

Al-Qaida in Iraq's tactics undercut its support

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Every morning during my year in Iraq, there was a classified briefing that summarized all of the successes and failures of the last 24 hours. The failures almost immediately appeared on TV or Internet while few of the coalition's successes received much attention. This may explain the lack of awareness of one of the most important recent stories of the war -- the imminent defeat of the most vicious insurgent group, al-Qaida in Iraq.

Al-Qaida in Iraq is a semi-autonomous franchise of the international al-Qaida movement. While most of the credit for pushing al-Qaida in Iraq into collapse belongs to the Marines and soldiers of the U.S.-led coalition, some of al-Qaida's defeats were self-inflicted.

Successful insurgencies must have an inspirational vision or cause. This vision not only attracts fighters to the insurgency, but also helps ensure that the majority of the population remains neutral. The post-war communist insurgency in Greece failed, in part, because its only cause was resistance to the German invaders. No one was sure what the communists intended to do when the Germans retreated. As a result of this uncertainty, support for the communists was limited. Al-Qaida in Iraq committed the same mistake. Resistance to the U.S. coalition is popular in Iraq, but the different insurgent factions have drastically different visions for when the coalition leaves.

To reduce uncertainty, al-Qaida in Iraq proposed a three-stage vision of crushing "the crusaders, the Jews and the Shi'a." Considering that almost two-thirds of the population of Iraq are Shi'a, al-Qaida's vision, while it helped recruit fighters among Sunni fanatics, ensured that a large portion of the population would violently oppose it.

Support for al-Qaida in Iraq was further undermined by the tactics it adopted, especially attacks on innocent civilians, respected international organizations and symbols of the Islamic religion. One of the greatest tragedies of any war is the killing of innocents by mistake or collateral damage. However, al-Qaida in Iraq went a step further and deliberately made targets of civilians including children. In fact, al-Qaida leadership in Iraq published a justification for such attacks, based on some ambiguous passages in the Koran.

In addition, respected international organizations such as the United Nations and the Red Cross were targeted. More offensive was the bombing of mosques and other sacred places by al-Qaida and related groups. Considering the worldwide outrage that followed the false rumor that a U.S. prison guard had dropped a prayer book in a toilet, how much more offensive to true believers is the deliberate destruction of multiple copies of the Koran when insurgents bomb a mosque during prayer time?

Al-Qaida was also baffled by the patience and endurance of the United States and its coalition partners. Shortly after the 2003 invasion, leaders of the insurgency stated that ousting the United States would only require a short, violent conflict. Al-Qaida leaders stated that Somalia and Lebanon proved that Americans were unwilling to risk the lives of their sons and daughters for any cause. As soon as 30 or 300 had died, America would run. When this retreat did not occur, the insurgent propagandists turned to U.S. anti-war movement statements that the 2004 and 2006 elections were referenda on the war. The anti-war vote would weaken President Bush, who would be forced to retreat. Instead, there are now as many American military in Iraq as on election day 2006. Al-Qaida in Iraq is like the boy who cried wolf. It has been wrong for so long about the imminent retreat of the Americans that it has lost all credibility.

Al-Qaida in Iraq is visionless, vicious, deceitful and stupid. Periodically, it can still launch simple terror attacks on civilians but, as its members desert, its ability to coordinate complex operations is disappearing. In fact, unless it drastically adapts its goals and means, al-Qaida in Iraq probably has only a single hope for recovery -- that the United States and her allies abandon the struggle.

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