

Al Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) Rebirth and the Syrian Jihad's Coming Failure

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After a sustained decline from 2008 to 2011 Al Qaeda's volume of attacks in Iraq has risen in the last two years and the country's sectarian tensions have surged. The monthly death toll due to terrorist attacks in Iraq has recently reached over a thousand people. The civil war between Sunnis and Alawites in Syria has clearly exacerbated Iraq's precarious security environment and its fragile confessional structure. Some observers see the emergence of the extremist Al Nusra Front in Syria and AQI's reorganization into ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) as vivid evidence that the terror organization has been rejuvenated [1].

Similar arguments were made about Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) a year ago when the group acquired a northern Malian sanctuary. AQIM expansion, however, was short lived. The Maghreb terror network's chaotic and brutal ten month rule over places like Timbuktu, Kindal and Gao and its tyrannical imposition of Sharia law fostered intense domestic and international resistance. AQIM ritualistic stoning of adulterers, its amputations of criminal's limbs and its desecration of Sufi shrines and mosques enraged and mobilized opponents. Assisted by West African forces, France January 2013 military intervention routed AQIM and its allies driving them easily from their terror sanctuary.

Today the Maghreb terror network has retreated toward the mountains next to the Algerian border where it has maintained a low level guerilla war that has failed to gain popular support. The meteoric rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria is likely to encounter a similar fate. What follows is an analysis of ISIL's rise and its likely fall in Syria.

Prior to the 2011 U.S. military disengagement, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was in retreat. Iraq was recovering from its calamitous 2005-2007 civil war. AQI's attacks had been drastically reduced. Despite Ayman al-Zawahiri's 2005 criticism of AQI's sectarian strategy in a letter confiscated by U.S. forces, the network continued its attacks against Shia and Christian targets. Terrorist violence was considered manageable by many experts. AQI's blood thirsty tactics had evaporated its public support. By 2011 the terror network had been declared as a defeated organization [2].

Al Qaeda's position in Iraq changed dramatically after the departure of American troops and increased tensions between Baghdad's Sunni, Shia and Kurdish political blocs [3]. Without American leverage to broker reconciliation between Iraq's competing confessional groups and U.S. military assistance to Baghdad's counterterror operations, AQI recovered and exploited the country's tumultuous political situation. Since 2011 Sunni perceptions that the Shi'ite-Kurdish dominated government in Baghdad is intent on isolating and persecuting their community have increased.

Baghdad's 2011 arrest warrant for a prominent Sunni politician accused of sponsoring terror and the central governments storming of a Sunni refugee camp killing large numbers of civilians accelerated sectarian tensions that AQI has successfully exploited. Its network of suicide bombers, financial patrons and car bomb factories has been reinvigorated.

Fernando Renaires notes that suicide bombings, car bombs, and I.E.D attacks doubled a year after the departure of American troops

effectively debunking claims that U.S. occupation was exclusively an incubator of jihadist violence [4]. Iraq's political elite's inability to distribute oil revenues equitably between confessional groups, determine the scope of provincial autonomy and resolve Kirkuk's status have poisoned sectarian relations. AQI's has targeted Iraqi security forces and Shia, Kurdish and Christian communities with car bomb attacks and suicide operations. It has not deviated from its late leader Abu Musab Zarqawi sectarian approach so heavily criticized by Al Qaeda Central.

Confessional violence and civil war in neighboring Syria has had a synergistic effect on reviving Al Qaeda's regional fortunes. Syria is no stranger to Sunni Islamist rebellions. The Baathist Party's seizure of power in the 1960's and the ascension of Alawite and Christian minorities in Syria's government and security forces under the Assad family engendered Sunni opposition. Islamists and jihadists were particularly incensed by the secular Socialist ideology of the Syrian regime [5]. By the late 1970's jihadist forces mobilized and rebelled. Damascus is destroyed Islamist forces in the beleaguered city of Hama. Some 10,000 rebels and civilians were killed by Hafez al Assad's Alawite dominated security forces. His son (Bashar) has been even more brutal in his attempts to destroy today's Sunni dominated insurgency.

By March 2011 Damascus began to be effected by the Arab Spring. Protests in Sunni towns like Daraa and Homs were savagely repressed by Assad's army and militias. The murder and mutilation of child protesters catalyzed the rebellion that initially was secular, non-violent and democratic. Both the exile Syrian National Council and its military ally the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were initially dominated by moderate secularists and Islamists.

Since 2012 the fighting has dramatically intensified and Syria has subdivided into warring confessional communities. Sunni jihadists seek revenge for the regime's destruction of the 1979-1982 Islamist revolt and are animated by the secular and confessional character of Assad's Regime. They consider the Alawites Shia apostates and their Christian allies infidels who have declared war against Islam. The latest estimates put the death toll at over 115,000 dead, 6 million displaced and close to three million refugees. Given such a panorama, extremists are now on the ascendant.

Al Qaeda aligned jihadist forces have undertaken key roles in the insurgency. This should not be surprising. During the Iraq war, Assad facilitated a foreign fighter supply network devoted to transporting and

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financing Sunni jihadists. Damascus became a vital link in the flow of AQI fighters to Iraq and Zarqawi had a substantial Syrian based AQI financial and logistical infrastructure. This network now provides succor to anti-Assad jihadists that feature dozens of groups including Al Qaeda affiliates Al Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Formed in January 2012 Al Nusra Front is a Syrian jihadist organization that has used foreign fighters mainly for martyrdom missions. The group has ruthlessly attacked Syrian security forces and Alawite militias with military assaults, car bombs, suicide bombers and I.E.D assaults and it has taken a leading role in the fighting against Assad's regime. The group has been involved in a leadership dispute with AQI. In February 2013 AQI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that al Nusra was an appendage of his organization that now has been recast as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. After a confusing delay, Al Nusra's leader Abu Muhammad al-Juliani rebuffed the attempted merger in a dispute mediated by Ayman al Zawahiri [6].

Al Qaeda's Egyptian leader decided to keep the organizations separate, a decision protested by ISIL emir. Irrespective of the quarrel, ISIL and Al Nusra have mounted joint operations and they have pursued a ruthless sectarian agenda. Kurdish, Christian and Alawite communities have been attacked by Al Nusra and ISIL. Al Qaeda affiliates control much of northern Syria and their implementation of Sharia that has created tensions and local resistance. ISIL and al Nusra have repeatedly clashed with Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces in areas they control.

Radical Islamist and jihadist forces comprise some 40 to 50 percent of rebel militias and their battlefield capability greatly exceeds the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) [7]. It is clear that jihadist forces have mobilized and their efforts to establish Islamic rule in areas they govern is characterized by growing extremism. Al Qaeda militants in Syria have beheaded Catholic priests and captured regime soldiers. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that radical Islamist groups including Al Nusra and ISIL killed 190 civilians in Latakia in June 2013 military operations designed to cleanse Alawite villages [8]. Entire families were summarily executed. Hundreds of women and children were kidnapped.

Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria now control more territory than any other place and the flow of foreign fighters into the country exceeds the Iraq war. Recent estimates put the number of foreign fighters waging jihad in Syria to be around six thousand including Pakistani and Chechen brigades [9]. Syria is the number one jihadist battleground in the world.

How will this dynamic of jihadist mobilization and extremism evolve in Syria? If the past is a good indicator, jihadist extremism will mobilize opponents. The record of past modern jihads is not promising with failures in 1980's Syria and in 1990's Egypt, Libya and Algeria. ISIL and Al Nusra extremism has encountered significant resistance. Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliates today face a formidable array of opponents that include some FSA units, Kurdish Brigades, Christians, Assad's army, Hezbollah, and aligned Alawite militias.

Despite the strong jihadist presence that includes Pakistan, Uzbek and Chechen allies, it is unlikely Sunni radicals will be able overcome their enemies. If the jihadists see Assad's forces gaining ground and local resistance to their rule mounting, they may fracture. Since

Hezbollah's summer 2013 military intervention, Assad's forces have strengthened and the rebels, most notably in the battle of Qusayr, have experienced reversals. The war has reached a turning point where the regime has insured its survival and divisions among the rebels make a Sunni military victory unlikely. Assad's military position is gradually improving as his regime succeeds in creating a resupply corridor linking Damascus, Homs and the coastal region. Al Nusra and ISIL forces are being progressively displaced from these areas. The battle currently raging in Syria's mountainous Qalamoun region may be decisive in securing the regime's advantage over its rivals.

At best Islamist forces can hope that the sectarian passions continue to swell their combat ranks and assist their consolidation over territory. Yet as the foreign presence in Al Qaeda grows, it is likely to alienate the local population. Al Qaeda's position in Syria is fragmenting and this should facilitate ISIL's decline in neighboring Iraq. Under such a scenario, ISIL and Al Nusra's dreams of a mythic idealized Syrian-Iraqi ummah are as likely to be as successful as AQIM's efforts to recreate a modern version of Muhammad's Medina community in Timbuktu, Goa and Kindal.

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