

# HAS AL QAEDA IN IRAQ BEEN DESTROYED? REASONS FOR THE POWER STRUGGLES IN IRAQ AFTER THE WITHDRAWAL OF US FORCES

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## 1. Al Qaeda has learned from its defeat in Iraq: the establishment of a safe haven in Yemen

In 2006, Al Qaeda in Iraq (Al-Qa'idah fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, or Al Qaeda in the land of the two rivers, AQI) was on the verge of defeating US forces. A victory parade was held in Ramadi as early as September 2006. AQI, in an alliance with the other Sunni Arab terror groups, had drawn up a joint plan of operations and was seeking to wage a decisive battle by means of urban warfare in Baghdad. AQI held supreme command.

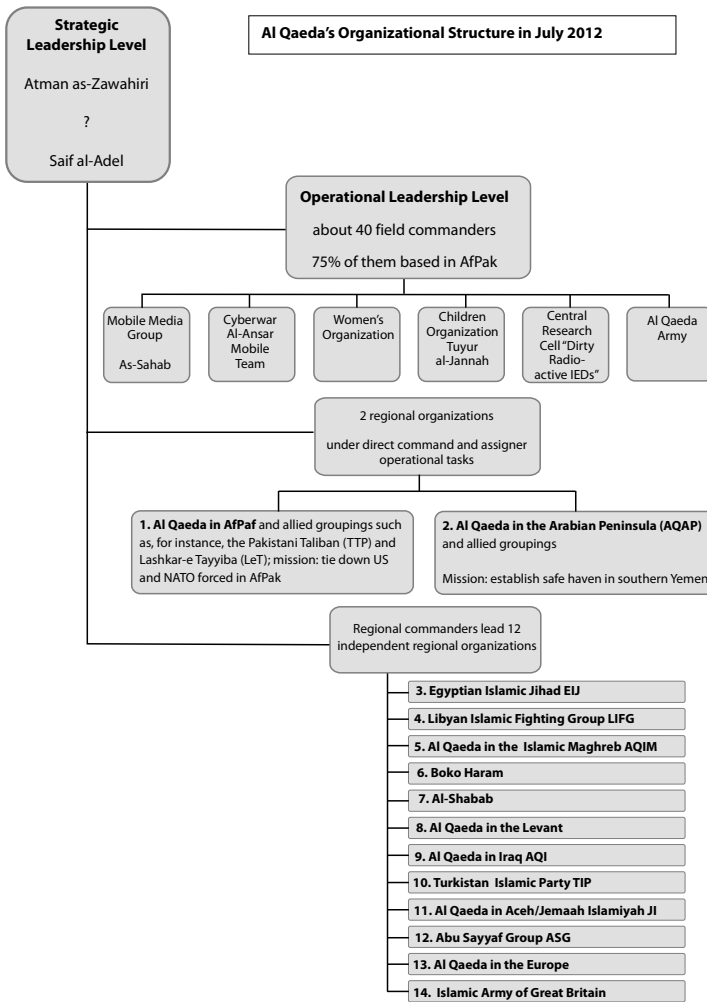
General Dr. David Petraeus, however, succeeded in largely destroying AQI within two years by implementing FM 3-24.<sup>1</sup>, a new US Counterinsurgency Strategy, and killing 12,000 Al Qaeda fighters. In addition, around 80,000 insurgents defected to the government forces and formed support militias, or Awakening Councils. However, several hundred AQI fighters survived and continued the fight in Iraq.

From 2003 to 2008 the focal point of operations for Al Qaeda lay in Iraq. In 2008, Al Qaeda's leadership shifted its main operational effort from Iraq back to Afghanistan and redeployed the Al Qaeda Army to North Waziristan in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA. From 2008 to 2012, roughly one hundred Al Qaeda Army fighters per month came from Iraq to the FATA via Iran. They were smuggled through Iran by drug trafficking gangs allied with Al Qaeda. Since then, the Al Qaeda Army has undertaken training in North Waziristan in preparation for its deployment to Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> See **The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual**: U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5, Chicago/ London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Al Qaeda’s Strategic Leadership Level has learned lessons from its defeat in Iraq. Al Qaeda’s regional organization, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), established in 2009, has been tasked with the preparation of a safe haven in southern Yemen, in the event that Al Qaeda should also lose in Afghanistan/Pakistan. AQAP is Al Qaeda’s “Noah’s Ark”.<sup>2</sup>



**Fig. 1:** Al Qaeda’s Organizational Structure in July 2012<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See **Krech, Hans** 2013. Al-Qaida in Afghanistan/ Pakistan. – Der Mittler-Brief. Informationsdienst zur Sicherheitspolitik, 1/2013.

<sup>3</sup> See **Krech, Hans** 2011. Al Qaeda in Autumn 2011: Facts and Figures. – Orient. German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East, IV/2011, p. 6–12.

## 2. Reasons for the power struggles in Iraq after the withdrawal of US forces

### 2.1. Democratization of the power structures as a result of the takeover of power by the Shi'ite population majority

The two principal branches of Islam – the Sunnis and the Shi'ites – originally formed in Mesopotamia, now Iraq, in the 7th century. The Sunnis account for the majority of all Muslims. There are only three nations today where the Shi'ites make up the majority of the population. These are Iran, Iraq and Bahrain.

After the Sunni Abbasid caliphs' dynasty took over power in 750 AD and relocated their capital to Baghdad in 762 AD, the Sunnis ruled the “land of the two rivers”, which was inhabited mostly by Shi'ites, until 2003. Over a period lasting 1,253 years, Sunni rulers bloodily repressed the Shi'ites in their own actual heartland, Iraq. And for 1,253 years the Shi'ites defended themselves and, almost invariably, suffered defeat.

The dictatorship of the Sunni minority population over the Shi'ite and Kurdish majority culminated in the Baath dictatorial regime from 1968 to 2003, in which Saddam Hussein, the Stalin of Iraq, relied solely on his own tribe<sup>4</sup>, the Al-Bu Nasir (“Takriti”), and some of the Sunni minority to retain power. More than one million Iraqis were murdered by the Baath regime between 1968 and 2003. Saddam Hussein's secret service agents, who in some cases had received their training from the Ministry for State Security (MfS) of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), murdered, raped, tortured and plundered.

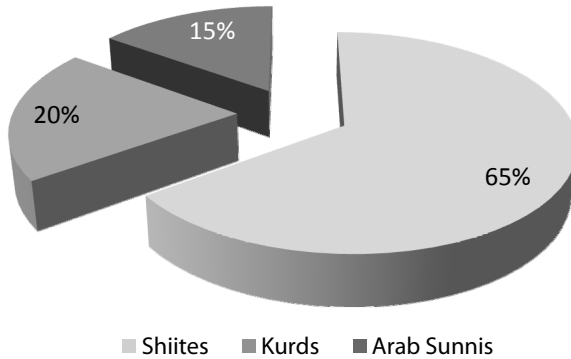
This dictatorship of a small Sunni minority over the Shi'ite and Kurdish majority was brought to an end in 2003 by Operation “Iraqi Freedom”. It was a liberation from the most terrible dictatorship ever suffered by an Arab nation.

For the Shi'ites and Kurds, the struggle to overthrow the dictator Saddam Hussein came at the cost of many lives. When, in 2003, US forces marched in, several major Shi'ite and Kurdish resistance movements were embroiled in the struggle against Saddam's regime. There were many “Stauffenbergs” in Iraq whose names were written in blood on the birth certificate of the new Iraq. The new, democratic Iraq is a nation in which the Shi'ites will always

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<sup>4</sup> There are 18 tribes in Iraq.

have the majority in any democratic elections and the Kurds will form the second-strongest group.<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 2:** Iraq's most important population groups in 2013 (in percent)

## 2.2. Saddam's followers and Sunni groups defend themselves

Saddam's tribe, the Al-Bu Nasir, as well as the majority of the Sunnis have lost all their privileges. They are, today, an impoverished minority who until 2003 had been "milking" the country. Most of them live in the three provinces of Al-Anbar, Diyala and Salahuddin, where there are very few crude oil resources.

Many of the former Sunni officers, secret service agents and Baath personnel were, moreover, personally involved in torture and murders. Since blood feuding is common in Iraq, they cannot return to their towns and villages. Hence they fight from abroad, in particular Jordan and Syria, against the new Shi'ite-dominated government headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. There is no alternative for them for the foreseeable future.

Possibly, the tens of thousands of former Baath supporters will seek a new home in other Arab countries, but for now they carry on fighting for a return to a Sunni led Iraq and to bring down the Shi'ite-Kurdish government coalition.

<sup>5</sup> See **Krech, Hans** 2003. *Der Bürgerkrieg im Irak (1991–2003). Ein Handbuch mit einem Konzept für eine Friedenskonferenz für die Region Persischer Golf*. Berlin: Dr. Köster.

### 2.3. The Kurdish attempt to strengthen the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan

In northern Iraq an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan has crystallized since 2003. It is controlled jointly by two – previously – mutually hostile Kurd parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP). Jalal Talabani (PUK) is the current president of Iraq. He advocates the integration of Iraqi Kurdistan into the federal state of Iraq. Masud Barzani (KDP), President of Iraqi Kurdistan, is seeking to strengthen autonomy.

On 22 May 2013 in Erbil, an open dispute broke out for the first time between Talabani and Barzani about the issue of further developing Kurdish autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

Iraqi Kurdistan sells the crude oil that is under its own control, and does so against the wishes of the government in Baghdad. All revenues flow into the coffers of the autonomous government. The Peshmerga, the Kurdish Armed Forces, protect Iraqi Kurdistan. The government armed forces of Iraq have no presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. Frequently tensions develop between the government armed forces and the Peshmerga, particularly regarding the dispute over border issues in the Mossul region.

### 2.4. Asymmetric conflicts do not end at a chosen point in time as in conventional war but rather subside slowly

It should be noted that the withdrawal of US forces was not accompanied by any peace agreement with the Islamist Sunni Arab underground groups or with the Baath. Any agreement with AQI is unthinkable anyway.

Asymmetric conflicts do not end with a cease-fire as in conventional war, but subside slowly. This process of an asymmetric conflict subsiding can take ten or twenty years and is difficult to influence, meaning that there will still be waves of attacks in Iraq for years to come. This has nothing to do with the alleged failure of the US armed forces or the security forces in Iraq, but is solely due to the nature of asymmetric conflicts.

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<sup>6</sup> See **Francis, Bassem** 2013. Escalation of dispute between Talabani and Barzani parties. – Al-Hayat, 23 May 2013.

### 3. The rise and fall of AQI from 2003 to 2008

In early 2002, 100–150 Islamist fighters led by a Jordanian, Abu Mussab al-Sarkawi (real name: Fadel Nassal al-Chaleileh), fled from the Herat region in eastern Afghanistan, through Iran, to northern Iraq. They went into hiding, near Halabja, among the Ansar al-Islam (Al Tawhid, Helper of Islam), a Salafist Kurdish terror group of around 1,000 fighters. In 2003 these two factions spawned AQI, which officially joined Al Qaeda on 20 October 2004. In November of 2004, Osama bin Laden officially appointed Sarkawi as his deputy for Iraq. Abu Mussab al-Sarkawi was killed by a US air strike on 7 June 2006.

Notwithstanding the death of its leader, AQI became the leading Sunni Arab terror group in Iraq, reaching the zenith of its power in 2006. This manifested itself on 15 October 2006 with the renaming of AQI to the Islamic State of Iraq (Dawlat al Iraq al Islamiya, ISI).

AQI perfected its urban warfare tactics in the major Sunni towns and cities in Iraq, continued to develop the use of IEDs, and had outstanding snipers at its disposal. Thousands of Iraqis also lost their lives in AQI attacks. It is for this reason that AQI lost part of its grassroots support among the Sunni Arab population in 2007/ 2008.

The Al Qaeda Army was built up in Iraq and by 2006 was comprised of some 16,000 fighters. AQI is Al Qaeda's regional organization for Iraq, while the Military Committee of Al Qaeda's Operational Leadership Level can deploy the Al Qaeda Army to other regions.

The women's organization and the children's organization Tuyur al-Jannah (Birds of Paradise) were also formed in Iraq. The AQI leadership included the first female emir of Al Qaeda. Many women attacked US soldiers and Iraqi checkpoints as suicide bombers.<sup>7</sup>

The children's organization Tuyur al-Jannah recruits children up to the age of 16 who are also unscrupulously exploited for suicide attacks. In 2010, 96 percent of all the suicide attacks conducted by AQI in the Diyala province were committed by the children of Tuyur al-Jannah.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See **Krech, Hans** 2013. Tarnung mit der Burka. Ein gefährlicher Trend bei islamistischen Terrorgruppen. – Europäische Sicherheit & Technik, 5/2013, S. 115–117.

<sup>8</sup> See **Youth & children from religious schools behind suicide operations.** – As-Sabah, 20 July 2010.

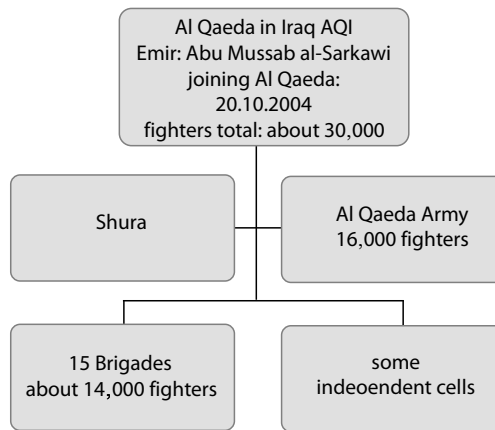


Fig. 3: Structure of AQI in 2006

#### 4. AQI reorganizes – 2008 to 2013

The heavy setbacks suffered by AQI in the years 2007/2008 led to a change in its strategic objectives. US military personnel managed to come into possession of a planning document. AQI was preparing for a long war of attrition against US forces and Iraqi security forces. Massive terror attacks against Shi’ites were meant to provoke a religiously motivated civil war between Sunnis and Shi’ites and thus help AQI to become the strongest Sunni Arab terror faction again.

Strategic Planning of Al Qaeda in Iraq

Handwritten document addressed to Abu Ajjub al-Masri (real name: Abu Hamsa al-Muhajir), commander of AQI (Balad, April 2008)

Offensives	Implementation Measures
Infiltration of Iraqi security forces	Infiltration of the Iraqi security forces and the establishment of Al Qaeda cells within the armed forces, infiltration of the officer corps, the conducting of insider attacks
Economic warfare	Attacks on oil production installations, oil pipelines, power plants, energy lines, trucks
C and B weapons	Contamination of drinking water with nitrates and bacteria
Media war	Dissemination of misinformation to unsettle the population and stir up unrest

Offensives	Implementation Measures
Struggle for the hearts and minds of Sunni Arabs in Iraq	Exploitation of Islam to win back the hearts and minds of the Sunni Arab population.
Weakening of the Awakening Councils	Organization of conflicts between the Awakening Councils and Kurdish and Shi'ite militias, armed forces, parties and organizations
Strategic objective	Division of Iraq, reconstruction of the Islamic State of Iraq under AQI leadership in the Sunni Arab provinces

Source: Media source: documents reveal Al-Qa'idah plan to divide Iraq, in: Aswat al-Iraq news agency, 17 April 2008.

For security reasons, AQI subdivided the area of operations in Iraq in 2010 into two commands, each led by an emir: one emir for the northern provinces, and one emir for the southern provinces. The Emir of AQI always bears the code name al-Baghdadi and has eleven deputies who are prepared to replace him in the event that he is killed.<sup>9</sup>

AQI presented the new leadership on 15 May 2010.

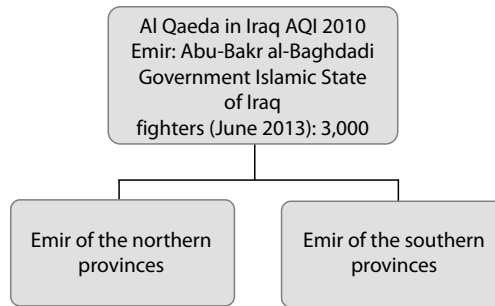


Fig. 4: Leadership structure of AQI as of 2010

<sup>9</sup> See *Al-Qa'idah ready to install two leaders to succeed.* – Al-Hayat, 23 April 2010.



### The new AQI leadership (15 May 2010)<sup>10</sup>

Islamic State of Iraq	Name
Emir	Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi (real name: Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Samarrai)
Prime Minister	Husayn al-Qurashi
Secretary of Defence	Al-Nasir Li-Din-Allah Abu Sulayman (real name: Numan Salman Mansur al-Zaydi)

### Victims of AQI attacks since the withdrawal of US forces from the towns and cities in June 2009 to 1 June 2013

Year	Killed	Injured
June – late December 2009	931	3,054
2010	1,426	2,227
2011	250	345
2012	695	1,746
1 January – 1 June 2013	324	747
Total:	3,626	8,119

Source: Data Base Al Qaeda 2009–2013 (Hans Krech).

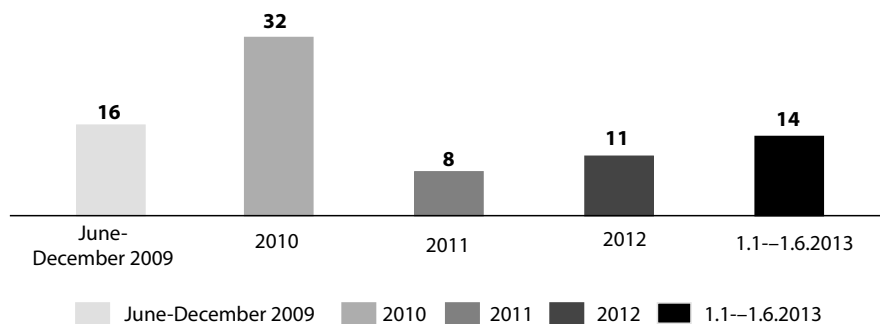


Fig. 5: AQI Suicide Attacks

Source: Data Base Al Qaeda 2009–2013 (Hans Krech)

<sup>10</sup> See **Al-Qa'idah declares Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi a new leader.** – Al-Hayat, 17 May 2010; **Analyst says shortage of funds will not hamper Al-Qa'idah's ability.** – Elaph.com, 23 June 2010; **Denslow, James** 2011. Sunni disposition. AQI remains in the shadow of the US withdrawal. – Jane's Intelligence Review, 12/2011, p. 15; **Lahoud, Nelly/Caudill, Stuart/Collins, Liam/Koehler-Derrick, Gabriel/ Rassler, Don/Ubaydi, Muhammad al-** 2012. Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined? West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, p. 26.

In January 2011, AQI was thought to have had 17 cells in Baghdad<sup>11</sup>, and on 11 June 2013 the Defence Committee of the Iraqi parliament estimated the total number of AQI fighters in Iraq to be around 2,000.<sup>12</sup>

AQI has faced major funding difficulties: protection money is extorted from traders and business owners, and banks are robbed (including the central bank in Baghdad on 13 June 2010). AQI also robs department stores and sells the stolen goods on the black market. The uncertain funding situation is AQI's strategic weak point.

AQI has been particularly successful with its infiltration of the Awakening Councils. It was thus possible for AQI to covertly gain access to secret Ministry of the Interior databases containing the names and residential addresses of the Awakening Councils' leaders. In Baghdad, from July to October 2010, 630 leaders of Awakening Councils were killed in front of their dwellings at close range by AQI assassins using weapons fitted with silencers.<sup>13</sup>

As the number of attacks declined, the Ministry of the Interior attempted to forensically secure any evidence so as to be able to pursue and convict every perpetrator individually; AQI then targeted the crime laboratory in Baghdad on 26 January 2010 where all the evidence was centrally stored. A suicide attacker blew himself up with his car bomb in front of the entrance, killing 20 people, wounding 80 others, and destroying the crime laboratory.<sup>14</sup>

#### AQI's New Military Tactics (2009 – 2013)

Since late 2009, AQI has proceeded to rent or lease apartments or houses near their targets, to hide explosives there, and then to blow them up.
In late August 2010, AQI planned a series of attacks involving letter and package bombs against leading provincial politicians in Diyala province.
From late 2010, AQI began attaching IEDs with magnets to parked cars in Baghdad. The unsuspecting drivers would then be followed covertly by an AQI fighter in a car who would detonate the car carrying the IEDs by remote ignition as soon as it passed a checkpoint.

<sup>11</sup> See **Random targeting campaign led by Al-Qa'idah & Iran affiliated groups.** – Al-Rai al-Aam (Kuwait), 13 January 2011.

<sup>12</sup> See **Sabah, Muhammad** 2013. Sources to Al-Mada: Qa'idah returning to Iraq. – Al-Mada (Iraq), 12 June 2013.

<sup>13</sup> See **Intensive American presence in Iraq.** – Al-Jazeera.net, 1.10.2010; **Iraqi Anti Terrorism apparatus aborts new coup attempt.** – Al-Hayat, 10 December 2010.

<sup>14</sup> See **New tactics used in Baghdad explosions.** – Al-Hayat, 27 January 2010.

In mid-April 2010 the Iraqi secret service managed to prevent the hijacking of a passenger airplane. AQI wanted to crash the plane into the golden cupola of the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf. This attack based on the 9/11 model would have caused a civil war between Shi'ites and Arab Sunnis.
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In the summer of 2010, AQI began to improve the disguises of its fighters in the al-Anbar Province. The AQI fighters shaved off their beards, wore jeans and T shirts and listened to hip-hop music.
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On 1 June 2013 an AQI research cell in Bagdad which had begun to produce C weapons at two locations was unearthed. They were producing sarin and mustard gas.
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Source: Data Base Al Qaeda 2009–2013 (Hans Krech)

Despite its massive decline in manpower, AQI is still a capable terror group that, tactically, ranks among the most creative of Al Qaeda's regional organizations. The majority of its fighters are combat-proven and confident in what they do. New military tactics are constantly being developed and applied. AQI's most successful tactic since 2009 has been to organize waves of attacks, i.e. coordinated simultaneous attacks using IEDs, car bombs and suicide attackers in more than one town or city of Iraq.

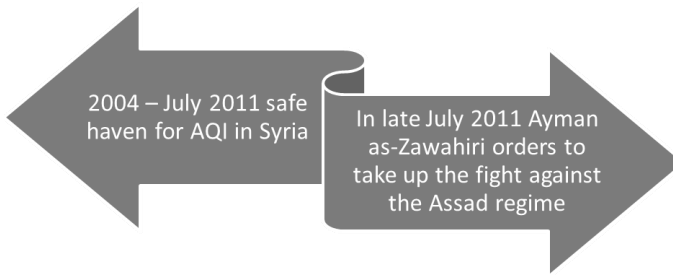
AQI cooperates particularly closely with the Nakshbandi, made up of former Baath fighters and the Al-Bu Nasir tribe. The leader of the Nakshbandi is Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, the former deputy of Saddam Hussein. The Nakshbandi's military commander is thought to be Mohammad Junis al-Ahmad.

## 5. AQI was the nucleus for Al Qaeda in Syria

From 2004 until July 2011, AQI had a safe haven in Syria. AQI training camps were located there under the protection of the Assad regime and in some cases were guarded by the Syrian secret service. There were, as a result, constant tensions between the governments of Iraq and Syria concerning these AQI training camps.

In late July 2011, the new leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman as-Zawahiri, made an about-face in the terror organization's policy towards Syria. He ordered AQI to leave the training camps in Syria and to take up the fight against the Assad regime. This marked the birth of Al Qaeda in Syria, which is under the auspices of Al Qaeda in the Levant (AQL). The AQL regional organization was established on 7 February 2007.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See **Krech, Hans** 2012. Al Qaeda in the Levant and the Civil War in Syria. – Orient. German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East, III/2012, pp. 45/46.



**Fig. 6:** The about-face in Al Qaeda's Syria policy in late July 2011<sup>16</sup>

The Al Nusra Front, a sub-organization of Al Qaeda in Syria formed in December 2011, has become particularly well-known. In June 2013, the Al Nusra Front had as many as 20,000 fighters, among them several hundred fighters from AQI. These combat-hardened AQI fighters form the core of all Al Qaeda brigades in Syria. They are also thought to be responsible for the training of new fighters.

On 9 April 2013 AQI established the Al-Nusra Front – a sub-organization of the Iraqi Al Qaeda regional organization.<sup>17</sup> Al-Fateh Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of the Al Nusra Front, publicly announced on 10 April 2013, for the first time, that he would be placing his units under Ayman as-Zawahiri's command.<sup>18</sup> On 9 June 2013, Ayman as-Zawahiri annulled the merger of AQI with the Al Nusra Front, carried out unilaterally by AQI, on the grounds that he had not been consulted beforehand. The Al Nusra Front therefore continues to belong to Al Qaeda in the Levant.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Destruction or re-emergence of AQI?

Since 2009 the Iraqi security forces have succeeded in preventing numerous AQI attacks and in killing or capturing many AQI fighters and leaders.

The border with Syria has been undergoing fortification since late 2009. From 2004 to July 2011, AQI's training camps were located in Syria. A three-

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> See **France24**, 9 April 2013; **n-tv**, 9 April 2013.

<sup>18</sup> See **BBC World News**, 10 April 2013; **Al Jazeera TV**, 10 April 2013; **France24**, 10 April 2013; **An-Nusra pledges allegiance to Az-Zawahiri**. – Al-Watan (Syrien), 11 April 2013; **Al-Jawlani's surprise brings Al-Nusrah's differences out into the open**. – Al-Jazeera.net, 11 April 2013.

<sup>19</sup> See **Al Jazeera TV**, 9 June 2013.

metre-high security fence which is fitted with electronic surveillance systems purchased from the US is being installed over a length of 275 km. Border brigades secure the fence. AQI has since begun to build tunnels to pass underneath the border fence.<sup>20</sup>

On 7 May 2010, the Baghdad Operations Command announced that a three-metre-high security fence is also to be erected around the capital. Baghdad will then be accessible only via eight access points at which each and every vehicle will be checked.<sup>21</sup>

Despite all the successes achieved by the motivated and capable Iraqi security forces against AQI, the fact remains that AQI has not been destroyed and that in 2013 the number of attacks has been on the rise again.

AQI is one of Al Qaeda's most capable regional organizations and traditionally commits an extraordinarily large number of bloody attacks. When carrying out the attacks, AQI gives little consideration to innocent civilians. It has, as a result, lost an enormous amount of support among the Sunni Arab population since 2006.

AQI was the first regional organization to introduce equal rights for women, who can become fighters and emirs. Women and children have been sacrificed on a huge scale as suicide attackers.

AQI has no scruples whatsoever in its more or less indiscriminate fight against Shi'ites. AQI seeks to provoke the Shi'ites into a religiously motivated civil war against the Sunni Arabs. In such a civil war (dressed up as a war of religion), AQI could again become the leading terror group among the Sunni Arabs. The three Sunni Arab provinces would secede from Iraq, and AQI would then re-establish the Islamic State of Iraq there.

AQI works closely together with the Nakshbandi, the terror groups of former dictator Saddam Hussein. Since late July 2011, AQI has formed the basis of all Al Qaeda brigades fighting in Syria against the Assad regime there. Possibly, AQI including its brigades in Iraq also benefit from the arms and munitions deliveries and the monetary donations that the Syrian opposition receives.

A factor limiting the resurgence of AQI is its uncertain funding. AQI cells are trying, almost desperately, to obtain money through robberies in order to further fund their struggle.

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<sup>20</sup> See **An Iraqi state of alert on the borders with Syria**. – Al-Akhbar Lebanon, 28 April 2010.

<sup>21</sup> See **Plan to build wall around Baghdad**. – Al-Jazeera.net, 7 May 2010.

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