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Training on a Battlefield: Iraq as a Training Ground for Global Jihadis

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This article aims to describe and analyze the training that foreign jihadis in Iraq have received, how this may impact on the future of the insurgency in Iraq, and the potential spillover effect from the Iraqi jihad scene. The nature of the training in Iraq has been influenced by the difficult conditions the jihadis were operating under, and much has consisted of on-the-job training inside safe houses. The foreign jihadis were dependent on the support of the local Iraqis in order to conduct training, but the increasing use of suicide attacks has turned their erstwhile allies against them.

Keywords al-Qaida in Iraq, Iraq, terrorism, training

Introduction

The Afghan guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation and the subsequent civil war in Afghanistan planted the seeds for the rise of al-Qaida, and the creation of a generation of jihadi veterans who later exported their experience to other conflict areas such as Bosnia or Chechnya, or who indulged in international terrorism.[1] Just as the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan attracted scores of Arab and Muslim volunteers, the occupation of Iraq has drawn thousands of foreign fighters, and created a fertile learning and training environment for a new generation of global-minded jihadis. This has led many to fear that Iraq may become the same "terror breeding ground" as was Afghanistan.[2] This is a highly complex question that will not be fully answered in this article. Instead, this article will focus on the characteristics of the actual training given in Iraq, and analyse whether or not this training can provide some clues to the aftermath of the insurgency in Iraq, and the potential for a spillover of terrorism from Iraq.

The mujahidin in Iraq have been facing a much tougher environment than their predecessors in Afghanistan. From 1996 to 2001, al-Qaida and the Arab mujahidin had access to a sanctuary under the protection of the Taliban. With the brief exception of al-Anbar province, it has been difficult for the foreign fighters to find protection in Iraq. The flat terrain of Iraq, combined with U.S.

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surveillance technology, has made it difficult for the mujahidin to find suitable training fields. Despite these realities, the insurgents in Iraq have been able to offer tough resistance against the Coalition forces over an extended period of time. There are several reasons why the insurgency in Iraq has been able to survive and expand its activities. One reason is the low sympathy for the Americans amongst the Sunni population of Iraq. Another reason is the militarized state of Iraq; most males have military experience and arms are widely available. In addition, experienced jihadis entered the country to join the resistance from the very beginning of the conflict. These experienced veterans and former officers did not need much training, and they were instrumental as instigators of the insurgency in Iraq. However, in order to sustain the insurgency as time passed, and as they were facing tougher and tougher conditions, the experienced veterans had to transfer their skills and experience to a new generation of recruits without previous fighting experience.

The question posed in this article is, therefore: how do insurgent groups train in a complex and hostile environment such as Iraq? Two important characteristics of the insurgents' training in Iraq may provide an answer. The first characteristic is the existence of what may be termed a "hierarchy of learning," with a few experienced mujahidin at the top, and untrained and inexperienced "cannon fodder" at the bottom. However, the most interesting segment of this hierarchy is the mid-level that might be called "the talented mujahidin." These are mujahidin who were able to rise through the learning hierarchy based upon their skills and talent, and in turn become experienced and skilled mujahidin themselves. The training given in Iraq was also suited to enforce the cellular and decentralized organization of the resistance. The mujahidin were specialized and compartmentalized through training and battle experience according to their observed skills and talents. These skills were observed in training, and honed in actual fighting.

The Organization of the Resistance

Many observers have described the insurgency in Iraq as a decentralized, vertical, cellular organization.[3] It is possible to argue that the training given in Iraq was suited to support a decentralized cellular structure, and, at the same time, the decentralized organization itself provided a fertile learning environment, as a vertical, cellular structure facilitates the flow of information.[4] By adapting a decentralized cellular structure, the insurgents in Iraq dispersed their resources and skills to a larger segment of the insurgents instead of concentrating the skills and experience in the top level of the organization. This reduced the effect of the killing or capturing of an important military leader, as the knowledge and skills were not confined to them, but also spread to mid-level leaders of small cells. My findings in this article also show that many of the trained recruits in turn became trainers themselves, and taught new recruits to be military leaders of yet other cells. In this way the insurgency created new resources through training, and contributed to sustaining and developing the capabilities of the insurgency. It has also been pointed out that the cellular structure of the insurgency in Iraq gave most of the jihadis a basic introduction on how to manage a terrorist network, a valuable skill if some of the returning jihadis should want to organize a cell in their home country.[5]

The Hierarchy of Learning

A division of labor is not exceptional to the insurgency in Iraq. Most organizations distinguish between members who are more valuable to the organization's survival and maintenance, and members who can be sacrificed for the cause.[6] However, in the complex and hostile battle zone of Iraq, it was extremely important to distinguish between those who were crucial for the survival of the group, and those who could be sacrificed. Given the difficult conditions they faced in Iraq, the mujahidin had to strike a balance between spending the available resources on the actual fighting, or spending (some of) the available resources to create new resources through training.

Based upon this balance, it is possible to divide the mujahidin of Iraq into three groups within a kind of hierarchy of learning. Those who had prior training or experience either from a regular army or from other jihadi arenas constituted the top level of this hierarchy. They were responsible for much of the military activity in Iraq as military leaders, and these experienced mujahidin were trainers for the second group—jihadis without prior training, but with ability and capability. The most skilled of the second group could rise in the hierarchy to become military leaders or military trainers themselves. However, the third group consisted mostly of untrained "cannon fodder," as its members were used as suicide bombers. Much of this "cannon fodder" came from countries without general conscription, such as Saudi Arabia.

It is important to stress that there are no indications that the mujahidin consciously created this hierarchy, but rather that it arose more or less naturally as the jihadis possessed different levels of skills and experience prior to their participation in the insurgency. What is more important is that the learning hierarchy has evolved with time, and changed in accordance with the changing circumstances facing the mujahidin. I will discuss this further later on in the article.

The Experienced Mujahidin and the Military

Many of the jihadis fighting in Iraq had received training prior to their involvement in the insurgency in Iraq. The Iraqis had received training in the Iraqi military, while the foreign jihadis had received training during their stay at battlefronts such as Afghanistan or Bosnia. Due to their skills and experience, they assumed important roles in the insurgency in Iraq, both as military leaders and as military instructors.

Some of the most important military leaders within the al-Zarqawi network in Iraq had received military training in al-Zarqawi's camp in Herat, Afghanistan. A case in point is the Jordanian Nidal 'Arabiyyat aka Abu Hamza al-Urduni, who attended several training courses in al-Zarqawi's Herat camp.[7] 'Arabiyyat came to Iraq before the fall of Baghdad, and was one of the first recruits to join al-Zarqawi's Iraqi group al-Tawhid wa' al-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad). One of his specialities gleaned from Afghanistan was car-bomb operations, and he was allegedly behind several of the most important terror attacks in Iraq until his death in 2004.[8] Another veteran from the Herat camp was the Syrian Sulayman Khalid Darwish aka Abu al-Ghadiya al-Shami. Whilst in Herat he was trained in a variety of disciplines, including document forging. He became an accomplished forger, providing the al-Zarqawi network with fake passports for jihadis traveling abroad.[9]

Many of the insurgency recruits had backgrounds in the armed forces, and could draw on their previously acquired military skills and networks.[10] Most of the former military personnel joined the Iraq-oriented insurgency groups, such as the Army of Muhammad (Jaysh Muhammad), or the Islamic Army in Iraq (al-Jaysh al-Islami fi'l-Iraq). However, some of the former military officers also joined the more global-minded al-Qaida-inspired jihadi groups. For instance, it has been alleged that the leader of the Mujahidin Shura Council (Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin), Abu 'Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi, was a former officer.[11] Al-Hajj Thamir Mubarak, a member of al-Tawhid wa' al-Jihad and the brother of the failed suicide bomber from the Amman attacks in 2005, had served as an officer in the former Iraqi army.[12] Abu Faris al-Ansari had served as captain in the Mukhabarat, and played an important military role in al-Tawhid wa' al-Jihad. According to his martyr-biography, he contributed to changing the course of jihad in Iraq as one of those responsible for the first capture of Fallujah.[13]

These examples show how the mujahidin in Iraq exploited the already available resources in order to gain a foothold for the jihadis and insurgency at an early stage. Without the existence of these experienced fighters and their skills it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to create a viable and potent insurgency such as what we have witnessed in Iraq. Earlier studies of insurgencies have found that one of the reasons for their eruption is late recognition of the insurgency, as this gives the insurgents an opportunity to organize resistance without facing opposition. As Bruce Hoffman has pointed out, the U.S. intelligence officers and analysts were not reassigned from their search of WMD to focus on the insurgency until late November 2003.[14] This meant that the insurgency in Iraq had several months to develop without facing tough resistance, providing it with the time and the opportunity to train new recruits. In addition, the decision to disband the Ba'th party and the Iraqi armed forces created a vast pool of potential recruits with military experience and access to weapons, and knowledge of the whereabouts of the vast amount of weapon caches scattered around Iraq.[15]

The Experienced Mujahidin and Military as Trainers in Iraq

As time passed, more and more of the experienced mujahidin and military officers were captured or killed, and their skills and experience were lost with them. The key to the survival of the insurgency in Iraq was to transfer the skills of these experienced mujahidin and military officers to the new recruits without former experience in order, in time, to replace the first generation of military leaders. In addition to their functions as important military leaders, the experienced mujahidin thus served important roles as trainers of the recruits.

For instance, the above-mentioned bomb expert Nidal 'Arabiyyat spread this knowledge further as he was a teacher in the "art of rigging bombs" ('ilm al-tashrik) in Iraq.[16] Another Afghan veteran, Abu Khabab al-Filistini, served as a trainer in Iraq, and among his students was Abu Usama al-Maghribi, the Moroccan suicide bomber allegedly responsible for the attack against the United Nations Headquarters in Baghdad in September 2003.[17] Perhaps the most striking example of the role of the veterans from Afghanistan as midwifes of the jihadi movement in Iraq is the story of Abu 'Abdallah al-Shami. He learnt about explosives and the rigging of suicide cars while in Afghanistan, and came to Iraq before the fall of Baghdad. Al-Shami was instrumental in transferring this knowledge to the Iraqi

scene. Al-Shami opened his house, and used it as a school for the "first class of suicide bombers in Iraq."[18]

The "Talented" Mujahidin

However, it was not enough to rely on veterans in order to sustain the capacity of the insurgency as there was tough resistance from the Coalition forces, the Iraqi security forces, and from pro-government militias. In order to optimize the employment of available resources, mujahidin with specialized knowledge were used as instructors instead of cannon fodder. A case in point is the Jordanian Abu Hummam al-Urduni, who had a second degree black belt in Tae Kwan Do. When he arrived at al-Qa'im, he signed himself up as a suicide bomber. However, because of his abilities, the military leaders wanted him to train the youths in the Rawah camp in martial arts and other physical skills instead.[19]

Although the experienced mujahidin or military officers played the role of military leaders, and the untrained young recruits tended to play the role of foot soldiers or "cannon fodder," it was possible to rise up through the "learning hierarchy" based on a kind of skills-based meritocracy. A good example is the Libyan Abu Nasir al-Libi aka Abu al-'Aza'im. He came to Iraq prior to the fall of Baghdad, but went back to Libya. He returned to Iraq with eight fellow Libyans when the Arab mujahidin under the command of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were on the rise. He joined al-Qaida in Mesopotamia (al-Qaida fi bilad Rafidayn), and received basic training and training in the production of explosives, becoming an expert. When he had reached this level, he began to train others, and sent them to different places where they created cells of their own. He then became the leader of one of these cells, and began manufacturing car bombs.[20]

Another illustrative example is the Saudi Khallad al-Nadji aka Khaled al-Mani. He arrived in Iraq shortly after the second Fallujah battle, and joined a group where he received training in martial arts. He distinguished himself in this training and impressed his superiors, and he was picked out to be a member of a special group ordered by al-Zarqawi. The group was to be under the direct command of al-Zarqawi, and the aim of the group was to execute difficult operations. After a short period of time, Khallad al-Nadji became deputy commander of the group.[21]

These examples indicate that it was possible for talented, competent individuals to climb within the learning hierarchy to become military commanders in the Iraqi jihadi groups. As these newly educated military commanders served as trainers for yet other recruits, and created their own cells or battalions, they dispersed skills and experience and thus sustained the insurgency movement even though the older veterans and leaders were killed or captured.

Foot Soldiers and "Cannon Fodder"

The lowest position on the learning hierarchy was filled by the foot soldiers and "cannon fodder"—those without military or jihadi experience. The Saudis seem to have comprised the large bulk of foot soldiers and suicide bombers in Iraq. This is probably because of the lack of conscription in Saudi Arabia, and also because an overwhelming part of the Saudis fighting in Iraq lacked former jihadi experience. According to an FFI study by Thomas Hegghammer, only 9 out of 205 Saudis killed in Iraq are known for prior jihadi experience.[22] There are many reports indicating

that the inexperienced and untrained recruits did not last very long in battle. For instance, a Syrian fighter recounted how he went to Iraq with a group consisting of 50 Syrians and Saudis. A couple of months later, only three were alive.[23] Another Syrian who traveled to Iraq at the beginning of the insurgency claimed that there were more volunteers than there were weapons available, and that the majority of the volunteers lacked military experience.[24]

Several of the foreign fighters were given training immediately after they entered Iraq. For instance, a Yemenite called Abu Thar reached Iraq through Syria with a group of other recruits. Shortly after the group crossed the Iraqi border, they were picked up and transferred to a village in order to receive training. After a few days of training, the group was sent to Hit in al-Anbar province, where they were in need of fighters. The Yemenite was later assigned to al-Tawhid wa' al-Jihad.[25] However, some of the recruits complained that they only received very brief and rudimentary training in Iraq. An Iraqi who had served two years in the Iraqi army complained that the training he received when he joined the insurgency was "paper training," where they were instructed on how to fire an RPG without actually firing one.[26]

The learning hierarchy changed with time as the environment of the jihadis changed. At the beginning of the insurgency, when resistance to it was less tough, and the jihadis were more popular with the general Sunni community in Iraq, it was easier to conduct training and transfer the knowledge of the experienced muja-hidin and military officers to the new recruits. However, as the jihadis faced tougher resistance, it is plausible to assume that they had less time to transfer the veterans' skills and experience to the new recruits. This probably affected the quality of the training given in Iraq. The jihadis reacted to the tougher resistance by relying more on suicide attacks against softer targets, such as civilians and Iraqi security forces, which required less physical training.[27] This, in turn, led to reduced support from the Iraqi Sunni community for the jihadis, thus making it even harder for the jihadis to conduct effective training, as they were dependent on access to safe areas. The fact that the use of suicide bombers skyrocketed after the mujahidin were driven out of Fallujah, which they controlled from April until November 2004, may indicate the correspondence between access to safe areas and the use of suicide attacks.[28]

In addition, it has been argued that as it has become more difficult to receive training in Iraq, Iraq has lost some of its attractiveness as a training ground. Because of the lack of access to a sanctuary, the recruits had to stay inside safe houses in the cities, and they were increasingly used as suicide bombers. Jihadis in Iraq complained in 2005 that it had become increasingly harder to receive training there.[29] There have been indications that the jihadi groups in Iraq have streamlined the recruitment and assignment of Saudis for suicide operations.[30] For instance, the Saudi Faris bin Sa'ud al-Shammari was killed in a suicide operation only one month after his arrival in Iraq.[31] This implies that the learning and training environment for an untrained recruit arriving in Iraq in 2005 was very different from the learning environment they would have experienced if they had arrived in 2003.

Training Areas

Here I will not discuss the pre-war training camps of Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan or the training camps belonging to the Saddam Hussein regime, as the focus here is on training during an ongoing insurgency. However, there have been some reports saying that the foreign mujahidin are being trained at camps set up

by former regime officials.[32] Documents captured after the fall of Baghdad showed that the former regime had trained foreign volunteers in suicide attacks before the invasion. However, it has been remarked that it took one and a half years from the fall of Baghdad for suicide attacks to become more common, and this indicates that Saddam Hussein had trouble recruiting potential suicide bombers.[33]

In order to establish training facilities, an insurgency movement needs to exert territorial control over areas of some geographic extension. This is particularly important in the earliest phases of the insurgency when the insurgents must avoid premature confrontation by building their organization out of reach of the enemy.[34] In Iraq, the initial need for training areas was not very acute, as many of the insurgent members and leaders had prior fighting experience. However, in order to train new recruits, they needed suitable training areas. One of the most difficult obstacles for training in Iraq was the lack of sanctuaries where the mujahidin could conduct training without being spotted by the enemies. Al-Anbar province, situated between Baghdad and the borders of Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, was an important exception. The majority of the foreign fighters entered Iraq through the Syrian-Iraqi border, and thus al-Anbar became a logistical hub for the foreign fighters. The resistance against the Coalition forces was especially strong in al-Anbar, and the foreign fighters were received and facilitated by influential tribes in the area.[35] Al-Anbar is also the largest of the Iraqi provinces, with vast desert areas where the mujahidin could hide. All these factors made al-Anbar a suitable area as a base for the mujahidin. Most of the training took place either in camps situated in the deserts of al-Anbar, or in safe houses scattered around in the Sunni-dominated part of the country.

Camps

One of the main differences between training in Iraq and Afghanistan was the existence of large permanent training complexes in Afghanistan from 1996–2001. The hostile environment for the mujahidin in Iraq made it difficult to construct similar camps. Instead, the mujahidin in Iraq relied more on mobile, desert-based camps that could easily be moved in order to avoid being discovered by Coalition forces or Iraqi security forces. One of the first and the most important camps in Iraq was the Rawah camp in the province of al-Anbar.

The Rawah Camp

The Rawah camp was the first training camp for the foreign mujahidin in Iraq, except for the pre-war camps of Ansar al-Islam in Northern Iraq, and the training camps of Saddam Hussein. The camp was founded at the time of the attack on Iraq in March 2003, and was bombed to smithereens by the Coalition forces in May 2003. The story of the Rawah camp, as told by one of its founders Abu Muhammad al-Salamani, throws light on how training in Iraq was conducted at the beginning of the insurgency.[36]

The founders of the camp resided originally in a small house in al-Qa'im, and went out to the desert to train small groups of young recruits. However, as more and more foreigners poured into Iraq coinciding with the attack on Iraq, it became necessary to find a bigger house in the rural outskirts of al-Qa'im. Due to the presence of British forces in the al-Qa'im area, the mujahidin decided to move to a more secluded place to finish training before they staged attacks on the Coalition forces.

The founders of the camp warned young recruits against fighting with the former forces of Saddam Hussein, as he was known for his hostility towards Islam.[37]

They decided to build their camp in Rawah, which was far away from people, so they could perform military training during the day. The founders of the camp had experience from Afghanistan, and used this to design the camp so they could hide during the day and train during the night.The young recruits were trained in the Rawah camp for about 30–45 days before the leaders began searching for a new site to construct another camp in order to avoid detection. The idea behind the camp was to prepare the recruits for the battles ahead through a combination of military and spiritual training. The daily schedule for the recruits illustrates this point. The day began with a prayer, followed by morning exercise and a theoretical lecture about arms. Later the youths received lectures in al-fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and in reciting (al-tajwid) and memorizing the Quran. They also sometimes received a spiritual lecture before morning exercise. When the mujahidin in the camp had completed the training, they began to execute attacks on the Coalition forces, and according to al-Salamani, the foundations for the subsequent jihadi activity in Iraq were laid in al-Qa'im and Rawah, and spread from there to the rest of Iraq, and especially to Fallujah.[38]

The al-Qa'qa' Camp

A film issued by Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna called "Healing of the hearts" (Shifa' al-Sudur) shows clips from training in a desert camp called the al-Qa'qa' camp (mu'askar al-qa'qa'). As with the daily schedule in the Rawah camp, the film from the al-Qa'qa' camp illustrates how both theological and military instructions are considered important parts of the building of a cadre. The trainees first receive a lesson in al-shari'a, then the same instructor shows the trainees how to operate several types of weapons, including 60 mm mortar, RPGs, explosives, and shooting weapons. In all the clips the instructors are speaking and demonstrating, while the trainees are sitting in a circle around the instructors, and sometimes asking them questions. In the last part of the training, the trainees are shown practicing seizing and blowing up empty buildings with a group of seven mujahidin.[39] Another film from Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna, called "The difference between God and the Devil," shows more training from the al-Qa'qa' camp, including physical exercises and running through an obstacle course.[40] This "camp" is highly mobile, as it only consists of 10–15 men and an instructor, and a few practice weapons.

These two camps highlight some of the most important characteristics of training in a complex and hostile zone such as Iraq. Much of the training was conducted in mobile camps, where the key to survival was to avoid being discovered by the enemies. This implies that safety and precautions were important elements of the daily life in the camps or as mujahidin.

Safe Houses

Due to the insurgents' lack of easy access to sanctuaries, they had, to a large extent, to rely on safe houses in the cities. These safe houses served as meeting places for the mujahidin, as weapons depots, and as places to construct weapons and car bombs. In addition, religious and military instructions were given inside these safe houses. Safe houses in Mosul and Haditha have been described by a former jihadi veteran who had lived in Britain, as "dark, dank places with no hot water or electricity."

Due to their unpopularity among the population, the mujahidin often had to pull the shades down.[41] Some of the safe houses were given to the mujahidin by pro-resistance Iraqis, while others were purpose-built by the insurgents themselves. For instance, one of the abductors of the *Christian Science Monitor* journalist Jill Carroll had built a safe house that functioned as a meeting house and as a bomb factory. In fact, it was still being built while Carroll was kept there.[42]

Much of the training was conducted inside safe houses. The above-mentioned Abu 'Abdallah al-Shami opened his house and gave instructions about explosives and the rigging of suicide cars.[43] The house of al-Shami was a meeting place for the mujahidin, and Abu Nasir al-Libi was amongst those who joined his house.[44] Another jihadi veteran, Abu Umar al-Masri, opened his home in Iraq to the mujahidin.[45] Abu Khalid al-Suri served as a counselor and adviser in the house of al-Masri, and also took a short course in explosives and the rigging of cars.[46] This indicates not only how important the safe houses were in training the recruits, but also that the safe houses played an important role in socializing the recruits, and contributing to the creation of committed jihadi cadres.

Some of the jihadi films show training taking place in the backyards of houses or inside houses. For instance, a film issued by al-Qaida in Mesopotamia shows a group of mujahidin called "the Lions of al-Tawhid" (usud al-tawhid) receiving drills and running through an obstacle course in what seems to be the backyard of a house.[47] Another film issued by al-Qaida in Mesopotamia called "The Caravan of Martyrs from the Levant" shows a group of mujahidin receiving drills in closed order by an instructor, while the banner of al-Tahwid wa' al-Jihad is being waved in the background. Here the training also takes place in the backyard of a house.[48] Sometimes the training takes place inside houses. For instance, a film issued by Jaysh Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jama'a called "The road to establishing the religion" shows a group of mujahidin listening to a religious lecture inside a house. Thereafter, another man explains to the mujahidin how to operate a handgun, and shows how it is taken apart, put together, and loaded.[49]

Is it possible to train recruits effectively within the confinements of a house or a backyard? As mentioned, some of the mujahidin in Iraq complained that they only received "paper training" where they saw how to operate weapons, but did not actually get to operate them. It is therefore likely that much of the training in safe houses could be seen as "paper training." To avoid detection, the freedom of the fighters was restricted, and to shoot an RPG would probably constitute a security threat. However, a safe house was instead a suitable environment for indoctrination, and especially for the grooming of potential suicide bombers. The training received inside safe houses had to be combined with actual on-the-job training, and, as will be argued below, Iraq provided plenty of live practice targets.

Training Outside Iraq

Several of the foreign jihadis in Iraq received training outside of Iraq, especially in the Palestinian refugee camp 'Ayn al-Hilweh in Lebanon, where the Islamic group 'Asbat al-Ansar is based. For instance, the above-mentioned al-Ghadiyya al-Suri allegedly received training in the 'Ayn al-Hilweh camp.[50] Abu Sharif, a spokesperson for 'Asbat al-Ansar, has stated that several well-trained mujahidin from Lebanon went to Iraq to fight.[51] Some of the mujahidin who joined al-Qaida in Iraq belonged to 'Asbat al-Ansar, but it is not known whether or not they received training in

Lebanon beforehand. For instance, Ayman Nur Salah aka Abu Hafs belonged to the 'Asbat al-Ansar group in the Ayn al-Hilweh camp. He went to Iraq and joined al-Qaida in Iraq.[52]

There have also been reports of training camps for mujahidin heading for Iraq in Syria. In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, foreign mujahidin in Fallujah belonging to a group called Martyrs of Islam said that they received training in arms at a desert camp in Syria. They said that over 140 Arabs were receiving training in this camp during one month. They said that they learnt how to make bombs, set booby traps, and fire a range of weapons.[53] There have also been other reports stating that foreign volunteers first went to Syria, where they received basic training, and when they were ready to fight they were taken across the Iraqi border and directed to safe houses.[54]

Adapting Through Training

It has been stated that a terrorist group's ability to change and adapt in accordance with the changing environment is the key to its success. The key to adaptation is learning from past mistakes, and being able to adjust tactics and techniques based upon this experience.[55] Training is essential in implementing the adjustments, and in Iraq, the mujahidin adapted to the tough environment through three measures: training in urban warfare in order to control cities and because much of the fighting between the insurgents and the Coalition forces took place within the cities; on-the-job training; and specialization. Another adaptation is the already discussed cellular, vertical, and decentralized organization of the insurgency in Iraq.

Controlling Cities

Compared to Afghanistan, Iraq is a much more urbanized and densely populated country, and apart from the mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan, there are few mountains within which the mujahidin can hide. The flat terrain of Iraq and the presence of the Coalition forces and their surveillance technology have made the cities more suitable landscapes for mujahidin to hide within, to stage ambush attacks from, and to detonate suicide bombs in crowded areas.

In addition, the mujahidin in Iraq have been trying to take control over selected cities, Fallujah in particular. The rationale behind this is that the mujahidin seeks to control the cities in order to use the cities as safe areas, and as training grounds. There have been several reports stating that Iraqi insurgents have controlled Iraqi cities for shorter or longer periods. In early 2007, it was reported that the so-called Islamic State of Iraq (a coalition of several of the most extreme Sunni groups in Iraq), controlled the city of Samarra,' and turned the houses and farms of Samarra' into training camps.[56] Such temporary safe havens are one of the reasons for the survival and the maintenance of the insurgency. However, most important was the insurgency's control over Fallujah from March/April 2004 until November 2004. The mujahidin used Fallujah as a training ground and a secure operational base. When the Iraqi and Coalition forces entered Fallujah after the second battle of Fallujah in November 2004, they found something that resembled a laboratory, where it seems that the insurgents conducted training and research on chemical weapons.[57]

The jihadi training in Iraq reflects the emphasis on urban warfare and the strategy of controlling cities. For instance, the special elite group that Khallad al-Najdi belonged to received training in urban warfare (Harb al-mudun).[58] The military leaders also drew lessons and insights from the first fighting in Fallujah in April 2004, and prepared themselves to defend the city should the Coalition forces try to capture the city once more. One of the measures was to create a "quick invasion force" that should secure the mujahidin's control of a city. A member of the Lebanon-based 'Asbat al-Ansar group, Abu Ja'far al-Maqdisi, was ordered by al-Zarqawi to create this group. Together with Abu Khubayb, al-Maqdisi trained this force. Due to security measures, the training was given individually and coordinated at a later stage. This invasion force was used during the second fighting in Fallujah in November 2004, and played an important role in the struggle.[59] When the two jihadi groups, al-Qaida in Iraq and Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna, defended their control over the city of Haditha in the al-Anbar region in 2005, they had learnt from the mistakes during the first Fallujah fighting. Instead of remaining in the city and fighting the Coalition forces, they withdrew from the city and returned when the Coalition forces left.[60]

On-The-Job Training

Since it was periodically difficult for the mujahidin in Iraq to find peaceful and suitable training areas, much of the training consisted of experience gained through actual fighting. The insurgency in Iraq enjoys an advantage compared with groups operating in less violent environments. It has been pointed out that it was difficult for the Provisional Irish Republic Army (PIRA) to exercise with live fire and actual fighting experience, as this was difficult to conceal in Northern Ireland and would constitute a security risk.[61] However, the more violent and less controllable Iraqi environment gave ample possibilities for the insurgents to train with live fire and learning-by-doing, without necessarily constituting a breach of security.

The jihadi training in Iraq seems to have been a kind of interaction between the actual training and the implementation of the training on the battlefield. The military leaders learned from their past mistakes, and adapted the training to avoid repeating mistakes. For instance, before the second attack on the Abu Ghraib prison, (named "The Conquest of Abu Anas al-Shami"), the military leaders wanted to avoid the mistakes of their first attempt. Therefore, they trained for three months before the attack. However, the military leaders opted not to inform the foot soldiers about the purpose of the training. They were not informed until a couple of hours before the actual attack.[62] After the second fighting in Fallujah, al-Maqdisi received a letter from al-Zarqawi, instructing him to pick out the very best of the mujahidin and give them special training, such as wall climbing and crossing water obstructions. The task of this elite group was to attack the Abu Ghraib prison. He was also asked by al-Zarqawi to create a special force with the task of abducting foreigners.[63]

The insurgents videotaped their attacks and used them later as a kind of video training, and it has been reported that al-Zarqawi ordered the filming of bomb making classes so that the knowledge would not be lost if the instructor was killed.[64] Insurgent groups have distributed videos to each other in order to learn the most effective bomb making techniques.[65]

Specialization

As previously mentioned, the training given in Iraq was adapted to fit a cellular and decentralized organization. Some of the talented mujahidin were selected by their superiors and given more specialized training in order to serve in more specialized cells, such as Khallad al-Najdi and Abu Nasir al-Libi.

Another illustrative example is given in an interview with a commander of the ''Baghdad Sniper Brigade'' belonging to the Islamic Army in Iraq (al-Jaysh al-Islami fi'l-Iraq). The commander tells that in the beginning the mujahidin were trained in the use of all sorts of weapons without specialization. Over time they gained experience, and the leaders of the group observed their skills shown during battles and chose to train the mujahidin to specialize in only one kind of weapon, based upon their observations. They found mujahidin who possessed the qualities needed to be snipers and trained them until they had managed to create a fair amount of snipers. The commander relates that when the Islamic Army in Iraq observed the impact of sniper operations on the Western audience, they decided ''to develop their expertise and advance the capabilities for the process of training.''[66]

There are also examples of recruits being given special training right away, without receiving general training. In these cases, the given training is based more upon need than talent. For instance, the Jordanian jihadi Abu Zobayer stated that he received a week-long ''crash course'' in the use of weapons during the summer of 2003 in a desert camp close to Baqubah. Each of the recruits was given specialized training and not a more comprehensive, general training. Abu Zobayer was taught how to launch RPGs, and how to place IEDs on the roads. Thereafter he was assigned to a cell consisting of 15–20 men.[67] It has been argued that the production of the IEDs is a highly specialized function in the resistance. Evidence has been found to support this idea.[68] It has even been alleged that highly specialized IED cells can be hired by the bigger insurgent groups on a contract-per-job basis.[69]

The emphasis on specialization may be a result of the lack of resources and the lack of safety for the insurgency in Iraq. In order to gain the most out of each recruit, they are trained in a specialty the military leaders knew would have an impact on the enemy and the enemy audience, such as to become snipers, to operate RPGs, and to make and place IEDs. However, this may also constitute a drawback for the insurgency, depending on the level of specialization. If few people are in charge of important functions, such as designing IEDs, etc., it implies that their expertise dies with the specialist unless learnt by others.[70] However, the U.S. military has not observed that the arrest or killing of an IED bomb maker has led to a noticeable reduction in the number of IED attacks.[71] If it is correct that al-Zarqawi ordered the video-recording of the bomb making classes, this may have contributed to the spread of this knowledge, even after the death or capture of an instructor. However, although a video-recording may have an educational value, it is doubtful whether a video can replace live training by an experienced instructor.

Fostering Violent and Committed Cadres

It is not enough to concentrate on military and physical preparation to understand the nature of the insurgency in Iraq, and especially the extensive use of suicide attacks. The jihadis in Iraq emphasized that religious and spiritual training was as important as, if not more important than, military and physical training.

The activities in the training camps showed that the camps were meant to prepare the recruits both through military and spiritual training. When the above-mentioned Khallad al-Najdi became a deputy commander, he was concerned with two things—military and religious education (al-Tarbiyya al-'askariyya wa' al-tarbiyya al-imaniyya).[72] A Lebanese teacher who went to Iraq has said that he was not allowed to leave for Iraq until he had attended an academy for jihad where he was given a religious basis for the fight and learnt about the ideology behind jihad.[73] As discussed earlier, in a film issued by Jaysh Ahl al-Sunna wa' al-Jama'a called ''The road to establishing the religion,'' a group of mujahidin are listening to a religious lecture inside a house. Thereafter, another man explains to the mujahidin how to operate a handgun and shows how it is taken apart, put together, and loaded.[74]

There may be several reasons for the jihadis' stress on the spiritual and religious training. The most important is the use of a religious ideology to legitimize the fight against their perceived enemies, and in order to interpret the conflict in Iraq within a jihadi-salafi framework. However, as many of the important military leaders in Iraq already belonged to social or political networks through their prior experience in the Iraqi army, or through relationships formed in Afghanistan, it may be possible that it was not so important to socialize the recruits. The ideology of jihadism is easily accessible throughout the world through the Internet, and it is plausible to assume that several of the foreign insurgency recruits were motivated by this ideology before they came to Iraq. However, a more important point may be that it was necessary to socialize the recruits in order to avoid defection to some of the other insurgent groups, and to apply the global jihadi-salafi ideology to the local Iraqi context.

A more pragmatic reason might be that when the insurgents had to hide inside safe houses, it was much easier to conduct religious or spiritual training than military training. The camps, and especially the safe houses, are probably a perfect environment for indoctrination and radicalization of the recruits. To stay together with fellow mujahidin in ''dark places with no hot water or electricity'' and with the shades down for extensive periods must have had a profound effect on the residents. This was especially important in the recruitment and motivation of suicide bombers.[75] In addition, religious and spiritual preparations need fewer resources than military training, and are easier to conduct inside safe houses. Thus, the lack of large training infrastructures, and the influx of untrained volunteers, may help to explain the extensive use of suicide bombs. However, as many of the experienced leaders were killed or captured over time, it may also have become more important to socialize the recruits in order to sustain the networks in Iraq.

The End of the Iraqi Jihad?

In recent months, the position of the foreign jihadis in Iraq seems to have become precarious. It is somewhat premature to announce the defeat of al-Qaida in Iraq, although there are presently several interrelated indications pointing to this conclusion.[76]

The most important indication is the loss of support for al-Qaida and the foreign jihadis amongst the Sunni population. The support for al-Qaida has never been high in the overall Sunni community, but the foreign jihadis enjoyed the support and tactical cooperation of some influential tribes, and of local Iraqi-oriented Sunni insurgent groups. This support was crucial in providing the foreign jihadis with a

sanctuary that served as a training ground for jihadis in al-Anbar. This tribal "Sahwa movement" (or awakening movement) received much attention following the U.S. decision to provide the anti-al-Qaida tribes with weapons. However, this is the result of a development that had begun already in 2005. The development has its origin in a changing attitude amongst the Sunnis towards talking with the Americans and engaging in the political process before and after the general election on 15 December 2005. At the same time, many of the Sunnis were fed up with the bloody conflict with the Shiites, and they blamed the foreign jihadis, and al-Zarqawi in particular, for instigating the conflict. Al-Qaida in Iraq was opposed to this changing attitude, and began targeting tribal leaders and insurgent groups that engaged in talks with the Americans. To revenge the killing of the tribal leaders, several of the tribes in al-Anbar turned against al-Qaida and formed the al-Anbar Revenge Brigade at the beginning of 2006.[77] Some of the insurgent groups that had been in a tactical alliance with al-Qaida also took up arms, especially the Islamic Army in Iraq.[78] This process continued throughout 2006 and beyond, when al-Qaida in Iraq was in open and sometimes armed conflict both with U.S.-backed tribes and with Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups.[79]

Although there is some disagreement on the impact of the surge, most observers agree that the level of violence has been reduced since August 2007. The impact of the surge and the al-Sahwa is most evident in the former stronghold of the jihadis in Iraq, al-Anbar province. The Iraq Coalition Count had registered 13 Coalition casualties in al-Anbar from September 2007 to the end of December 2007. This is a considerable decline compared with the casualty rate in al-Anbar since the beginning of 2004.[80] The statistic issued by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISOI) confirms that their ability to stage attacks in al-Anbar was reduced significantly in the second half of August and in September 2007. From the 1st to the 15th of August 2007, ISOI recorded 65 attacks in al-Anbar, while this declined to 16 attacks during the next two weeks.[81] ISOI reported to have executed just one attack in al-Anbar during September, and the trend towards a negligible number of attacks in the province has continued. However, the statistics from ISOI reported a marked increase in activity in Baghdad and Diyala in the same period, indicating that they have regrouped in other areas.[82] The statistic issued by ISOI in 2008 so far has registered military activity mainly in Baghdad and Diyala and some activity in Mosul, but no activity in Anbar.[83] The statistics issued by The Iraq Coalition Count confirms that there has been relocation from al-Anbar to Baghdad and Diyala. While al-Anbar was the deadliest province for Coalition forces in 2006 with 356 casualties, there has been a sharp reduction in 2007 with 161 registered casualties.[84] In 2008, two coalition soldiers have been killed as a result of hostile fire in Anbar so far.[85] In Baghdad there has been a rise from 266 casualties in 2006, to 404 in 2007. In Diyala, the rise was even higher, up from 20 in 2006 to 119 in 2007.[86] However, the statistics issued both by The Iraq Coalition Count and by the Iraq Body Count indicate that there has been a reduction in the level of violence in Baghdad since September 2007, although the Iraqi Body Count reported that February 2008 was the first month since September 2007 with a rising number of civilian casualties.[87] There are also indications that the jihadis have fled further north, especially to the province of Ninewah.[88] Even though it may be too early to conclude whether al-Qaida in Iraq has been beaten, the loss of their most important sanctuary is likely to have a major impact on the jihadis' opportunity to conduct training.

Is Iraq "A New Afghanistan" or is Afghanistan "A New Iraq"?

As mentioned in the introduction, there has been much fear and speculation about the potential spillover effect from the insurgency in Iraq to Middle Eastern and European countries. However, in the 5th year of the insurgency, there have been few signs of terrorist activities conducted outside of Iraq by returnees from Iraq. An important exception is the coordinated suicide attack against three hotels in Amman on the 9th of November 2005, staged by al-Qaida in Iraq, and the averted plot against an Israeli cruise ship in Turkey in 2005 which was planned by Lùai Sakka, an associate of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[89] Another example may be the Lebanese group, Fatah al-Islam, established in the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al-Barid in Northern Lebanon in November 2006. The founder of this group, Shakir al-'Absi, was reportedly an associate of al-Zarqawi, and Fatah al-Islam has been seen as a direct spillover from Iraq. However, a recent FFI study indicates that few of the recruits to Fatah al-Islam have combat experience from Iraq, and thus the direct effect from the Iraq war may be limited. Instead, the Iraq war served as a repertoire of tactics for Fatah al-Islam, and as a mobilizing factor towards a salafi-jihadi ideology espoused by al-Qaida in Iraq.[90] This point illustrates that so far the impact of the Iraq war on international terrorism has been predominantly indirect. Several of the executed terrorist attacks and averted plots in Europe have been motivated by the Iraq conflict, and nations involved in the Iraq conflict have been threatened more often than countries not involved. A study published in 2007 concluded that the Iraq war has led to a significant increase in attacks conducted by jihadis on a global basis, even when excluding Iraq and Afghanistan. This was an indirect effect of the conflict in Iraq, and not a direct consequence of the activities of returnees from Iraq. However, the study warns that some jihadis have left Iraq and returned home.[91] There have been some indications that the failed attack against a nightclub in London, and Glasgow Airport in June 2007, had some connections with al-Qaida in Iraq, although the details are not clear at present.[92]

Perhaps the most important consequence of Iraq as a training ground is not the training of cadres inside Iraq, but the proliferation of tactics employed in Iraq through the massive video-recordings of these tactics made available globally through the Internet. Some of the tactics that have received most international attention, such as suicide attacks, brutal kidnappings, and the extensive use of IEDs, have spread to other conflicts, most notably to Afghanistan.[93]

There are also signs that the Afghan jihad currently may be more popular for foreign Arab fighters than the jihad in Iraq, as the jihad in Afghanistan is seen as being more "pure" since it is not complicated by a sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shias as in Iraq.[94] Since about mid-2007, a decline has been recorded in the number of foreign fighters coming into Iraq from Syria. This is partly due to tighter border control on the Syrian side, but as this article has indicated, Iraq may also have lost its status as a "jihad magnet" due to the state of the foreign jihadis in Iraq, and the lack of training opportunities for newly arrived jihadis.[95]

Conclusion

If it is correct that al-Qaida and the foreign jihadis are losing ground in Iraq, what are the implications for the foreign jihadis themselves? Will they return home, or will they fight to their death in Iraq? There are some signs that surviving foreigners are

leaving Iraq and traveling back to their home countries, particularly to neighboring or nearby countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.[96] The majority of foreign fighters hail from Middle Eastern countries, and these countries are more vulnerable to the import of terrorism from Iraq. There have also been reports of Iraqi returnees coming back to European countries.[97] However, the key issue here is whether the European intelligence agencies are able to control and monitor the inflow of returnees.

If some of the foreigners fighting in Iraq survive, and are able to go home to their original country, they will possess valuable skills and knowledge and could assume roles as leaders of terrorist cells. They will presumably have connections with other foreigners or Iraqis, and thus be connected to wider terrorist networks. Given the high-risk environment in Iraq, the surviving jihadis will have learnt much about security and how to conduct covert operations. As suggested by Dennis Pluchinsky, a former senior intelligence analyst with the U.S. State Department, the urban character of the insurgency in Iraq makes the lessons and skills learned in Iraq easier to transfer to Europe than skills learnt in Afghanistan.[98] Due to the cellular organization of the Iraqi resistance, a large portion of the surviving jihadis will have some experience with managing terrorist cells in Europe or in the Middle East. The returning jihadis may also have become more radicalized after fighting in Iraq.[99]

However, this article has shown that as the insurgency in Iraq evolved, it became increasingly difficult for the foreign mujahidin to receive training, and instead they tended to die in suicide attacks, which in turn reduced the attractiveness of going to Iraq in order to undertake jihad. Many of the earliest foreigners who went to Iraq are now dead or captured. This supports the finding in an earlier article on training in Iraq which stated that ''Iraq will provide a far better learning environment for mid-level managers than for the foot soldiers.''[100] As shown in this article, the mid-level managers, or the ''talented mujahidin,'' of the training hierarchy have been weakened as the opportunities to provide training have become infrequent, and the new recruits are instead being killed in suicide attacks. This may reduce the direct impact of the Iraqi returnees. However, there are indications that the most important expansion of terrorism from Iraq hitherto is indirect through radicalization of sympathizers in the West, through providing motivation for target selection, and through spreading tactics, techniques, and ideological texts through the Internet.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Dr. Brynjar Lia, FFI and the anonymous reviewers at *Terrorism and Political Violence* for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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