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CJTF-7 Red Cell

A Red Cell Political Military Assessment

3 Feb 04

Future Al-Qaida and Zarqawi Network Operations in Iraq

Al-Qaida and Zarqawi Network Goals in Iraq

~~(S//REL)~~ Ultimately, the leadership of Al-Qaida (AQ) and the Zarqawi network want to cause the complete failure of the Coalition project in Iraq and to mire Coalition forces in a costly battle. Perhaps, their optimal long-term scenario envisions an Iraq this is dominated by Sunni extremist leadership and provides a safe-haven for AQ. They likely calculate the best way to achieve their goals is to impede and disrupt the political transition process, undermine and fracture any emerging Iraqi government, and instigate large-scale destabilization of the country. **Igniting confessional war would be an effective way to Balkanize Iraqi society into warring camps, discredit Coalition aims, and create a chaotic environment favorable to Al-Qaida operations and goals. Attacking key Shia religious, political, and military targets would be the primary, but not only, method for sparking greater civil unrest and, perhaps, sectarian war. As the deadline for the transfer of sovereignty approaches, we can expect an operational surge by AQ and its associates in Iraq.**

Target Selection and Intended Effects

~~(S//REL)~~ AQ and the Zarqawi network can be expected to carefully select targets of high symbolic value and maximum psychological effect. Obvious targets include personalities and structures associated with the Coalition and the new Iraqi government: Coalition Provisional Authority officials and buildings, embassies of Coalition nations, GC members and new Iraqi ministers, key Kurdish and Shia leaders and institutions, Iraqi security forces, provincial and city council members, United Nations assessment teams, or perhaps softer targets such as Baghdad hotels outside of the Green Zone that host numerous Westerners. As the date for transfer of sovereignty nears, AQ and Zarqawi operatives could also target gatherings of provincial and national authorities, such as provincial meetings, or caucus and election sites. Coalition forces present in Iraq without a strong political mandate from their countries, are also lucrative targets as mass-casualty attacks these contingents could minimize their efforts or possibly cause their withdrawal.

Targeting the Shia and Sparking Confessional War

~~(S//REL)~~ **Killing top Shia religious authorities or destroying a key Shia mosque in Najaf or Karbala could release enormous destabilizing forces in Iraq and would be a likely method for AQ to incite confessional war.** The most holy sites of Shia Islam reside in Najaf and Karbala rather than Iranian locations such as Qom. The assassination of Grand Ayatollah Sistani or the destruction of a revered mosque, such as the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf, would send reverberations throughout the Shia world and direct Shia anger at both Sunni Arabs and the Coalition. This could spark wide-scale

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Shia on Sunni violence in Iraq, particularly in areas where both communities are mixed such as Baghdad or Basrah, which could, in turn, lead to countrywide ethno-religious violence, causing Iraqi society to factionalize and shattering hope of national unity.

~~(S//REL)~~ **The coming Ashura festival on 2 March, where Shia pilgrims will gather in large numbers at key mosques, could provide the perfect target to achieve AQ and Zarqawi goals.** Members of Shia militias such as the Badr Corps or the Mahdi Army could also be targeted. In general, high-value Shia targets are significantly more vulnerable than major Coalition of GC targets. **Major attacks, perhaps simultaneous, against key Shia personalities, mosques, and militias are likely imminent.**

Kurdish Targets

~~(S//REL)~~ Though the perpetrators of the 1 February suicide bombing of Kurdish political party offices in Irbil are not known, the target and method are compatible with AQ, the Zarqawi network, and the Kurdish extremist group Ansar al-Islam. Kurdish leaders, such as GC members Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, are primary candidates for assassination because of their close relationship with the US, their secular orientation, and their experience bridging divides in Iraqi politics. The Kurds would not be able to effectively replace their mature, reasonable leaders, and the assassination of figures with the stature of Barzani or Talabani could politically destabilize the Kurdish region and possibly occasion the rise of a younger, radicalized leadership less given to a national reconciliation. The assassination of Barzani or Talabani could also entrench Kurdish autonomy demands and dramatically deepen tensions between Kurds and other ethno-religious groups in Iraq, as well as exacerbate an already-strained Kurdish relationship with Turkey. The upcoming Kurdish New Year could also provide prime targets against Kurdish interests.

Sunni Targets

~~(S//REL)~~ AQ and Zarqawi operatives may also attack certain Sunni targets with the aim of punishing collaborators and sparking ethno-religious strife. Although current GC President Mohsen Abdul Hameed is a Sunni Islamist who heads the Iraqi Islamist Party and is associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, he would nevertheless draw AQ's wrath for cooperating with the Coalition. AQ has shown no compunctions about killing other Muslims and can be confident that any major attack they conducted against Sunnis would be non-attributable.

Methods of Attack

~~(S//REL)~~ Though AQ and Zarqawi operatives in Iraq face serious operational challenges such as small numbers, a limited, though increasing, number of safe houses, and the growth of Iraqi security forces, we assess they are currently capable of conducting a limited number of major terrorist attacks. AQ's most prevalent attack technique will remain VBIEDs, often against multiple symbolic targets that seek to inflict large numbers of casualties. The network's operatives are skilled at complex attacks, and many of the network's recent VBIED attacks have employed breaching teams, using either vehicles or small units employing direct fire to neutralize perimeter security in advance of a main attack. The network also has demonstrated capabilities not normally associated with Former Regime Elements, to include large-scale directional charging and mixing of explosive compositions to overcome force

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protection measures or target construction. These attacks, moreover, have been characterized by meticulous planning and pre-operational surveillance and intelligence gathering.

~~(S//REL)~~ In addition, AQ has a long standing interest in acquiring and using chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons. Chemical and biological weapons are the most likely the network will employ; depending on the type or agent employed, dispersal devices would be emplaced to affect large gatherings, enclosed headquarters facilities, to assassinate key personnel, or to contaminate food or water supplies. Their CBR ability within Iraq is likely crude, however.

Conclusion

~~(S//REL)~~ **AQ and Zarqawi attacks aimed at deepening ethno-religious cleavages in Iraq are to be expected, with key Shia personalities and institutions being the foremost targets.** AQ and Zarqawi leaders likely calculate that a state of civil war and creative violence is preferable to the current situation of Sunni disenfranchisement and a Shia and Kurdish ascendancy that is swiftly becoming institutionalized in the political, economic, and military realms. Benefits for AQ and Zarqawi that could flow from a civil war in Iraq would be the collapse of GC authority and Coalition goals, a wedge driven between the Shia and Coalition, the galvanizing of Sunni wrath against Shia, Kurds and the Coalition, and the creation of a lengthened time-table for anti-Coalition forces to pursue success. Such a plan is also consistent with Al-Qaida's rhetorical calls for apocalyptic, cataclysmic "final battles" for the sake of Islam.

Possible Targets of AQ and Zarqawi Network in Iraq

- Shia religious leaders: Sistani, Sadr
- Key Shia mosques in Najaf and Karbala
- Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, SCIRI Leader
- Senior Shia Clergy from the Najaf Hawza
- Badr Corps and Mahdi Army leaders, offices, concentrations
- Gathering points for Shia Ashura pilgrims
- Kurdish Leaders: Barzani, Talabani, Barham Saleh
- Kurdish political offices
- GC members and Iraqi ministers
- UN assessment teams and buildings
- Coalition contingents with weak political mandates from their countries
- Sunni authorities cooperating with Coalition
- Provincial meetings, caucus and elections sites associated with the Transitional National Assembly
- Iraqi Security Forces

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