



February 26, 2007 (updated)

Ansar al-Sunnah Threatens Al-Qa'ida in Iraq

On January 13, 2007 a message demanding retribution for the killing of Ansar al-Sunnah (AAS) fighters by Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) was transmitted by AAS' Judicial Committee to AQI's Emir, Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir. Apparently after receiving no response from al-Muhajir, the letter was posted on a private (password protected) online forum on January 22, 2007. The letter was subsequently posted to an unprotected website sympathetic to Iraqi insurgent groups. As part of an ongoing collaboration with the Department of Defense to collect, translate, declassify, and disseminate documents that provide new insights into the internal functioning of salafi-jihadist organizations, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point has made this letter available at <http://ctc.usma.edu>.

The AAS letter to AQI is striking because the groups have long been considered close ideological allies and both are purportedly members of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an alliance of Jihadi groups in Western Iraq. The apparent killing of AAS fighters demonstrates that Jihadi-Salafist elements within the Iraqi insurgency continue to clash amongst themselves even while attempting to tighten their military and political relationships.

When Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir succeeded Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi as Emir of AQI, many observers expected that the organization would increase its cooperation with other insurgent groups, as Al-Qa'ida's senior leadership had repeatedly urged Zarqawi to do. Those predictions appeared well-founded when AQI, along with several other insurgent groups, established the ISI in October, 2006.¹

This letter—and the killings it references—indicates that AQI remains highly unstable. One potential explanation is that al-Muhajir does not completely control AQI. This may be because of the group's cellular administrative structure, which increases security but limits the Emir's ability to control his fighters.² More

¹ The Islamic State of Iraq formalized and appeared to deepen the relationship between groups that had previously been linked under the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC). Prior versions of this report erroneously implied that AAS was part of the MSC and a founder of the ISI. That was not the author's intent; nevertheless, it was implied by the text. Claims that AAS was "purportedly" a member of the ISI are based on the assertions of the ISI's Emir, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, that "brigades and thousands of brother fighters" from AAS and other insurgent groups had sworn allegiance to the ISI. Al-Baghdadi. 22 December 2006 "Truth has Arrived and Falsehood Perished."

² *Harmony and Disharmony*. <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony.asp>

significantly, the discord may reflect an ongoing ideological struggle within AQI between Zarqawi-like absolutists who shun compromise with other insurgent groups and more pragmatic leaders.³

Ansar al-Sunnah seems particularly perturbed about the killing of these particular fighters because of their experience and seniority within AAS. They are also frustrated that the institutional mechanisms designed to resolve disputes between insurgent groups, namely the Islamic State of Iraq, have been unhelpful. In the absence of a functional dispute resolution system, AAS hints it may act independently to punish offenders.

Ansar al-Sunnah's critique of the ISI is particularly damning because the ISI has prioritized its judicial and dispute resolution capabilities. The most important ideological document distributed by the ISI emphasizes the state's ability to solve "conflicts and disputes," and warns that its agents will carry out "mandatory punishments" under Shariah.⁴

Whether or not the killing of AAS' operatives was directed by al-Muhajir or the ISI, Ansar al-Sunnah's direct appeal to AQI indicates that the ISI's constituent groups still operate independently of one another. It also suggests that AQI remains the dominant force in the ISI. This is important because AQI has tried to minimize the perception that it is dominant in the ISI, even going so far as to ask satellite news channels to only use the term "Islamic State of Iraq" rather than "Al-Qa'ida in Iraq" when covering the violence in Iraq.⁵

Ansar al-Sunnah's frustration with AQI comes at a critical moment in the fight for Iraq. Numerous reports suggest that the ISI is struggling to enforce its authority in Anbar Province.⁶ Meanwhile Ansar al-Sunnah has called for resistance inside Baghdad against the "Surge" plan. Open warfare between AAS and AQI is unlikely in the short term, but their dispute underscores the bankruptcy of the Jihadi-Salafi political movement. Nevertheless, the U.S. should not underestimate the importance of the Islamic State of Iraq, which serves as an important rallying cry for Jihadi-Salafis around the globe, especially those unaware of its internal disputes.

³ Fishman, Brian. "After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq." *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2006. Vol. 29, #4

⁴ Abd al-Rahman. Al-Tamimi, Uthman bin "Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq." *Furqan Institute for Media Production*. (This document was written and produced by scholars associated with the ISI in order to justify its existence to scholars outside of Iraq.)

⁵ February 13, 2007. Islamic State of Iraq statement.

⁶ For example: Santora, Mark. "Iraqi Militants Launch Attack on U.S. Outpost" *The New York Times*. February 20, 2007 P. A1

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