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Abstract: This is a series of papers that translate and analyze articles, reports, religious decrees, and other documents, written in Arabic by Islamist scholars, clerics, operatives, or intellectuals.

Arab volunteers killed in Iraq: an Analysis

By Reuven Paz

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Introduction

Since the end of the major phase of the war in Iraq and the collapse of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein in May 2003, Iraq—like Afghanistan in the 1980s, and Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s—has turned into a magnet for Jihadi volunteers. Unlike the case of Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya, the vast majority of the volunteers that streamed into Iraq are Arabs, while only few fighters stem from non-Arab Muslim countries or emigrant communities in the West.

One possible reason for the predominantly Arab composition of Jihadists in Iraq may be the fact that Iraq is an Arab country; occupied by the “Crusaders,” thus stimulating heightened degree of Arab solidarity among Arab supporters of Jihadi-Salafi individuals and groups. An additional reason may be the ease with which Saudis, Kuwaitis, Jordanians, or Syrians can cross the borders to Iraq. Furthermore, the Sunni Jihadi groups, and many other Islamists, even from within the Saudi and other Arab Islamic establishments, view the insurgency in Iraq as a legitimate Jihad not only against the Americans, but against the Shi`is as well.



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In the past two months, supporters of Jihadi-Salafi groups have posted lists of Arabs who were killed in Iraq on Islamist web sites. Saudi supporters of Global Jihad gathered the bulk of the details. With the information provided thus far, a list of 154 names of Arabs killed in Iraq in the past six months—mainly since the battle over Falluja—can be generated. Although the list is not necessarily a complete enumeration of all the Arab volunteers killed in Iraq, a short analysis of this list is nevertheless useful.

It is important to note that this list contains only those Arabs who joined the Jihadi-Salafi insurgency, primarily of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's group, and supporters of Qaedat al-Jihad. Even though the list is incomplete, it provides us with some interesting insights about the phenomenon of foreign volunteers for Jihad, which shows no signs of subsiding. One should also keep in mind that since the list contains information on those volunteers who have been killed, it does not necessarily reflect the exact numbers and composition of all Arab volunteers in Iraq. Nevertheless, it may be a relatively accurate reflection of the division of those who actually participated in the battles.

Analysis

Sorted by their countries of origin, the 154 Arabs killed in Iraq in the past six months have the following distribution:

Saudi Arabia:	94 (61%)
Syria:	16 (10.4%)
Iraq:	13 (8.4%)
Kuwait:	11 (7.1%)
Jordan:	4
Lebanon:	3 (one was living in Denmark)
Libya:	2
Algeria:	2
Morocco:	2 (one was living in Spain)
Yemen:	2
Tunisia:	2
Palestine:	1
Dubai:	1
Sudan:	1 (living in Saudi Arabia)

Particularly striking in the above list is the absence of Egyptians among foreign Arab volunteers for the insurgency in Iraq, even though Egypt is the largest Arab country, with millions of sympathizers of Islamist groups. It is also known that many Egyptians,



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including professionals among them, arrived in Iraq looking for work, and some of them were taken hostage by insurgent groups. Hundreds of Egyptians also took part in previous Islamist battles in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. The absence of Egyptians from the list may be explained by a significant decline in the influence of Jihadi groups in Egypt; the harsh oppression of Islamists by the Egyptian authorities; the mass trials of Egyptians who returned from other regions where Islamists staged insurgencies; and the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. While the Brotherhood does support the Jihad in Iraq, it advocates a strategy of propaganda only, demanding of its adherents to strictly refrain from physical participation in the Iraqi Jihad.

Another element to note is the relatively small number of Iraqis involved in the fighting on behalf of the Zarqawi group. Furthermore, it seems that out of several thousands of Iraqis killed in the battles of Fallujah, only a negligible small number of Iraqis were members of Zarqawi's group. The vast majority appears to have been members of other groups, including Saddam Hussein loyalists, or civilians.

The small number of Iraqis associated with Zarqawi may suggest that Zarqawi's group, Tawhid wal-Jihad—now also known as Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia—is in fact composed mostly of non-Iraqi Arab volunteers, such as Zarqawi himself, as well as his late chief cleric—Abu Anas al-Shami—both of whom are Jordanians. It could also explain the alliance between Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden, due to the multi-national nature of the two groups. If true, it also shows that the majority of insurgencies carried out in Iraq by Iraqis, is directed by the remains of the Baath Party, i.e., by Saddam loyalists rather than by the Islamists.

The list also shows that the majority of the Arab Jihadi volunteers in Iraq originate from countries that are bordering Iraq, namely—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Syria—due to the ease with which Jihadists from these countries can infiltrate Iraq. Among those killed the number of Syrians, 16, is of note. This high number of Islamists from Syria killed in Iraq must have been noticed by the Syrian authorities, and should raise their concern. The Syrian government, as part of its established policy of supporting the remains of the Iraqi Baath Party, seemed to have turned a blind eye to the number of Syrian Jihadi volunteers that cross the border into Iraq.

Sorted by their residency within Saudi Arabia, the distribution of the 94 Saudi volunteers is as follows:



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Najd (mostly in Riyadh): 61
Qassim/Buraydah: 12
Hijaz (mostly in Mecca): 7
Eastern province: 7
Southern province: 5
North/Tabbouk: 2

Out of 154 Arabs killed in Iraq, 33 carried out suicide attacks, as following:

Saudi Arabia: 23 (10 from Najd—9 of them from Riyadh; 5 from the Eastern province; 5 from Buraydah; 2 from the Hijaz; 1 from the Southern province).
Syria: 5
Kuwait: 2
Libya: 1
Iraq: 1
Morocco: 1

The list clearly, albeit not surprisingly, points at the significant involvement of Saudis in the Islamist insurgency in Iraq. The data may be slightly incorrect in the percentage of Saudis killed in Iraq, since mainly Saudi supporters of Global Jihad gathered it. The number of non-Saudi Arab volunteers killed may be higher. Despite these minor potential inaccuracies, the number of Saudis killed in the past six months in Iraq (94) is too large to be ignored. It strongly suggests the Saudis' direct and active involvement both in the insurgency battles as well as in terrorist operations. Saudis also constitute the highest percentage, 70% (23 of 33), of Arab suicide bombers in Iraq. Here, too, the Syrians occupy the second place (15%).

The division of Saudis according to regions shows that residents of Najd, primarily of the capital Riyadh, have assumed the most prominent role among participants in terrorist activities in Iraq. As the data shows, Najdis consist 43.5% of Saudi suicide bombers, and 64.9% of all Saudi volunteers to Iraq. It seems that the Tawhidi/Wahhabi doctrines of Najd—the heart of Wahhabism—remain highly effective, even though it is the Saudi clerics and scholars who studied in Islamic universities in the Hijaz who have developed parts of the dissident doctrines of Global Jihad.

An even more important conclusion derived from this data relates to the social origin of most of the Saudi volunteers, since Najd is the region of the Saudi kingdom's more influential tribes.



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Many of these Saudis come from respected and well known tribes or families whose members were involved in Islamist terrorist activity within and outside of the Saudi kingdom in recent years, including the 9/11 attacks. These tribes include, inter alia, the Al-Utaybi, Al-Shamari, Al-Mutayri, Al-Dawsari, Al-Qahtani, or al-Rashed tribes.

Many of the Saudis present on the list were 25-30 years old and married. Some were highly educated, and the list contained several professionals, including two young businessmen. In ten known cases two Saudi brothers volunteered to fight in Iraq and were killed. In three cases, two brothers carried out a suicide attack, either a joint or separate attacks. One of the Saudis, Muhammad bin Aedh al-Ghadif al-Qahtani, was a Captain in the Saudi National Guard before he went to Iraq. The National Guard seems to be the Saudi military force most exposed to Jihadi-Salafi influence, as was earlier proven in other terrorist cases that took place inside the kingdom. Members of the Guard also sold or smuggled weapons to Saudi Islamists that were subsequently used in operations in Saudi Arabia.

From the partial data available of Arab volunteers killed in Iraq, we can further learn that some of them, not only Saudis, came from wealthy or upper middle class families. Some were students who left their studies in order to join the battle in Iraq. Only few were involved in past Islamist insurgencies in Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Chechnya. Three Saudis, two Lebanese, and one Kuwaiti were sons of Afghan alumni. Yet, the vast majority of Arabs killed in Iraq have never taken part in any terrorist activity prior to their arrival in Iraq. One Syrian was 13 years old and with his father in Fallujah, where the two were killed.

Many of the Arabs killed in Iraq, especially the Saudis, went to Iraq in groups, consisting mainly of friends, and some were influenced by brothers or other family members to join the Jihad. This is another sign of the impact of the Jihadi atmosphere in Saudi Arabia, both with regard to dissident views vis-à-vis the Saudi regime, and the duty of Jihad in Iraq. The support for violent Jihad in Iraq against the Americans was encouraged by the Saudi Islamic establishment. In October 2004, 26 of the senior Saudi Ulama published a declaration supporting the Jihad in Iraq, eliciting no reaction by the Saudi government.

Conclusion

While the list analyzed above is incomplete, the data it contains provides us with a glimpse into a very important aspect of the Islamist involvement in the insurgency in Iraq: Arab Jihadi volunteers constitute a significant portion of the Sunni insurgents.



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This ensures the persistence of the Jihadi-Salafi model of Global Jihad, which is further strengthened by the situation in Iraq, unlike the Afghani one, enjoys widespread coverage in the international media. The battle experience that Jihadists gain in Iraq, a campaign that, unlike in Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Chechnya, is plagued more by acts of terrorism than by guerrilla warfare, supplies the Islamist adherents of the Global Jihad culture with a wealth of first hand field experience, in spite of the absence of organized training camps.

It seems that thus far, Saudis are not only the group most affected by the insurgency in Iraq, but also help feed it. One significant explanation for that may be the Wahhabi hostility towards the Shi'is, who are perceived as infidels, and the notion of the need to support the Sunni minority in Iraq. Even though the Iraqi Sunni community is composed from various kinds of trends, including many Baathists, Saudi Wahhabi circles view it as a community under attack. Hence, Islamists should assist it through a personal duty (*Fardh `Ayn*) of Jihad, in order to turn it into the “victorious community” (*Al-Taefah al-Mansourah*) in Islamist terms.

The intensive involvement of Saudi volunteers for Jihad in Iraq is also the result of the Saudi government's doublespeak, whereby it is willing to fight terrorism, but only if directly affected by it on its own soil. Saudi Arabia is either deliberately ignoring, or incapable and too weak, to engage in open and brave opposition to Jihadi terrorism outside of the Kingdom. In the future, the Iraqi experience of these mainly Saudi volunteers may create a massive group of “Iraqi alumni” that will threaten the fragile internal situation of the desert kingdom. In the past year, it appeared as if the Saudis were successful in limiting the Jihadi-Salafi terrorism on Saudi soil. Their blind eyes in the face of the Saudi Islamic establishment's support of the Jihad in Iraq may pose a greater threat in the future, as soon as the hundreds of volunteers return home. The present Saudi regime does not seem as firm as its Egyptian colleague in fighting its domestic Islamist opposition. While Egypt managed to put all returnees from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Albania, and Chechnya behind bars for a long time, at present the Saudi regime does not seem to have the willingness and wherewithal to do the same with its own returnees.

In recent months, the insurgency in Iraq is affecting another neighboring country—namely Kuwait. The Kuwaiti authorities are facing a rising wave of Salafist insurgency, including terrorist operations. In January-February 2005 they also seized large amounts of weapons. We should also add to that the activity of Islamist groups in Jordan, and the support for the Jordanian Zarqawi in his homeland. The spiritual father of the



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Tawhid wal-Jihad is the Jordanian of Palestinian origin, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdesi, who was recently acquitted by Jordanian court after several years of detention.

The Iraqi insurgency and the involvement of Arab volunteers, should, therefore, be more alarming among Iraq's neighbors. The Arab sympathy for the Sunni Jihadists in Iraq these days, reminds us of Arab solidarity with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980-1988. Many Arab circles perceived the war then as a reflection of the past hostility between Arabs and Persians in the early Islamic history. Islamist fundamentalists in our times may view the Sunni-Shi'i conflict in Iraq in similar terms.