



Warning Update: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency Begins as ISIS Loses Ground in Mosul

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Early indicators suggest that a post-ISIS Sunni insurgency may be forming in Iraq and al Qaeda (AQ) is trying to gain traction within it.

This essay highlights indicators that post-ISIS insurgencies are forming and that al Qaeda is present in Iraq. ISW [forecasted](#) on November 30, 2016 that Iraq will likely face a renewed Sunni insurgency as military operations diminish ISIS's hold in Mosul. The U.S.-backed Coalition has been focused only on eliminating ISIS, not other insurgent groups or the conditions that grow them. Political conditions therefore permit an insurgency to take root. Iraqi insurgent groups that predated the rise of ISIS remain active, even though ISIS has tried to suppress them. These groups have publicized their intent to revive a resistance movement against the Iraqi state. It is too soon to assess whether these insurgent groups will operate under a national umbrella.

- Neo-Baathist group **Jaysh al-Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya** (JRTN) stated in October 2016 that it [attacked](#) ISIS militants in Mosul and called for more attacks. In December 2016, it [denounced](#) political participation in Iraq, which is especially relevant in the year prior to provincial and national elections, which will likely transpire in April 2018.
- **The 1920s Revolution Brigades**, another neo-Baathist group, focused its January 2017 issue of its magazine on its concerns on the [state of resistance](#) movements in Iraq, particularly those aimed at reducing Iranian influence in both Iraq and the region. The group has been publishing its monthly magazine for nearly a decade now, despite ISIS's dominance, underscoring that it remains an active group with distinct objectives from ISIS which it will pursue when ISIS recedes.
- Several [Baathist leaders](#) are leading ISIS cells around Kirkuk Province and Hawija, according to an anonymous security source in Kirkuk cited in November 2016. Hawija became a Baathist hotspot after the fall of Saddam Hussein and again in 2013. If true, these Baathist leaders could keep these capabilities and networks even if ISIS is defeated, granting them the resources to develop an insurgency.

These groups may be able to act independently of ISIS as its grip loosens. For instance, groups such as JRTN that went to ground in Mosul in 2014 in order to survive ISIS's dominance and targeted assassinations will likely find opportunities to reemerge in the vulnerable period after ISIS loses control of the city but before the Iraqi government fully holds it. Indicators of JRTN's revival in Mosul will likely include signature attacks such as [drive-by assassinations](#) against both members of ISIS and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). JRTN was [active](#) in Diyala, primarily around Qarra Tapa, prior to ISIS's resurgence in the province in July 2013 when its leaders broke out of Abu Ghraib prison and took over the insurgency in the province. Afterwards, ISIS [competed](#) with JRTN, likely incorporating some of its organization and forcing other

portions to ground. JRTN can use ongoing sectarian and ethnic violence in [Diyala](#), however, to rebound as ISIS recedes. ISIS may again find itself in competition with the insurgent groups it was previously able to suppress, such as JRTN, as both seek to reestablish attack capabilities and control recruitment pools.

ISIS, nevertheless, continues to be active and capable of conducting spectacular attacks in Iraq and will remain so for months, despite its losses elsewhere in the country. ISIS launched a series of [deadly attacks](#) in Baghdad over the New Year holiday and has demonstrated its ability to attack disperse areas of Iraq, including [Kirkuk](#), Tikrit, and [Samarra](#), since operations in Mosul began in October 2016. ISIS, however, may begin to alter how it carries out attacks in Iraq as the group transforms from a governing to a guerrilla style terrorist organization. This shift will make attribution of attacks difficult, especially if signature capabilities erode or attack patterns change.

Recent anomalous attacks, therefore, need to be assessed equally as possible indicators that non-ISIS insurgents are already conducting attacks in Iraq and as indicators that ISIS is changing tactics or losing capabilities.

The clustering of IEDs in one neighborhood is an anomaly. ISW has assessed a baseline of three to six IEDs per day across Baghdad, but IEDs are rarely concentrated in one neighborhood.

- A [cluster](#) of five IEDs detonated in a single neighborhood in Shuala, northwest Baghdad, on December 31, 2016. ISIS did not issue a claim.
- ISIS [claimed](#) a [cluster](#) of five IEDs in Sha'ab, northeast Baghdad, on December 15, 2016.
- There are several hypotheses for the different claims behind these clustered IEDs:
 1. ISIS is responsible for both clusters of IEDs but either could not or did not issue a claim for the Shuala attacks.
 2. Another insurgent group carried out both the Sha'ab and Shuala clustered IEDs, but ISIS claimed attacks it did not carry out.
 3. ISIS is responsible for the first cluster of IEDs and a different group is responsible for the second.

Increased [reports](#) of armed [motorcycle](#) gangs in the area between Tikrit and the Hamrin Mountains in Diyala may be an indicator of Sunni insurgent presence, as these tactics were [common in Diyala](#) in 2006. Unnamed security officials attributed the attacks to ISIS, but these officials may be unable or unwilling to attribute the attacks to other insurgent groups. ISIS has primarily used motorcycles for spectacular attacks, but ISW cannot assess confidently that it did not use motorcycle gangs.

ISW also [forecasted](#) in November 2016 that AQ would likely try to co-opt and mature insurgent groups in Iraq. AQ leader Ayman [al-Zawahiri](#) called in August 2016 for Iraqi Sunnis to resume a "[long guerrilla warfare](#)" and urged AQ in Syria to support the rebuilding process in Iraq, as we noted in that essay.

There are early indicators that AQ is present in Iraq and may be establishing ties with insurgent groups.

- Local police in Samarra [arrested](#) two militants on January 31 who confessed to ties to AQ. Shi'a-dominated security units, in particular, often try to force Sunnis to confess to terrorist groups, so many arrests are the results of sectarian abuse, not actual crime. Reports of forced confessions have usually claimed that the arrested person had ties to ISIS, not AQ, making this artifact meaningful.
- ISW previously [assessed](#) that AQ would likely reenter the Iraqi theater from Syria through the Euphrates River Valley. Its emergence in Samarra may suggest that AQ is reviving sleeper cells in Iraq in addition to or before sending envoys from Syria. Alternatively, it may suggest that AQ is prioritizing major Shi'a targets in Iraq such as the shrine cities.

Regional states may be accelerating an insurgency by enabling Sunni armed groups.

- Saudi Arabia is funneling [arms shipments](#) to Sunni tribes in Anbar in anticipation of a showdown with the Shi'a Popular Mobilization units, according to a CENTCOM official in December 2016.
- Turkey's [support of AQ](#) and other Sunni opposition groups in the region, particularly in Syria, may allow or directly facilitate AQ's return to Iraq, likely by way of Mosul.

ISW will reassess some previous attacks it has attributed to ISIS to determine whether they in fact should be attributed to other insurgent groups. As ISIS loses capabilities, the insurgent organizations rising in its wake may share attack patterns with one another and with the diminishing ISIS. ISW will consider its attribution of attacks such as IEDs targeting ISF convoys. The ability to distinguish between ISIS and insurgent groups will remain difficult while dormant groups revive their organizations and reestablish capabilities.

Future Indicators

AQ is likely to build upon or co-opt already present insurgent groups. AQ did so in Iraq between 2004 and 2006, and in Syria from 2011 to today. It may try to [unify](#) disparate Iraqi insurgent groups, as it did in 2006 under the Islamic State of Iraq. It has likewise been trying to unite groups in contemporary Syria by establishing military councils and merging with local groups. The current insurgent elements in Iraq may be too ideologically and geographically dispersed to create a national movement in the wake of ISIS; their [attempt](#) to do so in January 2014 after the fall of Fallujah to ISIS likewise failed. This vulnerability could accelerate AQ's cooptation or establishment of an affiliate in Iraq more quickly than did ISIS in 2013 or AQI in 2004. Iraqi insurgent groups' residual antipathy to AQ or ISIS, dating from the Awakening in 2007 and the current situation, may dampen AQ's success, however.

AQ's efforts to rebuild its networks in Iraq will occur at a local level. We should expect AQ to interfere in local politics, especially as provincial and parliamentary elections approach in 2018. It may try to establish an assassination campaign against [local politicians](#) or tribal leaders, undermine the electoral process, or portray it as an ineffective method to address grievances. AQ and Sunni insurgents are likely to attack campaign rallies and voting stations. Changes in Sunni tribal relations and alliances may also indicate that AQ is leveraging its tribal connections and know-how to revive networks and increase its position. It may try to play tribes against each other, as it did in [al-Qaim](#) in 2007, or it may use inter-tribal disputes, such as the ongoing rivalry within the dominant Jubur tribe in northern Iraq, to eliminate resistance.

ISW has established named areas of interest (NAIs) in places where AQ had significant networks in 2007 to watch for the indicators above and anomalous activity. These areas will likely spawn a Sunni insurgency even without AQ because they face sectarian or ethnic tensions, have populations that are under-served by the Iraqi government, or have ideological propensities to support Salafi-jihadi movements.

- **Diyala Province**, particularly along the Hamrin Ridge, in the eastern Khanqin District, including Qarra Tapa, around Muqdadiyah, and near Baqubah.
- In the **Euphrates River Valley** around **Ramadi, Fallujah, and al-Qaim** where insurgents, especially AQ, can take advantage of tribal networks and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) flows.
- **In the Zab Triangle**, including Hawija, Shirqat, and northern Salah al-Din.
- **IDP populations and camps**, particularly those that have been long-barred from returning home to Jurf al-Sakhar, south of Baghdad, and in the Tigris River Valley in Salah al-Din.
- An increased effort by AQ to establish a presence in **southeastern Syria** could also signal a larger plan to extend its presence into western Iraq.

Conclusion

Current anti-ISIS operations in Iraq focused on defeating ISIS's will or capability to fight are undermining that group but also exacerbating political instability. Iranian-backed Shi'a militias and former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's political party have threatened Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi with a no confidence vote. Abadi is at risk of losing his position before the operations against ISIS conclude and has been forced to make [concessions](#) to militias that are often contrary to U.S. interests in order to guarantee that he keeps his seat. He has not been able to stop Iranian-backed militias from [resuming operations](#) near Tal Afar, for example. The concessions will likely exacerbate sectarian and ethnic tensions if they benefit [pro-Iranian interests](#) at the expense of Sunni Arabs. The U.S. will need to ensure that PM Abadi has the support he needs to keep his position without conceding to Iranian interests that could undermine recent anti-ISIS successes.

The U.S. needs immediately to broaden its anti-ISIS strategy in Iraq and Syria to include AQ and its affiliates. The U.S. must act robustly through political, economic, diplomatic, and military means to eliminate the political conditions that ensure al Qaeda, ISIS, and ISIS's successors the ability to incubate and recruit.