



The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq

Dr Michael Knights

Lafer Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony Submitted to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation and Trade, and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

December 12, 2013

Chairman Poe and Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Members Sherman and Deutch, distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation and Trade and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, it is an honor to appear before you this afternoon to discuss the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The subject of Al-Qaeda in Iraq is one that has been close to my heart throughout the last decade. Like others I was disheartened to watch the group grow from 2003-2006 and relieved to see it crash and burn in 2006-2009. I was saddened but not surprised to watch it rebound strongly from 2010 onwards. Indeed since the autumn of 2010 I have been telling all who would listen that the group was poised to make a comeback.

Since 2004 I have worked in all the Iraqi provinces and most of the country's hundred districts, including some of those where Al-Qaeda is strongest. I have worked alongside the Iraqi security forces, the U.S. military and the reconstruction community as they battled Al-Qaeda. It is my firm belief that Al-Qaeda's resurgence was both predictable and preventable.

Just as firmly, I believe that the counter-terrorism situation in Iraq is still recoverable. We defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq just five years ago, comprehensively dismantling their networks and propaganda campaigns. In the coming years the United States can help Iraq to do it again.

The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq¹

By the middle of 2010, Al-Qaeda in Iraq was dead on its feet. The organization suffered critical setbacks in late 2006 and early 2007 as Sunni Arab tribal militias – the Sahwa (Awakening) – turned against Al-Qaeda. In parallel the U.S.-led military effort protected the Sahwa and executed high-tempo remorseless counter-terrorism operations that ripped Al-Qaeda in Iraq to pieces. The group's foreign volunteers and money started to dry up. Al-Qaeda cells began to process of disintegrating into local criminal franchises that now kidnapped and extorted to pay their salaries rather than fund insurgency. In April 2010 Al-Qaeda in Iraq lost its two most senior leaders – AQI emir Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and war minister Abu Ayyub al-Masri – and stood in the verge of “disintegration” according to the US commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno. In a press conference on June 4, 2010, Odierno noted: “Over the last 90 days or so, we've either picked up or killed 34 out of the top 42 Al-Qaeda in Iraq leaders.”

In the summer of 2010 new leadership was announced by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the proto-caliphate and umbrella movement led by Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The new ISI emir was named as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husayni al-Qurashi (alias Abu Dua), an Iraqi Salafist from Samarra who received doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence before 2003 and was detained in Camp Bucca until his release in 2009. The new ISI war minister was named as Al-Nasir Li-Din Allah Abu Sulayman, a figure about whom little is known (he is rumoured by press reporting to be a Moroccan Arab-Afghan and a former detainee).

By early 2012 it was clear that the deaths of AQI's senior leaders were a watershed event that unfolded just as the movement sought to find a new way to operate in Iraq. Numerous processes have unfolded since Al-Qaeda's defeat in 2006-2009, including the release of large numbers of experienced militants from U.S. detention facilities, changes in the balance of foreign and Iraqi fighters within the movement, the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and determined attempts by Al-Qaeda in Iraq to learn from its mistakes. These changes crystallized in the year after the deaths of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri, culminating in a successful re-launch of the movement in April 2011 and a significant recovery of operational space within Iraq's Sunni Arab communities. The movement appears to have rationalized its near-term objectives and synchronized its propaganda with the mounting concerns of Iraq's Sunni Arabs.

¹ The following three paragraphs are an updated précis of a piece I first wrote in early 2012 when I assessed that the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq had been underway since the spring of 2011. See Michael Knights, *Back with a vengeance: Al-Qaeda in Iraq rebounds*, in IHS Defense, Security & Risk Consulting, February 24, 2012.

The metrics of Al-Qaeda in Iraq's resurgence are undeniable.²

- In 2010, the low point for the Al-Qaeda effort in Iraq, the movement's signature attacks like car bombings declined to an average of 10 a month and multiple-city coordinated attacks occurred only two or three times a year.
- In 2013, so far there has been an average of 71 car bombings a month and a multiple-location strike every 11 days.

Suicide operations are on the increase too: in 2010 these had dropped to an average of six per month, and this average was maintained throughout 2012. In 2013, so far there has been an average of 22 per month. According to U.S. government officials providing background briefings in October 2013, the uptick has been mostly driven by foreign jihadists who entered Iraq via Syria.³

This last metric is particularly disturbing because it shows that young jihadist volunteers drawn to the Syrian conflict are willing to be played into Iraq, where suicide operations are more regularly undertaken than in Syria. Even taking into account the relative ease with which terrorist groups can manipulate and shape the psychology of young volunteers once they are physically in the conflict zone, it is remarkable that such would-be "martyrs" are more than willing to leave the iconic theatre of Syria and go to next door Iraq to die. Al-Qaeda is clearly succeeding in convincing its own operators that Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are one continuous conflict zone. Indeed, on July 9, 2013 Al-Qaeda car bombs detonated in areas spanning from Beirut to the Iranian border with Iraq, an operation Al-Qaeda websites coined "From Beirut to the Diyala," referring to the river in eastern Iraq.⁴

Impact of the Al-Qaeda Resurgence in Iraq

Al-Qaeda's resurgence in Iraq is undeniably damaging to U.S. interests in Iraq, in the broader region, and potentially in the homeland security environments in Europe and the United States.

In Iraq the accelerating pattern of anti-Shiite bombings is rekindling sectarian revenge attacks.⁵ Retaliation has begun slowly, in part because of the "conflict fatigue" felt by Iraqi communities. At the low point of violence in Iraq in early 2011, the country suffered about 300 major security incidents a month. Throughout 2013, the monthly total of incidents has regularly topped 1,200. But this is still well below the 6,000-plus incidents that were reported each month during the darkest days of the civil war-like conditions in late 2006 and early 2007. What this tells us is that violence in Iraq remains largely limited to attacks undertaken by small militant cells, whilst the general population continues to stay uninvolved and civilian-on-civilian ethno-sectarian violence is still relatively rare. If this dynamic

² My metrics are drawn from liaison relationships with the Iraqi Security Forces and various private security companies still operating in Iraq. I maintain a private database to catalogue Significant Activity (SIGACT) data.

³ See senior U.S. State Department official's comments during the October 30, 2013 conference call entitled: "Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's visit to Washington and the U.S.-Iraq Partnership under the Strategic Framework Agreement."

⁴ See the Islamic state of Iraq's propaganda video, "From Beirut to the Diyala," July 28, 2013, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVvwAxk6Kwk>

⁵ The following section draws on my October 3, 2013 BBC piece, "Iraq's Never-Ending Security Crisis," see <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-never-ending-security-crisis>

changes, violence in Iraq will undergo a step-change that could tear the society apart again – but this time with no U.S. military to step in.

Will civilians continue to largely sit out the conflict? Nearly two years of intensified Al-Qaeda mass-casualty attacks and sectarian massacres are beginning to severely test Shia patience, resulting in growing evidence of revenge attacks on Sunni mosques, preachers and civilians. Sectarian tensions in the region, particularly those emanating from the crisis in Syria, and domestic Iraqi politics provide background drivers for the strengthening of local militant groups, many of whom act as “agents of influence” for Iran’s intelligence services. In Baghdad, the epicentre of sectarian tension, the Shia-dominated security forces collude with low-profile retaliatory actions by Iranian-backed groups like Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and the followers of the radical Shia cleric, Moqtada Sadr. And to many Sunnis in Baghdad, the Iraqi security forces appear to be the ultimate Shia militia, corralling Sunnis into ghettoized neighbourhoods, where they are subject to repressive policing and economic isolation. Sectarian attacks on the Sunni minority are even accelerating in Basra, the oil-rich province in the “deep south” of Iraq. In the last six months an average of 25 Sunnis have been killed there each month, with some corpses dumped with notes explaining that they were killed in retaliation for the increasing number of al-Qaeda bombings in Basra. So within Iraq, Al-Qaeda’s resurgence is making the country less stable and cohesive, splitting apart Sunni and Shia powerbases, whilst Iran’s influence grows stronger.

In concrete terms, Al-Qaeda in Iraq is making certain key economic projects untenable, making the U.S. economy more vulnerable to oil shocks. One example is the U.S.-backed Haditha-Aqaba pipeline that will need to run through Al-Qaeda’s new desert emirate in Anbar province. Likewise the U.S.-backed effort to get Basra oil and gas flowing through Turkey will require driving a new pipeline through Al-Qaeda heartlands northwest of Lake Tharthar in the Jazira area and into the terrorist hub of Mosul in the north. This undermines the U.S. goal of helping Iraq to develop three export pipelines versus the current single export hub to the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, which is threatened by Iran.

The Syrian crisis is strengthening Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and Iraqi militants are, in turn, complicating Syria’s future path. Operating as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams (ISIS), Al-Qaeda in Iraq has ambitions to dominate the Salafi terrorist scene in Syria. Al-Qaeda in Iraq wants to expand, to be adjacent to Lebanon and the Mediterranean, Israel to the West and Turkey in the north. The Islamic world that Al-Qaeda harkens back to was frequently led by a major caliphate based in Baghdad, dominating the world bridge between Asia, Africa and Europe. This is what Al-Qaeda wants to rebuild. Sudan, Afghanistan-Pakistan and Somalia were fine as temporary hideouts, but they are not symbolic centres for Islam. Libya and even Yemen are likewise peripheral to the Arab civilization in historical terms. In Iraq and the adjacent Syrian and Lebanese conflict zones, Al-Qaeda can claim to be fighting on the front line of the Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict, directly confronting what they portray as Iran’s proxies in the Iraqi and Syrian governments plus Hezbollah. The most attractive possible centre for an Al-Qaeda caliphate is thus Iraq – operationally, politically and culturally. This is why Al-Qaeda’s operations in Iraq and Syria have such dangerous potential, touching so many ring states - Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

More broadly there is the issue of returnees from the Iraq-Syrian jihad and the effect they could have on security in North Africa, the Gulf, and Western countries. Whilst the threat from jihadist returnees can be overstated – many die in conflicts, some isolate their jihad abroad from their lives at home – it is clear that well-trained, blooded Al-Qaeda fighters are dangerous people to have wandering the world. Such fighters can act as a magnet for terrorist recruitment in regional and Western nations due to the respect shown to them by young Muslims. They are repositories of obscure military knowledge on bomb-making, operational planning and counter-surveillance. Thus they can potentially serve as the anchor for new terrorist cells wherever they put down roots.

A final aspect of the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq is the potential for the movement to attempt expeditionary strikes against the US homeland and overseas interests beyond Iraq. The evolution of the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) springs to mind, recalling how a muscular local affiliate of Al-Qaeda's senior leadership decided to initiate attacks directly against the United States to raise its profile. Al-Qaeda in Iraq is a movement whose horizons, ambitions and operations are broadening by the day. How soon before they decide to further raise their profile, and their claim on the Syrian jihad, with international attacks? Possibly never – after all, Al-Qaeda in Iraq has been a fairly insular terrorist group for many years⁶ – but the prospect cannot be discounted and should not be overlooked. Recalling the 9/11 attacks, it is clearly not preferable that a major Al-Qaeda terrorist franchise be allowed to develop safe havens within large ungoverned spaces adjacent to Europe, North Africa and Asia. And it is notable that due to the U.S. commitment to withdraw from Iraq, the country has an unfortunate and unique status, for now at least: it is practically the only place in the Islamic world where U.S. armed drones cannot or will not openly operate.

Vulnerabilities of Al-Qaeda in Iraq

The good news is that we defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq before, just five years ago. We studied Al-Qaeda in Iraq and identified its vulnerabilities, which were numerous. Today's Al-Qaeda in Iraq differs in some regards but is still critically vulnerable to a smart U.S.-Iraqi joint counterterrorism campaign.

A Portrait of Today's Al-Qaeda in Iraq and its Vulnerabilities

Even without access to classified information it is possible for an experienced Iraq expert to fuse together open source data and discussions with Iraqis to paint an accurate picture of today's Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The movement is Iraqi-led but taking in more foreigners every month, via the Syrian conflict.⁷ Al-Qaeda in Iraq remains focused like a laser on themes that matter to the Sunni Arabs such as

⁶ Setting aside some attacks into Jordan in 2005, Al-Qaeda in Iraq has always been a predominately inward-looking movement and this tendency has deepened since 2010. Though Iraqis have been involved in acts of international terrorism in recent years (notably in the Jordan in 2005, the UK in 2007 and in Sweden in 2010), AQI was at most tangentially involved in the latter two cases. In Iraq, Al-Qaeda has eschewed anti-foreign targeting since January 2010, undertaking practically no attacks on Western targets in Iraq, ostensibly because the greater threat to the Sunni Arabs is now posed by Iran and the Shia.

⁷ See senior U.S. State Department official's comments during the October 30, 2013 conference call entitled: "Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's visit to Washington and the U.S.-Iraq Partnership under the Strategic Framework Agreement."

prisoners but it still has no positive agenda for running the Sunni Arab parts of Iraq. Thus it is largely reliant on the Iraqi government continuing to make grievous political mistakes in its treatment of the Sunni Arabs and in its counter-insurgency operations.

Since 2010 Al-Qaeda in Iraq has been self-funding through organized crime rackets involving kidnap for ransom, protection payment from large Iraqi companies, plus trucking, smuggling and real estate portfolios. At the present time extortion of commercial enterprises is rapidly accelerating, particularly in remote desert areas where the security forces can offer no real protection at present.⁸ Foreign funding may be increasing, attracted by boosted operational activity and sectarian tensions across the region.

The movement is still small, numbering in the hundreds, but is expanding rapidly and trying to recentralize command and control. This is creating greater communications traffic, larger numbers of terrorist meetings, and rivalries. Al-Qaeda in Iraq is attacking greater numbers of targets and harder targets every month, all of which are expanding its operational footprint, its financing needs, and its thirst for fighters, vehicles, and explosives. Al-Qaeda has started to show interest in controlling areas again: initially in the open military occupation of small town centres or police stations for minutes or hours, and the issuance of “night letters” in some Sunni towns to restrict un-Islamic activities like barber’s shops, music shops and alcohol vendors.⁹

As these points suggest, Al-Qaeda in Iraq is undergoing an ambitious re-expansion that will naturally create added vulnerabilities which may be exploitable. First, the movement is undertaking so many more interactions per day than it did in 2010 that is increasingly vulnerable to communications intercepts, “threat finance” analysis, and network analysis. Until recently Al-Qaeda in Iraq only needed to spread the word every few months that a multi-city attack was expected on “Day X” and the local cells would participate as they saw fit. Now this is a weekly phenomenon, involving many more hubs, and every logistical requirement of the terrorist network has been multiplied. Al-Qaeda in Iraq is also in danger of over-reaching, as it did in 2005-2006 when it sought to develop mini-caliphates in Iraqi towns and impose limits on Iraqi lifestyle, such as a ban on cigarette smoking. Iraqi Sunni Arabs are growing resentful of Al-Qaeda again as they grow more powerful: the movement is scaring Sunni Arab political leaders in Iraq, challenging tribal leaders for local control, and taxing growing numbers of Iraqis. The stage is set for a return of the Sahwa and intelligence-led special operations, if the Iraqi government can embrace the opportunity.

The U.S. Role in Defeating Al-Qaeda (Again)

A U.S.-led coalition defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2005-2009. We know it can be done. The challenge now is to understand what parts of the successful formula are still applicable, and which ones the U.S. can support in the post-withdrawal environment.

⁸ Anecdotal conversations with multiple Iraqi national security officials suggest that Al-Qaeda is now capable of taxing local businesses as a standard practice in rural Anbar, as was the case back in 2005.

⁹ See a treatment of these issues in Michael Knights, “Yes, Iraq is Unravelling,” *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2013, at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yes-iraq-is-unraveling>

The first observation I will offer is that Iraq cannot kill its way out of this crisis. Successful counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency efforts cannot succeed if the enemy recruits faster than they are dispatched. Once again we need to drain the swamp of Al-Qaeda recruiting in Iraq.

In 2007-2009 the Iraqi conflict lost its luster for many would-be jihadists (in Iraq and abroad) because it appeared to be a tawdry, confused struggle with no clear narrative to sustain the enthusiasm of Sunni Arab militants. Militant groups split, fought each other, and seemed to be more interested in organized crime and internal squabbling than fighting the coalition and Iraqi government. Now we have seen the return of a clear narrative – that an Iranian-backed Shiite-dominated government in Iraq that collectively punishes the Sunni Arabs, and that the only force capable of resisting the government and avenging the Sunnis is Al-Qaeda. This narrative has to contain fewer seeds of truth than it does today if Al-Qaeda's growth in Iraq is to be checked.

Draining the Swamp of Al-Qaeda Recruitment

Splitting the reconcilable Sunni Arabs from irreconcilable militants will require a number of strategic-level political steps to be completed. All have the ultimate objective of making Sunni Arabs in Iraq feel less isolated and less desperate, and thus less susceptible to support Al-Qaeda passively or actively.

One is the punctual execution of free and fair national elections in Iraq on April 30, 2014. The U.S. Government seems to have strongly cautioned the Maliki government to stick with the electoral timeline and has signaled that the U.S. will pay close attention to the implementation of elections and post-electoral government formation. This is job number one for the U.S. government and this promising start should be maintained throughout what will perhaps be a yearlong effort (based on the 249-day process in 2010). Perceptions of a stolen election, of Iranian meddling, or of non-inclusive government without Sunni Arab participation would gift the terrorists with a further propaganda coup. On the other hand a positive propaganda coup might be secured by the government if the terrorism charges against Rafi al-Issawi, a top moderate Sunni politician and Minister of Finance, can be rapidly quashed. The United States has intervened on Issawi's behalf before concerning the charges against him and should do so again.

During the next Iraqi government term (2014-2018) the counter-terrorism environment would be best-served by the success of a social peace initiative with a scope similar to South Africa's "Truth and Reconciliation" programme or the de-Nazification programme in Germany. Though all countries are different and no model can be replicated, the purpose of mentioning these precedents is to demonstrate that they can succeed. Blanket de-Baathification in Iraq is an ongoing grievance for Sunnis and strengthens their recruitment potential amongst experienced mid-aged militants and the younger relatives of purged Baathists. Judicial reform of counter-terrorism law and modernized prison system might also reduce Al-Qaeda recruitment potential. Indeed the movement has reaped significant rewards from Sunni Arab despair at the conditions and legal treatment faced by the large Sunni Arab prison population.

Energetic, well-publicized U.S. engagement in Iraq can also serve the counter-terrorism effort. Al-Qaeda is strengthened by the very real perceptions held by Iraqi Sunni Arabs that Iran is winning in

Iraq, whilst the United States has lost interest (at best) or has traded Iraq to Tehran in some Machiavellian deal (at worst). This perception also no doubt plays into the calculations of external funders of Al-Qaeda and other Sunni Arab militant groups in Iraq. Only by staying engaged in Iraq, treating Iraq as the high priority it should be, and paying attention to Iraq can the perception of Iranian influence be offset.

Ongoing well-publicized defence sales and military cooperation are also useful ways to signal U.S. commitment, especially if larger numbers of Sunni Arabs are reintegrated to the armed forces. Indeed, the Iraqi armed forces, and particularly the Iraqi Army, remains a corner of Iraq where nationalism is relatively pronounced and which could be rebuilt into an institution that would give Sunni Arabs greater hope. Any efforts taken to rebuild the Iraqi military through U.S.-supported professional military education will help on this count, including visits to the U.S. National Defense University, International Military Education and Training (IMET) grants, plus Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs.

Operational and Tactical Counter-Insurgency

In 2005-2009 the United States and Iraq cracked the code when it came to reducing the local recruiting pool of militant groups and severely disrupting their local freedom of movement and operational security. The method was population-focused counter-insurgency, which saw local paramilitaries (Sahwa) paid to fight Al-Qaeda whilst the U.S. and Iraqi forces lived amongst such communities to protect civilian and the Sahwa. Since 2009, the Iraqi government progressively demobilized the effort, stopping the pay of Sahwa, arresting some and taking weapons permits from others, and allowing their security forces to detach from local communities and use a dragnet approach of mass arrests against Sunni Arabs. If this sounds almost illogical and entirely self-defeating, this is because it was a critical unforced error by the Iraqi government.

Rebuilding the Sahwa is one plank of a new population-focused counter-insurgency in Iraq – possibly the most important one. After years of dominance Al-Qaeda was decimated by the Sahwa in a period of months in Ramadi in late 2006 and early 2007.¹⁰ As a movement, Al-Qaeda is terrified, deep down, of the Sahwa because it was so brutally effective against them. Even the Shia-led government in Baghdad recognizes the efficacy of the Sahwa, though they have found it extraordinarily difficult to stomach the idea of armed paramilitaries, often led by former insurgents, operating in or near cross-sectarian areas.

The key will now be to convince Baghdad to put the most credible and influential local sheikhs in charge again, not Baghdad-selected cronies selected purely to buy Prime Minister Maliki some local influence. That means getting Ahmed Abu Risha back into the top spot.¹¹ Then comes the hard work of re-hiring, reissuing weapons permits and getting pay issued to the fighters. This has proven very

¹⁰ For an excellent granular examination of the U.S.-Sahwa partnership, see Bill Ardolino, *Fallujah Awakens* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2013).

¹¹ There has been extensive speculation in 2013 that Abu Risha will return as the head of Iraq's Sahwa. For a sample see Mushreq Abbas, *Iraq to reinstate Sahwa forces*, *Al-Monitor*, August 27, 2013, see <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/iraq-revive-sahwa-qaeda-sunni-protesters.html>

difficult since the United States stopped running the programme, suggesting we need to train the Iraqis to run such a programme more effectively, potentially including advisors stationed in Iraq who have the freedom of movement to get out to deepest darkest Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din and Babil.

Reform of the counter-terrorism law is also required, to make it harder for the wrong Sunnis to be rounded up and held for the wrong reasons. Draft reforms to the Counter-Terrorism Law very been debated in parliament and they focus on tightening up the process by which arrest warrants can be served in Iraq, which currently only requires two anonymous tip-offs and is widely abused by the security forces. The draft law also envisages a selective amnesty for long-term detainees against whom no case has been brought. Whilst it may seem counterintuitive to strengthen counter-terrorism by weakening counter-terrorism law, this is exactly what needs to happen in Iraq due to the major role that ineffective and draconian counter-terrorism powers plays in bolstering Al-Qaeda's recruitment.¹²

Population-focused counter-insurgency is a difficult skillset to learn – or re-learn in Iraq's case – but there is a strong case that the Iraqi military should readopt a more open policy towards Sunni Arab communities. This means not only supporting the Sahwa but also ending the collective punishment of such communities through economic blockades, excessive checkpointing, and blanket arrests. The Iraqi security forces need to return to neighborhood-level combat outposts and reintegrate into communities. Units need to ensure a reasonable degree of ethno-sectarian balance in their officers. These developments are all probably years away but a good start could be made relatively quickly if the Iraqi government decided to embrace the proven formula of population-focused counter-insurgency. As the world's premier practitioner of this approach, the U.S. military is uniquely qualified to build these techniques into its major security assistance effort in Iraq, being that such tactics are every bit as vital and demanding as the task of absorbing U.S. equipment.

In the sphere of propaganda Al-Qaeda in Iraq is deft at reminding Sunni Arabs all the reasons why they fear Shiites, Kurds and the Iraqi government. But Al-Qaeda itself could be highly vulnerable to attack by propaganda or Information Operations. As previously noted, the organization is almost hard-wired to over-reach in terms of geographic scope, ambition and rivalry with local Sunni Arab community leaders. Though it has adopted a relatively restrained approach since 2011 vis-à-vis Iraqi Sunni Arabs, the gloves are coming off as Al-Qaeda feels more secure in Iraq. In remote desert areas, Al-Qaeda in Iraq murders local community leaders and seeks once again to impose aspects of Shari'a law. In Syria we see the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams (ISIS) operating in the same manner. The United States can help Iraq to undertake more effective Information Operations using state media and U.S.-supported media such as Al-Hurra television.

Sunni Arab leaders in Iraq have reacted to the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in ways that point to the beginnings of a new anti-Al-Qaeda effort, if the opportunity is grasped. Though such leaders could have stuck with the anti-government protests that were building momentum in March 2013, they

¹² For an introduction to these themes see Michael Knights, *Rebuilding Iraq's Counterterrorism Capabilities*, Policywatch 2112 (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 31, 2013), at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebuilding-iraqs-counterterrorism-capabilities>

have instead begun to draw closer to the Iraqi government, in part because Prime Minister Maliki has been eclipsed by a graver danger to the status of Sunni Arab leaders in Iraq. So from top to bottom, there is a growing desire amongst Iraqi Sunni Arab politicians and citizens to undercut Al-Qaeda in Iraq before it is too late and the challenge becomes insurmountable. America's role is to continue using its considerable convening power to get Sunni Arab politicians around the table with Iraqi government, highlighting the synergies in their views on the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Hard Counter-Terrorism: Kill and Capture

Though I have argued that Iraq cannot kill its way out of this crisis, there is nonetheless a pressing need for "hard counter-terrorism" capabilities to kill and capture irreconcilable Al-Qaeda operatives. In counter-terrorism, the hard militarized edge of the process is itself broken down into a set of sub-processes: Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze and Develop (F³EAD). These distinctions are quite useful in pinning down Iraq's weaknesses and Iraqi requirements that the U.S. government is well-postured to fulfill.

- **Find**. This is a key problem for Iraq, with the government having progressively gone "blind" in terms of timely targeting data since U.S. withdrawal began in 2009. One aspect of the target identification of Al-Qaeda is the Sahwa, who are the best means of constricting the operational security of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, particularly in cities and towns. In the remote rural and border areas, technical intelligence becomes increasingly vital but the Iraqi government suffers from a lack of wide-area surveillance systems that draw together imagery intelligence and signals intelligence. Iraq also needs help collecting financial intelligence on so-called "threat financing" – Al-Qaeda's money flows. On all of these points there is a lot that can be done - and hopefully is already being done – to help Iraq to use the systems it has, to fuse that data with U.S.-provided data, and to analyze the data and create timely targeting options, which has historically been a weakness in Iraq. The cost to the United States is twofold: the U.S. intelligence community has to open itself up again to an Iraqi intelligence community that is penetrated to some extent by Iranian-backed agents of influence. (Though Iraqi protection of U.S. sensitive equipment seems to have been relatively good, so far). And the U.S. government probably needs to accept a degree of risk in pressing the Iraqi government to accept and protect embedded U.S. advisors at a range of lower level counter-terrorism hubs such as the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) Regional Command Centres in key provinces like Anbar, Babil, Diyala, Kirkuk and Nineveh.
- **Fix and Finish**. One of the reasons that Prime Minister Maliki came to Washington DC with a strong request for Apache attack helicopters and armed drones is the recognition that Iraq's counter-terrorism forces cannot reach suspected terrorist locations with sufficient stealth, speed and striking force to kill or capture the targets. This is particularly the case in remote border and desert areas in Anbar and Nineveh province, adjacent to Syria. There is a lot the United States can do to support this effort, and this support does not necessarily hinge on handing over sensitive killing technologies (Apache, Predator/Reaper). Building up Iraqi helicopter assault capacity is vital. Ensuring that Iraq's armed helicopters and fixed-wing strike

aircraft are used effectively by Iraqi control centres is another priority area. Keeping Iraq supplied with precise air-to-ground munitions like the Hellfire is worthwhile, particularly as collateral damage from these small munitions is minimized. But setting technology aside, the real opportunity for the United States is to help Iraq expand and maintain the high-quality ISOF. The best way to do this is to help put Iraqi counter-terrorism on a sound legal footing with a law that establishes the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) as a ministry that is adequately funded and under parliamentary scrutiny, like all other ministries. The present quasi-official status of CTS deprives it of a budget of its own and limits personnel replacement to offset attrition. U.S. lobbying might help formalize CTS' role under the next government.

- **Exploit, Analyze and Develop.** One of the defining features of the "industrial-scale" counter-terrorism undertaken by U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in Iraq was the rapid processing of intelligence through Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) of computers and cell-phones plus the use of detainee-provided information and biometric and weapons intelligence. These inputs, usually derived minutes or hours after a raid, generated new arrest warrants on further suspects before news of the initial raids even reached the next level of the targeted network. Thus the onion of Al-Qaeda in Iraq was peeled faster than it could grow new layers. This is an area where the United States is uniquely qualified to build capacity in ISOF and other Iraqi forces.

Conclusion

This testimony has argued that the counter-terrorism situation in Iraq is still recoverable. We defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq just five years ago, comprehensively dismantling their networks and propaganda campaigns. The United States can help Iraq to do it again. The challenge now is to understand what parts of the successful formula are still applicable, and which ones the U.S. can support in the post-withdrawal environment.

It should be clear that Iraq cannot kill its way out of this crisis, though Baghdad may find this option an alluring misconception. U.S. policy should aim at guiding Iraq in the direction of holistic sectarian reconciliation and the defeat of Al-Qaeda's narrative that Iraqi Sunni Arabs have no hope of acceptance or security in post-Saddam Iraq. Splitting the reconcilable Sunni Arabs from irreconcilable militants will require a number of strategic-level political steps to be completed. All have the ultimate objective of making Sunni Arabs in Iraq feel less isolated and less desperate, and thus less susceptible to support Al-Qaeda passively or actively. The United States can provide reassurance to Iraq's Sunni Arabs by staying engaged in Iraq, treating Iraq as the high priority it should be, and paying attention to the country's political developments. The United States should continue to help Sunni Arab moderates like indicted Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi to re-enter politics. This creates a powerful symbol that progress is possible. Rebuilding the Sahwa is one plank of a new population-focused counter-insurgency in Iraq – possibly the most important one.

In terms of specific security assistance, the United States should support counter-terrorism and judicial reforms in Iraq, as well as the institutionalization of Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service as a line ministry. Capacity-building should be maintained and expanded through overt military-to-military ties and professional military education, plus covert intelligence cooperation. U.S.-supported professional military education is a vital long-term effort, including Iraqi exchanges with the U.S. National Defense University, International Military Education and Training (IMET) grants, plus Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs. Iraqi air-mobility and precision strike capabilities should be supported by the United States. Intelligence fusion, mission planning and Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) are areas where U.S. advisors should be engaged on the ground – assuming they are not already.