

THE METAMORPHOSIS FROM AQI TO THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ (2006–2011)

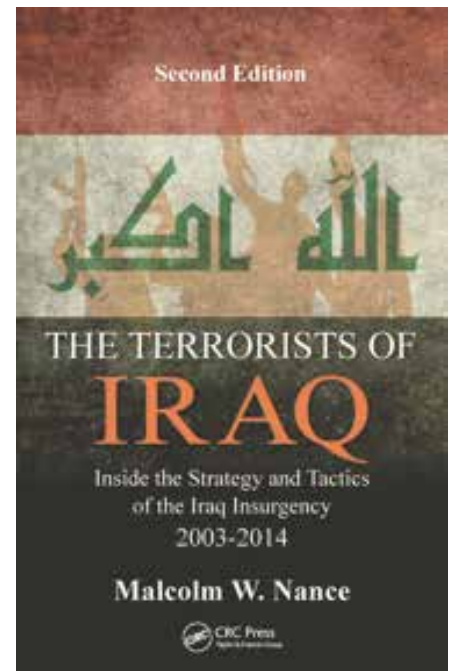
*Excerpted from The Terrorists of Iraq by Malcolm Nance
(Taylor and Francis, 2014).*

By Malcolm W. Nance

As early as 2005 al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had sought to carve out a national entity within Iraq. They went so far as to declare an Islamic Emirate of Iraq. At the time they only occupied a few dozen safe houses in the Western governorates, some in Baghdad and a neighborhood in Anbar Province.

The Jolan District in Fallujah had been dominated by AQI members and sympathizers starting in the months after the invasion. It was quickly lost along with more than 1,000 jihadist fighters to the U.S. Marines, who rooted them out in intense house-to-house combat. Even without occupying any land, they understood that the concept of appearing to be a virtual entity was a psychological multiplier for their fighters. Better to be considered heroes of a nation

instead of operatives in a terrorist group. Under the protection of the Iraqi Sunni community, they wanted to carve out a piece of secure terrain that would allow foreign fighters to abandon their homes and families, come via Syria to the “state” in their jihadist version of the Prophet Mohammed’s Hijra (emigration), and start a new life toward an eventual place in paradise. They could take on local wives, train, brag, and fight alongside other men like themselves. They needed





Pol-e-charki Afghan National Army base, located off the Kabul-Jalalabad Highway in the Kabul Province. Photo by: AED

a place of their own where they could be involved in something bigger than themselves—they could fight like the companions of the prophet Mohammed in a real, live jihad against the “crusaders” and “apostates.” The best of them would volunteer to die in martyrdom bombings and go straight to heaven! So it was decided that even itinerant “knights” needed a base of operations to call home.

Fostering this romantic image was extremely important to AQI for recruitment. Osama bin Laden wanted Iraq to become the central battlefield in the Middle East. As Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his men achieved success, they would ultimately convert or betray their Iraqi sponsors by any means necessary to start the formation of a religious nation in the mold of the Taliban’s Afghanistan. Iraq would become a safe harbor from which to spread their fighters, weapons, and ideology to destabilize other nations of the Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia and Syria.

In early 2005, with the al-Qaeda chief’s blessing, they declared an Islamic Emirate of Iraq. This rebranding never really caught on, but it was more important internally to establish a change in mindset for the fighters. Then again, previous name changes by AQI were overshadowed by al-Zarqawi’s brutality. Tenzim al-Qa’ida fi Balad al-Rafidayn, or al-Qaeda in Iraq, remained the battlefield name for its fighters. Besides, the news and social media loved this name.

One year later al-Zarqawi was dead and the Americans were starting to discover that some Sunni tribes did not want al-Qaeda’s brand of Islam. Abu Ayyub al-Masri, a former Egyptian Army officer who operated under the nickname Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, took over AQI after al-Zarqawi’s death. Unlike al-Zarqawi, he listened to the leadership of al-Qaeda and sought to create a more inclusive



An Iraqi soldier from 3rd Battalion, 1st Brigade, 1st Iraqi Army Division pulls weapons, explosive material and documents from a cache found in an Al-Qaeda in Iraq safe-house in the Muthana district near Thar Thar Lake in Iraq. Photo by: Department of Defense



Fallujah, Iraq (Jan. 29, 2005) - U.S. Navy Seabees assigned to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Twenty Three (NMCB 23) patrol the streets of Fallujah in 2005. Photo by: 3rd Class Todd Frantom

group where all jihadists could operate together to create the only legitimate Islamic nation-state on earth. This effort at reaching out was necessary. In some of the frontline zones Iraqi religious extremist (IRE) groups were finding that logistics and manpower were becoming difficult. Some groups were not getting supplies or fighters while taking on a large share of the day-to-day combat. Due to al-Zarqawi's notoriety, AQI was reaping the lion's share of foreign fighters and was accused of ignoring Iraqi Islamic groups. The operational difficulties also increased. Many of the Sunni tribes in Anbar

governorate under the influence of Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha al-Dulaimi, chief of the biggest tribe in Anbar, formed the Sawahat al-Anbar (the Anbar Awakening) to reject AQI's operations.

Abu Risha's turning on AQI led to a series of tribal defections to the central government. That started the withdrawal of the major Sunni former regime loyalist combat forces away from the armed insurgency. At the same time, the Americans started to produce results in intelligence collection that led to the killing or capturing of senior members of many groups.

AQI and its advisory council decided that to counteract the Awakening, it would need to form its own alliance of tribes and fighters. On October 9, 2006, the Mujahideen Shura Council announced the formation of the Mutayibeen Coalition.¹ Al-Masri knew he would need to bring all fighters and Sunni tribes loyal to jihad together to counteract the effect of losing the largest insurgent groups in Iraq. The Ansar al-Sunnah and jaysh al-Mohammed, the former regime loyalist terrorists, were joining the government supporting "Sons of Iraq" as part of the Awakening.

As ex-terrorists, they were becoming lethally effective enemies. The key to doing anything in the Sunni regions relies on the direct cooperation of the tribal chiefs. Without their permission, nothing was possible—no operation was safe. Al-Zarqawi could not stand negotiation and preferred elimination of tribal chiefs who opposed him. He would kidnap their relatives and force their daughters to marry his jihadists—after they had been raped, of course. Al-Zarqawi wanted coalition by rule of the gun. He was scolded by harsh letters from al-Qaeda’s advisory council members, such as Aymen al-Zawahiri and Attiya al-Jaza’eri. They told him to work with the tribes, stop the beheadings, and rein in the foreign attacks on Jordan and Israel by AQI cells. Al-Masri understood what al-Zarqawi could not. Tribal politics trump everything and combat success was job number one—territorial expansion could come at a later date.

Khalf al-Mutayibeen, which is Arabic for “Coalition of the Nobility,” proclaimed it would act as an umbrella organization for all Sunni jihadist groups and tribes that shared its vision of warfare and nation building. For the first time, Iraqi operatives and commanders would be allowed to take over leadership roles and directly supervise foreign fighters as equals. Al-Qaeda Central (AQC), the favored name for the original senior leadership of the group, remained hidden in Pakistan. They were wisely encouraging integration of all Iraqi groups. Al-Zawahiri dispatched a liaison officer to al-Masri, an Iraqi named Khaled Abdul-Fattah Dawoud Mahmoud al-Mashhadani. Al-Mashhadani was better known as Abu Shaheed. Abu Shaheed was the highest ranking of the Iraqis in AQC’s senior management team and would be vital to meeting bin Laden’s vision of bringing all groups onboard for a unified

jihad structure. With his help, al-Masri created a truly integrated force comprised of an international jihadist collective that gave Iraqi locals a lead role since they knew the terrain and where to pressure the Shiite government. Operationally, they would all be called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

The Mutayibeen declaration stated that the jihadists had established a free Sunni “Islamic state” composed of the eight northwest and western governorates in Iraq, as well as Baghdad. In their first collective statement, they said:

These are the glad tidings coming out from the Land of the Two Rivers, the land of the Caliphates, and from Baghdad, the home of the Khilafa, may Allah free it from the Crusaders [Americans] and Saffavids [Iranians], in the blessed month of Ramadan. The fruits of the tree of Tawheed [monotheism] that the martyrs watered with their blood, have ripened and their time for harvest has come.

The truthful Mujahideen in the land of the two rivers have unified and reinforced one another and announce to the Muslims everywhere and Ahl-as-Sunni in Iraq especially, the glad tiding of the establishment of the State of Truth, the State of Islam that will implement Allah’s Shariah for the people in the land, that will protect Islam and be a strong shield for Ahl-as-Sunni in the land of the two rivers.²

It is the pleasure of the Media Committee to present to all Muslims the official spokesman of the Islamic State of Iraq, the spokesman of the Ministry of Information, to bring you the good news. And we call Upon all Muslims in the world, to support this state with money, men and Du’a, and Allah has full power and control over His affairs, but most of the men know not, and to Allah belongs all thanks and favour.³

The communiqué also delineated the boundaries of the Islamic State:

Your brothers announce the establishment

of the Islamic State in Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Ninawa, and in other parts of the governorate of Babel, in order to protect our religion and our people. Further, the Mujahid delivers a special call to the tribal heads in Iraq, and to all Sunni Muslims in that country, to pledge loyalty to the Emir of the Believers, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, by their adherence and obedience.⁴

On July 18, 2007, Abu Shaheed was arrested by U.S. and Iraqi forces. In a brilliant display of counterintelligence, al-Mashadani soon had some U.S. interrogators convinced that there was no commander of AQI after al-Zarqawi. He claimed that Abu Ayyub al-Masri did not even exist. He also claimed that ISI was not a real organization, but just a front for al-Qaeda.

Al-Mashadani was clever enough to give up enough information that was real and verifiable in order to spread his disinformation. He even stated that ISI media recordings of Ayyub al-Masri were an actor reading lines created by committee. U.S. force commanders questioned the veracity of the claim but gave it some credibility to the news media, maybe to smoke out al-Masri or to see which group would actually claim leadership. In the end, the ruse didn’t work. Intelligence indicated that there was a real person named al-Masri and that he was working with a senior Iraqi commander, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. They were coordinating missions hand in hand. During this period al-Masri oversaw major terror operations in Iraq that included hundreds of improvised explosive device (IED) attacks and massive suicide bombings. He and Abu Umar even managed to place an IED at the house of Abdul Sattar Abu Risha for his treachery in creating the Anbar Awakening. It killed him instantly. However, it was the joint pragmatism



Suicide bombings in Iraq since 2003 have killed thousands of people, mostly Iraqi civilians. Photo by: Jim Gordon

of al-Masri and Abu Umar that made ISIS flourish. They decided to allow the Iraqis to take the lead of ISI in the insurgency that would have longer-lasting consequences.

The 2009 inauguration of a new American president didn't change the outlook of ISI toward the Americans. Whether the American President was George W. Bush or Barack H. Obama mattered little. They had a caliphate to

establish and the crusaders were still in Iraq so the killings would continue.

Now that both Iraqi and foreign fighters were vertically integrated, the ISI suicide tactics decidedly improved. The ISI kept up a sustained suicide bombing campaign. Deploying people in trucks to blow up was safer than complex small infantry attacks. For now, they would capitalize on the Iraqi groups' expertise at covert infiltration of men, weapons, and explosive trucks into

the cities. One of the largest bombings in Iraq's history occurred in August 2009, when the Iraqi Foreign Ministry and Finance Ministry in Baghdad were attacked simultaneously, resulting in over 250 dead. More importantly, they targeted the hotel of the Awakening councils during a national meeting of all the tribal sheiks. The suicide truck bomb managed to kill dozens of "traitors" meeting with the Iraqi government.





AQI/ISI had been using IED and individual suicide bombs for years, but al-Masri and Abu Umar decided using multiple suicide car bomb attacks in a spectacular fashion was sure to get more satellite TV airtime, particularly if the TV crews were the target. Deliberately attacking the media would give anyone reporting in or on Iraq a message—we will not be ignored. On the morning of February 16, 2010, no less than four suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (S-VBIEDs) struck at the four hotels that supported the foreign news media. The attack started when a bomb was set off near a police station in central Baghdad. It brought the journalists and TV crews to their balconies to see what was happening across the traffic circle at Firdos Square. This attack was strategically selected, as it was in direct line of sight to the mezzanine balcony in the Palestine Hotel. Virtually all television satellite crews in the world used this location as a backdrop for reporting on Iraq from the safety of the Palestine and adjacent Ishtar Sheraton Hotels. When the journalists rushed to the windows, balconies, and the roof to see the attack, a second car bomb rammed the Texas barriers that protected the building—Texas barriers are 12- to 20-foot-high interlocking concrete walls. The massive explosion breached the wall. Moments later a third human-guided truck bomb, this one a 20-ton cement mixer filled with high explosives, crawled into the opening between the two hotels. It was stuck momentarily on the concrete debris, and that was the chance the Americans needed to stop the attack. The snipers and machine gunners on the top of the Sheraton opened fire and raked the giant truck with hundreds of direct hits. An American army sniper managed to place the killing shot through the head of the driver and the vehicle ground to a

*Ubaydi, Iraq (Nov. 14, 2005) - A U.S. Army UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter prepares to land near Ubaydi, Iraq prior to medically evacuating a wounded Iraqi Army soldier.
Photo by: Cpl. Michael R. McMaugh*

halt halfway through the walls. But ISI prepared for that possibility too; a backup “trigger” team detonated the truck with a remote cell phone detonator attached to the cement mixer. The explosion devastated the two hotels. Fortunately for the journalists, it had not completely entered the breach; if it had, it would have most likely collapsed both buildings.

On the other side of downtown, a S-VBIED raced up the ramp to the formidable Babylon Hotel and exploded in the entrance. The Babil was a massive concrete monstrosity on the south side of the Euphrates River situated directly across from the new American embassy in the Green Zone. It was a former guest hotel where Saddam would spy on his guests with listening devices built in to each room.

The S-VBIED onslaught was not complete. A fourth S-VBIED in a stolen ambulance raced into the perimeter of the Hamra Hotel. This hotel was favored by freelance journalists not associated with big media outfits. Located near the Australian embassy, the Hamra’s location gave it security advantages: a narrow street blocked by armed guards and a security barrier cut it off from Karada Street, and it had a T-barrier wall that

surrounded it. Previous attempts to hit it had failed, so it was believed to be relatively safe. However, because the hotel let its guard down, an ISI car bomb in the guise of an ambulance managed to get past the security barrier and explode inside of the perimeter. The day’s tally was 36 dead and hundreds wounded, but the value of such a high-profile antimedia attack was priceless.

However, the Americans were now operating at their best in counterintelligence. Having eschewed ruthless interrogation, they used effective methods of gleaned information. Intense professional interviews and cash incentives got them actionable tips. They were also working with the former Iraqi insurgents and had a good track record on helping break ISI cells. One such tip led them to carry out a combined U.S.-Iraqi Special Forces raid on a house in Tikrit. On the night of April 17, 2010, the residence under surveillance was confirmed by Iraqi and U.S. intelligence assets to have one or two high-value targets (HVTs) present. The mission was handed off to the combined Iraqi-U.S. Special Forces. The mission was to capture the targets, but if resistance was met, they were to use any and all

force necessary to neutralize them. As the task force attempted to take the residence, they were fired upon by the occupants. The Iraqis and Americans called in aerial missile support. Between the Hellfire missile bombardment, rockets, and gunfire, Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were killed. Al-Qaeda was again decapitated. One American Army Ranger was killed when a supporting UH-60 helicopter crashed returning from the mission.

The deaths of the two ISI commanders finally put to rest the notion that Abu Umar was a fictional character. A full dossier was released, including confirmation of his DNA. Quite a bit was known about Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. He was an Iraqi-born Hamid Dawud Mohamed Khalil al-Zawi. He was the senior Iraqi member of the Mujihdeen Shura Council (MSC), along with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, spiritual advisor Sheikh Abd al-Rahman, and operations officer Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Shaheed, the Iraqi who was the AQC’s liaison to ISI.⁵ Abu Umar was highly successful at staying out of the line of fire even though the entirety of U.S. forces was searching for him. Unlike al-Zarqawi, he led operations from the rear, maintained

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a high level of operational security, and managed the ISI like a CEO. He directed subordinate commanders to carry out missions and report back results, and fine-tuned the campaigns despite enormous pressure from the Americans and Iraqi government. Operating in Anbar and other Sunni areas was increasingly difficult as well, though under Abu Umar attacks were sustained, devastating, and professional. Although he was named as al-Zarqawi's successor in 2005, he actually would not lead combined operations until 2007. For a fictional character, Abu Umar was alleged to have been captured or killed no less than three times between 2007 and 2010.



Mugshot of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi taken by US armed forces while in detention at Camp Bucca in 2004. Photo by: US Armed Forces

Fortunately for the insurgency, the winding down of U.S. combat operations required the closing of Camp Bucca in 2009. Camp Bucca was the principal detention facility for the bulk of the Iraqi extremist insurgents captured in the five previous years. Despite the best efforts of American security forces, the detention of so many suspected and real insurgents at Camp Bucca had inadvertently created a concentrated ideas and team building environment. This location allowed the guilty, the innocent, and the unlucky to convalesce, strengthen relationships, and hobnob among the terror elite. Camp Bucca allowed the lowest key insurgents to meet, share lessons and knowledge, and conduct terror practicums on what each different group had learned from dealing with a large-scale professional force such as the Americans. The detainees knew they would eventually be released and that the Iraqi army would just be a hollow, well-equipped shell the U.S. Army designed.

One of those low-key Iraqi detainees was nicknamed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi held captive for 4 years in Camp Bucca. With the death of the top

two commanders, he would be tapped to be leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq's next generation, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁶ ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Nance is a consultant for U.S. intelligence agencies. He is an Arabic-speaking former U.S. Navy intelligence collections officer, and field interrogator. He spent two decades on terrorism intelligence operations in the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. He is currently executive director of the Terror Asymmetrics Project on Strategy, Tactics, and Radical Ideologies (TAPSTRI).

This article is an excerpt from *The Terrorists of Iraq* (Taylor and Francis, 2014).

ENDNOTES

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