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The Fiction of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi

Creativity Need in Information War with al-Qaeda in Iraq

By Steve Schippert and Nick Grace

Fully engaged in the Information War, al-Qaeda in Iraq continues to put forth its message in Iraq under the umbrella of a notional Islamic State of Iraq and employing an Iraqi actor to fill the fictitious shoes of its purported Iraqi leader, "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi." While al-Qaeda in Iraq is in dire straits in Iraq - as evidenced by the content of "al-Baghdadi's" latest al-Qaeda-prepared speech - its information campaign has kicked back into gear in earnest, deriding the "apostates" of the Iraqi Awakening movement (Sahawah al-Iraq or SAI) and announcing a new campaign through the end of January. The United States needs to engage in more creative means of participation in this Information War, exploiting al-Qaeda's faults and weaknesses beyond dry news releases and press conferences.

In a continuation of its ~~PSYWAR~~ campaign, al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) strategic and operational effort to maintain battlefield morale and to consolidate its leadership of the broader insurgency, AQI's al-Furqan Media released a 46 minute long audio file (MP3) onto the Internet late Monday night. The recording features a speech by the notional emir of AQI's umbrella organization, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). An Arabic-language transcript, in Word, Adobe PDF, and Flash, was posted shortly after the appearance of the audio.

Pulp Fiction: The Islamic State of Iraq and "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi"

In order to best understand the proper and important context of the latest from the Islamic State of Iraq, it must be understood exactly what the group is and who its purported leader, "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi," really is. At the height of his bloodlust, even Usama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri atop al-Qaeda's global leadership understood that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian with a violent penchant for video taping brutal beheadings and other murders, was a liability and a public relations nightmare among local Iraqis. Once Zarqawi, then AQI's leader, was killed in an American air raid in June 2006, this opened the door for al-Qaeda to put in place a new leader, Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri, to bridge the widening chasm between al-Qaeda and Iraqis created by Zarqawi.

In order to achieve this, al-Qaeda in Iraq - once led by a Jordanian run amok and now led by an Egyptian - sorely needed an Iraqi face with the appearance of Iraqi leadership. The notional "Islamic State of Iraq" organization was thus created and announced for this express purpose. Atop the ISI's leadership was an unknown figure introduced as "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi," and bin Laden's newly selected leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq pledged "allegiance" and subservience to the leadership and decisions of "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi."

There was just one problem. According to the Pentagon and confirmed to *ThreatsWatch* by a military intelligence source, "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi" is a notional character developed by al-Qaeda to put an Iraqi face on the Islamic State of Iraq, which is itself equally notional. A purely fictitious character, the physical role of "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi" is in fact performed by an Iraqi actor known as Abdullah al-Naima. Khalid Abdul Fatah Da'ud Mahmud al-Mashadani, the former "Information Minister" of al-Qaeda in Iraq, was captured on July 4, 2007 and revealed as much during his interrogation. The captured ISI "Information Minister" - in a distinct position to know - explained that al-Baghdadi's statements and the overall direction and strategy of the Islamic State of Iraq is, in fact, controlled by Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the Egyptian born head of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

He had, in fact, exposed a puppet show of lethal deception. Al-Qaeda never really wanted Iraqi leadership, so who better to play the part of an Iraqi leader than an actor by trade? And with the Iraqi stage and film industry being what it was under Saddam Hussein, few Iraqi actors were widely recognized, permitting the charade to commence. Multi-National Forces - Iraq (MNF-I) also revealed that some among the former insurgent groups now aligned with the Iraq Awakening movement (Sahawah al-Iraq) and Coalition forces did in fact eventually recognize al-Naima from his films, which served to drive a wedge further between them at the time.

A biography of al-Naima's "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi" character posted on Jihadist message boards and reported by Iraq expert Nibras Kazimi paints the lead role in al-Qaeda's screenplay as both religious and patriotic. Born in Baghdad with a strong Sunni pedigree, he is playbilled as a man in his 40s and as a Salafi activist under the rule of Saddam Hussein. His family supposedly hails from the Albu Mu'alleg clan of the Mashhadani tribe and is directly descended from the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. He is, according to the intelligence source, "the perfect Iraqi al-Qaeda leader." He is also, again, pulp fiction and al-Baghdadi's words are not those of an Iraqi leader, but rather a script penned by the foreign leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

This is the context needed to best understand the message most recently attributed to one "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi," which, as will be shown, is a message of desperation from a group on the run and finding former Iraqi allies now hunting them seemingly at every turn.

The al-Qaeda-Scripted Message: Signs of Desperation

"Al-Baghdadi's" speech, called "As for the Foam it Passes Away as Scum," is an attempt to rebuild morale within the rank and file inside Iraq and suggests that al-Qaeda's Islamic State is not faring very well. Al-Qaeda in Iraq faces both the anti-AQ Sunni Awakening movements, which are assisting U.S. forces in the fight against al-Qaeda, and also endures competition from an umbrella group of Sunni insurgencies called the Political Council for the Iraqi Resistance (PCIR). The purported emir of the ISI calls these opponents "apostates and traitors" and warns al-Qaeda fighters against either supporting them or even giving up. Any warning over giving up the fight within public al-Qaeda communications must be seen as a sign of dire straits.



Logo of the Islamic State of Iraq

In the speech, according to a summary acquired by *ThreatsWatch*, ISI head "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi" directly criticizes the PCIR and calls for unity under ISI leadership. He warns that disunity works to the West's interests and that the dissolution of the Islamic State would lead to deeper fractures within the Salafi-Jihadi armed campaign. The PCIR formed on October 11, 2007, and consists of the Islamic Army in Iraq, Mujahideen Army (Jaish al-Mujahideen), Conquering Army in Iraq, Sharia Commission of Ansar al-Sunnah (Jamaat Ansar al-Sunna), Islamic Front for the Iraqi Resistance (JAAMI), and Hamas of Iraq. It was formed primarily as a platform to counter al-Qaeda's notional Islamic State of Iraq, known to be an Iraqi puppet with foreign al-Qaeda strings.

"Al-Baghdadi" continues by denying that the anti-AQ Sunni Awakening movements and councils have come about as a result of actions by the ISI. Calling the Awakening movements "apostasy," he says that the root causes are tribal ignorance (jahiliyah), a love for this world, and misconceptions promoted by provocateurs. This runs counter to the steadfast and earnest motivating factors as stated by the Awakening movement (Sahawah al-Iraq) maintained since its inception and during its fast growth.

The al-Qaeda-prepared statement read by al-Naima (as "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi") admits the loss of parts of Diyala because of "the betrayal" of Hamas of Iraq, which split from the 1920 Revolution Brigade in March 2007 and reportedly fought alongside U.S. forces to combat al-Qaeda. But it reassures supporters that the ISI continues to control "most of its territory." None of that territory includes any significant portions of urban terrain anymore, save for small rural towns overtaken in al-Qaeda retreats from such places as Baquba in Diyala province.

Ramadi, the statement says, is the last "crusader" stronghold and that "it will soon be taken care of." This will be no small feat, as Ramadi is the epicenter of the entire Awakening movement against al-Qaeda. Once al-Qaeda in Iraq's own epicenter, they were driven out through the energetic cooperation of local Ramadi Sunnis in the al-Anbar provincial capital. It is now more an Awakening stronghold than that of the "crusader"

American forces. Driven out of Ramadi, al-Qaeda shifted its concentration of forces northward into Baquba, which the statement also ceded as now also lost. The nominal shell Islamic State of Iraq is truly a "state" without a capital.

Recruiting Calls and New Campaign: 3 Kills Each

"Al-Baghdadi" claims that while non-Iraqi fighters have greatly sacrificed for their cause, only 200 foreign mujahideen remain in Iraq. Again, al-Qaeda continues to press for the image of an Iraqi movement. This can also be seen in the fact that an 'outed' "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi" continues to stay in persistent character. He declares his admiration for the mujahideen, saying that they are stronger than steel and more stable than mountains, and tells them to show no mercy to "apostates." Suggesting that the ISI has a morale problem, he asks ISI fighters to hold steadfast and not let the blood of their brothers go to waste. He warns them against tribalism and nationalism, and commands them to protect the believers against the Awakening movements.

He also announces the formation of the "al-Siddiq Brigades," which refers to Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, the first of the *Rashidun* (rightly-guided Caliphs) who fought a war against rebel tribes and apostates, and consolidated Syria and Iraq into the caliphate. The "al-Siddiq Brigades," he says, will fight against the "apostates and traitors" that are weakening the ISI.



ISI Promotional banner for ghazw campaign.

In conclusion, "al-Baghdadi" calls for *Ghazw* against members of the Awakening movements and community groups that side with U.S. forces and wear "light-reflecting uniforms." Within the jihadist's concepts of warfare, *Ghazw* is a call for a campaign of short and sudden attacks to terrorize and demoralize both the enemy as well as non-combatants in order to weaken and eventually subjugate them. The individual mission of each mujahid, he says, is to conduct 3 J.E.D. attacks or 3 attacks with explosives, especially martyrdom attacks, or at least to kill 3 "apostates and traitors." He then places a deadline for achieving these campaign missions - the 20th day of Muharram 1429 H (likely to be January 29, 2008).

Conclusion: Engage Pulp Fiction In The Information War

This is the sixth message delivered by Abdullah al-Naima as "Abu Omar al-Baghdadi" since his appearance as the ISI emir in October 2006 and his first speech since Usama bin Laden's controversial "Message to the People of Iraq" in October 2007, which criticized al-Qaeda in Iraq's losses.

The media theater remains a major component of al-Qaeda's strategy and its wing in Iraq has suffered major setbacks in recent months. Al-Furqan Media, al-Qaeda in Iraq's media wing, is currently on the move, according to jihadists messages obtained by *ThreatsWatch*, and facing logistical difficulties. "(I)t takes time for moving such an infrastructure and find (sic) a safe place with... traitors around," one message stated. Recent sweeps in Samarra, as Bill Roggio has reported, have nailed well over 30 media operatives and suggests that al-Furqan is currently trying to reestablish its operations there.

Al-Furqan, which previously maintained a strong output of video products, released only two PDF magazines between September and November. It resumed video output on November 24 and has focused primarily on clips of modestly successful attacks against American forces and executions of Iraqi police.

The Department of Defense - from the Pentagon to the PAO's (Public Affairs Offices) for units deployed on the battlefield - have evolved into much more effective and efficient teams regarding the flow of information. However, new means of engaging in the Information War must be continually explored. Al-Qaeda has been invested and engaged to the extent that it has fielded a nominal and deceptive umbrella group called the Islamic State of Iraq and fielded a purely fictional leader whose shoes are literally filled by a stage and screen actor. Each time a statement is released, it should perhaps be broadcast in Iraq and made available in the West as a service to al-Qaeda in Iraq. The video feed should come complete with a split screen of "al-Baghdadi" on one side and a set of clips of Abdullah al-Naima's scenes in his movies on the other, slightly accelerated and enhanced with vaudeville musical fare reminiscent of the Keystone Cops.

There is more to the Information War with al-Qaeda (and others) than dry factual press releases and news conferences. We should be bold and creative enough to employ new means effectively and work in creative ways to belittle their credibility and erode what public support they maintain.

By Steve Schippert on December 5, 2007 11:08 AM