

Backgrounder #35

Recent Attacks in Iraq: Al-Qaeda in Iraq or Special Groups?

By Claire Russo and Marisa Cochrane, Research Analysts, Institute for the Study of War

October 6, 2008

Introduction

Over the last month there has been an increase in coordinated, well-planned attacks. While Coalition Forces are still investigating the perpetrators of these attacks, others have been quick to credit al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Although AQI is still present in Iraq, their networks have been largely disrupted by aggressive operations by Coalition Forces and Sons of Iraq (Sol). Since June 2007, the number of AQI attacks has decreased by eighty percent.¹ Their recent activity has been limited to the use of female suicide bombers on soft targets. It is unlikely that AQI has regenerated its forces and capabilities in such a short period of time.

However, these attacks do coincide with the return of Special Groups from Iran. They are not only a more capable enemy but have frequently conducted these types of complex attacks over the last year. Like AQI, Special Groups have strong motivations to undercut security improvements in order to maintain their operational capability and their criminal financing networks. It is not yet known who is responsible for these recent attacks and it is important to consider all possibilities before passing judgment.

If AQI is indeed responsible for these attacks, analysts must determine how they were able to regenerate their networks so quickly. Giving AQI credit for attacks of which they are not capable has serious consequences. This benefits Special Groups, AQI, and Shi'a sectarian political agendas, and is problematic for Coalition Forces and the Sol.

Recent Attacks in Diyala and Baghdad

In Diyala Province on September 24 2008, a joint force of Iraqi National Police (INP) officers and members of the local Awakening Councils were patrolling an area near the town of Khan Bani Sa'ad.² The force shifted its efforts to the nearby town of Dulaimat after an INP checkpoint was attacked by unnamed gunman killing one policeman. When they arrived in Dulaimat, their convoy was struck by an

IED, followed by rocket propelled grenade (RPG), small arms and machine gun fire.³ Evidence suggests that the insurgents prepared for the convoy's arrival, as they waited until the INP and Sols were surrounded before launching the attack.⁴ An initial report claimed there were twenty people killed during the attack, but subsequent reports claimed the death toll was upwards of thirty-five, including an INP Colonel, Lieutenant Colonel and a Captain.⁵

Several days later, on September 28, insurgents launched a complex attack in the crowded market area of the Rusafa Security District.¹ The attack involved two IEDs and small arms fire, which left ten civilians dead and more than thirty wounded. Nine Iraqi Police were also injured in the attack.⁶ While it is not yet known who is responsible for the attack, many have speculated that AQI was involved. However, the complex nature and methods of the Rusafa attack suggests Special Groups involvement. Moreover, the day after the attack, Coalition Forces conducted an intelligence-driven raid against a Special Groups leader who was suspected of conducting IED attacks in the Rusafa area.⁷

While many have dismissed the Khan Bani Sa'ad and Rusafa attacks as the handiwork of AQI, they do in fact have the hallmarks of Special Groups' tactics. In April 2008, at the height of the fighting in Sadr City, Iranian-backed militias conducted numerous complex attacks on Coalition and Iraqi forces. A typical attack consisted of an improvised explosive devices (IED) detonation followed immediately by small arms, sniper, machine-gun, and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fire. These attacks were well-planned and orchestrated, evident in the positioning of fighters, the location of the IEDs, and the intensity of the engagements. In an especially fierce attack on April 11, 2008, a Coalition convoy was struck by more than six IEDs; immediately after, they were engaged by machine gun and RPG fire in a firefight that lasted for over an hour.⁸ This attack illustrated the standard Special Groups tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) for engaging Coalition and Iraqi forces. Additionally, it revealed their high degree of training, supply, coordination, and capability. This type of attack was repeated on four other occasions in late April.⁹

Special Groups have also intentionally employed tactics that resemble those used by AQI. In late November 2007, a Special Groups cell conducted an AQI-style attack in the crowded Ghazil pet market in eastern Baghdad. A bomb, which was disguised as a birdcage and laden with ball-bearings, exploded among the shoppers, killing more than a dozen and wounding close to sixty.¹⁰ According to Coalition reports, "the Special Group's aim appears to have been to demonstrate to Baghdadis the need for militia groups to continue providing their security inside Baghdad."¹¹ Months later, in another attempt to disrupt Baghdad's improving security, another Special Groups cell detonated a car bomb in the Hurriyah neighborhood of northwest Baghdad in June 2008.¹² More than sixty people were killed in this attack. By using a car bomb, the hallmark of AQI, an Iranian-linked cell sought to reignite sectarian violence and disrupt Sunni resettlement in the area in order to maintain its real estate extortion network.¹³

Like al Qaeda, Special Groups also appear to be targeting Sunni Sol leaders in an attempt to dismantle the program and inflame sectarian tensions. As Special Groups return from recent training in Iran, they

¹ The Rusafa Security District includes parts of the Karadah neighborhood. This is worth noting as many stories refer to the bombing as occurring in Karadah.

are adopting new tactics that include the use of “sticky bombs.”ⁱⁱ Such explosives have been used in a series of attacks on SOI leaders in the Adhamiyah neighborhood of Baghdad. Many in Baghdad and Washington have been quick to blame AQI for these attacks. Yet, according to Coalition reports, these bombs are coming from “outside” the Sunni neighborhood, most likely from the nearby neighborhoods of Shaab, Ur, and Sadr City, where Special Groups have long operated.¹⁴ If AQI is indeed responsible for the attack, their use of “sticky bombs” represents an important advancement in their capabilities. However, the recent use of these explosives has thus far been limited to Iranian-linked groups.

Conclusion

Major Coalition and ISF operations in Diyala Province over the last year have aimed to push AQI out of the major cities and away from Baghdad, from Khan Bani Sa’ad to Muqdadiyah. Following the US troop surge in 2007, AQI’s ability to conduct attacks on hard targets was largely eliminated. Constant Coalition and ISF operations in Diyala have limited AQI to the use of female suicide bombers on soft targets.¹⁵ Throughout 2008, female suicide bombers have been the trademark of AQI attacks in central Diyala Province.¹⁶ It is unlikely based on this information that AQI has the capability to conduct attacks of this nature. If AQI is indeed responsible for these attacks, analysts must determine how they were able to regenerate their networks so quickly. Conversely, giving AQI credit for attacks that they are not capable of has serious consequences.

Inaccurately attributing attacks to AQI benefits Special Groups in several ways. Promoting the image of AQI as a capable enemy force increases the potential that the Shi’a population will turn to militias for protection, thus maintaining and even expanding their criminal financing networks. It also allows Special Groups to operate with impunity under the guise of al-Qaeda. Finally, overestimating AQI’s capability detracts from reports of security progress over the last year and makes the Government of Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces, and Coalition forces look weak. Special Groups seek to discredit each of these groups and they achieve this objective when security threats from AQI are misjudged.

Like Special Groups, Shi’a sectarian politicians benefit from the perception of a strong Sunni enemy. This Shi’a government has long viewed the Sols with suspicion and seeks justification for dismantling the program. Operation Omens of Prosperity in Diyala and numerous public statements by government officials confirm this desire.¹⁷ The appearance of a capable AQI allows the GoI to suggest that the Sol are not able to secure the populations they purport to protect and further more that they may be enabling them. A resurgence of AQI gives the Shi’a government the opportunity to reject the Sol program.

Consequently, Sols are in an increasingly tenuous situation. They have played a major role in the reduction of violence in former AQI strongholds, yet the GoI has expressed little interest in formalizing their role as a local security force. If AQI is wrongly attributed to attacks in Sol areas, not only does it discredit the ability of Sols to secure their neighborhoods, it also frustrates individual efforts within the

ⁱⁱ For more detail on the return of Special Groups and their evolving tactics, see Marisa Cochrane, “Special Groups Regenerate,” Iraq Report XI, Institute for the Study of War, August 29, 2008; and Marisa Cochrane, “The Return of Special Groups,” Institute for the Study of War, September 29, 2008.

program and gives the GoI a legitimate reason not to pay them. This is problematic since the GoI assumed responsibility for paying the roughly 50,000 Sol members in Baghdad and surrounding areas on October 1st.¹⁸ These frustrations could ultimately lead Sol members to abandon the program, putting the recent security gains at risk.

Finally, inaccurate assessments of AQI's capabilities are harmful to Coalition Forces. They contradict the Coalition message that operations under the Surge have dramatically improved security and all but defeated AQI. These conclusions are challenged if AQI is frequently credited with attacks and reported to have increased capabilities. Perhaps most importantly, the aforementioned challenges to the Sol movement, if realized, would be detrimental to Coalition objectives and strategy. Any threat to the continuation or integration of the Sols jeopardizes the Coalition's security aims and achievements.

¹ William Selby USN, "Increased Capacity of Iraqi Army Allows Coalition to Shift Focus," American Forces Press Service, October 1, 2008.

² Alissa J. Rubin, "Ambush Kills 20 Iraqi Men Searching for Weapons," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2008.

³ "Iraqi Officials Say 22 Troops Killed in Ambush Northeast of Baghdad," *Associated Press*, Baghdad, September 24, 2008.

⁴ "20 Iraqis die in ambush," United Press International, Baghdad, September 24, 2008.

⁵ Ali al-Tuwaijri, "Iraq hunts for Qaeda gunmen after 35 die in ambush," *Agence-Presses France*, September 25, 2008.

⁶ Multi-National Corps-Iraq Press Release No. 20080929-02, "Double explosions, small-arms fire injure civilians, police in Rusafa," September 29, 2008.

⁷ Multi-National Corps-Iraq Press Release No. 20080930-11, "U.S. Soldiers capture SG criminal in New Baghdad," September 30, 2008.

⁸ Multi-National Corps-Iraq Press Release No. 20080412-02, "Coalition forces return fire after complex attack in Sadr City (Baghdad)," 3rd BCT PAO, 4th Inf. Div., April 12, 2008.

⁹ Insert Apr 22, 26, 28, 29 attacks.

¹⁰ Stephen Farrell, "Bomb at a Market Shatters Lull for Baghdad," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2007.

¹¹ Department of Defense Press Briefing with Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Director of Communications, Deputy Spokesman, Multi-National Corps – Iraq and Colonel David W. Sutherland, Commander of the Grey Wolf Brigade, 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, November 24, 2007.

¹² Michael Gisick, "U.S. still searching for answers in Hurriyah; 'Gangsters' are the main suspects in Baghdad blast," *Stars and Stripes*, June 26, 2008.

¹³ "U.S.: Shiite 'Special Group' Behind Baghdad Bombing That Killed 63," *Associated Press*, June 18, 2008.

¹⁴ Erica Goode, "Friction Infiltrates Sunni Patrols on Safer Iraqi Streets," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2008.

¹⁵ Eric Hamilton. Iraq Report #10, Expanding Security in Diyala Province. August 13, 2008.

¹⁶ RICHARD TOMKINS. Women Help Foil Female Suicide Bombers. (*Middle East Times*) September 23, 2008

¹⁷ Tariq Alhomayed. Betraying The Awakening Council. 24/08/2008, Ashraq al Alswat.

¹⁸ Hugh Sykes. "Awakening fears for Iraq's future" 1 October 2008, BBC News, Baghdad.