

MOTHER JONES

Al Qaeda in Iraq: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Bush administration propaganda notwithstanding, Al Qaeda was not a factor in Iraq before the U.S. invasion. But it is now—and any withdrawal plan needs to deal with the demons we helped create.

Peter Bergen & Paul Cruickshank

A gathering threat from Iraq, a safe haven for Al Qaeda; stockpiles of chemical weapons in the hands of forces deeply hostile to the United States; Iraqi terrorist groups capable of attacking American allies and even, perhaps, the homeland itself. That was the utterly false portrait of Iraq that the Bush administration painted in constructing a rationale to invade the country in March 2003. Four and a half years later, in a hideous twist of irony, that description is a dangerous reality. Although Al Qaeda had no meaningful relationship with the Saddam Hussein regime, it is now entrenched in Iraq and is carrying out scores of attacks a week, some of them with chemical weapons in the form of bombs containing chlorine gas. Al Qaeda has used Iraq as a launching pad for attacks on American allies and as a training ground for thousands of jihadist terrorists from across the Muslim world, and it has said it will use its stronghold there as a base from which to attack the United States.

President Bush, though he dismisses as "flawed logic" the notion that the U.S. invasion of Iraq had a role in all of this, now says there are terrorists there who pose a direct threat to the homeland. "We've already seen how Al Qaeda used a failed state thousands of miles from our shores to bring death and destruction to the streets of our cities—and we must not allow them to do so again. So however difficult the fight is in Iraq, we must win it," he said in a speech in July in Charleston, South Carolina. Indeed, President Bush has elevated the fight against Al Qaeda in Iraq as the central justification for continuing to wage a large-scale war there, a rationale that has now superseded halting sectarian strife or installing a functioning democracy. At an Independence Day celebration in West Virginia this year, Bush asserted, "Many of the spectacular car bombings and killings you see are as a result of Al Qaeda, the very same folks that attacked us on September the 11th." That assertion is, of course, demonstrably false, as Al Qaeda in Iraq wasn't founded until three years after the 9/11 attacks.

As the nation wrestles with the question of how to execute the inevitable withdrawal, it is incumbent on all of us to ask the questions the Bush administration has clearly not. What is Al Qaeda in Iraq? Who is its leadership? How important has it been in fanning the conflict in Iraq? How Iraqi an organization is it? Can it attack American interests overseas or the United States itself? To what extent is it communicating with or taking direction from Al Qaeda's leaders in Pakistan? Does it pose more of a threat to the U.S. than Al Qaeda Central on the Pakistan border? How can Al Qaeda in Iraq be contained? And what would happen to the organization in the event of a total American withdrawal? Using Al Qaeda's Iraq presence as a propaganda tool is inexcusable and irresponsible. But so is ignoring it.

AL QAEDA'S EMERGENCE AS A FORCE IN IRAQ

Though the Bush administration tends to gloss over this fact, Al Qaeda only established itself in Iraq in October 2004, well after the U.S. invasion, when its leader Zarqawi fused his Tawhid and Jihad group with Al Qaeda by publicly pledging allegiance to Osama bin Laden. Zarqawi had earlier featured at the center of administration efforts to tie the Saddam Hussein regime to Al Qaeda. In his since-thoroughly-discredited address to the United Nations in February 2003, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell described a "sinister nexus between Iraq and the Al Qaeda network," elaborating that "Iraq today harbors a deadly network headed by Zarqawi's forces, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden" and that Zarqawi had set up his operations, including bioweapons training, with the approval of the Saddam Hussein regime.

No evidence of such a nexus has since materialized. Zarqawi's initial Iraq operation was limited to Kurdistan, part of the no-fly zone established by the United States in northern Iraq that was outside of Saddam Hussein's control. According to German intelligence officials who interrogated a defector from Zarqawi's group, Zarqawi traveled to northern Iraq with around 25 companions, mostly Jordanians, in mid-2002 and hooked up with the Kurdish terrorist group Ansar al-Islam, an outfit deeply opposed to Saddam's Baathist regime. Their plan was to use Kurdistan as a base to resist the impending American invasion.

Although Zarqawi ran a training camp in western Afghanistan up until the fall of the Taliban, he never joined the Al Qaeda fold, preferring to keep his independence from bin Laden—particularly because up until 2002 his preference was to attack Israeli, Jewish, and Jordanian targets rather than American ones.

It was only in late 2004, a year and a half after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, that a closer alliance made sense to Zarqawi and Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda wanted a foothold in the Iraqi insurgency, recognizing it as the cause célèbre for jihadists worldwide, while Zarqawi presumably recognized the power of Al Qaeda's global brand. After months of negotiations reportedly involving trips from Pakistan to Iraq by Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, a key bin Laden lieutenant, Zarqawi released an online statement on October 17, 2004, promising obedience to Al Qaeda's leader:

"By God, O sheikh of the mujahideen, if you bid us plunge into the ocean, we would follow you. If you ordered it so, we would obey!" For Zarqawi the timing of the alliance made sense because the Iraqi insurgency was catching on as a cause in jihadist circles worldwide. The capture of Saddam Hussein and television images of insurgents battling U.S. troops in two-pitch battles for Fallujah in April and November 2004 encouraged more foreign jihadists to travel to Iraq, according to Mohammed Hafez, a visiting Professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, whose 2007 book *Suicide Bombers in Iraq* authoritatively explores the insurgency.

Before joining forces with bin Laden, Zarqawi's group, though only a relatively small part of the overall insurgency, undertook a series of strategically significant operations that deterred the international community from taking on a greater role in stabilizing Iraq. In August 2003 his group bombed the Jordanian embassy and the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad, killing the U.N. special envoy to Iraq and prompting the United Nations to withdraw. And in November 2003, one of Zarqawi's suicide bombers killed 19 Italians, mostly paramilitary police, in the southeastern town of Nasiriya. Zarqawi's ability to deploy suicide bombers allowed his organization to launch more ambitious attacks than other insurgent groups and was a key contribution to Iraq's slide into chaos.

But Zarqawi's biggest impact in Iraq was in provoking sectarian warfare between its Sunni and Shi'ite communities. On August 30, 2003, his group exploded a massive car bomb outside a Shi'ite mosque in Najaf that killed 125, including one of Iraq's top Shi'ite clerics, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim. In early 2004, the U.S. military released a letter it said had been written by Zarqawi to Al Qaeda associates that noted that provoking Shi'ite attacks on Sunnis was crucial to bolstering the Sunni insurgency. Sunnis in Iraq, the letter stated, "have little expertise or experience" in fighting and "for this reason...most of the groups are working in isolation with no political horizon." It went on, "The Shia in our opinion are the key to change. I mean that targeting them and hitting them in [their] religious, political and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their hidden rancor. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands [of the Shia]."

Zarqawi's strategy to attack the Shi'ites—which was continued by his successor Abu Ayyub al-Masri after he was killed in June 2006—has, unfortunately, proven wildly successful. The tipping point in the slide toward full-blown civil war was the February 2006 attack on the Golden Mosque in Samarra, a sacred shrine for the Shi'ites, which triggered a more intense cycle of sectarian strife that has killed tens of thousands and caused more than a million to flee their homes. According to the U.S. military, that attack was masterminded by Haythem Sabah al-Badri, a former member of Saddam's Republican Guard who joined Al Qaeda after the U.S. invasion and rose to become the Al Qaeda leader for the Samarra area. Badri was killed in a U.S. air strike in August.

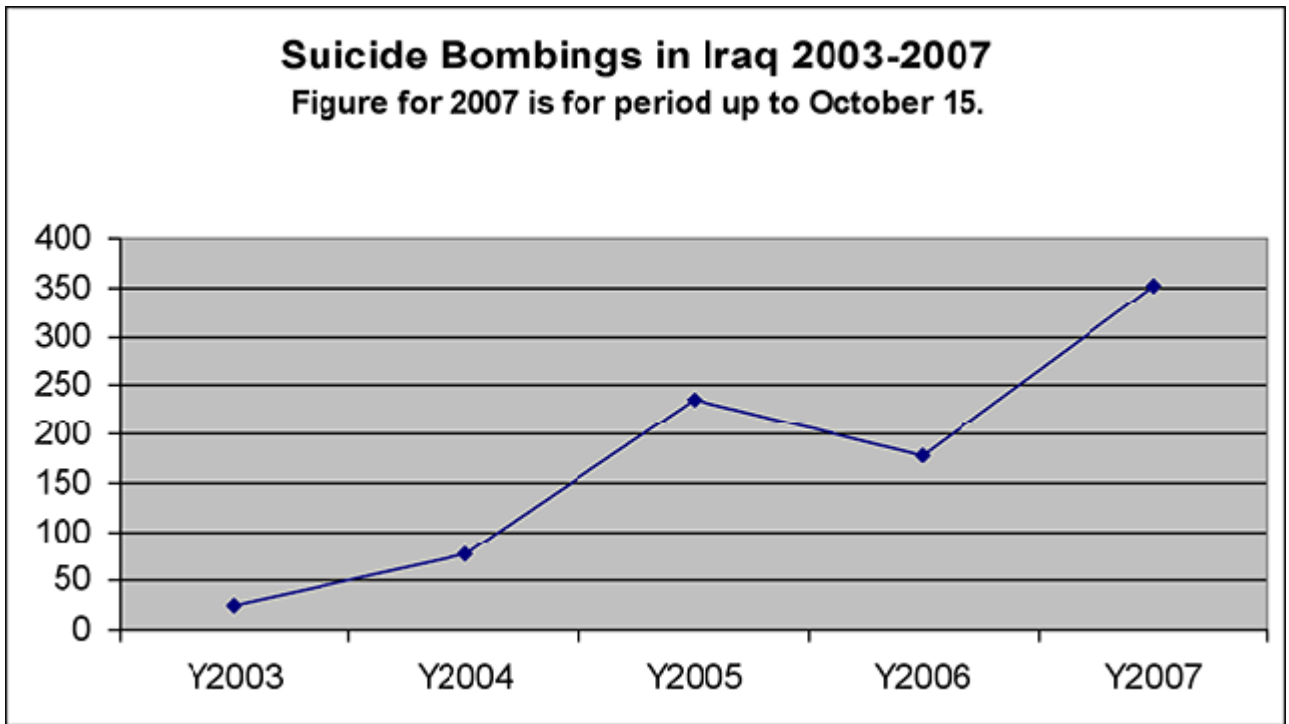
As a result in part of the tensions created by these attacks, Al Qaeda in Iraq (also known as AQI) has been able to diversify its volunteer base. Made up largely of foreigners at its inception in late 2004, the group is now dominated by Iraqi fighters, according to the July congressional testimony of Edward Gistaro, a top U.S. intelligence official. There has been a range of estimates about the size of AQI. The *New York Times* estimates that AQI has a fighting force of between 3,000 and 5,000 with perhaps twice as many supporters. In November 2006 AQI leader Masri claimed in an audiotape that his force constituted 12,000 fighters.

Whatever the precise numbers, it is clear that Al Qaeda constitutes a minority of the Sunni insurgency and has significantly fewer fighters than the Islamic Army in Iraq, the country's largest Sunni insurgent group. Last November Lt. General Michael D. Maples, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, estimated in congressional testimony that the total number of insurgents numbered between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters with many more supplying and supporting them.

Despite being smaller than some other insurgent groups, AQI has punched considerably above its numerical weight in Iraq. In a background briefing in July, the U.S. military estimated that AQI was responsible for up to 15 percent of all attacks in Iraq in the first half of 2007, though some experts have contested this figure, arguing it is a product of assigning Al Qaeda culpability too readily. For its part, AQI has certainly claimed a high attack tempo, detailing on jihadist websites 1,147 individual attacks for the month of January 2007; the Islamic Army of Iraq claimed responsibility for only 339 attacks in the same period, according to IntelCenter, a company that tracks jihadist propaganda for U.S. government clients. And the way AQI collates volumes of attack data from half a dozen provinces, detailing each individual operation, does seem to show an ability to coordinate operations across Iraq.

AQI's use of suicide bombers in Iraq has made the organization especially deadly, but because of improvements in American armor, such attacks have been mainly directed at Iraqi security services and Shiite civilians in recent years. According to figures tracked by Mohammed Hafez of the University of Missouri, as of October 15, 2007, there have been 864 suicide bombings in Iraq that killed more than 10,000 Iraqis. Given that the U.S. military estimates that Al Qaeda's foreign recruits have been responsible for 80 to 90 percent of such attacks, AQI has contributed more significantly than is generally understood to the conservative estimates of 70,000 Iraqi civilian deaths since the 2003 invasion.

AQI's suicide-bombing campaign has reached new heights since the U.S. military started surging troop levels at the beginning of this year, likely in response to the United States upping the ante. Hafez found that there have already been many more suicide attacks in Iraq in 2007 than in any other year, 351 as of October 15. And according to the U.S. military, in just the first six months of this year AQI killed or injured 4,000 Iraqi civilians. General David Petraeus accurately pointed out in congressional testimony in September that AQI was "off balance," but its destructive capabilities have clearly remained high.



THE THREAT

AQI's size and staying power matters; of all the Sunni insurgent groups, it is the only one that has declared an interest in targeting American interests outside Iraq. Even other Salafist-jihadist groups in Iraq such as Ansar Sunnah have made no indication that they want to fight outside Iraq. And the largest Sunni insurgent group, the Islamic Army of Iraq, has also insisted that its fight is in Iraq alone. When the Islamic Army of Iraq spokesman, Ibrahim al-Shammari, was asked in an interview on Al Jazeera in April, "Do your goals include causing America to fail abroad?" his answer was, "No, our goal is the liberation of Iraq from the occupation it is experiencing—the Iranian occupation and the American occupation." The Islamic Army in Iraq does not share AQI's radical brand of Salafist jihadism nor its penchant for global jihad; rather it is best described as "Islamist Nationalist," the group's communiqués making clear that its ambitions are restricted to creating a Sunni-dominated state run under Sharia law.

President Bush accurately reflected the available evidence when he stated in July that AQI was "a full member of the Al Qaeda terrorist network" that shares its parent organization's intent to attack the United States and its interests around the world. Although Zarqawi always maintained a certain independence from Al Qaeda's top leadership and was criticized by Al Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in the summer of 2005 for too harshly targeting Shiite civilians and other opponents, he made clear his commitment to a wider jihad against U.S. interests in the region by bombing three American hotels in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005, killing 60.

Zarqawi believed that establishing a stronghold in Iraq would provide "strategic depth and reach" for jihadists throughout the Middle East. "If we fail," the 2004 letter to Al Qaeda associates ascribed to Zarqawi noted, "we pack our bags and search for another land, as is the sad recurrent story in the arenas of Jihad." This closely echoes the views of Zawahiri, who wrote in his December 2001 tract *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* that "victory by the armies cannot be achieved unless the infantry occupies territory. Likewise, victory for Islamic movements against the world alliance cannot be attained unless these movements possess an Islamic base in the heart of the Arab region."

Zarqawi's successor Masri—an Egyptian operative thought to have ties to Zawahiri—has stuck even more closely to the Al Qaeda hymn sheet. In May the Associated Press found that Masri spent significant time in and out of Al Qaeda camps in Taliban-run Afghanistan in the 1990s, and President Bush has depicted Masri's ties to the senior Al Qaeda leadership as "deep and longstanding." Masri's closeness to the top Al Qaeda leadership was reflected by an even more fulsome pledge of loyalty to bin Laden than his predecessor's and his clear commitment to bin Laden's global jihad; he declared, for example, in a November 2006 audiotape that his organization "would not rest from Jihad until we have blown up the White House."

Under Masri, AQI's ties with senior Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan appear to have deepened. In July, U.S. forces captured an Iraqi Al Qaeda operative, Khalid al-Mashadani, who told his interrogators that he had acted as a conduit between the top leaders of Al Qaeda in Iraq and bin Laden and Zawahiri. According to the U.S. military, Mashadani revealed that "strategic direction" comes from the Al Qaeda senior leadership to the Al Qaeda in Iraq leadership. (Mashadani also said that Abu Omar Baghdadadi, the titular Iraqi head of the "Islamic State of Iraq"—AQI's latest name for itself—was in fact a fiction and that an actor had been employed to record his frequent audiotapes. According to General Kevin Bergner, the senior director for Iraq, this was a ruse by Masri to mask the fact that much of AQI's leadership is foreign—the pretence even featured a lengthy declaration of loyalty last November by Masri to his fictional boss.)

A key question is to what extent AQI is currently willing to use Iraq as a launching pad for an attack on the United States. While AQI may be predisposed to attacking the United States, this does not mean that its leaders are willing to divert resources from the Iraqi front. Bruce Hoffman, a professor at Georgetown University and a leading authority on terrorism, has argued, "[The threat jihadists] pose beyond Iraq is not so certain. There will be plenty of fighting to keep them there for years." However, the fact that much of AQI's leadership is foreign means that it is unlikely to be solely Iraq-centric in its approach. Indeed, Al Qaeda in Iraq may already have attempted an operation against the United States' closest ally: British authorities are currently investigating a possible link between AQI and the foiled terrorist attack in Glasgow in July. Additionally, AQI leaders may calculate that diverting resources from Iraq is worth the effort in that a successful attack against the United States or one of its allies would likely

significantly boost the prestige of their organization among jihadists, both within and outside Iraq.

Some have argued that worsening sectarian conflict in Iraq in the event of a U.S. withdrawal would lead AQI to shift its focus toward attacking Iran rather than the U.S. homeland. In a July audiotape, AQI warned Iran that it might be targeted: "We are giving the Persians, and especially the rulers of Iran, a two-month period to end all kinds of support for the Iraqi Shiite government...Otherwise a severe war is waiting for you." But AQI is unlikely to drop its long-term goal of undertaking operations in the United States. And according to Mohammed Hafez, Al Qaeda's fight against Shiite ascendancy "may also generate opportunities for anti-Western recruitment through the claim that the United States and its Western allies have given primacy to the Shiites over true believers."

Today it is not clear that even if AQI made attacking the United States a priority it would have the capability to do so. Its ability to attack the U.S. homeland is dependent on developing safe havens in Iraq in which the long-term planning, recruitment, and training necessary for an attack can be managed. To have a chance of launching a successful plot against the United States, AQI needs to be able to operate camps in Iraq with something like the freedom that Al Qaeda had in Taliban-run Afghanistan, a freedom it does not currently enjoy. It should be noted that even with Al Qaeda's advantageous setup in Afghanistan it took Khalid Sheikh Mohammed three years to put together the 9/11 attacks. With the U.S. authorities now much more alert to the threat, launching a successful operation will likely require even more planning.

Al Qaeda today is more likely to be able to organize a significant terrorist attack against the United States from Pakistan than from Iraq. This July's National Intelligence Estimate stated that Al Qaeda had "regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including a safe haven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas," while director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell testified in February that the next terrorist attack in the United States was most likely to emanate from Pakistan.

Al Qaeda currently has a strong presence in Baghdad and surrounding provinces such as Diyala to the northeast and Babil to the south, which includes a network of safe houses and patches of territory that they effectively control. However, Al Qaeda's safe havens in Iraq are currently significantly less secure than those in Pakistan's western mountains, and for two reasons. First, unlike Pakistan, the U.S. military is continuously launching operations against AQI, keeping the pressure up on the organization, making it much harder for it to organize large-scale foreign operations. And second, Iraq's relatively flat terrain makes it more difficult to conceal training camps.

The fact that Iraq is less safe an operating environment means that only the most committed and hardcore jihadists are willing to travel there, and when they do it

is usually with a determination to fight in Iraq and not elsewhere. The difficult conditions in Iraq have also limited its ability to recruit European jihadists. Since 9/11, most of Al Qaeda's plots against Americans outside Iraq have involved militant European jihadists for whom receiving terrorist training from Al Qaeda, or its affiliates, in Pakistan is easier than it would be in war-torn Iraq. For example, the three Islamic militants, two of whom were German citizens, accused of plotting attacks on a U.S. airbase and consulate in Germany this September were allegedly trained in camps in Pakistan, as were British citizens of Pakistani descent accused of plotting attacks on U.S. airliners in August 2006. For British militant Islamists, Pakistan has been an obvious first choice for terrorist training.

AQI's current ability to launch out-of-area operations should nevertheless not be underestimated. After all, in November 2005 it was able to task a team of Iraqi operatives to launch simultaneous suicide bombing attacks on American hotels in Jordan, and in August of that year AQI operatives were responsible for rocketing two U.S. warships in the Port of Aqaba, killing a Jordanian soldier. Al Qaeda may also take advantage of refugee flows out of the country to infiltrate the West with operatives. The United Nations expects 40,000 Iraqi refugees to come to Europe alone in 2007, double the figure for 2006.

Any future withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq will obviously affect Al Qaeda's ability to operate in the country. President Bush, unsurprisingly, has a bleak assessment of what withdrawal would mean, saying in July that "surrendering the future of Iraq to Al Qaeda would be a disaster," which is an obvious exaggeration, as the thousands of fighters that make up Al Qaeda in Iraq have no hope of taking over the whole country. Conversely, in their calls to wind down the war, Democratic presidential candidates have tended to downplay potential gains that Al Qaeda might make in Iraq. Indeed, a false choice has been presented by politicians on both sides of the aisle: For many Republicans, the central front of the war on terror is in Iraq, while for many Democrats it's on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Unfortunately, the sad fact is that today there are two key havens for Al Qaeda and they are in *both* Iraq and in Pakistan's tribal areas.

A complete withdrawal of U.S. combat brigades from Iraq under current conditions is likely to significantly strengthen AQI. And it is by no means certain that foreign jihadists would be diverted from Iraq in such a scenario. AQI's foreign recruits have largely been from the hardline Salafist-jihadist school, which is extremely anti-Shiite. Such recruits would likely still have a high interest in fighting a Shiite regime that would be perceived to them as a U.S. puppet even after American troops depart. To the extent that history can predict the future, it should be noted that many more foreign jihadists traveled to Afghanistan around the time of the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 than during the Russian occupation of the country. These fighters, whose ranks included the future AQI founder Zarqawi, traveled to Afghanistan because they wanted to participate in their day's celebrated jihadist cause, the civil war against a communist government seen as beholden to Moscow—a war they believed they had already nearly won by forcing the Soviet withdrawal. It is certainly possible that the

perception that another world superpower has been defeated by jihadists may encourage even higher numbers of foreign militants to make the trip to join the Iraq jihad bandwagon.

U.S. withdrawal would also be a boon to AQI because of the intensification in the civil war that would probably result. Although AQI has lost its footing in the Anbar province of western Iraq, which is overwhelmingly Sunni in population, it is no accident that the two provinces in which it has been most active, Baghdad and Diyala, are also those in which sectarian conflict has raged most intensely. In a study of AQI attack claims in January, the terrorism research organization IntelCenter found that these two provinces accounted for over 70 percent of claimed operations. If, as can be expected following an American pullout, Shiite militias intensify their attacks on Sunnis in demographically mixed areas, Iraqi Sunnis will be more likely to turn to AQI to defend them. In such a scenario, Al Qaeda in Iraq's virulent anti-Shiite ideology will also likely resonate more strongly among Sunnis, especially the younger generation.

Such extra Sunni support may enable AQI to extend its safe havens in Iraq and reclaim ground lost in recent months. Given the fact that it has been hard for the United States military and Iraqi government to permanently dislodge AQI from parts of Iraq, Shiite-dominated government forces would not likely be able to deny AQI sanctuary in swaths of central Iraq.

THE OUTLOOK

The one important caveat is that AQI's ability to gain control of territory or achieve even a mini-state in Iraq will be limited by the nihilistic tendencies of its recruits. The barbaric violence, radicalism, and extreme puritanism of AQI's recruits have turned off many Iraqi Sunnis, especially because Sunnis themselves have often been the victims of Al Qaeda violence. Al Qaeda's prospects in Iraq depend greatly on the degree to which Sunni Iraqis view it as a protector or an oppressor.

Nowhere has AQI's tendency to intimidate the local population to secure obedience been more evident than in Anbar province, the Sunni-dominated region to the west of Baghdad whose population centers of Ramadi, Fallujah, and Haditha are gateways to the western deserts. Last November, a U.S. Marine Intelligence Report "The State of the Insurgency in Anbar," authored by Colonel Peter Devlin and obtained by the *Washington Post*, found that Al Qaeda in Iraq had become "the dominant organization of influence" in the province, more powerful than the Iraqi government and U.S. troops "in its ability to control the day-to-day life of the average Sunni." It was, he wrote, "an integral part of the social fabric of western Iraq," so deeply entrenched that there was no longer the option of defeating it with a "decapitating strike to cripple the organization."

As a counterweight, Devlin proposed creating a local paramilitary force to protect Sunnis from Al Qaeda and strengthening the local Iraqi police force. And in the

months that followed, the U.S. military did just that, persuading or paying the region's tribes to join in the battle against Al Qaeda in Iraq. After a major November 2006 offensive by U.S. and Iraqi troops that degraded Al Qaeda capabilities in the region, two dozen Anbar tribes working under the auspices of the Anbar Salvation Front and convinced that the tide was turning against Al Qaeda, began to fight the terrorist organization, receiving weapons and ammunition from the U.S. Army.

Anbar does seem to be a genuine success story, but it should be noted that the breakthrough there was set in motion before the start of the U.S. surge. A promised \$300 million in U.S. aid for the region, which will likely be funneled through tribal sheikhs in large part, helped win loyalties; this spring the sheikhs instructed their followers, many of whom were former insurgents, to join the local police forces, swelling their number from a paltry 3,500 in October 2006 to over 20,000 by June. That month General David Petraeus told CNN, "What's taken place in Anbar is almost breathtaking. In the last several months, tribes that turned a blind eye to what Al Qaeda was doing in that province are now opposing Al Qaeda very vigorously. And the level of violence in Anbar has plummeted." According to the U.S. military, monthly attack levels in Anbar declined from some 1,350 in October 2006 to slightly over 200 in August this year.

In Anbar and elsewhere, Al Qaeda's hardline attitudes married to seemingly unlimited violence are also increasingly turning other Sunni militant groups against it. In April the Islamic Army of Iraq, for instance, issued an online communiqué condemning the actions of AQI. It is worth quoting in some detail:

These people became insolent against us and wrongly and hostilely killed some mujahideen brothers from this group—over thirty to date. Not satisfied with this, they declared hostility on the other jihad groups, and this hostility turned into confrontations with some groups, such as the 1920 Revolution Brigades...Indeed, Sunnis in general have become a legitimate target for them, especially the wealthy...Anyone who criticizes them or goes against them and demonstrates their error in such actions they try to kill...[We make an] appeal to Sheikh Osama Bin Laden, may God Almighty preserve him...Let him vindicate his religion and honor and take legal and organizational responsibility for the Al Qaeda organization. Let him investigate and ascertain the facts.

Al Qaeda's imperious attitude toward other Sunni Iraqis was reflected by leaflets it left in villages near Mosul in northern Iraq in April: "May the world know that we, sons of the Islamic State of Iraq, impose and lift blockades on any region we wish and at any time we wish." In May the Sunni militants of the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Mujahideen Army, and elements of Ansar al-Sunnah formed the Jihad and Reform Front to counter AQI. These insurgent groups have begun fighting against Al Qaeda in several areas of Iraq. In June AQI released a communiqué accusing other insurgent groups of targeting and killing its members, while the

Sunni Baghdad districts of Amiriyah and Doura witnessed fierce fighting between insurgent groups and Al Qaeda over the summer.

For the 1920 Revolution Brigades, a major Sunni nationalist insurgent group, the killing of its leader Harith Dhahir Khamis al-Dari by Al Qaeda in March after he refused to pledge allegiance to the fictional Al Qaeda leader Baghdadi was too much to stomach. A commander of the 1920 Brigades, Abu Hudhayfah, told the Arabic daily *Al Hayat* that Al Qaeda's actions had "left resistance groups with two options: either to fight Al Qaeda and negotiate with the Americans, or fight the Americans and join the Islamic State of Iraq, which divides Iraq. Both options are bitter." Significantly, the death of the 1920 Revolutions Brigade leader contributed to his uncle, Harith al-Dari—arguably the most important Sunni cleric in Iraq and the head of the powerful Association of Muslim Scholars—announcing in May that Al Qaeda had "gone too far" and its behavior was "unacceptable."

THE MAIN SUNNI INSURGENT GROUPS

INSURGENT GROUP	IDEOLOGY	GOAL	TARGETS U.S. OUTSIDE IRAQ	FIGHTING FORCE	IMPACT
Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI), 1920 Revolution Brigades, and the Mujahideen Army	Islamist nationalist; strong connections to tribes and disbanded Iraqi army.	Bring back Sunni government and remove Americans and Iranians	No	IAI alone has 15,000 or more	High; former army officers make for effective fighting forces.
Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a.k.a. Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)	Foreign-led Salafist jihadist	Sunni mini-state as a stepping-stone to restoring Islamic caliphate across Muslim world	Yes	At least 3,000	High; responsible for at least 80 percent of the suicide bombings that have killed some 10,000 Iraqi civilians and helped to ignite the civil war.
Ansar al-Sunnah	Salafist jihadist with significant Kurdish element	Hardline Islamic government	No	500-1,000	Moderate; has killed at least 600 civilians.

Tensions between Al Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent groups have been rising for some time. Al Qaeda's use of threats and violence to intimidate Sunnis from voting in the Iraqi elections of December 15, 2005, vexed other insurgent groups. Unlike Al Qaeda, the Islamic Army of Iraq, the largest Sunni insurgent group, is not ideologically opposed to democratic elections. After the elections, Zarqawi fiercely criticized the Sunni Islamic Party of Iraq, a Muslim Brotherhood-founded party, for forming a coalition government with Shiite parties and threatened Sunnis who did not back Al Qaeda's line.

These sorts of threats predictably caused a backlash against Al Qaeda; to try to repair some of the damage, Zarqawi announced the formation of the Mujahideen Shura Council in January 2006, a federation of several Sunni militant groups including AQI that was headed by the fictional Baghdadi. The grouping was, of course, a sham, and did little to mend relations between Al Qaeda and other Sunni insurgents. On June 8, 2006, the U.S. military received intelligence from local Sunnis in Baquba that Zarqawi was present there and launched an air strike that killed him.

His successor Masri again sought to restore unity in the Sunni insurgency by coming up with yet another name for his group: The Islamic State of Iraq. Masri attempted to woo other insurgent groups to unite with the new grouping through flattering rhetoric such as, "O heroes of Ansar al Sunnah Army, O the lions of the Islamic Army, O our sons in the Mujahideen Army...our yearning for you has increased and we are longing for your amity." But the sort of unity that Masri was proposing was signing allegiance to his fake emir Baghdadi, and this only further aggravated other Sunni insurgents. Jihad al-Ansari, an insurgent leader, sent an open letter to Baghdadi on February 2007, complaining that "this step of yours has caused innumerable negative results...many of your organization members desiring to confirm your authority to all Muslims in Iraq, have presumed to attack one and all and have continued to incite against anyone who abstains from swearing allegiance to you." Furthermore, AQI depicted itself as the vanguard for a prototype Sunni breakaway state containing several provinces surrounding Baghdad, a concept that was, according to a U.S. counterterrorism official, anathema to Sunni insurgent groups motivated by Iraqi nationalism.

Algeria in the early 1990s may offer some indication of Al Qaeda's future trajectory in Iraq. While a range of Islamists initially fought a united insurgency against the Algerian military that in 1992 cancelled an Islamist election victory, the radical GIA soon broke away from the more moderate FIS and indulged in more and more indiscriminate killing of anyone who disagreed with its increasingly hardcore "takfiri" ideology, helping to precipitate a civil war that left more than 100,000 dead. The result was that by 1997 the Islamist insurgency was so fractured internally and so unpopular with Algerians that it imploded. The vanishing of radical Islamists as an effective force in Algeria was accelerated by the closing of its key mouthpiece, the London-published journal *Al Ansar*, whose editors were unable to keep tabs with the internecine rivalries on the ground any longer.

Yet Algeria only offers so many pointers. AQI's pioneering use of the Internet means that it is in no danger of losing its ability to issue communiqués anytime soon. Unlike the Algerian GIA in the 1990s, Al Qaeda seems to be slowly waking up to the fact that violent excesses such as executing ice cream vendors because there was no ice cream at the time of the Prophet Mohammed might not be good for their cause. Masri in an audiotape last November urged his fighters to reign in their violence: "My brothers, you have been sent to make things easy, not difficult. Therefore take care of our Sunni kinsfolk...We protect their honor and money and do not speak badly of them even if they are not part of jihad and its people." This September Masri, presumably because his message had not yet gotten through, issued a lengthy communiqué advising his "commanders" to "beware spilling of innocent blood...avoid distasteful harshness...for nothing can destroy the solid structure of an authority like erratic extremism." Zawahiri has also stepped in with advice. In a videotape posted online on July 5 he urged Al Qaeda in Iraq to "open their hearts to their brothers," reminding AQI of "the critical nature of unity [which] is the gateway to victory." And on October 22, Osama bin Laden, possibly reacting to pleas for his intervention, released an audiotape warning jihadists in Iraq away from extremism and calling on Sunni insurgent groups to reunite "under one banner."

But the most crucial difference to the Algerian experience of the 1990s is that in many areas of Iraq, sectarian conflict is raging between Sunnis and Shiites. Shiite on Sunni violence legitimizes an Al Qaeda presence amongst Sunnis in demographically mixed areas and makes its hardline approach toward Shiites more attractive. It will therefore be difficult for the United States military to extend what it has achieved in Anbar, a province of just 1.3 million overwhelmingly Sunni inhabitants, to other parts of Iraq. General Petraeus conceded as much in his congressional testimony in September when he stated that "Anbar is unique, and the model it provides cannot be replicated everywhere in Iraq."

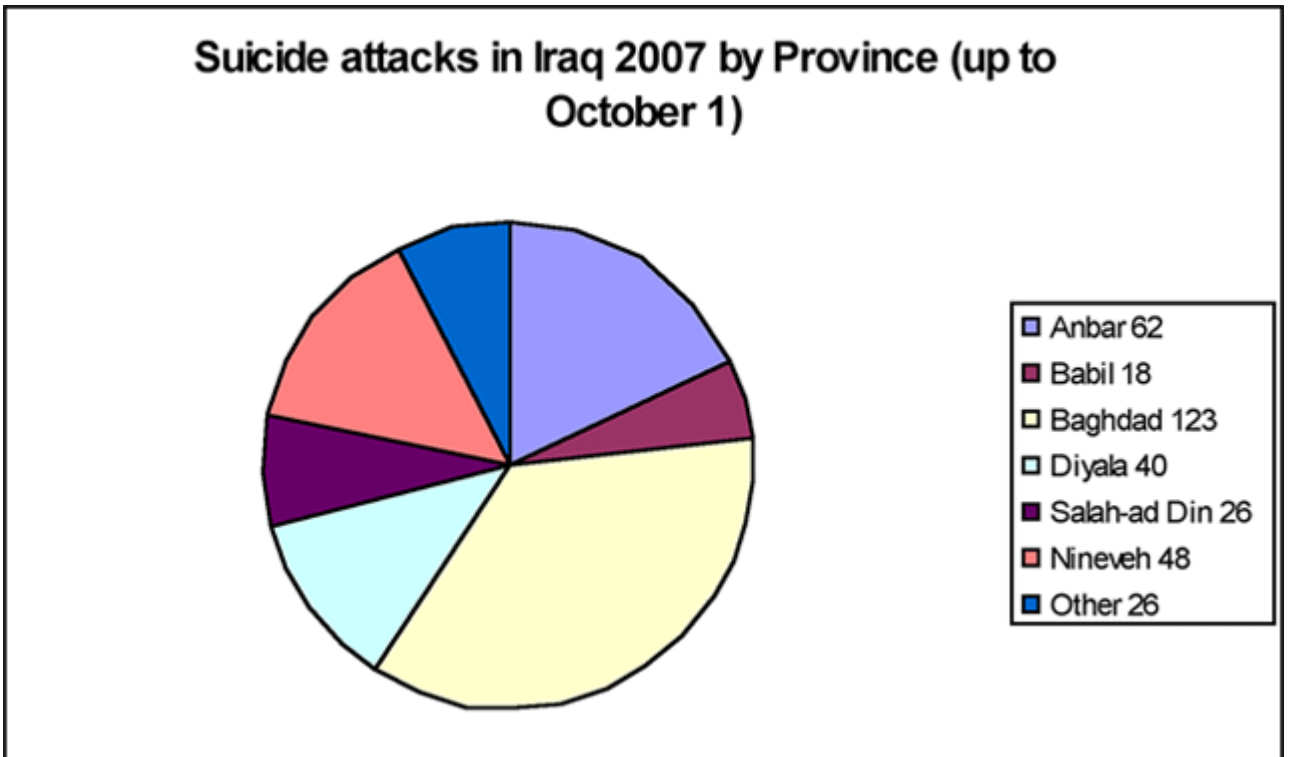
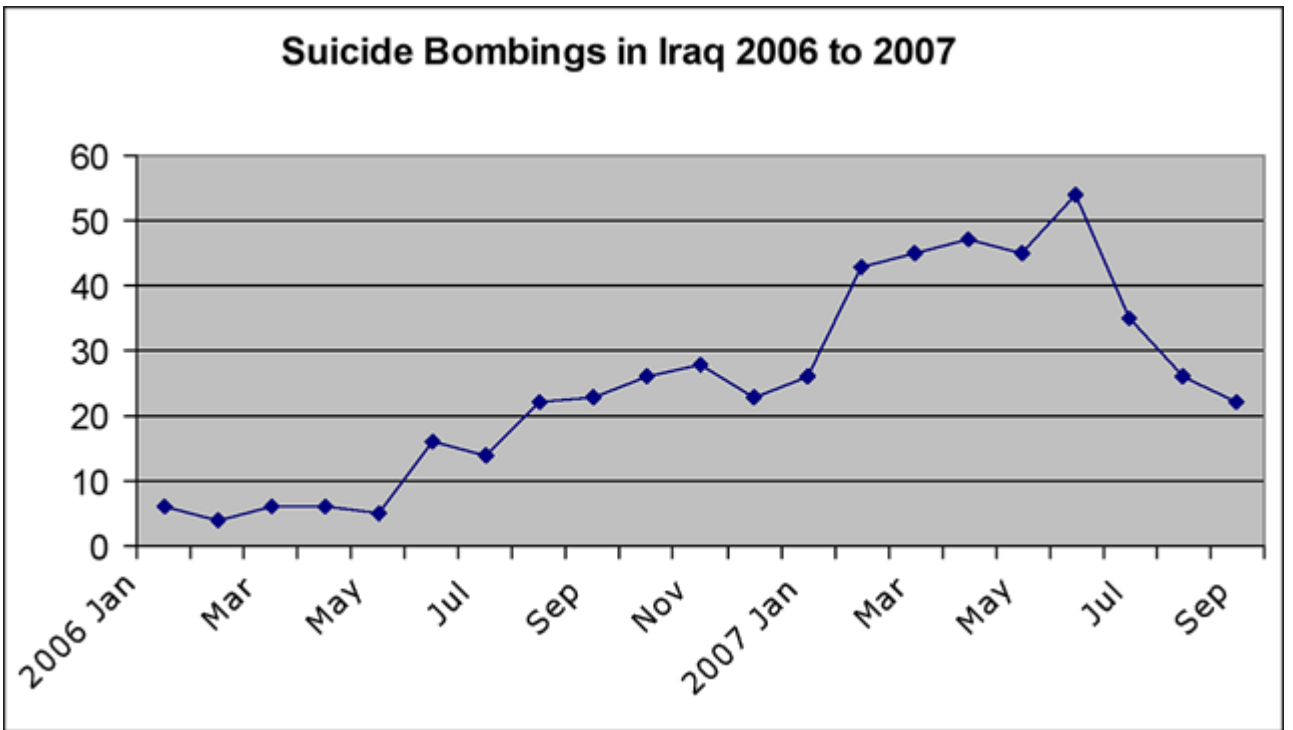
There have nevertheless been some encouraging developments in parts of Baghdad and surrounding provinces. In some parts of Diyala, a province to the northeast of Baghdad, Sunni insurgents have turned on Al Qaeda, one insurgent in Baquba telling CNN this June, "They ruled with tyranny. They really harmed our town, so we had to stop them, and they left." In the region's capital, Baquba, the same group has helped U.S. soldiers clear Al Qaeda out from local neighborhoods.

But cooperation between the U.S. military and tribal sheikhs—who are, in a wonderful euphemism, now officially termed "concerned citizens"—has very real limits. Often more the result of some insurgents' desire to settle scores with Al Qaeda at the local level, or to receive arms and funding, it hardly represents a fundamental shift in these groups' overall strategy, which remains removing the United States from Iraq and battling the Shiite-dominated government. Two key insurgent groups, the Islamic Army of Iraq and the 1920 Revolution Brigades,

have, for example, in recent months continued to claim attacks against the United States military across Iraq.

Advances against Al Qaeda in Diyala, Baghdad, Salah ad Din, and other provinces have mostly been limited to majority Sunni areas where the local population does not feel threatened by Shiite death squads and therefore has a lower toleration for Al Qaeda elements. Organizing Sunni resistance to Al Qaeda in Baghdad has been further complicated by the fact that tribal structures are weaker there than in the countryside, making it more difficult to organize a cohesive response. The pattern is broadly that where there is a high degree of sectarian conflict, Al Qaeda has remained strong. AQI retains a significant presence in swaths of Diyala, scene of some of the worst sectarian fighting between Sunnis and the province's large Shiite minority, while significant numbers of the Sunni minority in Babil, for the most part living in the northern part of the province nearest to Baghdad, have sought to safeguard themselves from Shiite militias and helped Al Qaeda build up havens there. Iraqi and coalition forces have also found it difficult to dislodge AQI fighters from Samarra, a town with a significant Shiite population in the Sunni majority province of Salah ad Din where tensions have run high since the infamous bombing of the Golden Mosque last year. The sectarian conflict that is raging in large tracts of Iraq is likely to give Al Qaeda enough fuel for it not to break up anytime soon under the weight of its own implosive tendencies.

While in recent months the surge in U.S. troops has certainly put more pressure on Al Qaeda and contributed to a drop in sectarian violence in Iraq, especially in Baghdad where increased U.S. and Iraqi patrols have pushed out some insurgents and dissuaded Shiite militias from some of their violent excesses, AQI still unfortunately remains a significant and deadly force. In the four months after the surge reached full force at the beginning of June, there were 137 suicide attacks in Iraq, an average of 34 per month. Although that represents an improvement on the average 41 attacks in the first five months of the year, there have still been more suicide attacks in the last four months than in 2003 and 2004 combined. June saw 54 attacks, the highest number of attacks in one month ever in Iraq, and though the rate of such attacks have fallen since, September still saw more suicide bombings than most months in 2006. From a geographical point of view, Baghdad has seen the largest drop in the rate of suicide attacks, down to 9.5 per month since the surge reached full force in June from an average of 17 earlier in the year. But while this points to some inroads being made by the Baghdad security plan—a joint U.S.-Iraqi effort to secure the capital—some Al Qaeda activity merely seems to have been displaced to other provinces: The rest of the country has actually seen a slightly higher rate of suicide attacks in the same time period.



SUICIDE ATTACKS IN 2007	JANUARY - MAY	JUNE - SEPTEMBER	
Baghdad	85	38	
Rate per month	17	9.5	44% drop
Other provinces	121	99	
Rate per month	24.2	24.8	2% rise
All Iraq	206	137	
Rate per month	41.2	34.2	17% drop

Although suicide attacks have recently fallen from their all-time high, it is far too early to declare victory against Al Qaeda in Iraq, as some senior U.S. military officials are advocating according to an October report in the *Washington Post*. AQI appears to retain some ability to launch guerrilla attacks despite U.S. and Iraqi government statements indicating otherwise. On September 16, for instance, some 100 gunmen believed to have been from AQI stormed two towns near Muqdadia in Diyala and killed more than a dozen civilians. In September AQI also launched an assassination campaign against government officials, police chiefs, and tribal sheikhs opposed to it. The most prominent victim of the campaign was Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha, the tribal leader who had spearheaded tribal opposition to Al Qaeda in Anbar province.

AQI's continued ability to sustain operations in Iraq is linked to its ability to recruit an increasing proportion of Iraqis. It remains unclear whether most of its local recruits join up because of ideology or because AQI offers them money, but anecdotal evidence suggests that Al Qaeda has had some success spreading its ideology among younger Iraqis. One young Sunni insurgent who opposes Al Qaeda told the German magazine *Der Spiegel* this June that around a third of young Sunnis support Al Qaeda. Youngsters growing up in the current-day conditions in Iraq are certainly vulnerable to radicalization, while a slightly older cadre of twentysomething Iraqis were also exposed to hardline Salafist teachings during the 1990s, a function of the difficulties of the sanctions years and Saddam's toleration of Salafist preachers virulently opposed to the United States.

What is certain is that the longer sectarian conflict rages in Iraq, the more young Iraqis will become radicalized. In October AQI released an online video entitled *The Caravan of Martyrs* that provided biographical details of 24 Iraqi Al Qaeda fighters recently killed in Iraq, some skilled in the handling of IEDs and apparently determined to die as martyrs. The increasing number of Iraqis skilled in the tools of terrorism is likely to have significant international security implications down the road.

WHAT TO DO?

So what should all this mean for U.S. policy toward Iraq? Some have argued that with chances of victory in Iraq bleak, it makes sense for the United States to cut its losses and withdraw, taking away the Iraq conflict as a recruiting tool for jihadists around the world, even if Al Qaeda's operational capability in Iraq would be boosted by such a move. Such an argument deserves careful consideration. In this magazine in March we published a study entitled "The Iraq Effect" that found that the global rate of fatal jihadist attacks had increased by 265 percent outside of Iraq since the March 2003 U.S. invasion, while a July National Intelligence Estimate found that "[Al Qaeda's] association with Al Qaeda in Iraq helps Al Qaeda energize the broader Sunni extremist community, raise resources, and to recruit and indoctrinate operatives, including for Homeland attacks."

Despite such findings, President Bush continues to put forward the so-called "flypaper" theory for fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq: "If we were not fighting these Al Qaeda terrorists in Iraq," he declared in Charleston in July, "most would be trying to kill Americans and other civilians elsewhere—in Afghanistan, or other foreign capitals, or on the streets of our own cities," arguing in effect that the United States can reduce the overall pool of terrorists by killing them in Iraq, as if somehow there were a finite number of terrorists to kill.

While such logic has been discredited by the surge of jihadist terrorist attacks around the world since the invasion of Iraq, there is still a strong argument for keeping significant U.S. forces in Iraq for several years. Daniel Byman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown, argues that U.S. policymakers face two unattractive choices: to either cede operational advantages to Al Qaeda in Iraq by withdrawing or continue giving inspirational advantage to the wider global jihad by maintaining troops in the country.

However, in weighing these choices it is important to note that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq is not going to quickly eliminate the extra energy that the American occupation has caused among jihadists worldwide, nor soften the militant anti-Americanism of young Muslims whose worldview has been shaped by the conflict in Iraq, nor make jihadists in Afghanistan and elsewhere unlearn terrorist techniques that have been passed on from Iraq. Withdrawal will, however, strengthen Al Qaeda in Iraq immediately, removing its foremost military adversary and potentially increasing the sectarian violence that drives Sunnis into its arms. In such circumstances there is a risk that AQI's capabilities to plan out-of-area operations, and even plot its own operations against the United States, would be significantly enhanced. Also, there is a real possibility that some of the insurgent groups now battling AQI would realign themselves with the terrorist network. The Islamic Army of Iraq, for instance, still has a strong admiration for Osama bin Laden. A precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would also boost the morale of bin Laden's followers around the world, just as the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan inspired jihadists in 1989.

Possibly the biggest fallout from reducing military pressure on AQI is that Al Qaeda Central, in the border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan, will be able to further leverage the contacts and capabilities of its Iraqi affiliate to plot attacks on the U.S. homeland, something this July's National Intelligence Estimate made clear it will most likely do. Cash flows from AQI to Al Qaeda Central would likely increase. As far back as 2005, Al Qaeda number two Zawahiri requested a \$100,000 transfer from cash-rich AQI, an intercepted letter revealed. Through kidnappings, oil smuggling, and other criminal activities in Iraq, insurgent groups as a whole are raising up to \$200 million a year, according to the U.S. military. (The 9/11 operation cost only \$500,000.)

So what sort of force should the United States leave behind in Iraq to contain AQI? Colonel Pat Lang, a former top official at the Defense Intelligence Agency who is a critic of the Bush administration (and an Arabic speaker), argues that the United States should at a minimum leave a force of around 30,000, including a reinforced division of around 20,000 soldiers, thousands to handle supply and logistics, and a Special Forces component of around 500. In addition to combating Al Qaeda, such a force would have to perform an array of tasks, including protecting the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and gathering critical intelligence on the ground that cannot be collected effectively from neighboring countries. This September Secretary of Defense Robert Gates came up with a similar estimate for the residual force needed in Iraq, proposing a long-term force of at least 17,500 combat troops.

But the faster the United States reduces its troops in Iraq to such levels, the more likely sectarian conflict will intensify—and so U.S. policymakers should also weigh leaving a larger force for the next several years, one in the high tens of thousands. Genocide in Iraq, for instance, would demand a comprehensive American response to create safe havens for civilians. Whatever the pace of the drawdown, the United States should increase aid to Sunni tribal leaders to prevent Sunnis from looking to Al Qaeda for protection if the civil war intensifies. An obvious risk with such a policy is that arming Sunni tribal groups will increase their ability to undertake attacks on both the Iraqi government and Shiite communities, and care therefore needs to be taken about which partners to work with. The de facto splitting up of Iraqi neighborhoods and provinces into Sunni and Shiite majority areas should in time reduce some of the impetus toward sectarian conflict.

BLOWBACK

One threat that the United States will find difficult to counter is the blowback effect of those foreign jihadists and their Iraqi cohorts who have fought in Iraq. This particular tape has been played once before—in Afghanistan, where tens of thousands of foreign militants trained during the 1980s and 1990s. The results of that training are well-known. According to the United States military, around 80 foreign jihadists are arriving in Iraq each month. The Brookings Institution estimates that by 2006 there were between 700 and 2000 foreign jihadists in

Iraq at any one time. Given Iraq's strategic location in the Middle East, the blowback from foreign fighters graduating from there could have severe implications for regional and international security. And that blowback has already started as some foreign recruits are moving back home or on to other fronts. AQI released an online newsletter in June 2006 describing how one Libyan AQI operative referred to as Abu Nasser "trained a large number of brothers in bomb-making and formed military cells outside Iraq." This trend will likely sharply accelerate when the Iraqi conflict eventually winds down.

The Arab countries surrounding Iraq are most at risk from such blowback. Saudi Arabia in particular faces a large security threat from returnees from Iraq because 45 percent of all foreign fighters emanate from Saudi Arabia, according to a report in the *Los Angeles Times* in July. There have also been more Saudi suicide bombers in Iraq than any other nationality. The nationality of 139 suicide bombers in the country has been determined by Mohammed Hafez, the University of Missouri professor; 53 were from Saudi Arabia, 18 from Iraq, 15 from Europe, and the rest mostly from other Arab countries. In April, Saudi authorities arrested 172 militants plotting to attack oil installations and assassinate Saudi leaders and recovered \$5 million that the group had stashed to fund its operations. Several of those arrested had returned to Saudi Arabia after gaining military experience in Iraq, according to Saudi officials. Iraq War veterans have also returned to other Arab countries. In Lebanon, there is evidence that the Fatah al-Islam militants who fought pitched battles with the Lebanese Army inside Palestinian refugee camps this spring fought in Iraq and gained operational experience there, according to Fawaz Gerges, a Middle East expert. Gerges also told us that in Yemen he recently interviewed jihadists "who boasted about their fighting experience in Iraq" and that "scores had been back and forth between Yemen and Iraq."

A number of Europeans have also traveled to fight in Iraq and several jihadists, likely several dozen, have already returned home. There will also inevitably be trained Iraqi terrorists among the millions of refugees now fleeing Iraq, tens of thousands of whom are expected to go to Europe. It is also possible that some jihadists trained in Iraq may eventually travel to America. Sustained intelligence cooperation will be required across the world to identify Iraq War jihadist graduates who remain operational.

There is no doubt that the bomb-making and urban-warfare skills developed by veterans of the Iraq jihad against the most effective fighting force in history will help sustain the capabilities of terrorist groups for a generation. The Iraq War may well have been the largest strategic blunder in recent American history, but that makes it even more vital that the United States now pursues the right set of policies toward Iraq. As the current president was once warned, "You break it, you own it."

MIRACLE IN RAMADI?

The Bush administration says the recent "Anbar Awakening" heralds a new way of winning in Iraq. The truth is more complicated.

TRUTHINESS	TRUTH
Anbar is evidence of the surge's success and that of General David Petraeus.	Bush benefited from lucky timing. Sunni tribes fed up with Al Qaeda's extremism began an anti-AQI campaign in September 2006, 4 months before the surge was even announced. As things improved, the White House eagerly took credit.
The Anbar model is being replicated all over central Iraq, including Baghdad.	It's only working in places where a majority of both residents and police are Sunni; in other areas, Sunnis view the mostly Shiite police as death squads in uniform.
Sunni tribes are on our side now.	Maybe, but there's no guarantee they won't switch back. 93 percent of Iraqi Sunnis think attacks on U.S. forces are justified.
Defeating Al Qaeda is the start of pacifying Iraq.	AQI makes up no more than 5 percent of the Sunni-led insurgency. And while the group did its best to stir up sectarian violence, the conflict now has momentum of its own.
Anbar is a model province.	Parts of Ramadi and other major cities lie in ruins; municipal services and local governments are almost nonexistent.
Changed military tactics won the day.	In General Petraeus' words, "What happened in Anbar is politics."

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