

BG(P) Kevin Bergner
Press Conference – Operations Against AQI
11 July 2007

Good afternoon, Asalaam aleikum.

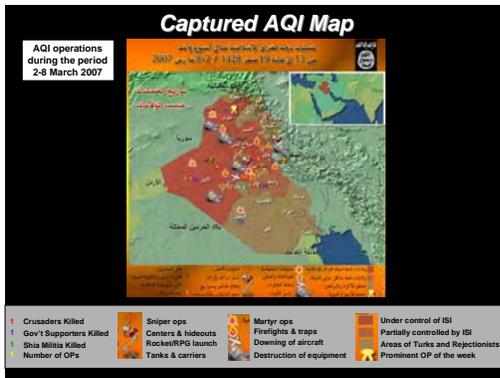
The security environment in Iraq is characterized by a number of threats. Last week we provided an update on one of those: special groups, supported by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force operatives and their surrogates from Lebanese Hizbollah.

Today we will provide an update on the principal near-term threat to Iraq—al-Qaeda of Iraq. In their own statements al-Qaeda leaders have declared Iraq their central front. AQI and its affiliates are the greatest source of spectacular attacks and are fueling sectarian violence. Our intelligence community, the Government of Iraq and MNFI-I all assess AQI as the main near-term threat to Iraq.

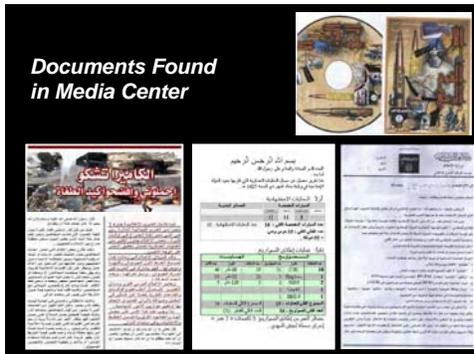
Al-Qaeda in Iraq is a network led and fueled by foreign extremists who envision a new caliphate and, according to al-Qaeda senior leader Al-Zawahiri's latest video, they claim the al-Qaeda gateway to victory starts in Iraq. Their goal continues to be a "Taliban-like state," featuring an extreme and distorted vision of Islam forbidding the most basic personal freedoms.

For all of those reasons, the Government of Iraq, Iraqi Security Forces and coalition forces are engaged in a tough fight against AQI and, in particular, it's extremist ideology and leadership, which has of course been comprised by foreigners at the top levels of the network. In recent months, more and more Iraqis have begun to reject its extremist ideology and take a stand against them. We are pursuing those who run these networks and we are enabled by increasing amounts of information from local citizens and increasing resolve by the Iraqi people to fight AQI.

Over the past two months our collective efforts against AQI leadership have begun to disrupt their networks and safe havens. Our operations are targeting AQI sanctuaries in areas around Bagdad and in neighborhoods in the city itself. We fully expect AQI operatives to lash out and stage spectacular attacks to re-assert themselves, but we are making progress and I would like to summarize it for you today.



Pictured here is one of the graphics we found on a hard drive. It represents AQI's view of the areas it claimed to control in Iraq in early March. It asserts AQI dominated all of Al Anbar and most of Northern Iraq, which by any measure was clearly not the truth.



We also found a sampling of other propagand documents.

- A letter that gives instructions on how to use the media to get out the AQI message most effectively.
- An al-Qaeda activity report, highlighting car bomb, suicide, missile, mortar, sniping and IED attacks.
- A propagand poster that encourages filming and distributing videos showing AQI attacks on Coalition Forces.
- And a pamphlet and CD cover of their sniper school.

In all, the media center had the capacity of reproducing 156 CDs in 8 hours and had a fully functioning film studio. This media center, and others like it, play an important role in AQI recruitment efforts in Iraq and around the world.

If you noted on our first slide showing the captured and killed leaders, there's also a group called facilitators. These facilitators -- like Abd al-Jabbar, Mahmud Tarad Muhammad Jarallah and Hussayn Awath Hussayn Hawawi -- recruited and smuggled foreigners into Iraq to conduct terrorism, many of whom become suicide killers. Of special note was a facilitator named Mehmet Yilmaz, also known as Khalid al Turki who we mentioned two weeks ago -- a top smuggler of foreign fighters into Iraq; a veteran against coalition forces in Afghanistan; and a close associate of Khalid Shaikh Muhammad, the mastermind of 9/11.

Last week Iraqi police in Ramadi captured one of these foreign fighter recruits.

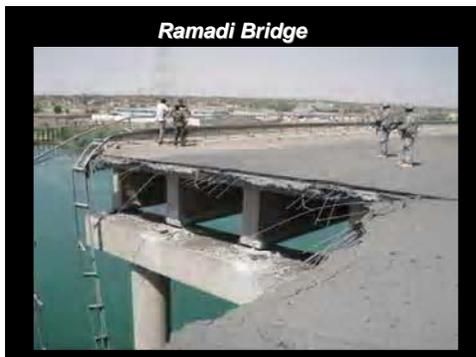
He was recruited by a man who attended his mosque to join an AQI unit in Iraq and kill coalition forces after listening to radical messages on cassette tapes and becoming interested in jihad. He was given the equivalent of 1,000 U.S. dollars to pay for his travel expenses. He was instructed to get a passport and make his way to Syria where an individual would facilitate his illegal crossing into Iraq. Without telling anyone, including his mother and father, he boarded a charter bus and traveled to Syria.

The Syrian facilitator, using multiple vehicles, smuggled him across the border into Iraq. He was blindfolded throughout the journey and laid in the back of vehicles covered by a blanket. Once across the border, the Syrian handed him off to an Iraqi who drove him to a small mud structure in the middle of the desert. He stayed at this remote location for approximately four days. It was here that he was partnered with another foreigner.

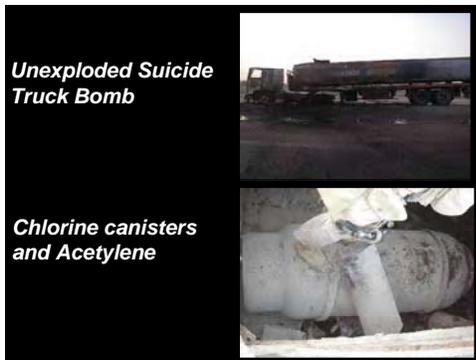
From there, the two men were handed off to another Iraqi and driven to an area near Ramadi – a city whose citizens have banded together to successfully drive al-Qaeda out of their neighborhoods.

The two men spent 10 days in hiding around Ramadi and were frequently moved from one location to another. It was at this point they were told they would become suicide bombers by driving truck bombs to destroy a major bridge outside of Ramadi. He claims to have reluctantly agreed.

On July 1st the two men were driven to a location outside of Ramadi, where they boarded two large trucks and followed their handler across the Ramadi Bridge. As they crossed the bridge he changed his mind and did not manually activate the explosive device as directed. His partner on the other hand did, collapsing two of the four lanes as shown here.

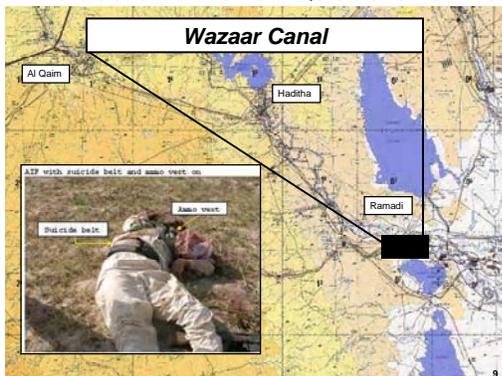


The Iraqi police quickly reacted and apprehended him and disarmed the truck he drove with 1,000 pounds of home-made explosive as well as tanks of chlorine and acetylene. He remains in coalition force custody.



His story is not uncommon. Approximately 60 to 80 foreigners are lured to Iraq every month by al-Qaeda. Approximately 70 percent transit through Syria as he did. Between 80-90 percent of the suicide attacks in Iraq are carried out by foreign-born al-Qaeda terrorists. In the last six months, more than 4,000 Iraqis have been killed or injured by AQI suicide attacks.

The attack on the Ramadi Bridge happened at the same time as Coalition Forces thwarted another al-Qaeda effort to attack Ramadi.



Coalition forces operating near Lake Habbaniyah, three miles southeast of Ramadi, received information from local sources that some 50 al-Qaeda fighters were staging near a marsh. Our forces moved to locate the terrorists, making contact with them in an engagement that lasted two days. The successful operation resulted 35 al-Qaeda terrorists killed and three captured. The terrorists were found carrying al-Qaeda propaganda, with many wearing suicide vests. One of the detainees was carrying a letter warning Ramadi would be attacked unless its residents repented for abandoning al-Qaeda. Also found was a weapons cache and supply of additional suicide vests.

This operation further demonstrated al-Qaeda's efforts to re-assert itself in places like Ramadi, where progress has been made. More importantly this engagement was an example of Coalition Forces operating in areas that have served as al-Qaeda sanctuaries – taking the fight to the enemy before they have the opportunity to strike at innocent civilians in population centers.

While our operations against AQI continue, we are also transitioning to support the Iraqi government in restoring basic services to areas once dominated by AQI.

In Baquba, an area that had become an al-Qaeda operating base, Operation Arrowhead Ripper has now resulted in 60 confirmed al-Qaeda extremists killed and 155 captured. We also uncovered more than fifty weapons caches and destroyed 122 improvised explosive devices.

The al-Qaeda of Iraq flag that was hung on the wall of an illegal court has been removed and the torture and execution houses have been shut down.

The Iraqi Government has restored food and medical shipments to Baquba for the first time in ten months. To date, they have delivered 462 metric tons of food as well as 10 truckloads of medical supplies, enough to support the entire population. And efforts are underway to restore fuel oil shipments and begin a large reconstruction effort.

It was not surprising that Ayman Al-Zawahiri recently released another lengthy video. In it, we see the number two man in al-Qaeda focusing on disunity, conspiracies and discord in Iraq and pleading for more foreign terrorist reinforcements and threatening non-volunteers. He even goes on to threaten Iran, telling them al-Qaeda will attack if their government doesn't stop its support of the Iraqi government.

This is another indication of the nature of AQI and why the Iraqi people continue to turn away from its extremist hatred and distorted ideology.

That concludes our operational update and I would be happy to take your questions.