq: Fragmentation or New Awakening?* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008).

3 Personal interview, senior KRG official, Ministry of Extraregional Affairs, March 2008.

4 Kimberly Kagan, "Securing Diyala," *Weekly Standard*, December 6, 2007.

5 AQI is sometimes used as a catch-all phrase 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 *takfiri* 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).

6 All statistics derived from Olive Group's incident databases.

River Valley halve in that month. Just 12 miles east of the river, villages such as Turki have been cleared every three to six months since late 2006 to break up insurgent bases, which have often numbered 30-100 fighters and held large explosives and ammunition caches.⁷ The areas south of Balad Ruz present a major logistical challenge for police, and Iraqi security forces based in Balad Ruz (a city of 80,000) are targeted by an average of 15 IEDs per month.⁸ Although tribal reconciliation between Sunni and Shi`a clans is promising, the relatively small number of Popular Committee militiamen cannot secure large swathes of land. Operations launched in late July 2008 will extend permanently-manned battle positions into the farmlands for the first time.

The Upper Diyala River Valley

The predominately Sunni Arab towns of Qaryat Zaghiniyat, Qubbah, Mukhisa, Abu Tinah and Abu Sadah are 6-12 miles north of Ba`quba positioned on either side of Route 5. These areas witness sporadic IED use to dissuade coalition and Iraqi patrolling, but their role as an offensive base for operations into Ba`quba or Khalis has been greatly constrained. In July 2008, insurgents fought particularly hard against Iraqi forces in areas east of Route 5, using 16 IEDs in areas that normally see three to five per month. Further along Route 5, Muqdadiyya had long been one of the last true bastions of AQI and related movements, but even this stronghold has been reduced by joint U.S.-Iraqi operations. At the start of the surge in January 2007, 55 reported incidents took place in central Muqdadiyya itself with only five incidents reported in the surrounding countryside, reflecting the ability of AQI and other movements to operate at will in the city. During this period, AQI fighters paraded through urban streets and evicted Shi`a from

⁷ These impressions were gained from numerous open source articles by *Stars and Stripes*, DefenseLink and syndicated press reporters in 2006-2008. For a useful reference, see the following articles: "Sheiks Continue Discussions of Security, Stability for Diyala," Multi-National Division-North PAO, December 10, 2006; "Sheiks Sign Peace Agreement," Multi-National Division-North PAO, May 3, 2007. Also see interview material with Colonel David Sutherland, commander of the Greywolf Brigade Combat Team, in Kagan, "Securing Diyala."

⁸ All statistics derived from Olive Group's incident databases.

entire villages, razing all buildings and destroying all cattle. By January 2008, the picture had changed; no attacks were undertaken in the secured urban area, while 48 IED attacks were attempted in the areas north of Muqdadiyya, reflecting AQI's effort to keep coalition forces out of its rural staging areas. By the summer of 2008, AQI could only hold public rallies in rural villages, and its reaction to the Diyala security operation has been muted in Muqdadiyya.⁹

Operations and Tactics

Intimidation remains the key operational goal of AQI and similar movements. When faced with coalition and Iraqi government cooption of segments of the insurgent community into *Sabwa*-type movements, the reaction of AQI has been to seek to instill fear in potential

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collaborators, either to swing them back over to active support for AQI or at least to neutralize them as potential opponents. The most tactically successful action of this kind was the September 24, 2007 suicide vest attack on a post-Ramadan reconciliation meeting involving notables from both Sunni and Shi`a communities at a Shi`a mosque in Ba`quba. The attack killed 28 people, including the two senior-most police officials and Sayyid Ahmad al-Tamimi, the head of the Shi`ite Endowment and the architect of many reconciliation meetings. Yet, as with similar attacks in Anbar in early 2006, such outrages tend to reinforce local determination to stamp out *takfiri*¹⁰ groups.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 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-

Suicide operations are relatively rare in Diyala and target selection is commensurately selective. A high proportion of the suicide attacks in 2008 have targeted *Sabwa* and Popular Committee leaders and headquarters, with a small minority targeted at Shi`a communities or coalition forces. This is an encouraging sign, marking a shift from sectarian targeting to the battle for control of the Sunni community. In the first six months of 2008, there were nine reported VBIED attacks and 14 reported suicide vest attacks. This equates to around one suicide operation per week somewhere in the governorate. The widely publicized use of Iraqi women in 11 of the suicide vest attacks in Diyala (plus another nine in Baghdad) is indicative of a range of features of AQI and related movements, notably the relative scarcity of foreign martyrdom-seekers, the increasingly Iraqi membership of *takfiri* movements in Iraq, and the switch toward suicide vest operations to reach well-protected targets in pedestrian enclosures. Women are well-suited for the latter role, being harder to screen at checkpoints manned by Iraqi Army or coalition personnel.¹¹ The Iraqis are slowly adding women to the security forces and are creating "Daughters of Iraq" to counter female suicide bombers.

A second operational objective of *takfiri* movements in Diyala is the desperate struggle to preserve and build safe havens in which fighters can rest, resupply and plan operations. The preponderance of roadside IED attacks sponsored or undertaken by *takfiri* groups as a defensive reaction to increased Iraqi Army presence is very apparent in many parts of Diyala. Thus, increased incident levels—and even increased friendly casualties—do not necessarily indicate that the insurgents have the initiative; in fact, increased insurgent activity often indicates the opposite.

Sunna/Ansar al-Islam.

¹¹ The subject of the 20-plus suicide bombings undertaken by women in Iraq in 2008 has been covered in a number of focused articles, notably: Alissa Rubin, "Despair Drives Suicide Attacks by Iraqi Women," *New York Times*, July 5, 2008; Bobby Ghosh, "Female Suicide Bombers: The Latest Weapon," *Time*, June 26, 2008; Amit Paley, "Female Suicide Bomber Attacks in Diyala," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2008.

A denser pattern of roadside IEDs, ambushes and VBIED attacks on battle positions have occurred during the Diyala security operation, which has seen reinforcements of Iraqi Army and Iraqi National Police forces almost double the usual 10-battalion Iraqi Army garrison of Diyala, joining elements of three U.S. brigades in the province. The two remaining areas with sufficient operational space for *takfiri* groups are the farmlands of Balad Ruz district and the Hamrin mountain foothills. The latter represents a critical line of retreat and reinforcement, linking extremists in Diyala with others in key areas such as Hamrin Lake, Tuz Khurmatu, Hawija, Bayji, Makhmur, Mosul and the Iraqi-Syrian border areas. Dispersal of personnel and regular movement of arms caches along this line will remain the *modus operandi*.

Military Operations to Win Political Space

Although plenty of AQI High Value Targets were captured during the opening week of the offensive (including the regional *amir* and his military and media deputies), only economic and political movement can finish off AQI in Diyala. The security operation will allow near simultaneous clearance of more areas than ever before, and the maintenance of the assembled force for some weeks will increase the chances of moving into the hold and build phase. Quick impact projects undertaken by the coalition and Iraqi Army have done much to meet near-term needs for fuel products and PDS rations, but Diyala has been denied true economic development since 2006 and has three years of provincial budget to disburse, let alone an additional \$100 million of government funding allocated to Diyala as a political symbol during the security operation. Only a functioning provincial government can deliver structured economic development, with an emphasis on job creation.

Provincial elections due in late 2008 or early 2009 are badly needed to correct the sectarian and ethnic imbalance on the provincial council. Regardless of what system is used, the participation of the Sunni Arab majority should increase the number of Sunnis on the council, and thus make more likely the appointment of a governor and police chief amenable to Sunni needs. The integration of Popular Committee

fighters into the Iraqi Police Service in Diyala and the recruitment of Sunni Arabs in the new locally formed brigade of the Iraqi Army 5th Division could further reassure Sunnis. Some vetting of the Popular Committees is necessary as AQI sympathizers are seeded throughout the movements, but the federal government, dominated by Shi`a and Kurdish factions, will also seek to undermine the Popular Committees in advance of the provincial elections, stirring Sunni fears.

The final issue that may affect AQI prospects in Diyala is the treatment of Kurdish claims on areas such as Mandali and Khanaqin. Thus far, the United Nations has recommended gradual steps in establishing the rights of return for evicted Kurds, and it is important that the process does not evolve too suddenly. AQI and other Sunni extremist movements were strengthened considerably by the deep sectarian and ethnic cleavages present in Diyala Province in 2006. Until they are addressed, these deep-rooted problems will allow *takfiri* groups to maintain a residual support network in local communities, requiring repeated clearance actions and complicating the hold and build phases of counter-insurgency operations.

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