

Al-Qaeda is the main enemy in Iraq, too

by Robert_J_Caldwell

To no one's surprise, all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies agree that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network poses the main threat of terrorist attack on the United States. That's the message of the National Intelligence Estimate released last week. The same conspiracy of murderous fanatics that inflicted a terrorist Pearl Harbor on us Sept. 11, 2001, is still dedicated to hitting America again, if possible with the chemical, biological or nuclear weapons of mass murder.

That much, most Americans already knew or assumed. What they might not know is that al-Qaeda's franchise operation in Iraq, formally known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI, is also currently the chief threat to U.S. and coalition forces there and to the democratically elected Iraqi government.

That contradicts a constant refrain of Iraq war critics - that fighting in Iraq distracts from the war we should be waging, against al-Qaeda. Well, guess who we're fighting in Iraq.

U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker calls al-Qaeda in Iraq the main fomenter of sectarian violence. "I have seen attacks from al-Qaeda that have been aimed at virtually every community in Iraq," Crocker says. In testimony July 19 by satellite from Baghdad, Crocker told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that al-Qaeda in Iraq attacks have targeted Sunnis, Shiites, Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds, all in an effort to provoke ethnic or tribal retaliations.

A Pentagon report to Congress in June - "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq" - identifies al-Qaeda in Iraq as responsible for most of the "high profile" terrorist attacks in the country. "High profile attacks, usually conducted by AQI, are now causing more casualties in Baghdad than do murders by (sectarian) militia, criminals or other armed groups," the report said.

The same carefully worded Pentagon report tags al-Qaeda in Iraq as "the primary threat to the security environment in Anbar Province." Sprawling Anbar, which encompasses a third of Iraq and stretches from Baghdad's western suburbs to Iraq's borders with Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, is the Sunni heartland and a strategic and geographical key to stabilizing the country.

Army Brig. Gen. Kevin Bergner, a spokesman for Multinational Force Iraq in Baghdad, declared July 11 that al-Qaeda in Iraq is the "principal near-term threat."

A defector from al-Qaeda in Iraq told U.S. and coalition authorities recently that "between 80 and 90 percent of the suicide attacks in Iraq are being carried out by foreign-born al-Qaeda terrorists." The defector estimated the toll of such attacks in the last six months at "some 4,000 Iraqis killed or injured by the al-Qaeda suicide

attacks."

AQI's nihilistic, indiscriminate slaughter of Iraqis of all ethnic and sectarian descriptions is consistent with its history of terrorism in Iraq. It was al-Qaeda in Iraq that bombed the Shiites' sacred Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006, precisely to provoke the Sunni versus Shiite bloodshed that then ensued. Al-Qaeda's supremely cynical calculation was that inciting civil war was the most effective way of defeating the U.S. mission to create a stable, secure democracy in Iraq.

In its place, al-Qaeda's goal is to impose Taliban-style Islamic rule in Iraq, an Islamic theocracy that could serve as a foundation stone for the restored caliphate that is Osama bin-Laden's supreme objective.

Iraq war critics can argue that al-Qaeda in Iraq is more a freelance franchise than a true subsidiary of bin Laden's core al-Qaeda. They can argue, also, that Iraq is still a hugely distracting sideshow to the main struggle pitting the United States and its allies against bin Laden's terrorist apparatus.

Let the critics argue with bin Laden's top deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. He and other al-Qaeda leaders have been proclaiming for years now that Iraq is the central front in the battle with the "infidel" West, and that their goal in Iraq is an Islamic state.

If most Americans were only vaguely aware that al-Qaeda in Iraq was a major combatant force there, they may know even less about recent coalition successes against these terrorists. A press that has turned almost uniformly negative on Iraq is hardly bothering to report multiplying signs that the tide has turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The U.S. command in Baghdad announced July 11 that coalition and Iraqi forces have killed or captured hundreds of al-Qaeda terrorists over the last two months, including 26 "high value" al-Qaeda leaders. Among those captured was the highest ranking Iraqi member of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who was apprehended July 4.

Army Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, commander of Multinational Corps Iraq and Army Gen. David Petraeus' senior deputy, notes that Ramadi, "once the al-Qaeda capital of Iraq," now averages less than one hostile incident per day, down from an average of 30 attacks per day just six months ago. Odierno says comparable successes are being achieved in Abu Ghraib, Taji and the Baghdad neighborhood of Amiriyah.

A telling measure of U.S. and Iraqi success is the steady increase, to record levels, of information provided by Iraqi civilians on terrorists and their operations. Odierno credits these tips with permitting the discovery of nearly 600 weapons caches, 1,300 improvised explosive devices (the biggest killers of American soldiers and Marines), 25 car bombs and eight bomb-making factories.

All this sends al-Qaeda an ominous message - Iraqis are turning against them. "I can think of no major population center in Iraq that is an al-Qaeda safe haven today," Odierno told Pentagon reporters by satellite Thursday.

The same scoffers who minimized al-Qaeda's role in Iraq will disparage or ignore the evidence that bin Laden's surrogates are losing. The facts show them wrong on both counts.

Robert J. Caldwell is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's Sunday Insight section and can be reached via e-mail at robert.caldwell@uniontrib.com.

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