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The Imaginary Emir: Al-Qa'ida in Iraq's Strategic Mistake

By Brian Fishman

On July 18, 2007, GEN Kevin Bergner confirmed suspicions that the “Emir” of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)—Abu Umar al-Baghdadi—is fictitious. The information was provided by Khalid al-Mashadani, who was the Minister of Information within the ISI before he was captured by U.S. forces on July 4, 2007. If al-Mashadani’s information is accurate, the al-Baghdadi deception underscores the fact that Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI) made a major strategic mistake when it established the ISI in October 2006. To exploit this mistake, the United States should not simply attack the AQI/ISI organization in Iraq, but rather highlight the ISI’s ideological failures.

The ISI was created to replace the al-Qa’ida in Iraq “brand name” in order to improve AQI’s appeal with two constituencies: Sunnis in Iraq—including insurgents—and senior jihadi scholars outside of Iraq. The ISI’s fundamental problem is that these constituencies have contradictory goals and interests: Sunnis in Iraq tend to be focused on pragmatic issues like security, occupation, and electricity; Jihadi ideologues outside of Iraq are primarily interested in the “proper” imposition of Islamic law and using the ISI to publicize their ideas.

The multiple constituencies created a paradox for AQI/ISI. The ISI cannot satisfy the jihadi ideologues without controlling Sunnis in Iraq enough to credibly impose Islamic law. Conversely, the ISI cannot control Sunnis in Iraq without moderating its ideology, which alienates some jihadi scholars and discourages AQI’s diehards.

The entire ISI project is a clumsy attempt to appeal to these multiple constituencies. Even the ISI’s name—the Islamic State of Iraq—reflects the group’s schizophrenic identity. The term “Iraq” appeals to Iraqi Sunnis who still feel an affiliation to their nation-state, but it is unacceptable to jihadis who reject all forms of nationalism and believe that “Iraq” is nothing more than the illegitimate product of a treaty between two infidel Western nations.¹ The “Abu Umar al-Baghdadi” farce reflects the same contradictions. On the one hand, al-

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Baghdadi was portrayed as the first Iraqi commander of al-Qa'ida forces in Iraq; on the other hand, AQI/ISI tried to bolster al-Baghdadi's religious legitimacy by claiming he was descended from the Prophet Muhammad.

The ISI and al-Baghdadi have been criticized by some jihadi ideologues since the two were created in autumn, 2006. This criticism is important because support from senior jihadi scholars is critical for developing broad-based legitimacy for the ISI outside of Iraq. The most important critiques are: (1) the ISI does not control enough territory with enough authority to be considered a "state," especially because the land is also claimed by an invader, (2) not all Sunni groups are cooperating under the rubric of the state, (3) major Sunni political leaders are not involved in the state, (4) the ISI does not have a bureaucratic capability for administering services, (5) the ISI does not have appropriate economic resources, and (6) the ISI's leadership is not appropriately qualified.

The ISI did have defenders (see: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Tamimi/ISI-Fourth_Gen4.pdf), including central al-Qa'ida figures Abu Yahya al-Libi and Ayman al-Zawahiri. It has also answered critics by building the trappings of a state, even declaring a cabinet, replete with an Agriculture and Fisheries Minister. Establishing a cabinet was very odd considering that the ISI had previously released a doctrinal text eschewing Western political constructs.

Despite these efforts, the ISI is failing. It has alienated Sunni insurgents in Iraq by demanding obedience and still cannot generate consistent support from jihadi scholars outside of Iraq. The revelation that al-Baghdadi is fictitious implies that AQI/ISI is still commanded by Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, who is thought to be Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian. Al-Muhajir has a reputation as a qualified military technician, but he has proven an unwise Emir. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq's schizophrenic strategy is a hallmark of failed jihadi efforts in the past—in Algeria, Somalia, and even Afghanistan. Al-Muhajir's amateurish stewardship of AQI contrasts sharply with the cautious, brutal professionalism of al-Qa'ida central.

Nevertheless, AQI's failures threaten al-Qa'ida central if they are exploited correctly. The link between AQI/ISI and al-Qa'ida central is more ideological than organizational, but the ISI's very public disputes with other Sunni insurgent groups threaten to de-legitimize the ideological basis of al-Qa'ida. Fighting Americans, apostates, and Shiites is one thing, but assassinating other Sunni insurgent leaders—that are admired by critics of the U.S. occupation in the Mideast—shines a bright spotlight on al-Qa'ida's radicalism.

The ISI's failures do not indicate political progress is imminent in Iraq. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq is still capable of producing massive casualties; moreover AQI is only a small component of the Iraqi insurgency. Most importantly, Iraqi factions are still unable to reach a political compromise. Even insurgents cooperating in the fight against AQI are likely just re-positioning for sectarian war. Nonetheless, the episode suggests that al-Qa'ida "franchises" in Iraq, North Africa, and elsewhere can create problems for al-Qa'ida central because the center must ultimately answer for mistakes made by the fringe.

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