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The next insurgency: Baathists and Salafis pool resources to fight Iraqi government

Guest contributor Dr Michael Knights wrote about the beginnings of “the next insurgency” in Iraq in April 2009, describing meetings between Iraqi Sunni leaders and Baathist insurgents, which were characterised as a “long-term hedging of bets” by both parties ahead of the US drawdown and the assumption of full control by the Shia-led government in Baghdad. Sources within the US and Iraqi government intelligence systems believe this next insurgency is starting to unfold.

Fears in security circles that Iraq is to become mired in a new security crisis – dubbed by GSN ‘the next insurgency’ – have been highlighted by a general increase in violence across Iraq in August/September. This was brought into stark focus by the 25 August mass casualty attacks, which struck 13 areas across the country even while US politicians and forces, and their Iraqi counterparts, were preparing to mark the formal end of American combat operations.

The theory that a new Sunni insurgency is slowly emerging from the still warm embers of the old one is not popular with either US or Iraqi politicians. In Washington, US intelligence analysts who are proselytising about the subject are being muffled due to the election-year need to claim Iraq as a stable patient who is no longer in need of US injections of blood and treasure. In Iraq, the prospect of renewed violence is understandably unpalatable and flies in the face of prime minister **Nouri Al-Maliki**’s claims to have pacified the country. There is substance to Iraqi politicians’ claims that mass casualty bombings do not necessarily signal a recovery of *Al-Qaeda in Iraq* (now operating as the *Islamic State of Iraq* or *ISI*). But the broader patterns of violence across the country nevertheless points to a significant undercurrent influencing the Sunni Arab community and its politics.

Iraq witnessed at least 17 mass casualty attacks in August, a little below the monthly average this year of 21. But the set of co-ordinated attacks on 25 August gave the sense of escalating violence, with mass casualty bombings attempted in Mosul, Kirkuk, Tikrit, Dujail (near the late **Saddam Hussein**’s birthplace), Baqubah, Muqdadiah, Ramadi, Fallujah, northern Baghdad’s Adhamiyah and Kadhimiyah districts, plus the southern cities of Karbala, Kut and Basra. These attacks were claimed by the ISI. Though only soft targets were selected across the south – typically Shia civilian gatherings targeted with multiple car bombs – the co-ordination involved in the attacks

is noteworthy at a time when the ISI and other groups continue to suffer significant attrition to their leadership cadres.

Such networks have had to work hard to stay ahead of the US–Iraqi campaign to eradicate jihadist cells and foil their plots. The ISI had settled into a pattern by late 2009, undertaking quarterly car bombings (spaced three months apart) against clusters of government buildings in Baghdad. The ministries of foreign affairs, finance, justice and the Baghdad Provincial Council were struck by car bombs. Government workers were targeted in a series of car park bombings near the International Zone. So-called concept attacks were carried out first against a trio of international hotels, then against diplomatic missions.

Politics, succession and risk in Saudi Arabia

Politics, succession and risk in Saudi Arabia is a GSN special report that was launched to great acclaim at a 15 January seminar in London, hosted and co-organised by Chatham House’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

The new report analyses Saudi policy on issues including succession, domestic and regional politics, defence, energy and financial trends, and features extensively researched biographical entries on 1,200 Al-Sauds from the ruling family’s main branch, together with profiles of leading cadet branch businessmen, and a range of maps and graphics.

Politics, succession and risk in Saudi Arabia focuses on how King **Abdullah Bin Abdelaziz** has sought to reshape the face of Al-Saud rule during his first five years on the throne through initiatives such as creating the Allegiance Council in 2006 and building national consensus on issues critical for the Kingdom’s future.

The report has a strong focus on the emergence of new generations, including the grandsons of Ibn Saud, who barring unforeseen regime change will eventually take on the senior leadership positions.

Order the report online or email nick@gsn-online.com

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The late-09 attacks killed 329 and wounded 1,936. But in March/April 2010, US-Iraqi 'man-hunter' teams captured the West Baghdad ISI emir **Munaf Abdelrahim Al-Rawi** and then killed ISI leader **Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi** and his 'minister of war' **Abu Ayub Al-Masri**.

Since these attacks, the ISI campaign has become haphazard and lacking in centralised direction. Baghdad attacks claimed by the ISI have since included bombings of Shia civilians, an attack on the *Central Bank of Iraq* headquarters, a bombing directed against the Saudi-owned *Al-Arabiya* television channel, and attacks on government checkpoints and recruiting stations. Significantly, some of these attacks have also been claimed by *Jaish Rajal Al-Tariqah Al-Naqshbandia (JRTN)*, a Baathist-controlled insurgent movement that is rapidly becoming the most influential insurgent group in the country.

Rebound in insurgent tempo

Mass casualty attacks may grab the headlines, but they represent less than 5% of the attacks that are still taking place in Iraq each month – and the broader patterns of violence is unsettling. There were 482 officially reported incidents in August. This is an increase on the 332 incidents in July. The rise is the first since incident levels started to drop following the March 2010 elections. The increase was most evident in Baghdad, where incident levels almost doubled in August. Key insurgent provinces like Salah Al-Din, Kirkuk, Nineveh and Diyala saw significant flare-ups of violence as insurgent networks upped their tempo.

US officials counter claims of renewed insurgency by correctly stating that incident levels are a fraction of the levels seen in the bad old days, and argue that the overall security situation has improved:

- over 6,000 violent incidents were recorded in the worst month on record, April 2007, versus 482 in August 2010;
- there was a high point of 235 mass casualty attacks in May 2007 versus 34 in July, the highest number seen this year;
- the effectiveness and lethality of attacks on military forces has greatly reduced. US and *Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)* deaths have dropped to historic lows and remain there, largely due to better military force protection measures; and
- almost every poll undertaken in Iraq finds the population less concerned about security than they were before.

All this is true, but will the insurgency continue to decline or will it (as a small subset of analysts fear) hold at current levels or even begin to rebound? The beginnings of a new insurgent campaign against the ISF is arguably becoming evident, and while this won't approach the levels of violence seen in 2006–08 (including sectarian cleansing and militia activation), it will make many northern and north-central Iraqi areas less safe. Of note: the predominately Shia 6th, 11th and 17th *Iraqi Army* divisions are being targeted more intensively by Sunni insurgents in and around Baghdad, in particular. This could lead

to increasingly heavy-handed army actions, which would in turn aid the recruitment of Sunni militants.

An evolving pattern of Sunni violence

Much of the violence is now passing beneath the radar of both the US and the Shia-led Iraqi government – the latter now being seen sometimes as just as clueless an occupier of Sunni areas as the US military was until 2007. Although bombs are smaller and the number of attacks is lower than in the past, much of the violence is being very effectively targeted and selectively employed. Sunni insurgent movements have largely moved away from the use of vehicle bombs against civilian targets to collectively punish and intimidate Sunni communities. Instead, such groups are attempting to rebuild operational sanctuaries and recruitment areas using more selective tools such as 'night letters' (warnings), assassination and bribery targeted on key community leaders and security force members.

The number of Under-Vehicle IED attacks and lethal close quarter assassinations with silenced pistols against ISF and *Sons of Iraq* police auxiliaries has increased fourfold in the last year. Rather than solidifying public opposition to the insurgency (as mass casualty attacks did), the 'new' tactics are quickly eroding the Sunni community's will to side with the Shia-led government and security forces. Indeed, thoughtless government policies on the Sons of Iraq – disarming some groups and freezing payments to others for months on end – have exacerbated the problem. The Sons of Iraq have now almost disappeared from the streets in west Baghdad due to poor treatment by the Iraqi Army and intimidation by Sunni militants. This is evidence of a more permissive environment for Sunni militants.

Al-Douri: last man standing

To many, the idea of a more cohesive Sunni resistance guided by an ambitious Baathist plan will sound outlandish in light of the security gains of recent years. Yet regardless of how unlikely the idea may seem, there is certainly something happening within the Sunni community, driven by the government's neglect of the Sunni issue, the apparent sidelining of Sunni votes for **Iyad Allawi**, and by the US withdrawal, which has come with terrifying rapidity for many of the Sunni militiamen who put all their eggs in the US basket from 2007 onwards. The kind of violence that matters – the targeted terror that changes the minds of many more people than are directly maimed – is on the increase. And the carefully parsed use of terror and intimidation for organisational profit – so different from the restless and self-defeating violence of *Al-Qaeda in Iraq* – is deeply reminiscent of the *Baath Party*.

If anyone can bring off even part of the purported JRTN agenda, it is **Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri**. The only one of the 1968 Baath coup plotters still alive and active, he has found a knack for keeping himself alive and relevant in Iraq's insurgent politics. He boasts a bevy of special relationships with groups as diverse

JRTN: Underground offensive led by Baathists with beards

The more methodical and thoughtful approach that Sunni insurgents are taking in their campaigns to undermine the government in Baghdad has led many to speculate about the role of former Baathists in such networks, and particularly the influence of the **JRTN** and its leader, former head of the **Baathist Revolutionary Command Council** and **Saddam** crony **Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri**. This kind of speculation is not just the bleating of Shia politicians seeking to underline their anti-Baathist credentials: serious discussions are taking place within the **US** intelligence community regarding the potential role that former Baathists may play in the future of Iraqi politics and, in the near term, the impact that former regime intelligence and military personnel are having on the Sunni insurgency.

JRTN is an enigmatic insurgent movement that formed in late 2006 in the areas that encompassed the Saddam-era 'presidential security triangle', bounded by Taji, Beyji and Kirkuk. This area encompasses the core insurgent theatres in Iraq: the Diyala River Valley, Tigris River Valley (TRV), Hamrin Lake and Hamrin Mountains, plus the insurgent support areas between Mosul, Sharqat and Kirkuk. Although the movement's name suggests a strong connection to the **Naqshbandiya** – a Sufi sect associated with the dervish culture – the group is a chameleon that has at times stressed its Islamist credentials, tribal networks and old Arab socialist roots as circumstances required. Like its leader, Al-Douri, and the **Baath Party** of old, the JRTN can become whatever it needs to be to achieve its goals.

The ultimate goal of the JRTN is up for debate, but according to US government intelligence analysts canvassed by *GSN*, Iraq's Baathists continue to think big and to aim for a return to power. Though a direct return to Baathist control is plainly impossible, the strategy being implemented by Al-Douri and other Iraq-based Baathists is more subtle. Whereas Saddam family *consigliere* **Mohammed Younis Al-Ahmed Al-Mawali**, the Syrian-based head of **Al-Awda** (literally the return), has focused on securing political rehabilitation, amnesties and the repatriation of Baathist exiles, the JRTN is the military wing of an effort to infiltrate former Baathists throughout a future nationalist government.

The new Baath Party is seeking to resurface as a nationalist movement and portray itself as a movement made up of experienced technocrats who are determined to get Iraq 'back on track'. They would play on the country's exasperation with poor services and its apparent distrust of inexperienced Islamist politicians to run major bureaucracies. Saddam's excesses and his familial nepotism would be condemned by the new

movement – just as **Stalin's** henchmen turned against his memory after his death. For such a plan to succeed, US analysts told *GSN*, the new Baath movement recognises that chaos must prevail, that the United States must leave, that living standards must not improve, and that any Shia-led (and in their view **Iranian**-sponsored) government must fail. These conclusions outline the form of the reinvigorated insurgency that the JRTN is shaping up to lead.

Tactics and operations

The JRTN's tactics and the movement's tight structure are highly indicative that Baathist and Saddam-era military and intelligence personnel are running the show. US military intelligence personnel describe JRTN as a disciplined organisation that is focused on the selection of high-quality personnel, training and operational security. JRTN has brought about a renaissance in the quality of insurgent attacks in areas such as Kirkuk, Hawijah and throughout the TRV, though the movement is supposedly active throughout the country, further pointing towards its exploitation of Baathist networks.

JRTN appears to have maintained a tight relationship with ISI and other Salafi terrorist groups, trading on Al-Douri's Islamist credentials, including his 'Return of Faith' campaign during the last decade of Baathist rule. In some cases, this has led to JRTN carrying out attacks on behalf of ISI, or where ISI has been allowed to claim the lion's share of the credit due to ISI contributions (usually money or suicide attackers). JRTN has facilitated the movement of ISI fighters. Notably, ISI leader **Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi** and ISI war minister **Abu Ayub Al-Masri** were killed in Tikrit, Saddam's home town and one of the major JRTN power bases.

In recent months, JRTN appears to have played a more assertive role in the relationship, perhaps exploiting not only the deaths of ISI's senior leaders but also the 3 May capture of **Abu Abdallah Al-Shafii**, the leader of **Ansar Al-Islam** and the longest-serving insurgent leader in Iraq aside from Al-Douri himself. JRTN uses ISI as a form of sub-contractor now, exploiting its ability to undertake suicide attacks in order to launch a campaign of car bomb attacks on political opponents of al-Douri's clan and on ISF bases in the movement's TRV base. In JRTN areas, Islamist militants are more integrated into the broader anti-**Kurdish** and anti-American resistance forces.

as Iraq's Sufis, Ansar Al-Islam, the tribes of north-central Iraq and nationalist militant movements such as **Jaish Al-Mujahideen**. Having stayed in Iraq permanently since 2003, Al-Douri is the last link to the Baath government and his insurgent credentials are rock solid compared to all the young pretenders in Iraq and the exiled Baathists outside. Nor is Al-Douri lacking in vision: it was none other than he who submitted letters to presidents **George W Bush** and **Barack Obama**; who interviewed with *Time* magazine; and who had pronouncements read out at the *League of Arab States* despite his charged status since 2003.

With other insurgents dropping like flies, Al-Douri simply needs to stay hidden and stay alive to become the last man standing and, possibly, re-emerge as the leader of Iraq's next insurgency.

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The newsletter is held as a source of record and learning in leading academic institutions, as well as by government departments and corporate information centres, and is essential reading for anyone serious about doing business in the Gulf.

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