

## **Has the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq finally been arrested? A quick impact analysis**

**May 2008**

A source from the Iraqi Defense Ministry reported that the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Ayyub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) had been captured in a raid on a safe house in Mosul.<sup>1</sup> The US military has yet to confirm the report.

Abu Ayyub al-Masri became the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (known as “al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers”) in June of 2006, after the group’s founder, Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi, was killed by US forces. Al-Masri, a former colleague of Osama Bin Laden’s second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, set up about rectifying the mistakes made by his predecessor, following al-Zawahiri’s advice to al-Zarqawi to put an Iraqi face on the organization, which was perceived with hostility by many Iraqis as a group of foreign opportunists.<sup>2</sup> Al-Masri created the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) ostensibly to serve as an umbrella group for al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Iraqi insurgent groups, and an Iraqi named Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was put in charge of ISI, with al-Masri relegated to the position of “Defense Minister” of the Islamic State.

Al-Masri’s attempts to ingratiate his organization to Iraqis were of limited success, however, and an indigenous rebellion against al-Qaeda sprung up in al-Anbar province, where his group was concentrated. The al-Anbar Awakening Council, consisting of tribes opposing al-Qaeda, quickly made it more difficult for al-Masri’s organization to operate in the province. Al-Qaeda moved more of its organization into Salahaddin province and around Baghdad, but tribal resistance and the US troops’ “surge” over the summer of 2007 kept the pressure on them. In recent months, the group has been attempting to focus its activities in and around the city of Mosul in Ninewah province, which was where al-Masri has been allegedly captured.

The US military has yet to confirm the capture. It is worth noting that the Iraqi military has falsely reported his death three times and his capture once, only to retract the claims later.<sup>3</sup> At least one Arabic-language media source has quoted an official in the Iraqi government saying that the man captured is not the leader of al-Qaeda.<sup>4</sup> The man captured has been passed over to US forces for a definitive identification, which is expected to be forthcoming.

If al-Qaeda has indeed been deprived of another leader, than it will constitute yet another blow to the organization which has been suffering under a tribally-organized backlash for over a year. Furthermore, the capture of al-Masri is not only significant because the group

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<sup>1</sup> CNN, “Iraqis Report Capture of al Qaeda in Iraq,” 9 May 2008.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/05/08/iraq.alqaeda/?iref=mpstoryview>

<sup>2</sup> Scheuer, Michael. “The Zawahiri-Zarqawi Letter: Al-Qaeda’s Tactical and Theater of War Concerns,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 2 Issue 22 (14 November, 2005).

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369830>

<sup>3</sup> CNN, 9 May 2008.

<sup>4</sup> *Aswat al-Iraq*, “The Government, the Ninewah Province, and Security Officials Refuse to Verify the Capture of al-Qaeda Leader Abu Hamza al-Muhajir,” 9 May 2008.

will be deprived of his leadership and contribution, but because it suggests that the organization is having trouble finding security and sanctuary in Iraq.

However, al-Masri's capture would be unlikely to have a significant impact on the total level of violence in Iraq, as there are several other insurgent groups that are still active, and have not already initiated their own death spiral by initiating a war with powerful Iraqi tribes. Further, sectarian strife and crime also constitute important parts of the overall security picture, and while al-Qaeda played an important role in initiating sectarian conflict, weakening it at this point may have a limited effect.