By Scott Stewart

On April 25, The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) posted a statement on the Internet confirming that two of its top leaders, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayub al-Masri, had been killed April 18 in a joint U.S.-Iraqi operation in Salahuddin province. Al-Baghdadi (an Iraqi also known as Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi), was the head of the ISI, an al Qaeda-led jihadist alliance in Iraq, and went by the title "Leader of the Faithful." Al-Masri (an Egyptian national also known as Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir), was the military leader of the ISI and head of the group's military wing, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Al-Masri replaced Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in June 2006. Al-Zarqawi had alienated many Iraqi Sunnis with his ruthlessness, and al-Baghdadi is thought to have been appointed the emir of the ISI in an effort to put an Iraqi face on jihadist efforts in Iraq and to help ease the alienation between the foreign jihadists and the local Sunni population. Al-Masri, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq and the military leader of the ISI, was considered the real operational leader of ISI/AQI efforts in Iraq.

STRATFOR viewed the initial announcement by Iraqi authorities of the deaths of the two leaders with a healthy degree of skepticism. After all, they had been declared dead before, only to later release statements on the Internet mocking the Iraqi government for making false claims. But the details provided in the April 19 press conference by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (complete with photos of the deceased) and the confirmation by the U.S. military helped allay those initial doubts. The recent admission by the ISI, which made a similar statement following the death of al-Zarqawi, has all but erased our doubts about the deaths.

But the ISI's statement has raised some other questions. It claimed that the deaths of the two leaders would not affect the group's operations in Iraq because new members had recently joined it. But when viewed in the context of other recent developments in Iraq, it appears that the operational capability of the ISI will indeed be affected — at least in the near future.

Recent Activity

The operation that resulted in the deaths of al-Baghdadi and al-Masri did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it was a part of a series of operations targeting the ISI in recent months. The raids have come as a result of a renewed effort to counter the ISI following a resurgence in the group's operations that included high-profile multiple-vehicle bombings directed against targets in central Baghdad on Aug. 19, 2009, Oct. 25, 2009, Dec. 8, 2009, and Jan. 25, 2010.

The raids that resulted in the deaths of the ISI leaders on April 18 were part of a chain of events that stretches back for months, and appear to be the result of the effective exploitation of intelligence gained in one raid used to conduct the next. For example, Iraqi Maj. Gen. Qasim Ata, the spokesman for the Baghdad Operations Command, told Al-Iraqiya TV on April 20 that

the intelligence that led to the location of al-Baghdadi and al-Masri was obtained during the March 11, 2010, arrest of Manaf Abdul Raheem al-Rawi, the AQI commander in Baghdad. Iraqi government sources claim al-Rawi is the man responsible for planning the multiple-vehicle bombings in Baghdad. If so, he is another effective operational leader who has been taken out of the ISI/AQI gene pool.

Then, following the April 18 raid, Ahmad al-Ubaydi — aka Abu-Suhaib, whom Iraqi officials identify as the AQI military commander for the northern Iraqi provinces of Ninevah, Salahuddin and Kirkuk provinces — was killed April 20. The next day, Iraqi authorities located an improvised explosive device (IED) factory in western Anbar province and seized two vehicle bombs and some smaller IEDs. On April 22, the U.S. Army announced the arrest of a bombmaker in Anbar province. On April 23, Iraqi police arrested another AQI military leader in Anbar, Mahmoud Suleiman, who was reportedly found with several IEDs in his home. Also on April 23, an Iraqi police SWAT team reportedly killed two AQI leaders during a raid in eastern Mosul. They claimed that one of the AQI leaders, Yousef Mohammad Ali, was also a bombmaker. In recent days, dozens of other alleged AQI members have either surrendered or been arrested in Diyala, Mosul, Salahuddin and Basra.

There have even been unconfirmed reports that Izzat al-Douri was captured April 25. Al-Douri, the "king of clubs" in the U.S. military's 2003 deck of most-wanted Iraqis and who has a $10 million bounty on his head, was a vice president of Iraq under Saddam Hussein and an important insurgent leader.

In late March, progress was also made against AQI in Mosul. Several suspects were arrested or killed, and among the latter were major AQI figures Khalid Muhammad Hasan Shallub al-Juburi, Abu Ahmad al-Afri and Bashar Khalaf Husayn Ali al-Jaburi.

This type of rapid, sequential activity against jihadists by U.S. and Iraqi forces is not a coincidence. It is the result of some significant operational changes that were made in 2007 in the wake of the American surge in Iraq. The then-commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), Gen. Stanley McChrystal, was instrumental in flattening hierarchies and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies in both intelligence and special operations forces activities inside Iraq in order to create a highly integrated and streamlined organization. The result was the capability to rapidly plan and execute special operations forces raids based on actionable intelligence with a limited shelf life — and then to rapidly interrogate any captives, quickly analyze any material of intelligence value seized and rapidly re-task forces in a series of follow-on operations. The resulting high tempo of operations was considered enormously successful and a key factor in the success of the surge, and recent developments in Iraq appear to be a continuation of this type of rapid and aggressive activity.

Such operations not only can produce rapid gains in terms of capturing and killing key targets, they also serve to disrupt and disorient the enemy. According to Iraqi Maj. Gen. Qasim Ata, AQI is currently in disarray and panic, and he believes that the organization is also facing money problems, since it reportedly has been in contact with al Qaeda prime in an attempt to secure financial assistance. This stands in stark contrast to the 2005 letter in which al Qaeda No. 2 Ayman al-Zawahiri asked AQI leader al-Zarqawi for funding. At that time there was a large flow

of men and money into Iraq, but it now appears that AQI is facing some financial difficulties. Following the recent raids in which senior operational commanders and bombmakers have been captured or killed, it also appears that the group may also be facing some leadership and operational-expertise difficulties.

Leadership

As STRATFOR has previously noted, leadership is a critical factor in the operational success of a militant group. Without skilled leadership, militant groups lose their ability to conduct effective attacks, particularly ones of a sophisticated nature. Leadership, skill and professionalism are the factors that make the difference between a militant group wanting to attack something — i.e., its intent — and the group's ability to successfully carry out its intended attack — i.e., its capability. The bottom line is that new recruits simply cannot replace seasoned operational commanders, as the ISI suggested in its statement.

Although it might seem like a simple task to find a leader for a militant group, effective militant leaders are hard to come by. Unlike most modern militaries, militant groups rarely invest much time and energy in leadership development training. To compound the problem, the leader of a militant group needs to develop a skill set that is quite a bit broader than most military leaders. In addition to personal attributes such as ruthlessness, aggressiveness and fearlessness, militant leaders also must be charismatic, intuitive, clever and inspiring. This last attribute is especially important in an organization that seeks to recruit operatives to conduct suicide attacks. Additionally, an effective militant leader must be able to recruit and train operatives, enforce operational security, raise funds, plan operations and then methodically execute a plan while avoiding the security forces constantly hunting the militants down.

Of course, not every leadership change is disastrous to a militant group. Sometimes a new leader breathes new life and energy into an organization (like Nasir al-Wahayshi in Yemen), or the group has competent lieutenants able to continue to operate effectively after the death of the leader (like AQI after the death of al-Zarqawi). But the current environment in Iraq, where numerous individuals have been rapidly and sequentially killed or captured, makes this sort of orderly leadership replacement more difficult.

Therefore, it will be important to watch the ISI carefully to see who is appointed as the group's new emir and military commander. (In practical terms, the emir may be easier to replace than the military commander, especially if the former is just a figurehead and not a true operational commander.) The group may have had a clear chain of command and competent, designated successors who have survived the recent operations. But if not, the leadership vacuum at the top could result in infighting over control, or result in an ineffective leader assuming control. The jury is still out, but with the recent successes against the ISI, there is a very good chance that it may take some time for the group to regain its footing. This, of course, is the objective of the up-tempo operations recently seen in Iraq. Effective counterterrorism programs seek to keep the militants (and especially their leaders) off balance by killing or capturing them while also rolling up the lower levels of the group. Militants scrambling for their lives seldom have the opportunity to plan effective attacks, and sustained pressure makes it difficult for them to regain the offensive.

Like operational leaders, competent bombmakers are not easy to replace. They also need to possess a broad set of skills and require a great deal of training and practical experience to hone their skills. A master bombmaker is a rare and precious commodity in the militant world. Therefore, the bombmakers recently arrested in Iraq could prove to be almost as big a loss to AQI as the operational leaders.

When we discussed the resurgence of the ISI/AQI back in October, we noted that at that time they had retained a great deal of their capability and that they were able to gather intelligence, plan attacks, acquire ordnance, build reliable IEDs and execute spectacular attacks in the center of Baghdad against government ministry buildings. We also discussed how the polarization surrounding the election in Iraq was providing them an opportunity to exploit. That polarization has continued in the wake of the elections as the factions jockey for position in the new government, but the extent of the damage done to the jihadists through the loss of so many commanders and operatives may not allow the successors of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi to take advantage of the situation before their window of opportunity closes.

We will be watching the jihadists in Iraq carefully in the coming months to see if they can regroup and retain their operational capability. The big question is: Will the recent operations against the ISI/AQI merely serve as another temporary setback like the killing of al-Zarqawi, or do they portend something more long-term for the future of the organization? The ISI/AQI has proved to be resilient and resourceful in the past, but we are not sure they have the ability to bounce back this time.

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