



Center for Strategic and International Studies

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

1800 K Street, N.W. • Suite 400 • Washington, DC 20006

Phone: 1 (202) 775-3270 • Fax: 1 (202) 457-8746

Web: www.csis.org/burke

Iraq's Sunni Insurgents: Looking Beyond Al Qa'ida

Anthony H. Cordesman
Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
acordesman@aol.com

Working Draft: July 16, 2007

The mix of Iraqi insurgent groups is as complex as ever. Al Qa'ida in Mesopotamia is only one part of a mix of different Sunni Islamist Extremists and more nationalist groups. There is a wide mix of Shi'ite extremists and militias. There are still no reliable estimates of the strength of given groups, or of how many attacks of what kind a given group conducted, who their leadership is in many cases, or exactly what they stand for.

Al Qa'ida in Iraq

US military spokesman, Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, provided the following description of the role of Al Qa'ida in Iraq in a briefing at press conference on July 11, 2007:

The security environment in Iraq is characterized by a number of threats. Today we will provide an update on the principal near-term threat to Iraq—al-Qaeda of Iraq. In their own statements al-Qaeda leaders have declared Iraq their central front. AQI and its affiliates are the greatest source of spectacular attacks and are fueling sectarian violence. Our intelligence community, the Government of Iraq and MNFI-I all assess AQI as the main near-term threat to Iraq.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq is a network led and fueled by foreign extremists who envision a new caliphate and, according to al-Qaeda senior leader Al-Zawahiri's latest video, they claim the al-Qaeda gateway to victory starts in Iraq. Their goal continues to be a "Taliban-like state," featuring an extreme and distorted vision of Islam forbidding the most basic personal freedoms.

...there's also a group called facilitators. These facilitators—like Abd al-Jabbar, Mahmud Tarad Muhammad Jarallah and Hussayn Awath Hussayn Hawawi—recruited and smuggled foreigners into Iraq to conduct terrorism, many of whom become suicide killers. Of special note was a facilitator named Mehmet Yilmaz, also known as Khalid al Turki who we mentioned two weeks ago—a top smuggler of foreign fighters into Iraq; a veteran against coalition forces in Afghanistan; and a close associate of Khalid Shaikh Muhammad, the mastermind of 9/11.

Last week Iraqi police in Ramadi captured one of these foreign fighter recruits. He was recruited by a man who attended his mosque to join an AQI unit in Iraq and kill coalition forces after listening to radical messages on cassette tapes and becoming interested in jihad. He was given the equivalent of 1,000 U.S. dollars to pay for his travel expenses. He was instructed to get a passport and make his way to Syria where an individual would facilitate his illegal crossing into Iraq. Without telling anyone, including his mother and father, he boarded a charter bus and traveled to Syria.

The Syrian facilitator, using multiple vehicles, smuggled him across the border into Iraq. He was blindfolded throughout the journey and laid in the back of vehicles covered by a blanket. Once across the border, the Syrian handed him off to an Iraqi who drove him to a small mud structure in the middle of the desert. He stayed at this remote location for approximately four days. It was here that he was partnered with another foreigner.

From there, the two men were handed off to another Iraqi and driven to an area near Ramadi – a city whose citizens have banded together to successfully drive al-Qaeda out of their neighborhoods.

The two men spent 10 days in hiding around Ramadi and were frequently moved from one location to another. It was at this point they were told they would become suicide bombers by driving truck bombs to destroy a major bridge outside of Ramadi. He claims to have reluctantly agreed.

On July 1st the two men were driven to a location outside of Ramadi, where they boarded two large trucks and followed their handler across the Ramadi Bridge. As they crossed the bridge he changed his mind and did not manually activate the explosive device as directed. His partner on the other hand did, collapsing two of the four lanes as shown here.

The Iraqi police quickly reacted and apprehended him and disarmed the truck he drove with 1,000 pounds of homemade explosive as well as tanks of chlorine and acetylene. He remains in coalition force custody.

His story is not uncommon. Approximately 60 to 80 foreigners are lured to Iraq every month by al-Qaeda. Approximately 70 percent transit through Syria as he did. Between 80-90 percent of the suicide attacks in Iraq are carried out by foreign-born al-Qaeda terrorists. In the last six months, more than 4,000 Iraqis have been killed or injured by AQI suicide attacks.

There are several important aspects of this statement. Al Qaeda is never described as the largest insurgent group in Iraq or as dominated the total number of attacks. It is described as the group that is most ruthless, that carries out many of them most bloody suicide attacks. Al Qaeda is never described as largely foreign. In fact, other briefings indicate its membership is 90-95% Iraqi. The foreign leadership listed has as many ties to the hard-line groups that have spun off the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as to Bin Laden per se.

The number of foreign volunteers is small, and the nationality is not identified – only that Syria seems to have tolerated their movement across its border. Other briefings have indicated that some are Saudi, some are Syrian, and these is a mix of Sudanese, Yemenis, North Africans from many other countries. The statement that most suicide bombers are young foreign men is almost certainly true, but intelligence and forensics have obvious problems in identifying dismembered corpses and web site claims have often proved inaccurate.

Looking at the Broader Mix of Sunni Insurgents

The US naturally focuses on Al Qaeda because of 9/11 and the fact it poses a serious international threat. So do some Iraqi leaders, but largely because it is easier for them, particularly if they are Shi'ite, to blame as many of Iraq's problems on foreigners and Sunnis as possible.

The reality is far more complex. A recent survey of insurgent claims and statements by various groups, conducted by Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, does give a rough idea of the diversity of insurgent activity in the spring of 2007.

The survey covered a wide range of groups, but concentrated on Islamic State of Iraq (ISI-Al-Qaeda), Mujahideen Army in Iraq, Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI), Ansar Al-Sunnah Army, Iraqi Resistance Army- 1920 Revolution Brigades, and The Islamic Front of Iraqi Resistance (JAMI). It described these groups as follows, and it is important to note that most are almost entirely Iraqi in membership and leadership:

Islamic State of Iraq or ISI-Al-Qaeda

ISI/Al-Qaeda was known previously as the Mujahideen Shura Council; Al-Qaeda Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers; and the Monotheism and Jihad Group; all three of which were led by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who was killed by Coalition forces in June 2006. Islamic State of Iraq was established in October 2006, in a likely attempt to gain local support for a group that has a large contingent of non-Iraqi fighters. Other insurgent groups tend to refer to ISI/Al-Qaeda as al-Qaeda in Iraq. The terms are used interchangeably.

The group was then led by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, whom the Iraqi government claims to have killed on May 1, 2007. The group's media outlet pledged to impose Islamic law on the areas in which it claimed authority. The group operates with a significant amount of independence from the larger network of al-Qaeda. It is not clear that al-Qaeda central leadership exerts control over ISI/Al-Qaeda.

Their ideology is “hard-line jihadist-Salafist,” including the perspective that jihad is a global struggle between believers and unbelievers. The group targets multinational forces, Iraqi forces, Shi'ite militias, and on occasion, Iraqi civilians. They operated in al-Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah Al-Din, Ninewah, and areas of Babil and Wasit.

Mujahideen Army in Iraq

The Mujahideen Army in Iraq has been active since 2004. They claim they are only comprised of Iraqi fighters, a few of whom served in the Iraqi Army under Saddam Hussein. It has members who do not claim loyalty to Hussein or the Ba'ath Party. Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Qaysi, the group's official spokesperson, told al-Jazeera television in November 2006, that the group was formed from an underground religious movement that began prior to 2003. The movement foresaw the fall of the Ba'ath party regime and, in preparation, took arms and equipment from their positions in the Iraqi Army.

The group is a Sunni jihadist-Salafist group, whose primary goal is to install an Islamic government with strict adherence to Shari'a law. They reject national reconciliation and are dedicated to driving out “occupation” forces. They target U.S. and Iraqi forces, however they do not target civilians, including Shi'ites. They operate in Baghdad, al-Anbar, Diyala and Salah Al-Din.

Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI)

The Islamic Army in Iraq was established in 2002 as an underground organization, and officially proclaimed in May 2003. The group consists entirely of Iraqi citizens and claims to be larger than ISI/Al-Qaeda. Some of its members formerly served in the Iraqi Army, however they were not loyal to the Ba'ath Party. Their spokespeople include Ibrahim al-Shammari, Ali al-Nu'aymi, and Imad Abdallah.

IAI is driven primarily by the objective of ending the occupation of Iraq. Also, it seeks to eliminate Iranian influence within the country. It advocates negotiations with the United States if the U.S. produces a timetable for troop withdrawal and recognizes the legitimacy of the Iraqi resistance, rather than portray all fighters as terrorists. Only when these conditions are met, is this group ready to seek to establish an Islamic state in Iraq based on Shari'a law.

IAI targets Coalition forces and Iraqi forces, as well as Shi'ite militias supported by Iran. Al-Shammari stated in April 2007 that the group had killed approximately 25,000 U.S. and Coalition soldiers. The group claims that it is not hostile toward Iraqi Shi'ites, but it sees Iran as a major threat. It does not support attacks against civilians unless they work with the U.S., Iran, and Iraqi government. The group also permits attacks on oil installations and vital infrastructure. The group operates primarily in Baghdad, al-Anbar, Diyala, and Salah Al-Din, although it claims to be everywhere.

Ansar Al-Sunnah Army (previously Ansar Al-Islam)

Ansar Al-Sunnah was a self-described “army of jihadists, scholars, and political and military experts,” whose goal was the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq. The Army grew out of the terror organization, Ansar Al-Islam, that was established in September 2003. The group was an umbrella organization for other smaller groups, and was comprised of Iraqi and foreign Sunni Arab fighters. It is led by Abu Abdallah al-Hasan Ibn Mahmud.

Ansar al-Sunnah did not believe in “man-made laws” or democratic values. It also rejected negotiations with the U.S. or Iraqi government. Its goal was to establish an Islamic State in Iraq, in accordance with Shari'a law. It targeted U.S. and Iraqi forces, including the Kurdish peshmerga, and those who support such forces, as well as Shi'ite militias.

They operate in Mosul, Baghdad, al-Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk and Salah Al-Din.

Iraqi Resistance Movement – 1920 Revolution Brigades

The Iraqi Resistance Movement – 1920 Revolution Brigades was established in June 2003. The group is comprised of former Iraqi Army officers, and is an umbrella organization for over a dozen “brigades.” The group denies connection to the Ba’ath Party. Its spokesman is Shaykh Abdullah Sulayman al-Umari.

Its primary objective was to drive coalition forces from Iraq and establish a nationalist government with Islamic values, including justice and equality. The ideology of the group was to implement the law of Allah on earth and to rid Muslims of any deviations and non-Islamic practices. It has sworn to continue jihad until they have achieved victory or martyrdom.

It cooperates against U.S. and Iraqi forces and those who worked for them. It does not attack civilians or vital infrastructure, and does not permit attacks on schools. The group claimed it has carried out over 5,000 attacks in 2006, killing over 2,000 U.S. troops, and wounding more than 7,000. It operates in al-Anbar, Baghdad and Diyala.

The Islamic Front of Iraqi Resistance (JAMI)

JAMI was established in May 2004 and is comprised of a combination of military officers and civilian fighters. The military wing of the organization is called the Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi Brigades. JAMI has not targeted Iraqi government personnel or installations, including the Iraqi Army. JAMI’s attacks were aimed at Coalition forces and were somewhat more sophisticated than other groups. Members of the group are better trained than most other insurgent groups because of their military experience.

The group is more nationalist than Islamic in its outlook. JAMI rejected the Maliki government and offers of national reconciliation with the current Iraqi administration. It has, however, stated that it would be willing to join a national-reconciliation initiative under certain circumstances.

In March 2006, it released a booklet on jihad in Iraq that emphasized the need to safeguard weapons and warned against individual or small-group confrontation with Coalition forces, because the latter were militarily superior. In May 2007, the group merged militarily and politically with Hamas-Iraq, a breakaway group of the 1920 Revolution Brigades.

The Diversity of Sunni Insurgent Statements

This survey counted the number of major statements in March 2007, usually attack related, from the 11 most active insurgent groups in Iraq. It is striking to note that the Islamic State of Iraq, of which Al Qa’ida was the leading part, ranked third, with 17%.

Figure One**Statements By Major Insurgent Groups in Iraq in March 2007**

<u>Insurgent Organization</u>	<u>No of Statements</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Islamic Army in Iraq	249	26
Ansar al-Sunnah	196	20
Islamic State of Iraq (ISI-Al Qa’ida)	162	17
Mujahideen Army	143	15
Shield of Islam	89	9
Jaysh al Fatihin	39	4
Jaysh al Rashidin	33	3
Just Recompense Brigades	26	3

Islamic Front of Iraq Resistance (JAMI)	14	1
Jihadist Brigades of Iraq	12	1
1920 Revolution Brigades	3	-
Total	966	100

Notes:

--This breakdown reflects statements by the groups involved, rather than their actual activities. Moreover, since a gap of several days often occurs between an attack and a claim, the totals will not reflect the number of claimed attacks actually in March.

-- Operations described in composite statements were not included in the first three columns of the table, which is intended to convey the overall impression statements would make on a visitor to the forum(s) where they were posted, rather than provide an exhaustive analysis of the claimed operations.

--The 1920 Revolution Brigades post fewer statements than other groups, and the totals are low but information is included from other web sties

Source: Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Rudolfo, Iraqi Insurgent Media, The War of Images and Ideas, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, Special Report, July 2007, p. 8.

Attack Patterns in Sunni Insurgent Group Statements

The study also found that insurgent claims of attacks on Iraqis exceeded claims regarding attacks on US and Coalition forces. The survey found that insurgents claimed to have carried out 357 single operations against US and Coalition forces in March versus 296 attacks on Iraqi government forces, 143 attacks on Shi'ite militias, and 439 attacks on Iraqi government forces and Shi'ite militias combined.¹

The more detailed break out of such claims shown in Figure Two shows that only a few groups concentrated on US and Coalition targets, and that fighting Shi'ite militias had become a major priority for a number of Sunni insurgent forces.

Figure Two
Breakdown of Statements by Iraqi Insurgent Groups in March 2007

<u>Group</u>	Operations Against US <u>Forces</u>	Operations Against Iraqi Government <u>Forces</u>	Operations Against Shi'ite groups & <u>militias</u>	Operations Against Kurdish Targets	Mixed <u>operations</u>	Composite operational <u>statements</u>	Publication announcements (audio, video and text)	Topical <u>statements</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI)	80	105	47	0	9	6	1	1	249
Mujahideen Army	132	4	0	0	0	2	2	1	141
1920 Revolution Brigades	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
Islamic State of Iraq (ISI-Al Qa'ida)	13	40	3	6	9	74	0	15	161
Jihadist Brigades of Iraq	8	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
Ansar al-Sunnah	44	90	37	6	3	2	5	4	192
Islamic Front of Resistance in Iraq (JAMI)	13	0	0	0	1	0	13	1	14
Jaysh al Rashidin	26	0	0	0	1	0	4	1	32
Just Recompense Brigades	0	15	11	0	0	0	0	0	26
Shield of Islam	20	37	30	0	0	0	0	0	87
Jaysh al Fatihin	21	0	15	0	2	0	0	1	39
Totals	357	296	143	12	25	83	25	28	- -

Source: Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Rudolfo, Iraqi Insurgent Media. The War of Images and Ideas, p. 10.

Estimates of numbers and type of attack by insurgent group remained classified. However, a background brief by US military experts in Iraq in early July 2007 stated that Al Qa'ida in Mesopotamia was responsible for only 15 percent of the attacks in Iraq in the first half of 2007. Other Sunni insurgents were blamed for 70 percent of attacks and Shi'a militias were blamed 15 percent. Shi'a attacks, however, had increased sharply and were estimated to be higher than 15 percent by the end of June.

The mid-July Benchmarks Assessment provided by the White House, states, "While AQI may not account for most of the violence in Iraq, it is the organization responsible for the highest profile attacks, which serve as a primary accelerant to the underlying sectarian conflict."ⁱⁱ

Putting ISI-Al Qa'ida and Foreign Volunteers in Context

None of this means that the ISI-Al Qa'ida does not play a critical role in the insurgency. Al Qa'ida's attacks do make an up a highly effective 15 percent and probably do the most damage in pushing Iraq towards civil war. The high visibility of these attacks and their relentless nature also do significant damage to the western public opinion, which sees the inability of coalition forces to stop these attacks as an indication that the war cannot be won. It does mean that ISI-Al Qa'ida's activities must be kept in careful perspective, and that it does not dominate the Sunni insurgency. It is also clear from other Coalition and US statements that all of the insurgent groups can raise most of their own money and relies on arms left over from the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq.

The foreign volunteer issue also needs to be kept in perspective. Brigadier General Bergner, stated that ISI-Al Qa'ida was responsible for 80-90% of the suicide bombings in Iraq, many carried out by foreigners and that some 60-80 foreign fighters infiltrated into Iraq each month to join the organization.ⁱⁱⁱ It is not clear how many suicide bombs involve foreigners, but the total number of bombings is minor compared to even the most conservative estimate of full and part time Sunni insurgents – some 15,000-25,000 – and foreigners have never dominated the number of detainees.

Others experts indicate any efforts to make precise attributions of attacks by attacker were uncertain. Just as the US tended to say most suicide bombers were foreign, often without any forensic or other evidence, Al Qa'ida in Mesopotamia sometimes got the blame for attacks where the true source was uncertain. Moreover, unclassified reporting sometimes implied that assuming Al Qa'ida "franchises" like the ISI are under some form of serious central Al Qa'ida control. Al Qa'ida in Mesopotamia has a stronger Egyptian and Jordanian influence in its leadership than leaders linked to tied to Bin Laden and his group. Its membership is also now estimated to be about 95% Iraqi.

General Bergner did say that, "Al-Qaeda senior leadership does provide direction to al-Qaeda in Iraq... They do establish and provide resourcing and support the network." The problem lies in knowing exactly what this means and how much control and support Al Qa'ida in Iraq really gets. These statements come at a time when the President and other Administration officials were attempting to make the risk that Al Qa'ida operatives in Iraq would attack the US and its allies if the US withdrew prematurely from Iraq.^{iv} There are, however, many experts that feel such direction from "Al Qa'ida Center" is relatively limited, and that Al Qa'ida in Iraq operates largely on its own.

ⁱ Daneil Kimmage and Kathleen Rudolfo, Iraqi Insurgent Media, The War of Images and Ideas, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, Special Report, July 2007, p. 9.

ⁱⁱ "Initial Benchmark Assessment Report." July 12, 2007; pg.4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sudarsan Raghavan, "US Military Calls Al Qaeda in Iraq 'Principal Threat'," Washington Post, July 12, 2007, p. A19.

^{iv} Sudarsan Raghavan, "US Military Calls Al Qaeda in Iraq 'Principal Threat'," Washington Post, July 12, 2007, p. A19.