

Iraq after the Death of al Qaeda in Iraq's Leadership

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Q1: Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announced on Monday that Iraqi forces had killed the leaders of al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq. What impact will these deaths have on violence in Iraq?

A1: Iraqi intelligence and security forces successfully planned and executed this operation, killing both Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir (also known as Abu Ayyub al-Masri), who was the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al Zawi (also known as Abu Umar al-Baghdadi), who led an umbrella organization—called the Islamic State of Iraq—for a number of insurgent groups. Both AQI and the Islamic State of Iraq have claimed responsibility for several violent events in the last several years, including the recent spate of attacks that killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians. Without key leaders like al-Masri and al-Baghdadi to provide focus and discipline, it will likely prove difficult for these groups to plan, organize, and carry out high-profile attacks against Iraqi government facilities along the lines of the August, October, and December 2009 bombings of key ministry buildings in Baghdad.

That said, the June 2006 death of then-AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi did infuse the insurgent group with renewed fervor, resulting in widespread violence during a time of political uncertainty. Moreover, AQI and the Islamic State of Iraq have recently demonstrated their willingness to exploit “softer” civilian targets, such as the April 5 bombings of apartment buildings in Baghdad. Although there appears to be dwindling public support for insurgent groups—particularly as Iraqis grow increasingly tired of the violence and look forward to seating a coalition government—AQI and the Islamic State of Iraq may continue along this trend of targeting civilians.

Q2: What was the U.S. role in this operation?

A2: According to both Iraqi and U.S. officials, Iraqi intelligence and security forces led this series of joint operations with U.S. support. In keeping with the bilateral security agreement, U.S. military forces withdrew from cities, villages, and localities in June 2009 and often emphasize that their Iraqi counterparts have taken the lead in operations across Iraq with some reliance on U.S. enabling capabilities, such as the close air support and rockets used in support of Iraqi ground forces in this case.

It is striking that the U.S. statements confirming the deaths of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi have emerged so quickly and been so unequivocal, characterizing this operation as a “potentially devastating blow to AQI,” giving the lion’s share of the credit to the Iraqi security forces, and highlighting those forces’ maturity in intelligence gathering, planning, and execution. General Ray Odierno, the commander of U.S. Forces–Iraq, stated, “The death of these terrorists is potentially the most significant blow to al-Qaeda in Iraq since the beginning of the insurgency... As the Government of Iraq continues to protect the people of Iraq, the U.S. stands ready to assist them.” Vice President Joe Biden noted that “this action demonstrates the improved security strength and capacity of Iraqi security forces. The Iraqis led this operation, and it was based on intelligence the Iraqi security forces themselves developed following their capture of a senior AQI leader last month.” These statements reinforce the growing role of the Iraqi security forces and downplay U.S. involvement.

Q3: What impact will this event have on Prime Minister al-Maliki’s public approval ratings?

A3: Prime Minister al-Maliki personally announced the deaths of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi and will likely see an increase in positive public opinion as a result of this security success. His State of Law bloc won 89 of 325 Council of Representatives seats in the March 7 national elections, and he continues in negotiations with the Iraq National Alliance and other political groups to form a ruling coalition. Although a recent nonbinding poll of Shiite Muslims indicated that al-Maliki would not be the front-runner for the prime minister position in such a coalition, the deaths of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi may increase his influence within the Shiite community.

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