

although this is more a result of al-Qa`ida's extreme violence than the government's assault on its ideology.²⁷

Yet not everyone is complying as wholeheartedly as the government would like. Interior Minister Prince Nayif has occasionally complained that some imams at the country's 50,000 mosques are not doing enough to counter extremist thinking.²⁸ Most importantly, there is still the internet, where one can easily find violent Islamist thought. Although many extremist forums and websites are blocked by the government, most technologically-savvy Saudi teenagers can find a way around the censors.

Present Danger

AQAP is now a major security threat to Saudi Arabia, having proved its determination to continue its jihad against the kingdom and its allies, principally the United States and the United Kingdom. The group's latest threat came in al-Shihri's audio recording aired by the Saudi-owned satellite television channel, al-Arabiya. In it, al-Shihri called for "kidnapping princes, senior officials, and ministers to exchange them for this Al Qaeda lady who had been assuming the task of recruiting women and collecting funds."²⁹ Addressing al-Qusayir directly, al-Shihri added that "your mujahidin brothers... were hurt by what has happened to you."³⁰ He then urged AQAP's followers in the kingdom to "persist in gathering information, inciting the Muslims, collecting money, and forming practical cells to kidnap the Christians and the princes of Al Saud."³¹

²⁷ This assessment is the author's personal observation, which is consistent with the research of Hegghammer.

²⁸ Prince Nayif was quoted as saying in 2008, "Frankly speaking, I would like to say that the imams of mosques, with the exception of the two holy mosques, have not played their desired role (in the fight against extremism)." For details, see "Imams Fail in Their Desired Role: Naif," *Arab News*, October 17, 2008. In the months since then, Nayif has repeatedly stressed the important role of mosque imams in combating deviant thinking. See "Intellectual Security: Naif briefed on Role of Khateeb," *Saudi Gazette*, May 10, 2010.

²⁹ Said al-Shihri issued the threat on an audiotape aired on al-Arabiya television on June 3, 2010.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

AQAP will attempt to deliver on its kidnapping threat to demonstrate its effectiveness. Targets are abundant. There are thousands of Saudi princes, and with 50,000 American and 30,000 British residents in the kingdom, there are also many Christians.

AQAP's "ambition is evident," said one Saudi-based diplomat. "It's immensely serious. The challenge for the Saudis now is to ensure that its capability to operate inside the kingdom is very low."³² That will not be easy considering the porous nature of the remote, mountainous Saudi-Yemen border and the inability of the Yemeni government, distracted by other concerns such as the southern secessionist movement and a failing economy, to engage AQAP more aggressively.

Interior Ministry spokesman al-Turki said that while al-Qa`ida is no longer "capable of waging a war" as it was in 2003, "the threat now is that it could be capable of planning and carrying out any atrocity—targeting oil facilities, residential compounds or targeting an official as they are threatening... This is their danger."

"We never say we've destroyed Al Qaeda and that we're okay," al-Turki added. "We say we have good control on our security situation. But this doesn't mean that anything [won't] happen. We're fully prepared for that."³³

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³² Personal interview, Saudi diplomat, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, June 2010.

³³ Personal interview, General Mansur al-Turki, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, June 2010.

Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations

By Myriam Benraad

IN APRIL 2010, the leaders of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) were killed in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid. Abu Ayyub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) and Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi died in Tharthar, Salah al-Din Province, marking a major setback for al-Qa`ida.¹ On June 2, U.S. Admiral Michael Mullen declared that AQI had been "devastated" by the killings.² In a related statement, the U.S. commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, announced that Iraqi and U.S. forces had captured or killed 34 of the 42 known AQI leaders, in what he described as "the most significant blow to Al-Qaeda in Iraq since the beginning of the insurgency."³

In recent years, AQI's capacities have been considerably weakened. The death of its founding leader Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in June 2006 was the first crucial blow to the jihadist organization, followed by the U.S. "surge" in 2007 and the mobilization of armed Sunni Arab tribes against its fighters. All of these successes deprived AQI from its main bases of support. According to official Multinational Force-Iraq (MNF-I) statistics, high-profile attacks are now at their lowest levels since the conflict began in 2003, and there has been a significant decrease in casualties among U.S. troops, Iraqi security forces (ISF) and civilians.⁴

Yet despite its recent setbacks, AQI will remain a viable organization for the foreseeable future. In a process that continued under the leadership of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the terrorist group

¹ Abu Ayyub al-Masri was an Egyptian and the head of al-Qa`ida in Iraq. Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi, was the head of the Islamic State of Iraq, largely considered an AQI front group.

² Robert Burns, "Top US Officer: Al-Qaida in Iraq 'Devastated,'" Associated Press, June 6, 2010.

³ "Al Qaeda in Iraq 'Broken,' Odierno Says," United Press International, June 7, 2010; "Odierno: Iraq Moves Toward Stability, US Drawdown on Track," Voice of America, June 4, 2010.

⁴ "Attacks in Iraq Down, Al-Qaeda Arrests Up: US General," Agence France-Presse, June 4, 2010.

has become increasingly indigenous, and thus more able to incorporate and exploit local grievances. Indeed, the latest parliamentary elections held on March 7, 2010 and the ensuing political deadlock seem to have given new impetus to the radical group and hardened its resolve to disrupt Iraq's transition to peace and stability. The recent wave of AQI-claimed terrorist attacks and the group's appointment of new leaders⁵ are ugly reminders of the network's resilience.⁶

This article addresses the factors likely explaining AQI's continued ability to renew and reinvigorate its ranks despite important human losses and key operational setbacks. First, it shows how the jihadist organization has built on the U.S. military drawdown of 2009, Iraq's current political crisis, and the country's overall fragile economic context. Second, it explores the impact of Iraq's indigenous Salafist legacy on AQI's ability to regenerate cadre. Finally, it argues that while the leadership losses will not end AQI's attacks, there are a number of policy actions that could more effectively counter the group.

Present Factors Behind AQI's Resilience

The loss of AQI's top high-ranking leaders was triumphantly announced by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on April 19, 2010, in an attempt to affirm his ability to restore security to Iraq and establish his legitimacy to form

5 Iraqi-born "Abu Suleiman" replaced Abu Ayyub al-Masri as the ISI's "war minister," yet was not formally identified as AQI's new head. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi was appointed as the ISI's new *amir*. Abu Abdallah al-Husseini al-Qurashi was appointed as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's deputy. For details, see Michael Christie, "Iraq's Qaeda Names New 'War Minister,' Vows Attacks," Reuters, May 14, 2010; "Al Qaeda's Iraq Network Replaces Slain Leaders," Reuters, May 16, 2010. Also see AQI's successive communiqués featured on www.alfalaja1.info and www.muslim.net.

6 Since the May 10, 2010 coordinated bombings and shootings launched by AQI in reaction to the loss of its senior leadership, other terrorist operations have occurred. One of the more recent and spectacular attacks occurred in June against Iraq's Central Bank in Baghdad that killed 18 and wounded 55 and was formally claimed by AQI. For details, see "Qaeda in Iraq Claims Deadly Central Bank Raid," Associated Press, June 17, 2010; "Al-Qaeda's Iraq Network Says Behind Bank Attack," Reuters, June 17, 2010.

the next government.⁷ In a subsequent declaration, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden echoed al-Maliki's announcement by calling the leaders' deaths a "potentially devastating blow" to AQI, adding that the operation demonstrated "the improved security strength and capacity of Iraqi security forces."⁸

In addition to the security progress achieved in recent years and a decrease in violence, the deaths of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, along with the elimination and capture of many other ISI figures,⁹ are obvious signs of enhanced intelligence and cooperation between Iraqi and U.S. forces. More importantly, it highlights their better understanding of AQI's strategy, network and recruitment methods. Yet it is not the first time that AQI has been nearly "destroyed."¹⁰ As illustrated by the spectacular attacks that killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians in May and early June 2010, in particular the series of bombings and shootings that left 119 dead and more than 350 injured on May 10, AQI retains resolve and confidence in its ability to operate in Iraq and roll-back

7 Tim Arango, "Top Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Reported Killed in Raid," *New York Times*, April 19, 2010; Aamer Madhani, "Leader Deaths in Iraq Seen as a Huge Blow to al-Qaeda," *USA Today*, April 20, 2010.

8 "Deaths of Top Al Qaeda Leaders a 'Potentially Devastating Blow,'" Associated Press, April 19, 2010.

9 Other recently killed or captured ISI leaders include: Abu Ahmad al-Afri, AQI's "economic security *amir*" killed on March 23; Khedr Abd Ghanem Khedr Dawan, the ISI's "finance minister" killed on March 25; Bashar Khalaf Husyan Ali al-Jubburi, Mosul's *amir* killed on March 24; Abbas Najem Abdallah al-Jawari (also known as Abu Abdallah) and Muhammad Nuri Matar Yassin al-Abadi, two top leaders of the ISI in Baghdad who were arrested in May; and Ahmad Ali Abbas Dahir al-Ubayd, known as Abu Suhaib and responsible for military, kidnapping and bribery operations in the northern provinces. For details, see Ernesto Londoño, "Iraq Reports Arrest of al-Qaeda Mastermind of '09 Bombings," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2010; Bill Roggio, "Iraqi Forces Kill al-Qaeda's Top Military Commander in the North," *The Long War Journal*, April 20, 2010; "Iraqi Forces Capture Two Senior al-Qaeda Leaders in Mosul," *The Long War Journal*, April 7, 2010; "Iraqi Forces Strike Blow to al-Qaeda in Iraq's Northern Leadership Cadre," *The Long War Journal*, April 2, 2010; "Iraqi Forces Kill al-Qaeda Leader in Mosul," *Aswat al-Iraq*, March 25, 2010.

10 For example, similar confidence was displayed by the United States and Iraq after the killing of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, AQI's former leader, in 2006.

security gains.¹¹ AQI's activities raise questions about the actual effects of the recent leadership decapitations and the durability of Iraq's stabilization process after the March 2010 elections that were supposed to reintegrate Sunni Arabs into the political scene and contribute to rebuilding a national pact.¹²

A number of factors account for AQI's resilience to date. First, the dramatic drawdown of U.S. combat troops from Iraqi cities in June 2009 increased AQI's ability to maneuver by creating security voids. With the scheduled withdrawal of all U.S. combat troops from Iraq by September 1, 2010, this trend could escalate.¹³ The ISF have received training and assistance and can be credited with key security achievements in recent months, but they remain exposed to the complex dynamics of violence that characterize the Iraqi conflict. In addition, the U.S. withdrawal will not fundamentally alter AQI's "occupation narrative," as the Iraqi government has already become the group's primary target with online propaganda depicting Iraqi armed forces as the new "occupiers."¹⁴ Illustrative of this shift was the series of attacks that AQI carried out at the beginning of June against Iraqi police patrols and soldiers in different Sunni areas.¹⁵ Leaders of

11 Alexander Mayer, "Al Qaeda in Iraq: Last Stand, or Sign of Resilience?" *The Long War Journal*, May 12, 2010.

12 Since 2003, the exclusion of Sunni Arabs from Iraq's political scene has been a key point of contention. Despite their high participation in the March 7, 2010 elections, many Sunni Arabs are angry by al-Maliki's willingness to use the Justice and Accountability Commission and the Iraqi judiciary to marginalize his opponents and disqualify elected Sunni Arab backers from Iyad Allawi's coalition, in particular by accusing them of ties to the Ba`ath Party. See "Iraq Panel Bars 52 Election Candidates, May Alter Results," Associated Press, April 27, 2010.

13 Approximately 50,000 military personnel will remain in Iraq after September 1 for training and other non-combat roles. For details, see David Alexander, "Qaeda in Iraq Struggling After Leadership Blow: U.S.," Reuters, June 4, 2010.

14 AQI's radical narrative has inspired smaller insurgent groups such as the Salafist "Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Army," led by Abu Muhammad al-Iraqi and which has carried out suicide attacks against the Iraqi government. According to some, the most radical factions of the al-Siddiq Army have already merged with the ISI. See Rafid Fadhil Ali, "The Succession Question: The Islamic State of Iraq Searches for New Leaders," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:18 (2010).

15 "Five Killed in Iraq Attacks," Agence France-Presse,

the “awakening” movement as well as moderate Sunni imams have also been targeted lately, such as in Anbar Province where security incidents have multiplied.¹⁶

Second, Iraq’s current political crisis serves AQI’s agenda. Al-Maliki’s repeated attempts to marginalize his opponent Iyad Allawi and disqualify Sunni Arab candidates from his cross-ethnic and cross-confessional “Iraqiyya” list have revived sectarian tensions.¹⁷ Sunni Arabs, who massively supported secular Shi’a candidate Allawi during the last electoral campaign, feel relatively deprived of their victory.¹⁸ While most reject AQI’s radical message, some could radicalize (or re-radicalize) if their grievances and requests for greater political participation are not addressed. Moreover, statements by Shi’a leader Moqtada al-Sadr that he may revive his feared Mahdi Army could drive sections of the Sunni Arab population into the arms of AQI or other related groups.¹⁹ Sunni Arab youth remain particularly exposed to the radical group’s narrative.

Other factors accounting for AQI’s resilience include the release of thousands of Iraqi detainees since 2009, some of whom are acknowledged to have made contact with AQI during their incarceration.²⁰ Until recently, U.S. and Iraqi security forces contended that previous releases were conducted in an orderly manner and that recidivism rates were low.²¹ Reliable sources from Iraqi ministries, however, suggest the opposite.²² A number of released detainees have returned to the armed struggle and have been involved in

June 15, 2010.

16 Waleed Ibrahim, “Police Targeted in Iraq Attacks, 11 People Dead,” Reuters, June 7, 2010; Sinan Salaheddin, “Iraq: Bomb Kills Sunni Militia Leader Near Baghdad,” Associated Press, June 16, 2010.

17 Ned Parker, “Iraq’s Election Adds to Sectarian Divide,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2010.

18 Lara Jakes, “Iraq Court Disqualifies Dozens of Candidates, Could Change Vote Outcome,” *Huffington Post*, April 26, 2010.

19 “Al-Sadr Call for Reviving Mahdi Army to Keep Security, Official Maliki Advisor Rejects,” AK News, April 25, 2010.

20 Myriam Benraad, “Prisons in Iraq: A New Generation of Jihadists?” *CTC Sentinel* 2:12 (2009).

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

AQI-led operations.²³ For instance, following his arrest by Iraqi and U.S. forces on March 11, 2010, AQI’s former top military commander in Baghdad, Manaf Abd al-Rahim al-Rawi, explained in an interview how despite being held in U.S. detention between 2004 and 2007, he joined AQI only one year after

“Many of the young Sunni Arab men who took up arms in 2003 to fight U.S. troops and later joined the ranks of AQI are known as indigenous Salafists who radicalized before the United States even entered Iraq.”

his release and became one of the main protagonists in the two deadly bombings against Iraq’s ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance on August 19, 2009.²⁴

Present economic hardship further worsens matters. In 2009, the Iraqi government reduced its defense budget considerably due to declining oil revenues, with important freezes in the hiring of police and military officers. While Iraq’s new budget, approved in February, allocates \$380 million to the security sector compared to \$270 million in 2009, a broader breakdown of the projected spending in 2010 shows how Iraqi security forces, despite improvements in the capability to lead counterterrorism operations, still suffer from relatively insufficient resources and facilities, which constrains their expansion.²⁵ The Iraqi National Counter-Terrorism Force (INCTF), for instance, continues to lack adequate financial means necessary to hire qualified personnel.²⁶

23 Ibid.

24 Jomana Karadsheh, “Al Qaeda Commander: How I Planned Iraq Attacks,” CNN, May 20, 2010.

25 “Breakdown of Iraq’s 2010 Budget,” Iraq Business News, April 5, 2010.

26 According to the U.S. Defense Department’s report to Congress in December 2009, “The INCTF is a highly capable force that contributes significantly to the COIN effort. Manning, however, remains low. INCTF has a projected steady-state end strength of 9,200 but, due to

Moreover, by nourishing widespread corruption and bribery, a stumbling Iraqi economy could boost AQI’s additional recruitment of unemployed young men or mere opportunists to undertake paid attacks. In this respect, reported shortages of foreign funds and increasing financial difficulties have caused AQI to increasingly rely on mafia tactics such as racketeering of local populations, oil theft and smuggling or other illegal enterprises as alternative sources of income.²⁷ This has been the case in Mosul where persistent insecurity and political feuds have created a perfect environment for AQI to ransom local merchants and civilians to purchase arms and pay bribes to recruit operatives, facilitators and accomplices at various levels.²⁸ Other Iraqi official reports also shed light on regular instances of bribes paid to Iraqi police, security officers and prison guards to release AQI members, thereby allowing them to operate again.²⁹

Iraq’s Deeper Salafist Legacy

Besides these current factors, AQI’s resilience can also be understood in reference to more structural developments that have marked pre-2003 Iraqi history. The development of the local Iraqi Salafist trend, along with other socio-political dynamics inherited from the 1990s, explain the continuing violence in Iraq and the resiliency of AQI. Many of the young Sunni Arab men who took up arms in 2003 to fight U.S. troops and later joined the ranks of AQI are known as indigenous Salafists who radicalized before the United States even entered Iraq.³⁰ With the number of

budget shortfalls, a hiring freeze, and a need for specialized training, currently has just over half the personnel it is authorized. INCTF also lacks sufficient means for resourcing the organization.” For more details, see “Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq,” U.S. Department of Defense Official Report to Congress, December 2009, p. 43.

27 Greg Bruno, “Al-Qaeda’s Financial Pressures,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 1, 2010.

28 See the extremely informative article by Saad al-Mosuli, “Al-Qaeda Turns to Mafia Tactics,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, June 11, 2010.

29 Myriam Benraad, “Down But Not Out: Al-Qaeda’s Iraq Comeback,” *Foreign Policy*, December 2, 2009; Myriam Benraad, “Iraq’s Enduring al-Qaeda Challenge,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 18, 2009.

30 Some local Iraqi Salafists are said to have participated in the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, such as late Iraqi in-

foreign fighters in the country dropping and AQI gradually “Iraqifying,” these local radicals appear to have become the bulk of the organization.³¹

The rise and spread of politicized Salafism throughout the final decades of the Ba`ath regime, especially among Iraq’s Sunni Arab youth—the “embargo generation”—had several causes, such as the Iran-Iraq war, the collapse of the Iraqi state following its military defeat in Kuwait and the overall impoverishment and destruction of Iraqi society during those years.³² To date, little analysis has been dedicated to this phenomenon, partly because of the belief that the Ba`ath Party had succeeded in eradicating Sunni Islamism, but also due to Iraq’s long closure to foreign observers.

After a relatively clandestine existence due to Saddam Hussein’s harsh repression, the fall of the Ba`ath regime removed all the constraints to the free expression of this local Salafist trend.³³ Other developments reinforced its spread, such as the presence of Western forces after 2003 and the related promotion of Western political and cultural values that exacerbated radical views. On the other end, the empowerment of the Shi`a

insurgent and Falluja native `Umar Hadid, whose Salafist fervor brought him to combat U.S. forces, and potentially al-Baghdadi himself, who is reported to have left Iraq between 1985 and 1991. This information is based on an interview conducted by the author with a security official in 2008. See also “Two Locals Were Core of Fallujah Insurgency,” Associated Press, November 24, 2004; Hannah Allam, “Fallujah’s Real Boss: Omar the Electrician,” Knight Ridder Newspapers, November 22, 2004.

31 AQI’s May 16, 2010 communiqué announcing the appointment of the two new ISI leaders, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Abdallah al-Baghdadi, depicts them as “pious Muslims” with “deep knowledge of theology and jihad.”

32 The author researched this phenomenon in the framework of her doctoral dissertation and conducted interviews with several Iraqi Salafists, some of whom with close ties to radical insurgent groups and familiar with AQI’s structure and methods. These subjects confirmed the pre-2003 radicalization process and the current preponderance of Iraqi fighters and facilitators within AQI.

33 For instance, well-known Salafist imam Mahdi Ahmad al-Sumaydai took exile in the 1990s under growing pressure of Saddam Hussein and returned to Iraq in 2003. He then became one of the most influential figures supporting the insurgency and was arrested several times by U.S. forces.

community at the expense of Sunni Arabs helped Salafists advocate their ideology and led angered individuals to join AQI, including soldiers and officials disenfranchised by the de-Ba`athification process and the Iraqi Army’s dismantlement.³⁴

It is believed that prior to 2003, Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, the ISI’s late *amir* and allegedly a pseudonym for Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi, was an Iraqi security officer from Haditha who joined the hard line Salafist movement during the 1990s.³⁵ Following the U.S.-led intervention, he quickly became convinced that offensive jihad would be the ultimate solution to end foreign occupation and that an Islamic government should be established in Iraq. Before his death, al-Baghdadi had become a key component of AQI’s broad “Iraqification.”

Required Policy Steps

Developments in the past three months have shown that AQI is weakened and that the ISF is benefiting from increased training and experience. Previous security gains and the elimination of AQI’s top leaders in April, however, have not prevented new attacks. The recent deadly wave of violence against Iraqi financial institutions—a double suicide bombing outside a government bank that killed 27 people on June 20 and the attack against Iraq’s Central Bank in Baghdad on June 14—shows how AQI uses the security void created by the U.S. withdrawal and the ongoing political crisis to stage new attacks.³⁶

34 Not all Iraqi Salafists were attracted to AQI, as evidenced by the tense ideological and operational divides that opposed the radical organization to other Iraqi insurgent groups in 2007, such as the Islamic Army in Iraq. Those who joined AQI were often among the most disenfranchised and either appealed to its irredentist rejection of the foreign presence—in the case of suicide bombers, for instance—or searching for a source of income in the case of purely opportunistic operatives.

35 According to Iraqi Defense Ministry spokesman Muhammad al-Askari, Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi was a police brigadier general in the 1990s and became an active Salafist at that time. He was first captured and detained by U.S. forces in 2006 and apparently managed to conceal his role in insurgent attacks to be released only after seven months. On the issue of detainee releases and their connection with AQI’s comeback, see Benraad, “Prisons in Iraq: A New Generation of Jihadists?”

36 “Al-Qaida in Iraq Claims Deadly Central Bank At-

It is clear that AQI will continue to launch operations in Iraq despite its serious cadre losses. Most of the latest arrests of ISI members tend to confirm that the group has now primarily become a local phenomenon. Although a minority among the armed opposition, AQI has already shown striking ability to adapt to evolving environments and could be a more durable obstacle to Iraq’s reconstruction than many predict.³⁷ There is no longer a distinct hierarchy within the group, which operates mainly through independent cells.³⁸

Perpetuating its stated priorities, the ISI’s new leadership has announced the launch of new terrorist campaigns against Iraq’s military and police forces. An ISI statement warned that the group will deliver “a long gloomy night and dark days colored in blood” to Iraq.³⁹ It is likely that AQI/ISI will target Shi`a communities to re-ignite sectarian violence, which is all the more credible in light of Iraq’s current political impasse. In a four-page statement posted on an Islamist forum confirming the deaths of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi, the ISI vowed that it was continuing the fight and committing to “what [its] two leaders stood for” and will “transform their blood into light and fire.”⁴⁰

tack,” Reuters, June 17, 2010; Liz Sly and Usama Redha, “Twin Suicide Bombs Outside Baghdad Bank Kill 27,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2010.

37 Iraqi and U.S. officials estimate that AQI now only represents a few thousand fighters. This figure, however, does not include facilitators, who are much more difficult to identify, as well as accomplices and other sympathizers who are likely to become more active if Iraq’s political and economic situation deteriorates in the coming months. See Yochi J. Dreazen, “Allies Kill Two Chiefs of Iraqi al Qaeda,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2010; “Petraeus: Al-Qaeda’s Iraq Tactics Shifting,” Reuters, December 13, 2009.

38 Several intelligence officials interviewed by the author suggest that AQI primarily operates as a loose network composed of decentralized cells, some of which cooperate with one another while others act independently. For concurring analysis, see “Top Two Leaders of Al Qaeda in Iraq Killed,” Reuters, April 19, 2010.

39 “Bombers Attack Soccer Game in North Iraq, 8 Dead,” Reuters, May 14, 2010.

40 The communiqué stated: “After a long journey filled with sacrifices and fighting falsehood and its representatives, two knights have dismounted to join the group of martyrs... We announce that the Muslim nation has lost two of the leaders of jihad, and two of its men, who are only known as heroes on the path of jihad.”

Defeating AQI requires defining a strategy combining both targeted actions with a more systemic approach. First, the United States should continue to assist and train the ISF to improve its capacity and capability to deal with terrorism once all foreign troops depart. Indeed, the ISF will have to deal with AQI and other threats alone in 2012. A first concrete step could be the strengthening of the INCTF's functions, especially of gathering and sharing intelligence between all institutions and agencies involved in security matters. Second, because AQI has seen its popular support fall dramatically, new measures should be taken to address its ideological strengths that draw cadre to its cause. Broader counter-radicalization and deradicalization campaigns should be enforced, and moderate imams mobilized to counteract AQI's radical Salafist ideology.

Eventually, Iraq's legal and judicial framework must be further reinforced, with law provisions and enforcement reaching further. A body of highly competent and trained counterterrorism magistrates should be established who would be allowed to use preventive prosecution and detention powers whenever individuals are reported to have connections with radical insurgents such as AQI and other related groups. Within the Iraqi prison system, which has become a crucible for the spread of Salafist ideology, the monitoring of inmates should be enforced to more effectively prevent prisoners from radicalizing and potentially rejoining the insurgency once released.

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The Return of Moqtada al-Sadr and the Revival of the Mahdi Army

By Babak Rahimi

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, one of the key Shi'a political players has been Moqtada al-Sadr. As the leader of a powerful Shi'a militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army, JAM), al-Sadr became one of the most important political contenders in post-Ba'athist Iraq. For the past two years, however, al-Sadr has maintained a low profile, studying at the theological seminary in the Iranian city of Qom. Yet al-Sadr recently made a dramatic re-entry into Iraq's turbulent politics, with his bloc winning 40 seats in the 325-seat parliament during the March 2010 nationwide elections.¹ This leverage has enabled al-Sadr to become a kingmaker in a Shi'a-dominated government. In Iraq's highly fractured parliamentary politics, al-Sadr emerged to play a decisive role in forging an alliance among the Shi'a bloc—led by Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition and Ammar al-Hakim's Iraqi National Alliance—while gaining considerable influence over who is appointed to certain government posts.² By striking a major political deal that allowed his rival, Nuri al-Maliki, to continue as prime minister in exchange for the release of his detained militiamen, al-Sadr has proved himself a savvy political actor, capable of negotiating with his adversaries to enhance his own political authority.

In April 2010, al-Sadr exercised this increased political leverage by publicly announcing the restoration of his feared militia, the Mahdi Army.³ The militia was disbanded in 2008 after Iraqi security forces, supported by international troops, neutralized al-Sadr's fighters during the final stages of counterinsurgency operations.⁴ Al-

Sadr's recent call for the restoration of JAM is largely in response to weeks of Sunni attacks on Shi'a urban centers in Baghdad and in the southern provinces. As al-Sadr called on his militia to support Iraqi security forces, he justified the move by arguing that JAM could provide protection for Shi'a neighborhoods, especially during religious events.

This article will examine whether the revival of JAM is a mere tactical move to provide security for the Shi'a community, or whether al-Sadr is again harboring larger ambitions. It will also describe the new characteristics of JAM, which through the assistance of Iran has been reshaped to fit the new Iraqi political context.

Revisiting the Mahdi Army

Since its inception in 2003, JAM has proven capable of changing organizational and operational tactics to advance the political interests of the Sadrist movement. In its original manifestation in the early phases of the post-war period, JAM emerged as a "citizen militia" to address local security problems with retaliatory actions against sectarian (Sunni) and foreign (U.S.-UK) threats.⁵ Between 2003 and 2007—a period of insurgent violence and (intra) sectarian conflict—JAM played a critical role in fomenting sectarian tensions as Iraq entered a deadly phase of civil conflict that almost tore the country apart. Between 2006 and 2008, the militia fractured, and some members broke away from al-Sadr's political faction in response to him entering negotiations with coalition forces. This development played a decisive role in al-Sadr's decision to move to Iran in late 2007 or early 2008, as he sought Tehran's protection against his own militiamen who no longer viewed him as a spiritual and military leader, but instead as a mere politician.⁶ With diminishing clout, especially after the 2008 provincial elections, the Sadrists suffered not only

1 Adam Schreck, "2 Candidates from Iraq's Sunni-backed Party Killed," Associated Press, June 5, 2010.

2 Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraq's Shi'ite-led Groups Edge Closer to Government," Reuters, June 16, 2010.

3 "Al-Sadr Call for Reviving Mahdi Army to Keep Security, Official Maliki Advisor Rejects," AK News, April 25, 2010.

4 Sami Moubayed, "Muqtada Unleashes News, Improved Army," *Asia Times Online*, April 30, 2010. Also see "Sadr

Reforms Mehdi Army Amid Iraqi Crisis," United Press International, May 20, 2010.

5 Karim Porzabid, "Moqtada-ie Javan be Donbale Marja'at: Goftego ba Shaikh Youssef Naseri az Azay-e Jaryan-e Sadr," *Shahrvand Emrooz*, December 30, 2007.

6 Babak Rahimi, "Two Types of Splinter Groups Break from Moqtada al-Sadr," *Terrorism Focus* 4:10 (2007); Babak Rahimi, "Becoming an Ayatollah: The New Iraqi Politics of Moqtada al-Sadr," *Terrorism Monitor* 6:3 (2008).