THE ‘IRREDUCIBLE MINIMUM’
AL-QA’IDA IN IRAQ AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION

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Car and suicide bombings remain a regrettable feature of daily life for many Iraqis, despite the assassination of a number of high-profile Al-Qa’ida leaders. As in Malaya, Algeria and the Philippines, leadership decapitation has had only limited effect. Instead, the targeting of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq’s legion of emirs must be part of a wider strategy that incorporates political and economic tools to undercut the resilience of Iraq’s decentralised insurgency.

In April 2010, United States Forces-Iraq and Iraqi security forces killed or captured most of the Al-Qa’ida leadership in Iraq. In the space of two weeks, Abu Ayyub Al-Masri, Al-Qa’ida’s overall leader in Iraq, Abu Abdullah Al-Rashid Al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, and Ahmed Al-Obeidi, the northern commander of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI), were killed in two separate operations. Some time later, there were reports that the leader of the Ba’athist insurgency, Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, had also been captured but this appears to have been the result of a mistranslation of a news report. The capture of other leaders followed quickly: on 4 May the leader of Ansar Al-Sunna (a terrorist group mainly operating in northern Iraq and Kurdistan) was arrested in Baghdad along with members of the cell believed to have been responsible for a series of car bomb attacks at embassies in Baghdad on 4 April 2010. In all, twenty-six insurgent leaders were killed or captured between January and June 2010. The removal of these leaders was reported as a substantial success for the security forces, holding out the possibility of an improvement in the security situation. These operations certainly appear to have generated a great deal of actionable intelligence but it is worth examining what the actual effect of ‘leadership decapitation’ will be upon AQI. Although on the face of it removing the leadership of an organisation would appear to be a logical step in a counter-insurgency campaign, recent research shows that it often has little or no effect, with a fairly strong argument that it may be counter-productive – actually prolonging the life of the group in question. This article will first provide an overview of recent research into the effectiveness of leadership decapitation and then examine the effectiveness of the strategy in the case of AQI.

Mixed Results
Removing leaders has long been a tactic in war and it is certainly true that the death or capture of a leader can have a profound effect upon his or her organisation. But there is some debate about its effectiveness as a tactic in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations. In 1962, the issue was discussed at a RAND Corporation symposium attended by the leading counter-insurgency experts of the day, including David Galula, Frank Kitson, Edward Lansdale, George Tanham and Napoleon Valeriano. Between them they had served in all of the major insurgencies of the post-war era – Vietnam, Algeria, Malaya, Kenya and the Philippines. The debate essentially boiled down to a discussion of the effects of leadership removal in the Philippines in comparison with Algeria and Vietnam. Officers with experience in the former found that removing leaders had been particularly effective, especially if this was followed up with further operations to exploit the resultant confusion. Some guerrilla units in the Philippines had taken between seven and eighteen months to reform after the capture or death of the leader; others had never done so. In contrast, David Galula (supported by Colonel White, a British officer with experience in Malaya) argued that removing the leader in communist insurgencies often had little effect as they were less reliant on individual figureheads and tended to ‘rotate leaders, groom successors and try to prevent the cult of personality’. While it is debatable whether communists really do avoid cults of personality – leaders such as Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Lenin still feature prominently in the culture of their respective countries – there is some evidence that the removal of leaders does not always significantly affect the outcome of an insurgency. It was also highlighted at the RAND symposium that subsequent leaders often learned from the experience of their predecessors;
David Galula pointed out that a ‘third generation’ leader can also often be more effective than either of the first two, having learned the value of good leadership and personal security. The general consensus was that it is always good to remove a leader when the opportunity presents itself, but not to expect that this would necessarily have a significant impact upon the enemy.

This subjective and anecdotal view that the effectiveness of leadership decapitation largely relies upon the type of organisation is supported by recent research. In a study of leadership decapitation between 1945 and 2004, Jenna Jordan found that removing the leader or top echelon only caused the collapse of the organisation in 17 per cent of the 298 cases she examined, with large religious extremist organisations older than ten years being the most resilient to leadership decapitation. Jordan’s findings appear to be borne out by other studies. Stephen Hosmer has noted that after the removal of Abimael Guzmán and Abdullah Öcalan, two very strong and charismatic leaders, their organisations (Shining Path in Peru and the PKK in Turkey) still carried on without them – albeit weakened. An example of a religious and separatist organisation that has proven remarkably resilient to a continual campaign of leadership decapitation is Hamas: Daniel Byman argues that this group increased its attacks following a sustained leadership decapitation campaign by Israel, even though the lethality of their attacks decreased over the same period. This, he argued, was due to the decentralisation of command within Hamas as a result of the loss of top leaders, and the fact that lower-level leaders increasingly started to act on their own initiative.

Jordan gave two main reasons for the resilience of large, mature religious terrorist organisations: first, older and larger organisations tend to have developed a ‘bureaucracy’ that allows for the replacement of leaders when they have been removed; and second, religious organisations tend to be more decentralised and, therefore, the removal of senior leaders has less effect on day-to-day operations. With regard to Al-Qa’ida, she concluded that ‘targeting bin Laden and other senior members of al Qaeda, independent of other measures, is not likely to result in organisational collapse.’

The Removal of Zarqawi
Before assessing the likely effect of the recent round of leadership decapitations on Al-Qa’ida in Iraq, it is worth examining what happened last time the senior leader was removed.

On 7 June 2006 the supposed leader of AQI, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, was killed in a bombing raid against a house he was using for a meeting. This was hailed as a significant development at the time, but Zarqawi’s death had no appreciable effect on the insurgency. If anything, it almost seemed to precipitate a more effective terrorist campaign and the insurgency appeared to gain strength: attacks continued to increase and there were more casualties than ever before. On 7 June 2006 the supposed leader of AQI, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, was killed in a bombing raid against a house he was using for a meeting. This was hailed as a significant development at the time, but Zarqawi’s death had no appreciable effect on the insurgency. If anything, it almost seemed to precipitate a more effective terrorist campaign and the insurgency appeared to gain strength: attacks continued to increase and there were more casualties than ever before. The Egyptian Abu Ayyub Al-Masri was named as the new ‘emir’ of AQI within days of Zarqawi’s death. Masri had reportedly
entered Iraq with Zarqawi and helped him establish the organisation, becoming one of the main facilitators for insurgents entering Iraq from Syria.  

**Zarqawi’s death had no appreciable effect**

The extent to which Zarqawi had control over the insurgency is open to question, however. The insurgency in Iraq was, and still is, more a loose coalition of groups than a unified movement. AQI was simply one of the ‘partners’, and not necessarily the senior partner at that. These included foreign Islamic jihadists, home-grown Islamic jihadists, former Ba’athists, nationalists (not necessarily Ba’athists) and tribal groups. A study by the West Point Combating Terrorism Center ‘Harmony Project’ revealed the fractious nature of the relationship between AQI and other insurgent groups: while they had a common cause to remove the foreign troops, they disagreed over methods and their views on Iraq’s future varied widely. Relations between the groups could hardly be described as harmonious and they have attacked each other on a fairly regular basis. AQI had managed to forge a loose working relationship with Ansar Al-Sunna, but their continued attacks against Iraqi civilians brought them into conflict with home-grown, Iraqi jihadist groups such as the 1920 Revolutionary Brigades and the Islamic Army in Iraq. When AQI attempted to consolidate the various groups described above under the umbrella of the Islamic State of Iraq, this enraged other groups who did not join the proposed coalition. Hence the fractious nature of the insurgent landscape meant that Zarqawi’s death did not have a major impact upon the insurgency as a whole, since many hubs of leadership remained.

**Additional Contributors to AQI Inefficiency**

AQI suffered additional problems with its command structure. According to the US Military Academy’s Counter Terrorism Center, which analysed AQI’s ‘lessons learned’ documents, the growth of the organisation throughout Iraq diluted the command structure as experienced personnel were spread among the new groups, and made communication difficult ‘to the point where the strategic intent of AQI’s high command was not clear to local cells’. Intra-cell bureaucracy also reached epidemic proportions as each function had its own ‘emir’: the multiplication diminished their authority over rank-and-file soldiers, who had a correspondingly reduced respect for those who held the title of ‘leader’. The organisation also reportedly suffered from ‘stovepiping’ of functions, with military, security, administration and...
Sharia departments overseeing their respective areas of responsibility, but with little co-operation between departments: this led to ‘noticeable delay in military and security operations’.20 Despite being a corporate weakness, the overly bureaucratic structures have proved to be a source of strength for AQI: when Zarqawi died, the emirs continued to function.

By the end of 2008, attacks against the security forces had dropped to around a quarter of the peak (1,800 attacks per week in mid-2007), whilst car bombings had dropped to a third.21 This significant diminution of the insurgency within two years of Zarqawi’s death, however, was driven by a range of factors, including a change in tactics by coalition forces and the increased capability of the Iraqi security forces. Nevertheless, two other factors had a particular impact upon the reduction in the capability of AQI over this time.

First, when Zarqawi was killed, the subsequent search of the house where he died revealed a map that showed typical insurgent support flowed into Iraq and which areas were important logistic hubs for their operations in Baghdad.22 This crude map provided the basis for the ‘Surge’ to target insurgent support networks in Diyala, Anbar and Babil provinces surrounding Baghdad.23 Operations Phantom Thunder, Phantom Strike and Phantom Phoenix between June 2007 and July 2008 succeeded in destroying much of the insurgent infrastructure in Iraq and regaining the initiative for the coalition forces.

Second, the ‘Awakening’ movement that started in late 2006 effectively pulled the legs out from under AQI by removing the support of the Sunni community. The origins of the Awakening lay in Anbar province, where local tribes reacted to AQI’s increasing levels of violent intimidation by forming armed groups to eject the insurgents.24 From Anbar, the Awakening movement spread to the other crucial support areas around Baghdad: Babil and Diyala provinces. Not only did communities begin to reject the insurgents, but insurgents themselves also joined the Awakening. For example, in June 2008 American officers reported that up to 500 former insurgents had surrendered (or ‘reconciled’) in Salah Al-Din province as part of arrangements made with the Awakening movement, and estimated that most of the remaining 1,800 fighters in the Balad area would reconcile in due course.25 To borrow Mao’s analogy, the AQI ‘fish’ were slowly deprived of the ‘sea’ and started to flounder onshore.

**Fragmented but Persistent**

It would be wrong, however, to conclude from this that AQI was, or is, in a terminal decline. Despite the removal of several key leaders in the first half of 2010, the fragmented and bureaucratic nature of AQI has ensured that – though the general level of violence has declined over the last three years – there is still a potent campaign of terrorism directed against the government, security forces and civilian population. There are still more than 200 civilian fatalities and an average of fourteen multiple fatality bombings every month in Iraq.26 Although lower than previous years, regular car bombing and suicide vest attacks in the major cities in central and northern Iraq persist, seemingly presaging a return to the dark days of 2007. The insurgency has been able to continue mounting effective operations, as the wave of attacks on 10 May – against several checkpoints in Baghdad as well as mass casualty bombings in Hillah, Suwayrah, Mosul and Basrah – demonstrated.27 In central Baghdad, insurgent groups led two large-scale attacks against financial institutions during June: on 13 June, fifteen people were killed in a combined suicide and ground attack on the Central Bank of Iraq;28 this was followed by an attack by two suicide bombers against the Trade Bank of Iraq on 22 June. Twenty-six people were killed and fifty-three injured.29 These latest attacks may have been an attempt by AQI to undermine the financial recovery of Iraq, or to hide their dealings with the two institutions by destroying their records: either way this shows a continued level of strategic thinking indicative of a renewed command structure.30

To a large extent, much of the damage to AQI at a strategic level has already been done. Military operations have diminished the capability of the top leadership to control day-to-day activities and reduced resources to a mere trickle compared with previous years, while community support has probably got as low as it can get as a result of the Awakening movement. The recent spate of high-profile robberies (and attempted robberies) throughout central Iraq is likely to be an indication of the dire state of AQI’s finances.29 What remains is a hard core of terrorist cells throughout the country, united in purpose if not actually under joint command. They have the knowledge and ability to operate in their own localities and within the major cities despite the high levels of security and continued improvement by the Iraqi security forces. This is the ‘irreducible minimum’ that General Odierno spoke of in 2008: it is likely that attacks will continue for several years, even if they decrease over time.30 The success of the counter-terrorist campaign from now on will not rely on ‘silver bullets’ such as the removal of national or regional level leaders. It will need a professional and sophisticated intelligence capability at local level – lower than provincial or even municipal, but at station level within the police or battalion/company level in the army – to target individual cells and their supporters. It also needs to be accompanied by political and economic progress that denies the insurgency the community support that it needs to regain its former capabilities and pose a serious threat to Iraq’s stability.

**The success of the counter-terrorist campaign will not rely on ‘silver bullets’**

In conclusion, the case of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq to date has borne out the experience of veterans of the Philippines, Malaya and Algeria in demonstrating that removing leaders from an insurgency may contribute to operational goals – but it is not the only solution. There are wider political and socio-economic issues that
must be taken into account. It has also confirmed the findings of academics and analysts such as Jordan, Hosmer and Byman that show that established organisations, particularly those with religious motivation, are remarkably resilient to leadership decapitation because of their decentralised and bureaucratic nature. Terrorism will be a feature of life in Iraq for some years to come. The continued targeting of insurgent leaders may play a role in diminishing organisational coherence to a certain extent; but ultimate success will rely on improving the capability of the Iraqi security forces, and continued political and economic progress.

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Notes


6 Ibid., pp. 13–14.

7 Ibid., p. 13.


11 Ibid., p. 100.


15 Brian Fishman, Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from inside Al Qa’ida in Iraq (West Point, NY: United States Military Academy Counter Terrorism Center, March 2009).

16 Ibid., pp. 1–6.

17 Ibid., p. 19.

18 Ibid.


20 Brookings Institute, op. cit., p. 5; STRATFOR, op. cit., p. 4.


24 Brookings Institute, op. cit., pp. 4, 5 and 7.


29 STRATFOR, op. cit., p. 7.