

## JIC Assessment, 25 July 2007

## AL QAIDA IN IRAQ: EXTERNAL AMBITIONS

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 25 July 2007.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. The relationship between the Pakistan-based Al Qaida (AQ) senior leadership ('AQ core') and Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) remains complex: AQ core can exert influence but has not succeeded in controlling AQ-I. AQ core and AQ-I view Iraq as the major theatre of jihad, presenting a realistic opportunity to gain control of ungoverned space; their intent remains to use this space to launch terrorist attacks elsewhere in the region and beyond.
- II. Significant pressure from intensified Multinational Force (MNF) activity, the success of the Sunni tribal groups against AQ-I, the death of AQ-I leader Zarqawi and the adverse publicity from AQ-I's Amman bombing may all have helped deter AQ-I from mounting the sustained campaign of external attacks envisaged by AQ core: it has not launched an attack from Iraq since November 2005. AQ core now wants AQ-I to concentrate firmly on Iraq as the immediate strategic priority.
- III. The capability of AQ-I to conduct external attacks from Iraq is limited; the more likely short-term threat is from extensive foreign fighter support networks in the region, particularly in Syria, many with links to associates in Europe and North Africa. AQ-I affiliated networks – wherever they exist – could turn to attack planning without warning.
- IV. So far, the threat to the UK emanating from Iraq has involved links between [...] and the AQ-I affiliated [...]. Action in the UK has [...] disrupted [...] but the threat from them to the UK is increasing.
- V. The investigation into the attempted bomb attacks in London and Glasgow last month has revealed [...] links between the two attackers and known Iraq-based extremists. At this stage there are no indications that Iraq-based extremists played any role in the direction or planning of the attacks.
- VI. AQ-I will be able to resist MNF and pressure from the Iraqis into 2008. As the MNF presence diminishes AQ-I will seek to regain lost ground, establishing firm bases in Sunni areas, and then it is increasingly likely that AQ-I will use them to reinvigorate its external attack capabilities.

<b>Assessment Base:</b> [...]
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**AL QAIDA IN IRAQ: EXTERNAL AMBITIONS**

*At FCO request, we assess AQ-I's external ambitions, AQ-I's relationship with AQ core and other AQ associated groups and the threat they pose to the UK.*

**The strategic relationship**

1. The relationship between the Pakistan-based Al Qaida (AQ) senior leadership ('AQ core') and Al Qaida in Iraq<sup>1</sup> (AQ-I) remains complex. We judge AQ core can exert influence but has not succeeded in controlling AQ-I. Intelligence shows that AQ core continues to experience difficulties in communicating with the AQ-I leadership: [...]

2. AQ core has sought to increase its influence over AQ-I. In early 2006 senior figures Atiyah abd al Rahman and Abd al Hadi al Iraqi were despatched to take leadership roles alongside AQ-I leader Abu Ayyub al Masri<sup>2</sup>. [...] However, he was detained in November 2006; Atiyah has remained in Iran. We are aware of two subsequent attempts by AQ core to send senior figures to Iraq: Khalid al Turki entered Iraq in January 2007 and took over AQ-I in northern Iraq (and was killed in June), [...] there is no intelligence to suggest that either had been given any external operations role.

**Strategic priority: Iraq**

3. We continue to judge that AQ core and AQ-I view Iraq as the major theatre of jihad, presenting a realistic opportunity to gain control of ungoverned space; their intent remains to use this space to launch terrorist attacks elsewhere in the region and beyond. But AQ-I has been unable to mount the sustained campaign of external attacks envisaged by AQ core. [...]

4. Since then, AQ-I has not launched a single external attack. Zarqawi's death in June 2006 and the adverse publicity over the large number of Muslims killed in the Amman bombing may have contributed. AQ-I has also been under significant pressure. In recent months intelligence has shown increasing AQ unease; the intensification in Multinational Force (MNF) activity and the success of the Sunni tribal groups have led to setbacks in AQ-I's efforts to control Sunni areas. We judge AQ core now wants AQ-I to concentrate firmly on Iraq as the immediate strategic priority: [...] Abu Ayyub to prolong the internal conflict, set aside external attack planning and delay the expansion of the 'Islamic State of Iraq' (ISOI<sup>3</sup>) until after the US had been weakened; [...] AQ core had told AQ-I that any external attacks required senior AQ approval.

**AQ-I external attack capability**

5. We judge that AQ-I's capability to conduct attacks from Iraq is limited: we have been unable to identify either an individual or group responsible for planning external operations (though this may be because our knowledge of AQ-I's structure is patchy). We judge most of its members are motivated by fighting the "near" jihad and see the international dimension as of secondary, or no, importance: AQ-I remains a largely Iraqi network, albeit that key leadership positions are held by foreigners.

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<sup>1</sup> AQ-I is the single largest Sunni insurgent network with the greatest geographical spread and influence.

<sup>2</sup> Replaced Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

<sup>3</sup> Declared by AQ-I in October 2006.

6. The short-term threat is more likely to come from extensive regional networks that facilitate the travel of foreign fighters and finance into Iraq: these are well established and resilient, particularly in Syria, many with links to associates in Europe and North Africa. These networks have a degree of autonomy; they are not necessarily 'AQ' or 'AQ-I'. We judge that AQ-I affiliated networks – wherever they exist – could turn to attack planning without warning; some would not necessarily seek authorisation from AQ-I or AQ core. At least one has already turned to attack planning: [...]

7. A recent statement from Abu Umar al Baghdadi, the [...]head of ISOI, threatened AQ-I attacks in Iran. These threats may have some substance: [...] a significant member of an AQ-I affiliated Kurdish network in Iran, has sought permission from AQ core to conduct kidnappings in Tehran, following an apparent tasking from Abu Ayyub. However, although AQ-I has a visceral hatred of the Shia, we doubt AQ-I will mount an attack in Iran. AQ core, in particular, fears the impact on the senior AQ detainees being held by the Iranians and on the activities of their important Iran-based facilitation networks. For the most part, the Iranians tacitly acquiesce in their activities, although some arrests have been made.

8. We judge that AQ core will continue to exploit and develop AQ-I facilitation networks, resources and expertise to conduct attacks elsewhere. [...]

#### **AQ-I: the threat to the UK**

9. So far, the threat to the UK emanating from Iraq has involved links between [...] and [...] AQ-I networks operating in Iraq [...]

10. [...]

11. [...] We judge that this [...] has been disrupted, at least temporarily [...] But we judge that the threat from them to the UK is increasing.

#### **The London and Glasgow bombs**

12. The investigation into the attempted bomb attacks in London and Glasgow last month has revealed [...] links between the two attackers – Bilal Abdullah and Kafeel Ahmed – and known Iraq-based extremists. Bilal is a joint Iraqi/British national who studied in Baghdad in 2003; none of the others so far detained are Iraqi citizens. At this stage there are no indications that Iraq-based extremists played any role in the direction or planning of the attacks. But the war in Iraq may have been a factor in the radicalisation of the two attackers: we judged in March 2006 that Iraq was likely to be an important factor for some time to come in the radicalisation of British Muslims, motivating extremists who view attacks in the UK as legitimate.

#### **Prospects**

13. For the immediate future AQ-I will continue to focus their attentions on Iraq; we judge they will attempt to intensify operations in the lead up to the September Congressional report in the US. AQ-I will aspire to conduct external operations – including in the UK – if an opportunity arises; we judge, at least in the short term, they will look for AQ core endorsement of any major plans outside of Iraq. We judge AQ-I will be able to resist pressure from the MNF and the Iraqis into 2008. As the MNF presence diminishes, AQ-I will seek

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to regain lost ground, establishing firm bases in Sunni areas and using them increasingly to reinvigorate its external attack capabilities.

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