

Al-Qaeda Adapts its Methods in Iraq as Part of a Global Strategy

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

For the last few months, reports from Iraq have been indicating a tangible decline in insurgency and terrorist operations. For the first time since 2003, the Iraqi people are enjoying a sense of security in the streets of Iraq, although skeptics claim it is the calm that precedes the storm. The stabilizing security situation comes amid claims that al-Qaeda has been defeated or at least has been seriously crippled in Iraq (alerhab.net, November 24). Has al-Qaeda actually been defeated and subjugated by the coalition forces in the Iraqi arena? Taking al-Qaeda's past and current behavior into account while monitoring Iraq's jihadi websites, one is presented with strong indications that al-Qaeda is adapting to the new realities on the ground while avoiding direct confrontation with the coalition forces. The global strategy of al-Qaeda since 9/11—as posted in al-Qaeda's internet forums—sheds further light on the terror plans it has designed to lure and engage Americans in various fronts in the region (alboraq.info, March 10).

Al-Qaeda: Defeat versus Retreat

The discourse concerning al-Qaeda's possible defeat in Iraq comes as a result of the relative drop in violent operations in the so-called "Sunni triangle." The decrease in al-Qaeda activity is attributed to many different factors, the most important of which is the mistake it made by targeting other Sunni jihadi groups such as the Islamic Army of Iraq, Iraqi Hamas and al-Rashideen Army. In August 2007, Iraqi Hamas was accused of helping Coalition forces in Diyala province against al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda did not understand the Iraqi mentality and tried to lead the community by establishing the Islamic State of Iraq, instead of coexisting with the different Iraqi groups. The targeting of Shiites and their shrines aggravated the Sunnis Iraqis as much as it did the Shiites because it upset the precarious balance between the Sunnis and Shiites. These blunders were exploited by the Iraqi government and Coalition forces, leading to the establishment of the successful Sunni Majalis al-Sahwa, or "Awakening Councils" (Emirate Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, December 9).

The Majalis al-Sahwa are paramilitary groups comprised of Sunni tribes formed to fight al-Qaeda. Contextually, Sunni wrath directed at the Coalition veered towards al-Qaeda, depriving it of much needed Sunni support. In the same way, the spokesman of the Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI), Ibrahim al-Shamari, says: "The decline in jihadi operations against the occupier is due to the fact that they are engaged by al-Qaeda in the worst struggle that could exist among fellow Muslims. The attacks of al-Qaeda, in some cases, took a form of full-scale war extending from north of Babel to Latifia area and from north and west Baghdad to Samarra. In this big area of its operations against IAI, al-Qaeda didn't target a single American, Shiite militia or the Shiite police" (hanein.info, December 15).

Conversely, the impression that al-Qaeda has been defeated in Iraq is challenged by the continued violent attacks occurring daily in Iraq. Al-Qaeda operatives are adapting to the new situation in the Sunni triangle imposed by the Majalis al-Sahwa by moving to northern Iraq, especially to the city of Mosul where they found a new ally. The Maghawir al-Tai Mujahideen in Mosul began a year ago as a small group operating in the industrial area in Mosul. They have since grown larger and decided to join al-Qaeda in the Islamic

State of Iraq, consequently providing a safe heaven for al-Qaeda to launch its new tactics. Jihadi forum chatters from Iraq claim that over 2,000 jihadis from Mosul have already joined al-Qaeda (hanein.info, December 15). It seems that a new application of the tactics of guerrilla warfare in other provinces is succeeding. These tactics include indirect confrontation, or "open grave tactics," that include road bombs, hit-and-run operations and car bombs, together with al-Qaeda attempts to take advantage of the differences between Sunni tribes on the issue of cooperation with Coalition forces. Al-Qaeda is also leaving behind sleeping operatives in the cities they flee, awaiting the right circumstances to reactivate. Evidence of this may be found in the recent bomb attacks in Diyala province that killed over 20 civilians and injured many others (almalafpress.net, December 10).

The jihadi websites responded indirectly to the reports on al-Qaeda's defeat in Iraq by posting reports and video of al-Qaeda attacks on Coalition forces, especially in areas where the Iraqi government says al-Qaeda has fled. In addition some websites re-posted al-Qaeda's future global strategy (www.alboraq.info, March 10, 2006). Moreover, al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri commented on the new developments in Iraq in general and al-Qaeda defeat in particular in a December 2007 interview published by Sahad, the media production house of al-Qaeda. According to Al-Zawahiri: "The jihadi situation is good in general, but setbacks are inevitable in jihad. The latest reports from Iraq indicate an increase in mujahideen strength and deterioration of the American situation regardless of their desperate efforts to delude by false propaganda. British withdrawal proves they are lying. Claiming victory over ISI through the collaboration of the Sunni tribes is mere cover for their big failure."

In summary, al-Zawahiri called upon the mujahideen to continue hit-and-run attacks, eradicate the hypocrites and traitors that infiltrated the mujahideen ranks, expose the traitors, call upon Muslims to stop supporting the pro-U.S. armed groups, concentrate on jihadi media and propaganda mainly through the internet and build upon what has already been achieved by establishing the ISI. Al-Zawahiri also called for the mujahideen to unite around monotheism and reconcile with the rest of the jihadi groups, especially with Ansar al-Sunna, headed by Sheikh Abu Abdallah al-Shafi'i. On the political side, al-Zawahiri said, "After the victory of the Islamic State of Iraq, it will endeavor to establish the Islamic caliphate from ocean to ocean" (sahab.net, December 16).

Al-Qaeda's Global Strategy

The conflict in Iraq forms only part of a larger al-Qaeda plan. Before 2001, al-Qaeda devised a new strategy to fight the crusaders and Zionists what they call the "far enemy." To achieve victory over the enemy, al-Qaeda deemed it necessary to engage the enemy on many fronts in the region away from its bases. 9/11 was the spark that would bring U.S. forces to al-Qaeda's battlefield. According to jihadi forums, al-Qaeda's global confrontation strategy comprises seven phases:

- The Awakening (2000-2003): This phase ended with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The Salafi ideologues believe that the Islamic Umma (nation) has been dormant in the 19th and 20th centuries because all the strategies implemented by the Muslims for resurrection have failed. Therefore, al-Qaeda planned to strike a blow to the enemy to induce an uncalculated reaction. 9/11 was the bait that provoked the crusaders and lured them to attack the Muslim nation.
- Eye Opening (2003-2006): By occupying Baghdad in April 2003, the Muslim nation awoke to the bitter realities of occupation. Al-Qaeda's objective in this phase was to

keep the U.S. forces engaged in a fight against al-Qaeda until 2006. Regardless of the results, the ability to maintain constant clashes with the enemy was considered a victory in itself.

- Resurrection (2007-2010): In this phase, al-Qaeda will be capable of mobilizing jihadis productively, exploiting unrest in different hot areas to keep the U.S. forces occupied in a war of attrition that will weaken its resolve and pave the way to directly attack Jews in Palestine and elsewhere.

- Recuperate and Attain Power (2010-2013): This phase will concentrate on overthrowing the infidel Muslim regimes by direct confrontation. The United States will be exhausted and unable to support all the infidel regimes in the region, hence, al-Qaeda will become more powerful and eligible to replace these regimes.

- Declaration of an Islamic state (2013-2016): At this point, the Western grip on the region will loosen, paving the way for the establishment of an Islamic state that will regain control of the Muslim nation, rebuild it and utilize the nation's wealth in creating an international deterrent to foreign intervention as well as expediting the demise of corrupt and tyrant regimes.

- Massive Confrontation: 2016 will witness the onset of an all-out war between the forces of good and evil with, of course, final victory for the Islamic state.

- Achieving Multiple Victories: Any victory achieved by al-Qaeda opens the door for more recruits to work with al-Qaeda in many different domains. Those who cannot join directly will establish their own centers based on similar radical Islamist theory and ideology. Al-Qaeda believes there is a direct proportion between multiple victories and repelling U.S. and Jewish aggressions [1].

Jihadis typically corroborate this scenario by citing verses from the Quran for every phase of the plan and believe that God will facilitate the victory of the Muslim nation.

Conclusion

Although the success of the United States and its partners in exterminating notable numbers of al-Qaeda leaders has significantly reduced its ability to perpetrate terror operations, it has not ended the al-Qaeda phenomenon. Rather, it has led to the creation of unpredictable, incoherent and scattered groups adhering to the Salafi-jihadi ideology. These decentralized formations will attempt to attack soft targets and wait patiently for any slackening of security on the hard targets. A complete defeat of al-Qaeda is unlikely to come about in the near future. Iraq—like other countries in the region—will suffer from al-Qaeda terrorism long after the withdrawal of the coalition forces.

Notes

1. Sources for the seven phases of al-Qaeda's global confrontation strategy are drawn from alboraq.org; al-ekhlaas.net/forum; alhesbah.com/v; alridaws.org/vb.

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