

# WebMemo



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## Fighting Al-Qaeda in Iraq

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According to unconfirmed news reports, the commander of al-Qaeda operations in Iraq, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, was killed earlier this week in a clash with Sunni Arab tribesmen north of Baghdad. While these reports may prove to be false—the Iraqi Interior Ministry had mistakenly claimed that Masri was killed in February—the news this time comes not from the Iraqi government but from Sunni Arab tribes that had formerly cooperated with the terrorist group. The estrangement of al-Qaeda in Iraq from its erstwhile allies is a hopeful sign for U.S. Iraq policy. Yet many opponents of the Bush Administration's policy in Iraq are unlikely to recognize it as such, in part because they mistakenly see the war in Iraq as a distraction from the war on terrorism.

Masri, an Egyptian who honed his terrorist skills in Afghanistan, has led al-Qaeda in Iraq since the death last June of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian. In April, Masri was named as the “Minister of War” of the “Islamic State of Iraq,” an umbrella organization for radical Sunni militant groups that seek to transform Iraq into a revolutionary Islamic state. Their goals and tactics, which include extensive and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, have been rejected by other Sunni Arabs, including many Sunni insurgent groups, who increasingly have turned against them.

This growing backlash against al-Qaeda in Iraq has led to the formation of the Anbar Salvation Council, a coalition of Sunni tribes opposed to al-Qaeda in Anbar province, a bastion of the Sunni-dominated insurgency. Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Reesha, head of the council, claims that his men

killed Masri in a fierce battle earlier this week. He has appealed to the Iraqi government to dispatch security forces to support his tribal militia against al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has repeatedly launched terrorist attacks against his supporters, including car bombs, suicide bombers, and chlorine gas bombs. Meanwhile, Abu Reesha has ordered thousands of his supporters to join the local police forces, greatly improving the security situation in the province.

The council's efforts are a positive development that demonstrates progress has been made by the United States and the Iraqi government in driving a wedge between some Sunni insurgent groups and the most radical groups, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq. The U.S. Army reportedly has provided the Anbar Salvation Council with ammunition, while the Iraqi government has provided vehicles.

Despite this progress, if the Democrat-controlled Congress has its way, U.S. troops would rush to withdraw, leaving the Iraqi government and the Anbar Salvation Council at the mercy of al-Qaeda in Iraq and other bloodthirsty groups. Many opponents of the Bush Administration's Iraq policy continue to indulge in wishful thinking about the consequences of a rushed exit from Iraq, despite the

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fact that the most recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq, released in February, concludes that such a policy would lead to a catastrophe. Some deny that Iraq means anything in the broader war against terrorism, despite a NIE released last year that concluded that a defeat for the U.S. in Iraq would be perceived as a tremendous victory for Islamic radicals and “would inspire more fighters to continue the struggle elsewhere.”<sup>1</sup> Others would prefer to fight al-Qaeda in Afghanistan rather than Iraq, despite the fact that al-Qaeda’s operational commander in Afghanistan stated in a video released on April 28 that Iraq is “the focal point of the conflict.”<sup>2</sup>

Al-Qaeda’s strategy is to carve out a state-within-a-state in Iraq to use as a springboard for exporting terrorism and subversion. Iraq looms much larger in al-Qaeda’s plans than Afghanistan because of its strategic location in the heart of the Arab world, in close proximity to the Persian Gulf oil fields, a high-value target for attack. Iraq is a more useful staging area for attacks on neighboring countries and Israel,

which is likely to become more of a target for future al-Qaeda terrorism. Moreover, Baghdad was once the seat of the caliphate that al-Qaeda seeks to recreate, which is an important ideological consideration. Finally, as an Arab-dominated movement, al-Qaeda would have a much easier time operating from bases in Sunni Arab regions in Iraq than in Afghanistan or Pakistan, where Arab travelers stand out from the local population.

Congress must seriously confront the consequences of a rapid withdrawal from Iraq and support continued efforts to help the Iraqi government contain and defeat the insurgency. Abandoning Iraq to an al-Qaeda-provoked civil war would have devastating consequences for U.S. national interests, the Middle East, and the Iraqi people.

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1. See Peter Brookes and James Phillips, “NIE Confirms that the Outcome of the Iraq War is Critical to the War on Terrorism,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1226, September 27, 2006, at [www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1226.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1226.cfm).
2. “New Video of Al-Qaeda Commander Al-Libi Released,” The Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Focus*, Volume 4, Issue 12 (May 1, 2007), at <http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373359>.