

Backgrounder #21

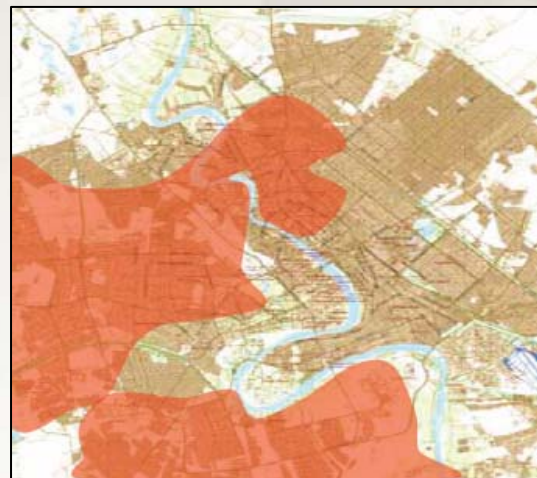
Developments Fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq

Eric Hamilton, Researcher, Institute for the Study of War

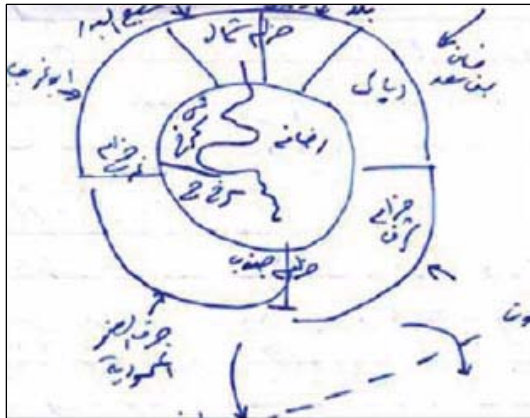
In the last year Coalition and Iraqi Forces and local Iraqi citizens made significant progress fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI was cleared from former areas of operation like Anbar and Baghdad and the organization became fragmented with its freedom of movement and ability to conduct operations reduced. Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-Iraq) recently released a series of maps illustrating these developments. These maps are presented and explained in this Backgrounder.

Al Qaeda in Iraq at the Peak

By the end of 2006 AQI controlled large swaths of terrain across Iraq. AQI used this terrain to foment sectarian violence in population centers – particularly in Baghdad. The dynamics of violence in Baghdad in 2006 were varied and complex. In general, mixed Sunni and Shia areas were the most violent. Throughout 2006 and into 2007 Shi'a militias engaged in sectarian cleansing in these mixed areas and drove Sunni populations to accept AQI as defenders. The Shi'a militias were based in eastern Baghdad particularly in Sadr City. AQI and affiliated Sunni groups were based in western Baghdad particularly in Dora and Ghaziliyah. From these strongholds both groups fought for the center of Baghdad with major fault lines on the west side of the Tigris River in Kadhimiyah, Karkh, and Rasheed, and on the east side of the Tigris in Adhamiyah and Rusafa. The map to the right shows the division down the middle of Baghdad with AQI controlled areas highlighted in red and Shi'a militia controlled areas not highlighted (For a more detailed map of the districts and neighborhoods of Baghdad see Appendix A).



Map 1: Areas of AQI Control in Baghdad
December 2006 (Source MNF-Iraq)

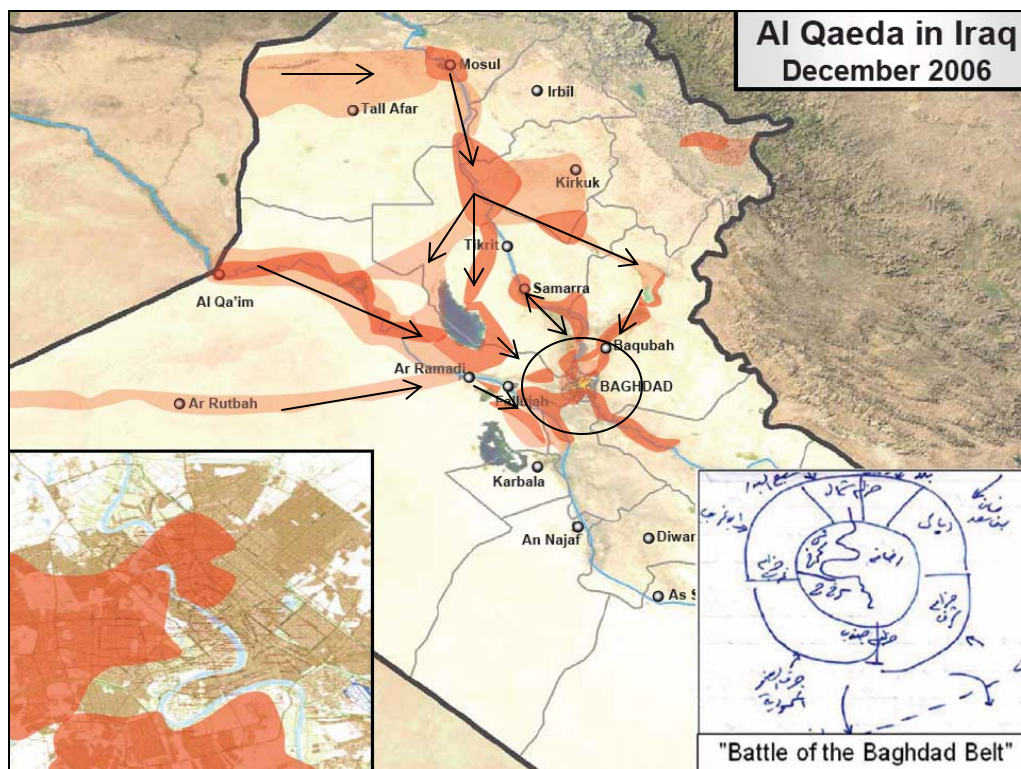


(Source MNF-Iraq)

AQI depended on the areas immediately around Baghdad in order to funnel fighters, weapons and money into the city. The diagram to the left was drawn by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and was discovered in an AQI safe house in December 2006.¹ It shows how AQI controlled Baghdad through a series of belts around the city limits. The Baghdad belts are residential, agricultural, and industrial areas that encircle the city, and networks of roadways, rivers, and other lines of communication that lie within a twenty or thirty mile radius of Baghdad and connect the capital to the rest of Iraq. Between 2004 and 2006 the belts were contested by both AQI and Shi'a militias because they were important areas for

funneling accelerants and projecting force into Baghdad. They were also the key corridors allowing fighters and facilitators to transit freely in and out of Baghdad to the surrounding provinces. The arrows pointing down also indicate that AQI used the southern belt to project force down into the mixed population centers of north Babil and Wasit provinces.²

Control of the Baghdad belts was also important for connecting AQI's network in Baghdad to the network throughout the rest of the country. Map 1 shows the state of AQI in December 2006. The dark red spots represent what were assessed to AQI operating areas "where they had some level of freedom of movement and sanctuary to conduct their operations." The lighter red spots represent areas of population influence and important lines of transit.³



Map 2: Areas of AQI Control and Influence in Iraq December 2006 (Source MNF-Iraq)

From Map 1 it is clear that AQI held a great deal of terrain by the end of 2006 with multiple lines of support running west-east from the Syrian border to central Iraq and north-south from Mosul down to Baghdad. In the north AQI operated along a line running from the border town of Sinjar through Tal Afar to Mosul. From Mosul this line ran down the Tigris River Valley to the Za'ab triangle where it split southwest to the Euphrates River Valley and the northwest side of Lake Tharthar, and south to the eastern side of Lake Tharthar and the city of Ramadi. At Ramadi this north-south line met up with the west-east line from the border town of Al-Qa'im that followed the Euphrates River Valley and the transit line that ran from the border through Ar Rutbah in western Iraq. From Ramadi, the line then skirted Fallujah and connected to the southern belts through the AQI stronghold southwest of Baghdad. From north of Bayji another line also split southeast and ran along the Hamrin Ridge to the upper Diyala River Valley. From here it followed the Diyala River Valley through Baqubah where it linked into the northern belts and the line that ran up the Tigris River Valley to Samarra.

The large areas of sanctuary and long lines of support highlighted in Map 1 were extremely important for attacking population centers. AQI established sanctuaries by terrorizing and intimidating local populations and then used these areas to plan, prepare and conduct operations. The areas outside of major cities, for example in the northern and southern belts of Baghdad, were particularly important for the construction of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED). IEDs were emplaced along strategic roads for use against Coalition Forces, which allowed AQI to control major transportation routes. VBIEDs were brought into cities and targeted Coalition Forces, the Iraqi government and Shi'a populated areas, which allowed AQI to control certain city neighborhoods and foment sectarian violence. The long lines of support allowed the senior leadership of the network to funnel foreign fighters, weapons and money from west to east and from north to south into Baghdad and the belts and other command and control nodes in population centers like Ramadi, Mahmudiyah, Salman Pak, Baqubah, Samarra and Mosul. Overall, AQI operated relatively freely throughout Iraq and was able to fall back easily on lines of support when Coalition operations were conducted.

Al Qaeda in Iraq Displaced

In 2007, a combination of factors pushed AQI out of sanctuaries in Baghdad, the belts and western Iraq and disrupted the network's long lines of support. In the fall of 2006 the Sunni tribal leaders of Anbar province formed an Awakening Council and began working with Coalition Forces after being alienated by AQI's brutal tactics for years.⁴ The Awakening Council organized local Iraqis in Anbar to cease providing sanctuary to AQI and began actively working with Coalition Forces. Awakening members began protecting key infrastructure, manning security checkpoints and providing actionable intelligence about AQI that allowed Coalition Forces to target the terrorist group without alienating the broader population. From the Awakening Council in Anbar grew the Concerned Local Citizens (CLC) movements that have spread across Iraq and now include more than 80,000 members.

In addition to the groundswell of opposition to AQI at the local level, the change in Coalition counterinsurgency strategy at the beginning of 2007 began to disrupt and dismantle the

AQI network. The purpose of the new counterinsurgency strategy was to secure the Iraqi population. The method for achieving this aim was to clear insurgent areas with significant military operations, control these areas by spreading Coalition Forces out into the population, and retain them by working with Iraqi Security Forces and local Iraqis. This new strategy began in February in Baghdad with Operation Fardh al-Qanoon (Enforcing the Law), or the Baghdad Security Plan. The Baghdad Security Plan moved Coalition Forces out of the large Forward Operating Bases (FOB) in and around Baghdad and into smaller Joint Security Stations (JSS) and even smaller Combat Outposts (COP) that were eventually located in nearly every Baghdad neighborhood. These smaller operating bases brought Coalition and Iraqi Forces together in the middle of neighborhoods where coordinating and conducting clearing operations with the help of local Iraqis led to more effective and permanent security gains. By controlling and retaining these areas Coalition Forces were then able to promote reconciliation and reconstruction and deny AQI (as well as other Sunni insurgent groups and Shi'a militias) the ability to return to former sanctuaries in the capital. The map to the right shows that by December 2007 AQI no longer controlled any areas in Baghdad and maintained influence in shrinking isolated pockets.



Map 3: Areas of AQI Influence in Baghdad December 2007 (Source MNF-Iraq)

With the Baghdad Security Plan in full force and the additional “surge” brigades in theatre by June, Coalition Forces moved out into the belts with the corps-level offensive Operation Phantom Thunder. Building on shaping operations that were ongoing since January, Phantom Thunder aimed to prevent insurgents in the belts and surrounding provinces from supporting violence in Baghdad. During Phantom Thunder Coalition Forces cleared Baqubah and the surrounding area to the northeast of Baghdad, Arab Jabour to the south, and the area between Baghdad, Fallujah, and the shores of Lake Tharthar to the northwest. Operation Phantom Strike followed Phantom Thunder and ran from August to December. Phantom Strike

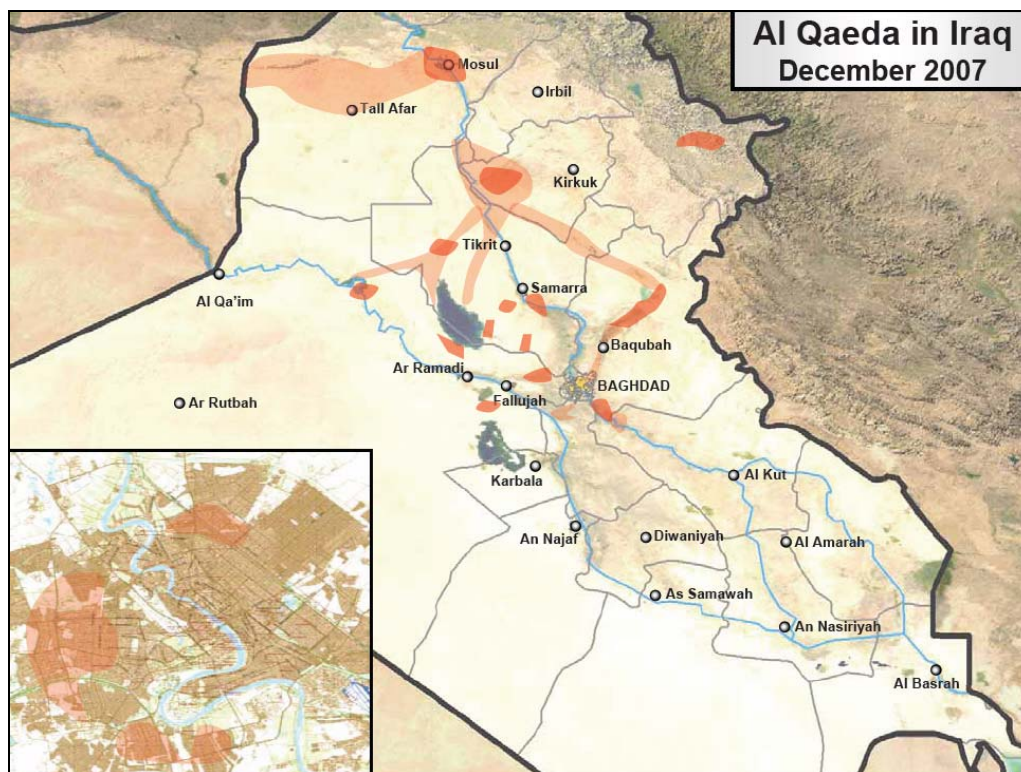


Map 4: Baghdad, the Belts and Beyond (Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping)

continued targeted operations in and around Baghdad and also pushed out beyond the belts in order to deny AQI from regrouping in new safe havens and cut the lines of support that channeled violence into Baghdad. In Multi-National Division – North (MND-North) Coalition Forces pushed up the Diyala River Valley to Muqadadiyah, squeezed the Za’ab triangle to the east of Kirkuk, and conducted a series of targeted operations up the Tigris River Valley.⁵ In Multi-National Division – Center (MND-Center) Coalition Forces

continued to clear the southern belt focusing on Arab Jabour and Hawr Rajab on the southern outskirts of Baghdad and pushing out into Yusufiyah, Mahmudiyah and Salman Pak further south.⁶

Operations Phantom Thunder and Phantom Strike were the largest series of coordinated military operations carried out by Coalition Forces since the start of the war in March 2003. These operations cleared AQI out of large sanctuaries in and around Baghdad and severed its long lines of support. In addition, the creation of the Anbar Awakening Council proved decisive in clearing AQI from western Iraq and the rise of CLCs elsewhere helped secure areas after they were cleared by Coalition operations. By December 2007 AQI had been pushed north into smaller, more remote areas of decreasing relevance as shown on Map 5 below.



Map 5: Areas of AQI Control and Influence in Iraq December 2007 (Source MNF-I)

Since this map was made Coalition Forces have launched a new corps-level offensive Operation Phantom Phoenix, which continues to pursue AQI as it seeks new sanctuaries. Referring to the red areas remaining on the map Rear Admiral Greg Smith said “with the start of Phantom Phoenix you can be pretty sure that many of those areas now are being pretty well squeezed.”⁷ Indeed in the beginning of January the red area above Baqubah was cleared in Operation Raider Harvest, the one southeast of Baghdad was cleared in Operation Marne Thunderbolt, and a series of coordinated operations around Samarra have cleared a number of the areas between Samarra and Lake Tharthar.⁸ These operations continue to push AQI north where Mosul is the last population center in Iraq that AQI controls.

Conclusion

In 2007, the bottom-up desire for security among Iraqis and a new counterinsurgency strategy by Coalition forces pushed much of the AQI network out of Baghdad, the northern and southern belts, and Anbar province. AQI continues to maintain a presence and conduct attacks in these former sanctuaries and will likely try to regroup on the fringes of these areas and re-enter them – the effort by AQI to establish a sanctuary north of Muqdadiah in northern Diyala and project force back down the valley into areas of strategic interest provides evidence for this.⁹ Significant pockets of AQI are still present above Lake Hamrin and along the sparsely populated Hamrin Ridge and in the vicinity of Mahmudiyah, Latifiyah, and Yusufiyah on the southernmost reaches of the Baghdad belt. The Bayji-Tikrit-Samarra line also remains the traditional home of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and serves as a strategic line of communication down the Tigris River Valley to Baghdad and to the Khalis Corridor and Baqubah areas in southern Diyala province. A large portion of the organization, however, has been pushed to a few key areas in the north – primarily the Mosul-Tal Afar-Sinjar-Rabiah line across northern Iraq and the Za'ab triangle to the west of Kirkuk.

The Mosul line has only a small contingent of U.S. forces, is the key point of entry for foreign fighters coming to Iraq from Syria and is an attractive region for AQI to find a safe haven by exploiting tensions between Sunni Arabs and Kurds. Mosul is the proclaimed capital of the Islamic State in Iraq and Abu Ayyub al-Masri has twice transited through Mosul in recent months indicating that the AQI leadership is operating in and around the Mosul area.¹⁰ Mosul is the last significant population center controlled by AQI in Iraq and it is the only area in Iraq where violence has not decreased in the last year. The Za'ab triangle also has only a small contingent of U.S. forces, sits on the ethnic fault line between Sunni Arabs and Kurds and is a key link in the line leading down the Tigris River Valley and across the Hamrin Ridge and along the road network connecting Mosul to the upper Diyala River Valley. Primarily Mosul, but also Za'ab, will be greatly contested in the coming months. Coalition Forces will continue to clear central Iraq focusing on Baghdad, the belts, and Diyala province, but will also conduct smaller operations along the Tigris River Valley, in Za'ab and around Mosul. It is likely, however, that Coalition Forces will not move in numbers to the north and that Iraqi Security Forces will be largely responsible for the fight in Mosul.

Coalition operations have degraded AQI's operational capabilities in the last year by clearing the network out of several large sanctuaries and fracturing its lines of support throughout the country. As a result, remaining areas of AQI control are partly isolated from one another and likely operate somewhat independently. AQI, however, continues to operate between these areas and uses them to facilitate money, fighters and weapons to areas of strategic interest like Baghdad and Baqubah. The network has not been defeated and will continue to conduct attacks. AQI will attempt to regroup on the fringes of former sanctuaries and in the north and will remain a considerable challenge in securing and stabilizing Iraq in 2008.

Appendix A: Map of Baghdad Security Districts and Neighborhoods



(Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping)

¹ Rear Admiral Greg Smith, Department of Defense Press Briefing, January 20, 2008; “Zarqawi Map Aided Successes Against Iraqi Insurgency,” *Fox News*, November 21, 2007.

² For a detailed analysis of the northern and southern belts around Baghdad see Kimberly Kagan, “From ‘New Way Forward’ to New Commander,” *Iraq Report* 1, March 1, 2007; and Kimberly Kagan, “The Real Surge: Preparing for Operation Phantom Thunder,” *Iraq Report* 5, July 6, 2007.

³ Rear Admiral Greg Smith, Department of Defense Press Briefing, January 20, 2008.

⁴ For detailed information on the Anbar Awakening, see Kimberly Kagan, “Anbar Awakening: Displacing Al-Qaeda from its Stronghold in Western Iraq,” *Iraq Report* 3, April 5, 2007.

⁵ Kimberly Kagan, “Securing Diyala,” *Iraq Report* 7, December 4, 2007.

⁶ Farook Ahmed, “Offensive Operations in Multi-National Division-Center: June 2007-January 2008,” Backgrounder #20, January 18, 2008.

⁷ Rear Admiral Greg Smith, Defense Bloggers Roundtable, January 23, 2008.

⁸ Eric Hamilton, “Operation Raider Harvest: Establishing Lasting Security in Northern Diyala,” Backgrounder #19, Institute for the Study of War, January 18, 2008; Operation Marne Thunderbolt in the Operations Section of the Institute for the Study of War website www.understandingwar.org; Multi-National Force – Iraq www.mnf-iraq.com.

⁹ See Eric Hamilton, “Operation Raider Harvest: Establishing Lasting Security in Northern Diyala,” Backgrounder #19, Institute for the Study of War, January 18, 2008.

¹⁰ Michael R. Gordon, “Pushed Out of Baghdad Area, Insurgents Seek Hub in North,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2007.