JESSICA D. LEWIS

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 14

AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ RESURGENT

THE BREAKING THE WALLS CAMPAIGN, PART I

ISW
INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF WAR

Cover Art by Maggie Obriwin.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

MAP 1 | IRAQ

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 14
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THE BREAKING THE WALLS CAMPAIGN, PART I

By Jessica D. Lewis

Al-Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) reached its apex of territorial control and destructive capability in late 2006 and early 2007, before the Surge and the Awakening removed the organization from its safe havens in and around Baghdad.[1] Subsequent operations pursued AQI northward through Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Mosul, degrading the organization over the course of 2007-2008 such that only a fraction of its leaders, functional cells, and terroristic capabilities remained and were concentrated in Mosul.[2] As of August 2013, AQI has regrouped, regained capabilities, and expanded into areas from which it was expelled during the Surge.

AQI in 2013 is an extremely vigorous, resilient, and capable organization that can operate from Basra to coastal Syria. This paper traces AQI's revival in Iraq since July 2012, when the organization launched a year-long operation they named the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. This campaign consisted of a series of 24 major vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks and eight prison breaks that demonstrate the evolution of AQI's military capability over that time (See Part 2 of this report, which describes these attacks in detail). VBIEDs had been the signature attack type of AQI from 2006-2008.[3] Since May 2013, AQI has consistently exceeded the number of VBIED attacks per month that it conducted in June 2007, while sustaining operations in Syria as well.

The "Breaking the Walls" campaign ended on July 21, 2013, when al-Qaeda in Iraq successfully breached the prison at Abu Ghraib, leading to the escape of 500 or more prisoners,[4] the majority of whom were detained during the Iraq War for terrorist activities.[5] The United States has reacted by reaffirming the $10 million bounty placed on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of AQI, whom officials said was based in Syria in August 2013.[6] Targeting AQI's leader, however, will not be effective in halting the organization's growth. AQI is no longer a small cadre based around a single leader, but rather an effective reconstituted military organization operating in Iraq and Syria.

The United States has also agreed to provide counter-terrorism support to the government of Iraq. As a senior State Department official said, the United States wants Iraq to "have the information to be able to map the network, to get at its financing, and to be very precise in its targeting, because Iraqi forces are under threat and they're liable to make mistakes such as going at the threat in a symmetrical way, rounding up too many people, targeting the wrong person, which makes the whole problem worse."[7] Yet the AQI network has grown robust over the past fourteen months, and mapping the network and its finances may not suffice to halt its expansion.

A senior U.S. administration official noted the unexpected growth of AQI's suicide bombing campaign. Briefing on August 15, 2013, he stated that "Over the last two years, we've had an average of about 5 to 10 suicide bombers a month, in 2011 and 2012…. We've seen over the last 90 days the suicide bomber numbers approach about 30 a month, and we still suspect most of those are coming in from Syria."[8]

AQI's path to war was not abrupt, however. Violence began to escalate in June 2012 just before the start of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. Casualty levels in Iraq have risen significantly over 2012-2013, caused primarily by AQI's VBIED attacks. The overall violence level in Iraq in July 2013 was commensurate with wartime levels last observed in Iraq in April 2008. Total monthly fatalities at the end of July 2013 exceeded 1,000 for the first time since that date, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission – Iraq (UNAMI).[9]

AQI has been able to grow not only because of its safe-havens and recruiting grounds in Syria, but also because it has replenished its veteran manpower through prison breaks inside of Iraq. The "Breaking the Walls" campaign involved a total of eight complex attacks upon Iraqi prisons, two of which successfully freed hard-core veterans who had likely participated in AQI's

**Iraq Civilian Casualties
2007-2008 vs. 2013**
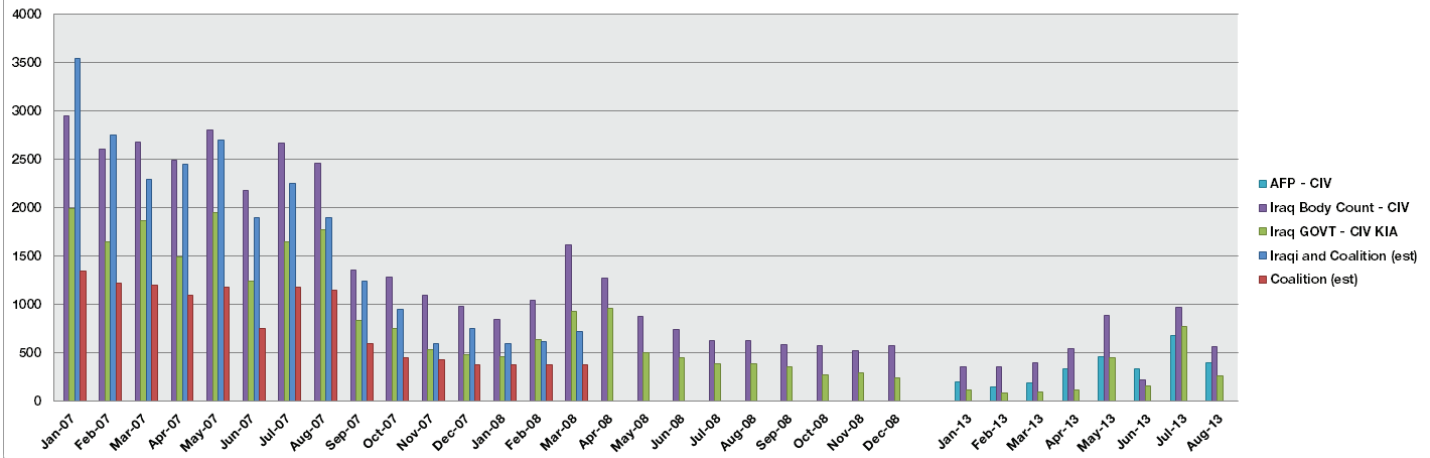
signature VBIED network during the period 2006-2007.[10] This study will focus upon AQI's use of VBIEDs throughout the "Breaking the Walls" campaign as the principal indicator of AQI's growing organizational and operational capacity inside Iraq, even if suicide bombers flow into the country from Syria.

A study of the success of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign elucidates the renewed capability of AQI's military organization. VBIEDs require an extensive planning and logistical structure, and the VBIED waves witnessed in 2012-2013 showcase the development of a force-level planning effort within AQI's military organization to orchestrate simultaneous attacks involving many cells. It is critical to estimate AQI's combat power in order to assess the level of threat AQI represents to the Iraqi state and further to U.S. interests.

The "Breaking the Walls" campaign supported AQI's expressed operational objectives to retake territory that it had formerly controlled and to establish governance in parts of Iraq and Syria. VBIEDs enhanced AQI's overall operations by overwhelming Iraqi Security Forces and degrading popular confidence in their ability to protect the population. AQI accomplished its 2012-2013 goals sufficiently and announced a new 2013-2014 campaign named "The Soldiers' Harvest," on July 30, 2013.[11]

Iraq Security Forces (ISF) and Shi'a militant groups have mobilized in response to AQI's attacks.[12] ISF has also mobilized on several occasions to address the predominantly Arab Sunni anti-government protest movement that has been active since December 2012.[13] The ISF launched new operations into western Anbar, northern Diyala, and other provinces in May 2013 in

pursuit of AQI. This operation, as well as the ISF's "Revenge of the Martyrs" campaign in August 2013, may widen the gap between the Maliki government and Iraqi Sunni Arabs.[14] The "Revenge of the Martyrs" campaign in particular also resulted in mass arrests.

The addition of alternate security measures in Baghdad, including the deployment of plain-clothed intelligence personnel and increased security patrols, likewise runs the risk of being counter-productive for Iraq's security, should marginal security gains in Baghdad come at the price of insurgency outside the capital. These operations, furthermore, have limited potential to counter AQI because the ISF is not effectively pursuing the organization throughout its depth inside Iraq. For example, AQI in August 2013 projected VBIED operations from the southern Baghdad belts as effectively as from the northern belts, but only the former are contested by ISF.

The threat of insurgency has also increased because of the growing regional sectarian dynamic emanating from Syria; the longstanding political and economic grievances of Iraqi Sunni Arabs; the instances of violent confrontation between ISF and protesters in 2013; and the mobilization of Shi'a militias. These conditions have provided AQI with ample opportunity to exploit a principal vulnerability of the Maliki government, namely the perceived exclusion of the Sunni from the political process. Even though most Iraqi Sunni Arabs still vehemently reject AQI, the terrorist organization may be able to drive a wedge between the population and the state. They will succeed if they are able to counter Maliki's majoritarian political strategy by producing new cleavages in the national government ahead of elections

in 2014 and shatter popular confidence in the ISF, upon which Maliki has relied for his strong-man image since the Basra campaign in 2008.

General Ray Odierno, commander of U.S. Forces-Iraq described AQI's goals in June 2010, when its capabilities were minimal. He noted, "al-Qaeda in Iraq… hasn't changed. They want complete failure of the government in Iraq. They want to establish a caliphate in Iraq."[15] He continued, "Now, that's a tall task for them now, as compared to maybe it was in 2005 or '06. But they still sustain that thought process. And it has nothing to do with the United States. You know, they continue to look around the world for safe havens and sanctuaries. And what they look for is ungoverned territories. And so what they want… is to form an ungoverned territory or at least pieces of ungoverned territory, inside of Iraq, that they can take advantage of."[16]

Control of territory in Iraq remains one of AQI's goals in 2013, but AQI also seeks to govern in Syria as well.[17] AQI declared itself the *Islamic State in Iraq and al–Sham* (ISIS) in April 2013, an expansion of its historical political identity now to include Syria. At a teaching tent in Aleppo, Syria during its Ramadan fair, ISIS displayed a map of its emirate with no border between Iraq and Syria as part of a wider al-Qaeda caliphate stretching from North Africa to the eastern frontier adjoining Iran.[18]

AQI has been instrumental in the Syrian conflict. By studying known instances of SVBIED attacks in Syria, one sees AQI has operated there alongside the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra since at least December 2011.[19] AQI had initially supported Jabhat al-Nusra by reversing the flow of fighters and resources that once streamed into Iraq from Syria.[20]

The growth of the two franchises created competition. AQI declared in April 2013 that Jabhat al-Nusra was subordinate to the *Islamic State of Iraq and Sham*. Jabhat al-Nusra rejected AQI's leadership, declaring fealty to al-Qaeda core directly.[21] Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri directed that the two affiliates operate in their separate geographic zones and put both organizations on probation as franchises.[22] Al-Baghdadi at first flatly rejected this instruction and reinforced his single-organization vision. Since June 2013,[23] the two organizations have apparently overcome their differences and often choose to cooperate tactically inside Syria. AQI's military, governance, and social investment in Syria has increased since this time, most recently through

a combined arms attack upon Minnakh airbase north of Aleppo,[24] through an offensive in northern Latakia,[25] and the sponsorship of a Ramadan social outreach program in Aleppo in August 2013.[26]

AQI also drastically increased VBIED attacks in Iraq in 2013. As of August 2013, AQI's new operation, "the Soldiers' Harvest," has increased the frequency and volume of VBIED waves and also incorporated spectacular attacks upon critical infrastructure, such as the Um Qasr port at Basra.[27] AQI will also likely continue to target hardened ISF facilities with complex attacks involving VBIEDs now that it has tested its greatest complex operational ability. AQI's success in Iraq at the expense of the ISF will add relative strength to the organization in Syria. AQI would then prosper in a deteriorating security environment that transcends state boundaries.[28]

BACKGROUND

Characterizing the evolution of al-Qaeda in Iraq's military capabilities requires an understanding of the state of play in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. forces in December 2011. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)'s operational capability had been degraded three years prior by Coalition Forces, Iraqi Security Forces, and local security elements known as "Sahwa" who took up arms to drive out al-Qaeda and prevent their return.[29] In the spring of 2010, U.S. and Iraqi forces "either picked up or killed 34 out of the top 42 al-Qaeda in Iraq leaders, and by June of 2010 the organization had "lost connection with [al-Qaeda Senior Leadership] in Pakistan and Afghanistan."[30]

By 2011, AQI was still able to conduct attacks, but the organization was isolated, disrupted, and did not pose an existential threat to the state. From September 2010 to December 2011, monthly fatalities in Iraq stabilized in the 300-400 range, according to Iraq Body Count database, which provides historical data covering this time period.[31] This range establishes a baseline for "normal" violence levels as reported from open sources, against which to compare observations of security conditions in post-war Iraq.

The resurgence of AQI followed two trends: first, the rise of internal, Iraqi Sunni political disenfranchisement after the departure of U.S. forces, and second, the escalation and radicalization of the Syrian conflict. Immediately after the withdrawal of U.S. Forces in

December 2011, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki arrested and tortured the bodyguards of Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi on the grounds that he had supported terrorism.[32] Hashemi ultimately fled the country and was sentenced to death in absentia.[33] Violent activities rose following the departure of U.S. Forces-Iraq (USF-I) and the Hashemi arrest, although one cannot establish the causal relationships between these contemporary events.

Fatalities rose above 500 for the month of January 2012, with two attacks on January 5 and January 14 most likely responsible for the overall increase.[34] These attacks involved multiple strikes, including many suicide attacks, upon Shi'a civilian targets in holy cities including Karbala, Nasiriya, and Kadhimiyah, and also Sadr City and Basra during the Shi'a religious observance of Arba'een. Other attacks documented in early 2012 include a large wave of explosions on February 23 that struck Baghdad, Basra, and Salah ad-Din.[35] This wave primarily targeted Iraqi Police and government institutions, and it appeared to involve vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). AQI evidently had an enduring ability to coordinate spectacular attacks, including the use of VBIEDs, in the post-USF-I period.[36]

The rise in attacks in Iraq paralleled attacks in Syria in ways that show the overall involvement of al-Qaeda (AQ) senior leadership with the reconstitution of AQI and its Syrian offshoot, Jabhat al-Nusra. VBIEDs detonated in Aleppo and Damascus in Syria on February 10 and 13, 2013.[37] A newly announced al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, claimed credit for these attacks in a formally produced video.[38] This coincided with a landmark statement by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri calling for Muslims in the region, specifically Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, to support the Syrian opposition.[39] AQI also launched a media campaign on February 24, 2012, just after its VBIED attacks inside Iraq. AQI announced a campaign to strike military headquarters on behalf of Sunni prisoners in Iraq during a 33-minute speech demonizing Shi'a Islam and the government of Iraq.[40] This distinctly sectarian speech typifies AQI's strategic voice and disposition in post-war Iraq before the campaign of attacks detailed in this report.

AQI also executed significant operations targeting Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in early 2012. Most notably, AQI launched a sophisticated raid on ISF units in Haditha, Anbar on March 4, 2012. AQI assassinated

two police commanders in their homes and seized a police checkpoint, killing 27 ISF personnel in total.[41] AQI claimed credit for the Haditha attack and described the operation in detail in a message posted to jihadist forums shortly thereafter.[42] AQI recorded the incident in a video illustrating how multiple AQI units surprised ISF by masquerading as Iraqi national police.[43] AQI also launched a wave of 26 attacks across the country on March 20, likely to disrupt and discredit the Iraqi government before the Arab League Summit on March 27-29, 2012.[44] AQI claimed credit for this wave of attacks as well.[45]

Overall violence began to increase sharply in June 2012, at which point Agence France Press (AFP) began to track daily casualties in Iraq in detail. AFP casualty records identified June 13 and June 16 as high-casualty days coinciding with multiple bombings.[46] The dataset of violent events that the author curated for this study documents an additional SVBIED on June 4, 2012, which targeted the offices of the Shi'a Endowment in Bab al-Muadham, Baghdad. AQI claimed credit for the attacks on June 4 and June 13.[47] The June 4, 2012 event produced a massive number of casualties for a single attack, an estimated 215 (26 killed/190 wounded).[48] This attack further demonstrates the capability and intent of AQI to deliver large-scale VBIEDs. Multiple VBIEDs incurring fewer casualties preceded this attack, and similar attacks continued into early July 2012.

AQI emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced on July 21, 2012 the start of what he called the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. "Breaking the Walls" began just after Ramadan, and three days after a failed assassination attempt against Bashar al-Assad that killed important members of his inner security circle.[*] In a recorded speech, Baghdadi described his intent to "target the pressure points of the Safavid project."[49] This message may be understood to target Maliki's government, but AQI's message at the start of the 2012-2013 campaign also reflected its broader intent to establish governance in Iraq and Syria.

[*] Open source reporting has not resolved the method of the attack, with Syrian state media asserting it was a suicide bomber and competing sources suggesting a remotely detonated IED or VBIED. Liwa al-Islam (LI) claimed the attack, and from subsequent events is a more likely perpetrator than the Free Syrian Army, which also claimed it. This paper does not presume to establish a correlation or causation between these events, but rather temporal proximity.

The simultaneous detonation of many VBIEDs against civilian targets in Iraq became an immediate hallmark of AQI's "Breaking the Walls" campaign. This VBIED wave phenomenon had been typical for AQI during the height of the Iraq war, and it appears that AQI reconstituted this core competency well before July 2012. Based on the sheer volume of attacks at the start of the campaign, it also appears that the early VBIED waves were scheduled and planned well in advance. AQI likely capitalized upon veteran expertise achieved while fighting U.S. Forces during the Iraq War and Assad's forces in the Syrian War to amplify lethal effects in 2012-2013, particularly through the utilization of VBIEDs.

U.S. officials described how, by August 2012, al-Qaeda inside of Syria had evolved from "disparate, disconnected units" and was "building a network of well-organized cells" that "are now communicating and sometimes cooperating on missions, with a command-and-control structure evolving to match more sophisticated operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan."[50] The officials stated that "The units are spreading from city to city, with veterans of the Iraq insurgency employing their expertise in bomb-building to carry out more than two dozen attacks so far."[51] They estimated the number of fighters in Syria at a couple hundred.[52] The level of organizational capacity indicated by this assessment sets the foundation for this study. AQI has re-emerged as a military force in Iraq and Syria, and it is critical to understand what capabilities the organization has regenerated in Iraq in order to assess the threat that AQI now presents to the region.

METHODOLOGY

Detecting AQI's Signature

Estimating the combat power and organizational culture of secret organizations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) may be approached through detailed analysis of the attacks they perpetrate. This study considers the violent events in Iraq that are documented in unclassified sources for what they indicate about AQI's renewed organizational capacity. Closely examining the public record of violent events, particularly the use of "spectacular attacks" in Iraq in 2012-2013, enables us to draw conclusions about AQI's broader operations.

AQI executed a wide array of attack types from July 2012 to July 2013 during the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. These attack types include small arms fire, indirect fire (IDF) via mortars and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), improvised explosive devices (IED), suicide bombers (SVEST), vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED), and a subset, suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIED). VBIEDs are the most complex attack type within this set, characterized by the rewiring of a vehicle into a traveling high-yield bomb rather than the placement of an explosive parcel within or outside of a vehicle.[53] All of these attack types were used for combined arms effects during the July 2013 Abu Ghraib and Taji prison attacks, and all of them appeared in dispersed fashion across Iraq throughout the course of the previous year.

A blanket study of attacks in Iraq is difficult because violent events are habitually underreported. Attribution is another challenge, as AQI was not the only group conducting attacks in Iraq during this time period. Other groups operating in Iraq today include Ansar al-Islam, Shi'a militias, and very likely Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqshabandia (JRTN), a Ba'athist militant organization.[54] All of these organizations are known to use small arms, IDF, and IEDs, and in some cases they are also suspected of suicide attacks and car-borne explosions.

Violent events in certain locales, furthermore, might be attributed to popular uprising rather than AQI.[55] This becomes a legitimate consideration in light of the anti-government protest movement, which began in December 2012 after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki attempted to arrest Rafia al-Issawi, a leading Sunni national political figure. The protest movement continued at least through September 2013, when this report was published. As more violent actors take up arms in Iraq, attack patterns of established groups become obfuscated, as the groups begin to overlap and react to one another. Nevertheless, it is possible to isolate coherent attack signatures for AQI within the available data. This study will focus specifically upon one of AQI's classic signatures, waves of vehicle-borne explosive improvised devices (VBIED). The VBIED waves of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign are identified and characterized in Part II of this report. Once attributed, these attacks may be used to evaluate AQI's operational capacity, depth, and targeting strategy.

Spotting VBIED Waves

VBIEDs constitute the most useful AQI fingerprint for several reasons. First, VBIEDs are generally the most lethal attack type, and therefore the most consistently reported publically.* Second, VBIEDs are the most complex attack type, which best illustrates the full capacity of AQI's supply chain. Third, VBIEDs have historically been assessed as AQI's signature attack type.[56]

Although it is likely that AQI bears sole responsibility for all VBIEDs in Iraq, it is worthwhile to challenge and re-prove this assessment, particularly given that Ansar al-Islam, another Salafist group, claimed credit for SVBIED attacks in Iraq over the course of 2012.[57] Although VBIED attacks are a core competency for AQI, other groups can adopt this technique, and therefore each VBIED attack by itself is only a moderate signal that AQI is responsible.

A stronger signal emerges in the detection of multiple coordinated VBIED attacks. AQI's signature massing of VBIEDs over the course of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign will be referred to here as a "VBIED wave," and defined for the purposes of this study as the detonation of six or more VBIEDs on a given day in Iraq.† AQI has claimed credit for several such VBIED waves since the launch of the campaign, beginning with a wave of 30 VBIEDs that detonated on July 23, 2012, just two days after the announcement of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign.[58]

* VBIED identification from public sources involves a qualitative as-sessment of each incident and the context in which it occurred. Not all attacks that are reported in news media as "car bombs" are techni-cally VBIEDs. For example, an Adhesive Explosive Device (AED), or sticky bomb, is not a VBIED, but an assassination technique designed to target the occupants of a vehicle. A genuine car bomb, likewise, is a bomb that is placed in a vehicle in order to target the occupants. By contrast, even though they are often reported as car bombs, VBIEDs direct explosive power externally, usually to inflict mass casualties or significant structural damage. This requires thoughtful design, which is why VBIEDs are characterized as a highly technical operation.

† The threshold of six VBIED attacks was chosen through holistic as-sessment to be the minimum volume of a VBIED cluster that other-wise bore characteristics suggestive of orchestration by a central VBIED command. Clusters of five or less VBIEDs, by contrast, appeared to be feasibly organized by a single VBIED cell assigned to a particular geo-graphic area, or alternately a co-occurrence of singleton VBIEDs that were not necessarily synchronized.

This study will examine the "Breaking the Walls" campaign in detail, particularly the VBIED waves that characterize this campaign. These waves can be broken down for the purposes of analysis into four "Phases" of the campaign. These phases were not announced, but rather assessed by observing qualitative and quantitative differences in attack patterns over time. The waves of VBIED attacks across these phases will be evaluated for their geographic spread, target selection, overall volume, and lethality. The VBIED waves will be considered in the context of individual VBIEDs that occurred outside of the 24 VBIED waves as well as other explosive events, such as IEDs and SVESTS, in order to refine an overall characterization of their complementary use by AQI. Part I of this report will address these waves in aggregate to describe phase changes that illustrate organizational growth within AQI, and a detailed examination of the individual waves is available in Part II.

In order to estimate lethality, the volume of the VBIED waves will be compared to daily casualty records maintained by Agence France-Presse (AFP).[59] AFP data provides a conservative and specific estimate for casualties, and as compared to other casualty data sets, represents a cautious minimum bound. The AFP dataset begins to provide daily casualty records from violent events in August 2012. Casualty insights prior to this date will be drawn from Iraq Body Count database, whose records begin in 2003.[60] The principal data set for the violent events considered in this study is proprietary and derives solely from open sources, including *National Iraqi News Agency*, *al Sumaria News*, *al Mada Press*, *All Iraq News Agency*, and the online *Iraq Body Count* (IBC) database.

THE FIRST CAMPAIGN: "BREAKING THE WALLS"

The Architects of "Breaking the Walls"

Al-Qaeda in Iraq's "Breaking the Walls" campaign began on July 21, 2012 and ended on July 23, 2013. During that time, AQI executed 24 VBIED waves that showcased the technical, logistical, and training capacity underlying AQI's VBIED program. The enlistment of these functions to deliver synchronized VBIED waves across Iraq reveals the presence of a robust and specialized VBIED planning capability within AQI's military organization. The style of execution of the VBIED waves demonstrates the growth of the VBIED organization in terms of its skilled leadership, its support to combined arms attacks, and its

VBIED ATTACKS OVER TIME

1 JULY 2012 – 31 OCTOBER 2012

1 NOVEMBER 2012 – 7 FEBRUARY 2013

8 FEBRUARY 2013 – 15 MAY 2013

16 MAY 2013 – 31 JULY 2013
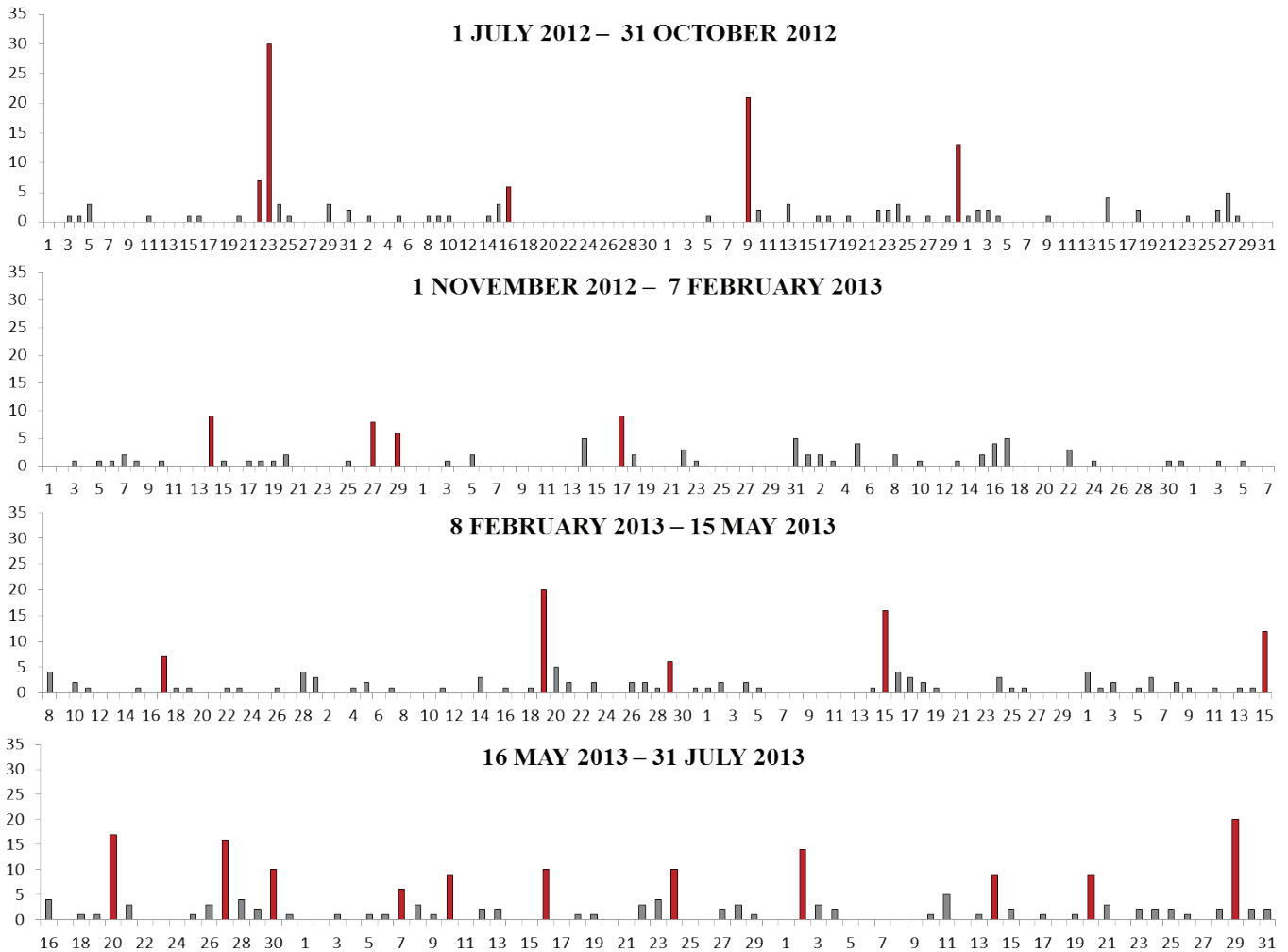
ability over time to train small effective teams.

The following section will identify four phases of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign based upon the patterns and characteristics of the VBIED waves and prison attacks perpetrated by AQI between July 21, 2012 and July 23, 2013. The four phases demonstrate centralized planning and direction of VBIED waves; the growth of AQI's VBIED capability; and the presence of multiple high-functioning VBIED cells in Iraq by the end of the campaign. The four phases constitute an assessment of AQI's battle plan and adaptation during the "Breaking the Walls" campaign.

PHASE I: Proof of Concept and Capability

The first phase of "Breaking the Walls" began in July 2012 and ended in September 2012. This phase constituted AQI's proof of concept and capability to execute repeated large-scale VBIED waves across Iraq. The VBIED waves

on July 23, 2012 and September 9, 2012, involving 30 and 21 VBIEDs spread over a wide geographic area, were the largest and farthest spread among the waves across all four phases. They served, therefore, to demonstrate the depth and breadth of AQI's ability to operate. They also indicate the presence of a VBIED construction facility and technical experts with the available materiel to generate many VBIEDs. Furthermore, they indicate the level of command and control already in place within AQI's VBIED apparatus, as the orchestration of so many VBIEDs on one day required effective communication to a very large team. It also required a plan. In this case, the plan arrayed attacks deliberately by province so that the whole of northern Iraq and Baghdad would feel the effects.

The two large VBIED waves, as well as several smaller waves and clusters of attacks between them, generally oriented on the northeastern front with a heavy density in Kirkuk City. Because the targeting strategy varied
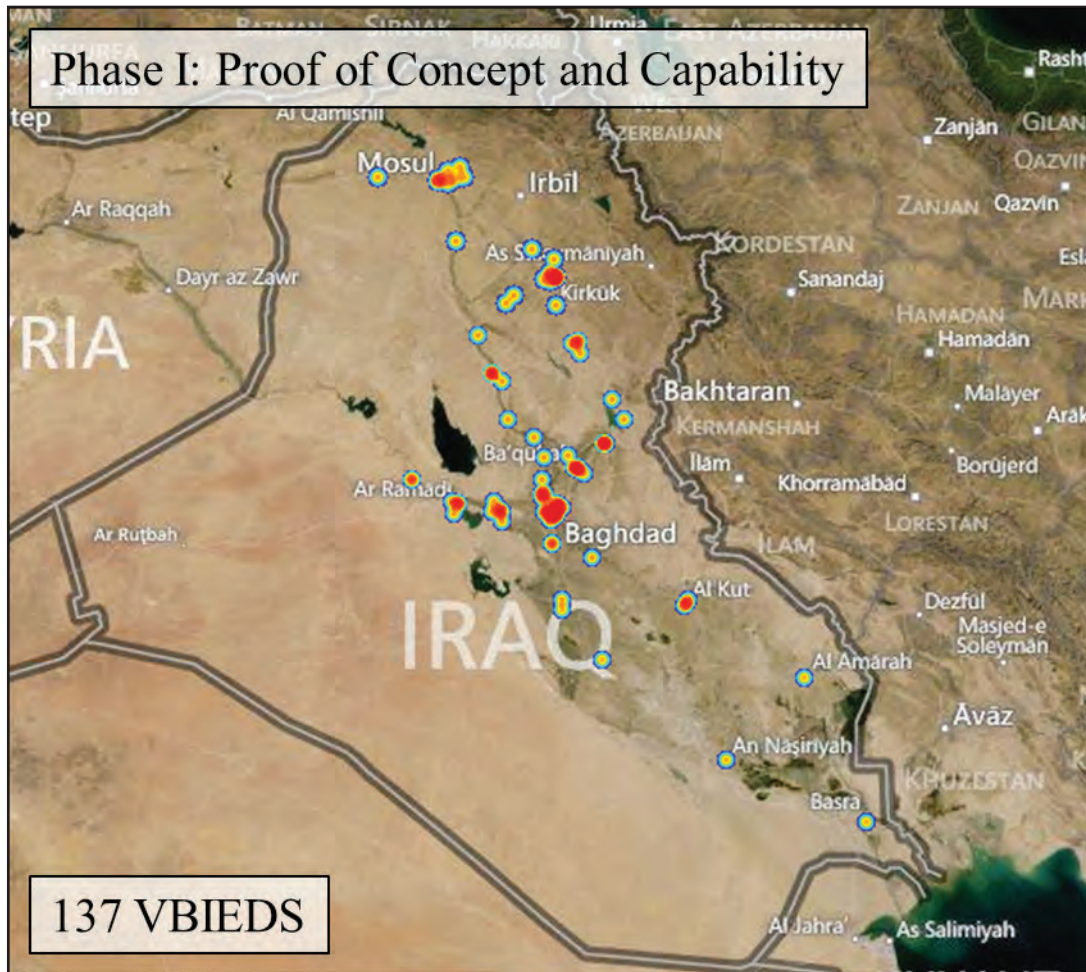
between civilian, military, and government targets, this geographic orientation does not necessarily evidence a clear operational intent. Rather, it may serve to illustrate the physical point of origin of the early VBIED campaign, assessed to have been more centralized then than it is now, particularly in terms of VBIED construction. Phase I constituted an impressive show of force, but not yet exceptionally focused operational planning. This contrasts with patterns observed in later phases.

The early waves of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign involved a large fighting force in addition to the explosive attacks. Very few of the early VBIEDs were documented as suicide attacks, which suggests that the drivers of the attack vehicles required an exit strategy. Drivers were likely deployed as part of teams to spot targets and aid in recovery. A wave of 30 VBIEDs, like that witnessed on September 9, 2012, therefore involved potentially many times more fighters, in addition to a vast VBIED construction apparatus and organizational leadership. This observation points immediately to a critical requirement for command and

control that was successfully fulfilled at the beginning of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. It also points to sophisticated campaign planning, which deliberately shifted operational objectives from the beginning to the end of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign.

The geography of the early attacks was also widespread, stretching from Basra in the south to Mosul in the north (see Part II for further details). This raises the question of whether the original fighting force was gathered together and then dispersed for attacks; or engaged remotely at various locations with guidance to synchronize attacks on a given day. The initial wide spread of attacks may lend to the impression that localized teams were established early on in the campaign, but rigor must be applied to this idea. The requirement to generate 30 VBIEDs and to prepare a deployable force for a specific mission with targeting guidance, training, and ready-made VBIEDs would take much time, but these early waves involved long periods of time in between attacks to"reset," commensurate with these constraints. It is instead plausible that the greatest

Phase II: The Green Line

112 VBIEDS

initial constraint for the VBIED organization was technical expertise, and this expertise, if limited to few persons, would suggest centralized VBIED planning, construction, and training.

In addition to VBIED waves, Phase I also incorporated four prison attacks against the Baghdad Counterterrorism Directorate; a police headquarters detaining 10 AQI personnel in Hibhib, Diyala; the Taji Tasfirat prison, which was subsequently struck several times; and the Tikrit Tasfirat prison. The attack against the Tikrit Tasfirat prison on September 27, 2012 in particular involved VBIEDs among other capabilities, including mortars, SVESTS, and small arms. This highly successful complex attack, which would have been planned from an echelon above the smaller VBIED cell organizations, secured the escape of 100 prisoners, 47 of whom were reportedly AQI affiliates on death row. Apparent from a break in attacks is that AQI engaged in a "strategic pause" after this prison break in order to absorb new human networks into its organization.

PHASE II: The Green Line

Phase II began in November 2012 and ended in February 2013. It began with an operational pause in VBIED and prison activity. This may be explained by several conditions: first and foremost, AQI received into its ranks the fugitives of the Tikrit Tasfirat prison, which likely required reorganization and restructuring within AQI. The marked increase in VBIED activity observed in later waves depended upon a rise in human capacity, suggesting that this event triggered new organizational growth within AQI's military. It may also have produced a shift in the leadership of AQI's VBIED operation, which assumed a distinctly different character in the later Phase III. The pause in VBIED activity may also indicate a defensive requirement to protect against ISF counter-terrorism efforts in the wake of the prison break. Nevertheless, as the month of October 2012 coincided with Eid al-Adha, AQI still managed to conduct significant attacks, including small, clustered VBIED activity on October 15, 2012 and October 27, 2012. Sadr City was struck more than any other location

in these two clusters in conjunction with the religious holiday (see Part II for more detail).

Phase II focused many attacks upon civilian and government targets along the Green Line separating Iraqi Kurdistan from the rest of Iraq, coinciding with an escalation in tension between the Government of Iraq and Iraqi Kurds. This tension ignited over the establishment on October 31, 2012 of the Tigris Operations Command, encompassing Salah ad-Din, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces and placing ISF in close proximity to Kurdish territories.[61] Kurdish response was uncompromising. Anwar Haji, the Undersecretary of the Kurdistan Peshmerga Ministry, stated on November 6 that the Iraqi Army would not be allowed to enter Kurdish territories.[62] Shortly afterwards, on November 8, the Kurdistan parliament rejected Maliki's decision to create the Tigris Operations Command.[63] Phase II of AQI's "Breaking the Walls" was accordingly oriented on Kirkuk, reflecting a deliberate targeting strategy to exploit a critical vulnerability of the Iraqi government.

This targeting strategy was not manifest to the same extent as in those attacks observed in Phase I. The waves in Phase II were significantly smaller, closer together in time, and in many cases involved well-chosen individual targets such as Kurdish political facilities. Phase II therefore demonstrated tighter operational focus, but also more importantly a temporary reduction in the overall scale of the VBIED activity. It is possible that this decrease was the result of a fundamental resource limitation; however, there are also indicators that AQI's VBIED activity was reorganized during this period. Namely, Phase II demonstrates a pattern of smaller waves of VBIED attacks that begins to suggest the presence of independent VBIED cells that had not been clearly visible during Phase I.

Examining closely the clusters of VBIED attacks that occurred during this period, significant groupings of attacks below the "wave" threshold occurred on January 16 and 17, 2013. On January 16, three VBIEDs clustered in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu struck facilities associated with the KDP and PUK, yielding very high casualties. These attacks may reasonably be attributed to one cell operating with the intent to exploit ethnic tension. On January 17, four VBIEDs struck in Karbala and Hilla in southern Iraq, targeting Shi'a civilians. These attacks may also be attributed to a single cell, and very likely a different one, intent on this mission to exploit sectarian tension. The signatures of these two attack clusters point

to two different cells on account of the near simultaneity, geographic disparity, and divergent target selection of the two VBIED clusters. These cells appear capable of conducting multiple simultaneous VBIED attacks in close proximity without guidance to coordinate attacks with adjacent cells.

The tight control evidenced by these small attack clusters points to the self-contained capability of a VBIED cell by January 2013. Based on the presence of VBIED waves indicative of coordination across multiple teams in addition to individual VBIED clusters after this date, it appears that a VBIED cell may at times determine its own mission and acquire VBIEDs without assignment, which would suggest that the VBIED construction sites are also forward deployed by this time. This represents a key growth step in AQI's evolution during the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. The combined occurrence of independent VBIED cell activity and synchronized attacks across many cells would come to typify later phases. It does not follow that VBIED construction teams are necessarily part of VBIED cells, but construction sites and their logistics require some form of protection that VBIED cell personnel may assist with providing. If instead VBIED cells have no role in this site protection mission, protection must instead be assigned to other AQI elements, such as local security battalions, because protection of these sites is an operational requirement.

Moreover, the leadership that had been in place to plan elaborate VBIED waves during Phase I apparently paused, particularly in January 2013, when no VBIED waves occurred that exceeded five VBIEDs on one day. The leadership's planning re-emerged profoundly during Phase III, which underscores the assessment that Phase II signifies a transformation period of the VBIED force at the leader level. This transformation might also have involved the manning, training, and deployment of additional VBIED cells, given that the overall volume and frequency of coordinated VBIED waves subsequently increased.

VBIED attack waves occurred on November 14, November 27, November 29, and December 17, 2012. These waves occurred in quicker succession, were relatively few in number, and consequently incurred fewer overall casualties than the attacks in Phase I. In fact, the four VBIED waves in Phase II cumulatively amounted to roughly the same number of VBIEDs witnessed within one wave on July 23 or September 9. The ability to synchronize attacks in more rapid fashion,
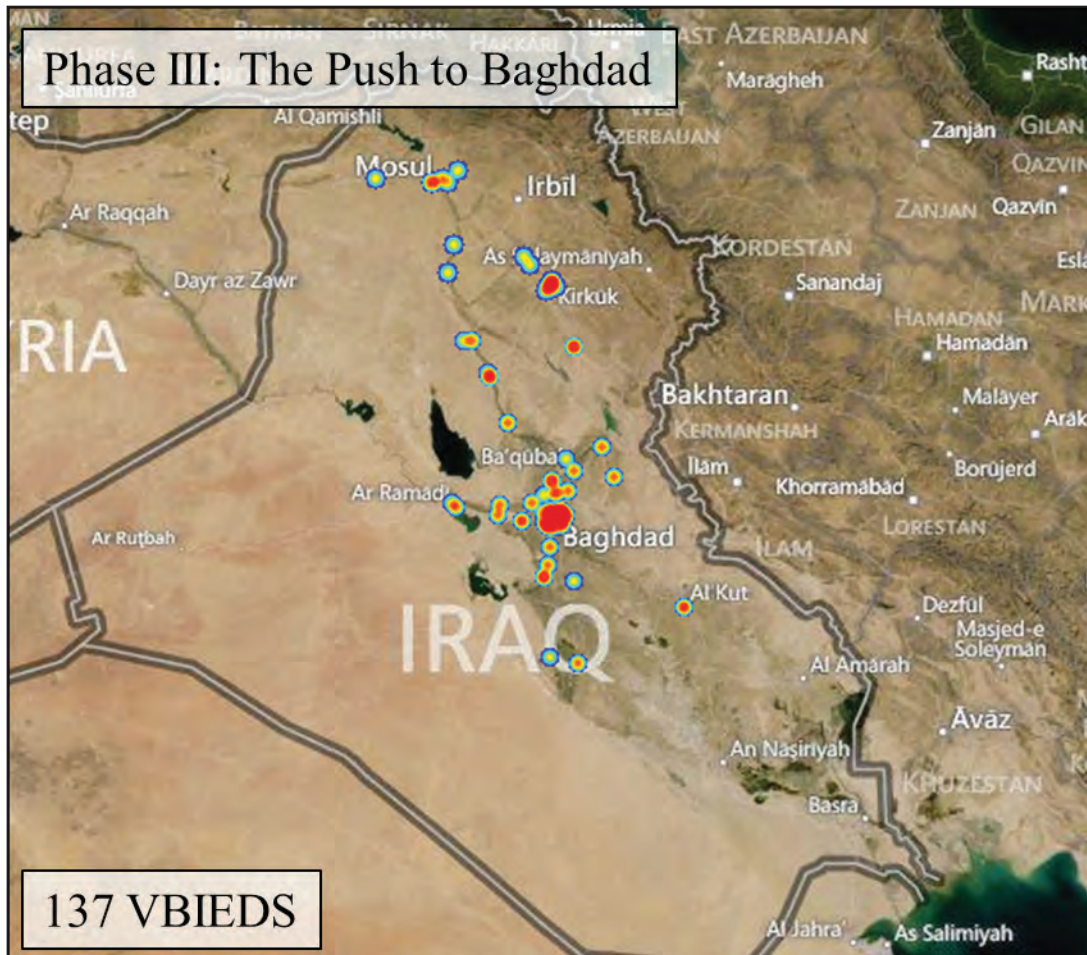
and in particular to reset for repeatable attacks upon Kirkuk, appeared to be the focus of continued Phase II VBIED wave activity while the rest of the VBIED force reorganized. Phase II also concluded with a pair of prison attacks, including a second attempt at Taji base.

PHASE III: The Baghdad Campaign

Phase III began in February 2013 and ended in May 2013. Phase III shifted the nation-wide VBIED campaign to Baghdad with large VBIED waves striking at a steady tempo of 30 day intervals. This geographical change and stabilized rate of attacks demonstrate the return of the VBIED planning cell, not only to coordinate highly sophisticated VBIED waves, but also now to direct action elements to mass upon a particular objective. Furthermore, some of the Baghdad waves in Phase III include as many as 20 VBIEDs in Baghdad on a given day, suggesting the requirement for three cells to deliver the observed attack volume, and perhaps more in a surge capacity. This high concentration of localized attacks over several months also suggests the presence of multiple

VBIED construction sites on the outskirts of Baghdad.

A preceding mini-wave on January 22, which consisted of three VBIEDs in Taji, Mahmudiyah, and Shula, may support placing two such cells in the belts around Baghdad. If so, the first projected force from Taji or Tarmiyah in the northern Baghdad belts, and the second projected from Mahmudiyah in the southern belts. The likely location of the third cell does not, however, emerge from the data. Historical support zones for AQI would suggest that Jisr Diyala and Arab Jabour southeast of Baghdad are possible candidates.[64]

The attack patterns in Phase III also point to complementary geographic clusters within the attack data. Strike patterns within the main VBIED waves outline three distinct attack zones within Baghdad: one to the north, one to the southeast, and one to the southwest within the city. This pattern validates the assessment of three separate VBIED cells operating in the Baghdad vicinity at this time. To strike similar targets at regular intervals four months in a row suggests that AQI enjoyed
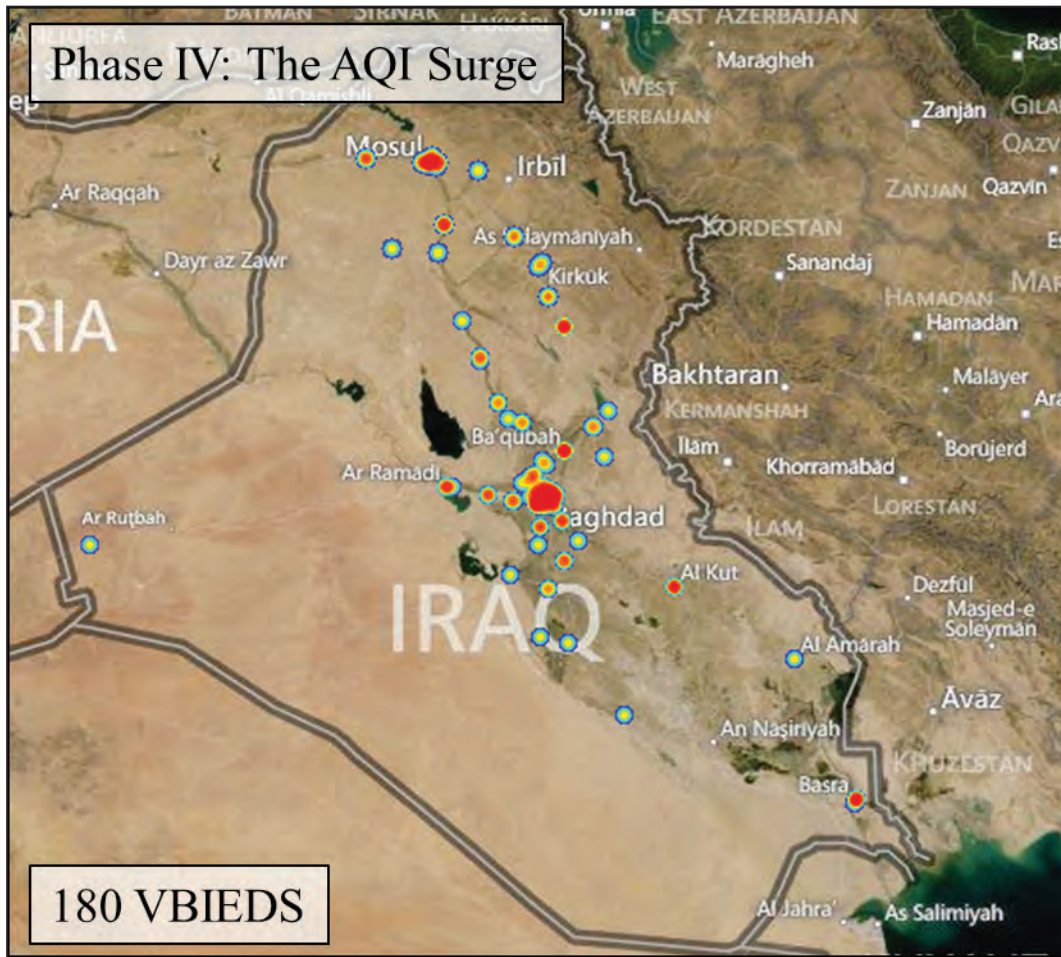
incredible freedom of maneuver at this time, which points to the Baghdad belts as the optimal environment from which to launch attacks upon Baghdad.

There was no operational pause after Phase II, likely because Phase II functioned in many ways as a strategic pause in VBIED planning. Phase III appeared to capitalize upon the launch of the anti-government protest movement on December 26, 2012 and the first violent clash between ISF and protesters near Fallujah on January 23, 2013. Phase III applied maximum pressure to ISF in Baghdad by targeting Shi'a communities in an apparent effort to demonstrate ISF's incapacity, and thereby to stoke the resurgence of Shi'a militias. Such an environment of uncontrolled violence has the potential to threaten the integrity of state security in Iraq, which translates directly to strategic gains for AQI in its declared pursuit of a caliphate. The VBIED wave on February 17, 2013 demonstrated the full shift of the national VBIED campaign to Baghdad, a trend that lasted until the end of May 2013. By the end of May 2013, Shi'a militias were once again actively engaged in violence in Baghdad.[65]

PHASE IV: The AQI Surge

After May 15, 2013, the VBIED campaign quadrupled in frequency and remained focused upon Shi'a targets in Baghdad. Nearly half of the VBIED waves documented in this study occurred during this last quarter of the campaign. Four additional observations serve to explain AQI's acceleration.

Declaring the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham

The Syrian provincial capital of al-Raqqa fell to the opposition on March 4, 2013.[66] AQI had likely been operating in Syria alongside Jabhat al-Nusra well before this, but their role may have intensified as al-Raqqa loomed as a near victory. Soon after, al-Raqqa became a throne for Jabhat al-Nusra and AQI alongside the secular opposition, and it is likely that AQI shifted military assets in Syria to secure this seat of governance, to recruit, and to advance further into Syria's military battlefronts.[67]

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the *Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham* on April 8, 2013 following this military victory.[68]

AQI STATE VISION MAP (SOURCE: MEMRI, 2006)

The U.S. State Department assessed as of July 2013 that al-Baghdadi is personally in Syria, which is reasonable given this governance disposition.[69] This does not imply that the military command of AQI has shifted to Syria, however. A strong military operating base near the Iraqi capital, which has long been a principal attack zone, would be an optimal configuration for AQI's military command.

Al-Baghdadi also declared that the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra was subordinate to the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham. This announcement did not gain ready acceptance by Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. The Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate rejected al-Baghdadi's leadership, declaring its independent affiliation to al-Qaeda core.[70] Al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri resolved the dispute with guidance on June 9, 2013 to the two groups to remain separate and operating in their respective geographic zones, namely Iraq and Syria.[71] Al-Baghdadi rejected this guidance on June 14, affirming his intent to pursue an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria.[72] AQI may have sought to increase attacks during this period in order to demonstrate capability and legitimacy to the al-Qaeda core grouping.

ISF Fires on Protesters in Hawija

A major inflection occurred in Iraq on April 23, 2013, however, that may have caused AQI's military presence to shift back to Iraq as a main effort. On April 23, ISF surrounded an anti-government protest sit-in camp in Hawija and conducted a search and raid.[73] Armed men inside the camp fired back, and a clash ensued which

claimed the lives of over 20 civilians in the camp and wounded over 100 others.[74] The response across the anti-government protest community was explosive. Clashes ensued between ISF and armed gunmen reportedly part of the neo-Ba'athist organization Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqshabandia (JRTN). JRTN seized temporary control of Suleiman Beg until tribal leaders brokered a deal with local officials to end the fighting.[75] The armed men in the protest camp at Hawija were likely not AQI. While Hawija falls along a likely axis of support for AQI, it is more likely that the camp housed militant elements of the nationalist JRTN, whose platform more directly coincides with the character and grievances of the Sunni protest movement. It is unlikely that AQI's fortunes had shifted to the degree that the organization would be welcome in a Sunni Arab camp in Iraq by that time.

Additional clashes following the one in Hawija occurred in Mosul and Fallujah, and several tribes in Anbar announced the formation of a tribal army to repel attackers, including the Iraqi Army.[76] The inflection also piqued ethnic tensions in Kirkuk, as Kurdish officials announced that Peshmerga forces would deploy "to fill the [security] vacuums… especially around the city of Kirkuk."[77] This inflection occurred immediately following the April 20 Provincial elections, from which Anbar and Ninewa were excluded ostensibly for security reasons.[78] This created another opportunity for AQI to amplify operational effects to exploit the gap between Iraq's Sunni Arabs and the state. It is likely that so many redundant opportunities caused AQI to double down on its efforts in Iraq. Maximizing force to target the Shi'a in Baghdad indicates AQI's principal strategy remained focused upon igniting a civil war that would mobilize the segments of the Sunni Arab community already teetering on the edge of an uprising.

The Extremist Regional Sectarian Face-Off

Shi'a militant activity in the region also coincided with this phase change in AQI's VBIED operation. On April 30, 2013, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah overtly announced the organization's role in the Syrian civil war, stating that Hezbollah "will not let Syria fall."[79] Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, responded by declaring Hezbollah militants in Syria its top priority.[80] These events demonstrate that extremist groups on both sides of the sectarian divide had faced off in Syria. They also influenced the mobilization of Shi'a militias in Iraq to the benefit of AQI.

AQI RAMADAN 2013, ALEPPO (SOURCE: HALAB)

On May 4, the Iranian-sponsored Shi'a militant group in Iraq, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) held a massive rally in Baghdad. AAH had also recently made its presence known in Syria as part of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade (AFAB).[81] AAH leader Qais al-Khazali called on members at the Baghdad rally to maintain readiness.[82] This event constituted a significant measure of AQI's ability to provoke a response, and AQI may also have increased operational tempo in order to mass on this objective.

Other Considerations

Yet another factor may have influenced AQI's battle plan in May 2013. Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, a senior Sunni cleric active within the anti-government protest movement, announced on May 13 that he would form a 'Commission of Goodwill' to begin negotiations with the Maliki government on behalf of protesters from all six provinces.[83] The protests had become divided between reconciliation and insurgency influences since the beginning of May 2013, and protesters in Salah ad-Din and Anbar demonstrated favor toward al-Saadi's initiative.[84] The cessation of protests would have directly undercut AQI's political strategy; it is possible that AQI increased attacks in order to mobilize ISF to block this effort.

But contemporaneous events alone do not explain this phase change. AQI greatly increased the frequency and sophistication of its VBIED operations at this time, indicating that added resources and organizational growth were installed months earlier. In most cases,

attacks occurred weekly, indicating an increased ability to sustain attacks in repeatable fashion. This escalation demonstrates AQI's refinement of its ability to recover and reset after attacks and the establishment of multiple fixed sites for preparing and staging VBIEDs.

Furthermore, the waves occurring during the last quarter of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign (May 2013 - July 2013) often achieved casualty levels in excess of 300, most with fewer than 12 VBIEDs per wave. This indicates that the lethality of individual VBIEDs increased over time, and emphasizes improved construction, improved execution, and reorientation primarily on civilian targets. The organizational growth may also be a direct result of the Tikrit Tasfirat prison break, which replenished AQI with new veteran manpower, potentially for use in Iraq and Syria. The source of AQI's amplified material resources are as of yet unexplained. Phase IV of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign concluded with the final two prison attacks on July 21, 2013. The Abu Ghraib prison attack resulted in the escape of 500 prisoners and the death of 68 ISF troops. The attack upon Taji prison was the third unsuccessful attempt over the course of the campaign. AQI then declared the conclusion of "Breaking the Walls."

Effects of the attack on Abu Ghraib

The effects of the Abu Ghraib prison attack upon Iraq have been profound. First, it permitted a huge manpower infusion to AQI, five times greater than that produced by the Tikrit Tasfirat prison break in September 2012, assessed in this report to have significantly enhanced AQI's operational capability in 2013. This manpower infusion may now be directed toward Syria as well, for safe haven as well as operational deployment. Though ISF has conducted operations to the north and west of Baghdad to interdict AQI,[85] it is likely that most of the prisoners are still at large and will become a part of the fighting force by 2014.

Additionally, this prison break demonstrated to the Iraq population that AQI can break hardened ISF defenses. Even though Abu Ghraib may be considered the least defensible prison facility for a number of reasons, this was still a shocking victory for AQI, which was also able to match ISF in a sustained firefight for a number of hours. This success gave significant advantage to AQI by demonstrating its capacity to the rest of the al-Qaeda network. It also supports the legitimacy of AQI as a political entity in Syria by showcasing its military might

and operational initiative on the Iraq Front. This success has likely contributed to AQI's operations inside Syria, where their operational initiative as well as governance strategy may now be observed north of Aleppo.[86]

AQI's operations at the end of "Breaking the Walls," especially the attack upon the Abu Ghraib prison, demand an aggressive ISF response, though the Iraqi government must be equally careful not to trigger Sunni popular backlash. If the ISF is able to mount effective counterterrorism operations to reestablish security in Baghdad, to clear the Baghdad belts, and to regain momentum to project force into the provinces, the Iraqi government may be able to regain enough legitimacy to consolidate gains. Targeting the AQI cells producing these VBIED attacks should be a top priority because such attacks are inflicting more civilian casualties than any other AQI operation, and constitute a principal threat to Iraqi stability at present.

If the ISF instead conducts blind search and raid operations into Sunni neighborhoods and communities that result in mass arrests, the government may precipitate a Sunni insurgency. JRTN, defected ISF units, and departed Sahwa could amplify this revolt, and effectively negate the advance of the ISF. Aside from crafting a more effective counterterrorism strategy, it is imperative that the Iraqi government reconcile anti-government protestors to the state. There must be a healthy perspective of Sunni participation in governance among the Arab population if Iraq is to emerge from the threat of al-Qaeda.

THE NEXT CAMPAIGN: "SOLDIERS' HARVEST"

AQI announced the start of a new campaign on July 30, 2013, claiming the VBIED wave on July 29 as the inaugural attack of the "Soldiers' Harvest" campaign.[87] As of September 1, 2013, there have been five large VBIED waves following the conclusion of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, on July 29, August 6, August 15, and August 20, and August 28, 2013. These waves focused upon Baghdad and southern Iraq. During this first month, AQI has also struck critical infrastructure, specifically the port of Um Qasr near Basra.[88] This suggests that AQI may escalate to strike more heavily protected facilities over the course of the next campaign.

Forecasting how else AQI will prosecute the 2013-

2014 campaign requires a study of the other elements of AQI's military organization, how they relate to AQI's governance strategy, and how this relationship translates to new operational objectives. It also requires a parallel study of Iraqi Security Forces, Maliki's scheme of maneuver, and how AQI will plan to disrupt national elections in 2014. The new campaign will likely capitalize upon AQI's amplified VBIED capability and continue its integration into attacks targeting hardened government facilities. Prison attacks and spectacular attacks targeting Shi'a civilians will likewise continue. Political assassinations of Sunni as well as Shi'a figures will likely escalate as Baghdad becomes more permissive for AQI at the expense of ISF.

Outside of Baghdad, AQI will likely begin to operate with impunity in villages where its control becomes palpable. In northern Diyala, southern Baghdad, northern Anbar, and Samarra, AQI may begin to project security battalions into urban areas, causing populations to displace. Population displacement will serve as the principal indicator that AQI has reestablished conditions that reflect the state of play in Iraq before the Surge.

AQI'S MILITARY ORGANIZATION

This study seeks to interpret VBIED wave patterns over time for what they indicate of AQI's organizational evolution into a professional military force. Maintaining a high volume of attacks at short and regular intervals demonstrates measurable growth in capacity to plan, operate, and sustain multiple VBIED cycles, revealing a broader array of technical expertise as well as increasingly sophisticated operational design. VBIEDs and prison breaks do not encompass the whole of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. AQI's 2012-2013 campaign likely also involved dedicated operations to establish and secure safe havens. Nevertheless, the VBIED campaign demonstrates how well AQI reconstituted as a fighting force in the wake of U.S. withdrawal. It dispels the possibility that AQI remained a small network of disparate fighters loosely led by a central political personage, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. As such, it reduces the expectation that removing one key leader will defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Instead, AQI's campaign showcases the depth of a multi-echelon military organization with well-established command and control that can design and implement coordinated attacks across the whole of Iraq. This

The Iraq VBIED Campaign in Syrian Context
December 2011 – August 2013

Iraq

AUG 4: ISF 'Revenge of the Martyrs' Campaign

JUL 30: AQI starts "Soldiers' Harvest" Campaign

JUL 23: AQI ends "Breaking the Walls" Campaign

JUL 21: AQI releases 500+ prisoners from Abu Ghraib

JUN 20: Provincial elections (Ninewa, Anbar)

APR 23: Clash between gunmen/ISF at Hawija Protest sit-in
APR 20: Provincial elections (except Ninewa, Anbar)

AUG 21: Chemical weapons attack in Damascus

APR 8: AQI Announces Islamic State of Iraq and Sham

JUN 13: Al-Qaradawi (Egypt) calls for "All forms of jihad"

JAN 25: Clash between gunmen/ISF at Ramadi Protest sit-in
DEC 26: Anti-Government Protest begins
DEC 20: PM Maliki attempts to arrest MOF Rafi al-Issawi
DEC 12: President Talabani suffers a stroke
NOV: GOI clash with Kurds over Tigris Operations Command
NOV 16: Hezbollah operative Ali Mussa Daqduq released

JUN: Regime captures Al-Qusayr

APR: Regime offensive on Al-Qusayr starts
APR: AFAB and Hezbollah become overt in Syria

JUL 21: AQI Announces "Breaking the Walls" Campaign

MAR 4: Al-Raqqa falls to the opposition

MAR 2: Rabiya/Yaarabiyah border crossing falls

JUL: Parliament attempts to summon Maliki for NCV

MAY: Interpol issued Red Letter on Hashemi

JAN: Rebel offensive in Darayya

DEC: Maliki issues arrest for VP Hashemi

NOV: Rebel anti-aircraft capability develops

JAN: Iraqiyya Boycott

SEP: Al Qaim/Abu Kamal border crossing falls

JUL: Full-scale aerial bombardment campaign begins

JUL: Syrian regime stops reporting casualties

JUL 18: Assassination attempt on Bashar al-Assad

MAY 10: Twin SVBIEDS IVO Damascus by JN

MAY: Massacre of Sunnis at Houla

Syria

FEB: Assad regime releases Abu Musab al-Suri
Battle for Homs
Zawahiri calls for mobilization in Syria

JAN 24: Jabhat al-Nusra releases first video

Prison Attacks
12+ VBIEDS
6+ VBIEDS
3+ VBIEDS
New year
Ramadan

organization enjoys unconstrained communication among teams as well as unconstrained access to human capacity and materiel. This negates the assumption that the Syrian civil war caused AQI to neglect the Iraq front. Instead, AQI seized the initiative in Iraq as it gained ground in Syria. Al-Baghdadi is now capitalizing upon a position of military strength in order to assert initiative on both fronts.

The most impressive and visible aspect of AQI's new military organization is its reconstituted operational art. AQI maintained the initiative in Iraq throughout the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, particularly from February 2013 – July 2013. This initiative bears a distinctive operational design signature at the force-level as well as the VBIED organizational level. The force-level planning element is assessed to have designed the prison attacks, while the VBIED planning team designed VBIED waves and provided support to force-level operations as

directed.

Indicative of this operational art, AQI maintained its initiative while reacting to events in Syria; to the actions of political figures in Iraq; and to the operations of Iraqi Security Forces. The organization exploited the creation of the anti-government protest movement, the clash between protesters and ISF at Hawija, and other unpredicted opportunities to their gain. And yet it appears that these events merely solidified AQI's campaign plan for "Breaking the Walls." The assessed four phases of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign described in this report align with a shockingly symmetrical planning calendar that may very well have progressed with minimal disturbance for the entire year, at least where VBIED waves and prison attacks were concerned (For more on this, see Part II of this report).

The principal action arm leveraged by AQI to inflict

human casualties in Iraq in 2012-2013 appeared to have been the VBIED organization. VBIEDs also struck military and political targets, but particularly in Baghdad, the VBIED campaign followed a classical 2006-2007 model of striking civilian targets in Shi'a and mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad. What is perhaps a new phenomenon is the synchronization of these attacks with attacks in the north, south, and west of Iraq. This suggests that VBIED operations have evolved to include not only a campaign plan, but also the capability to train, resource, and deploy VBIED teams as part of a unit.

It is possible that the reconstitution of AQI's VBIED capacity carried over directly through veteran technical experts from the original 2007 network, which may mean that the VBIED capacity developed ahead of the rest of AQI's military organization in 2012. It is also clear that AQI additionally executed many IED, IDF, and AED attacks that were likely prosecuted by other teams apart from VBIED cells. It has been suggested throughout this study that AQI will attempt to re-establish local emirates in conjunction with the declaration of the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*, and that these emirates would require local security elements. The presence of emirate structures built to execute attacks was validated when ISF detained the AQI Deputy Wadi of northern Baghdad on April 13, 2013.[89]

SVEST attacks were also increasingly reported during the last quarter of "Breaking the Walls," many as part of complex attacks. The VBIED dataset also shows a significant increase in SVBIED activity beginning in April 2013. These attacks do not overwhelm non-suicide

AQI DETAINEES, 2013 (SOURCE: AL GHAD PRESS)

attack incidence, but they are nevertheless important to track for several reasons. First, suicide attacks are an indicator of foreign fighter activity, and the rise in suicide attacks in Iraq suggests that foreign fighters are again flowing into Iraq from Syria. Second, the rise in suicide attacks indicates another organizational shift within AQI in order to capitalize upon attack types that can only be executed with suicide bombers — namely SVESTs. VBIEDs likely require less organizational adjustment to absorb suicide drivers, though optimizing their lethal potential requires new thought.

Negating the consolidation of local emirates in Iraq will depend upon the renewed cooperation of Arab Sunnis with the ISF and Maliki's government. The departure of Sahwa from their posts in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison break would be an alarming sign to the contrary.[90] Destroying AQI's VBIED capability, on the other hand, requires a direct approach by the ISF to dismantle and destroy the VBIED command and its component cells. ISF may do this by replicating Coalition Force operations to destroy the Baghdad VBIED cells in Rusafa and Karkh in 2007.[91] These operations involved aggressive interdiction of VBIED factories as well as the erection of concrete barriers in Baghdad to limit vehicular mobility.

In 2013, the cells are more likely located in the Baghdad belts rather than the city center, which may provide new opportunities to interdict along primary and secondary lines of communication into the city. This strategy may cause AQI to increase targeting of ISF at checkpoints. It may also cause AQI to respond in other ways, either by attempting to shift operations to the city center or increasingly to rely upon SVESTs. Both of these responses would degrade AQI's ability to operate, however, and reduce their present momentum. They may also be mitigated through early anticipation and planning against AQI's next move.

Combat Power of VBIED Cells

The ability to forecast AQI's tactical and operational planning also requires considerate thought for how the VBIED enterprise is organized. Observing VBIED waves drives provides key insights into the shape of the organization that plans, resources, and executes VBIED attacks. A very large wave, such as those witnessed on July 23, 2012 and September 9, 2012, demonstrates exceptional logistics and depth of technical expertise across the organization carrying out the attacks (see

VBIEDs vs. SVBIEDs
JULY 2012-JULY 2013
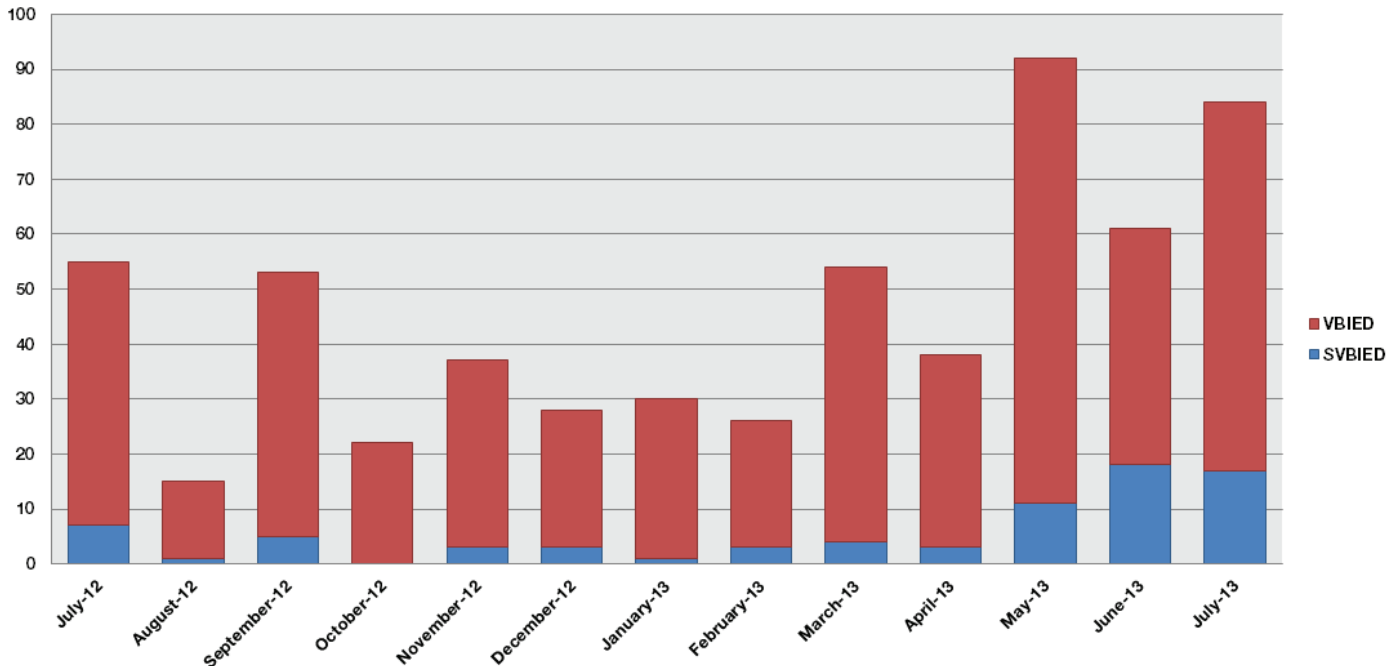
additional information on the waves discussed in this section in Part II of this report). These elements of control require both centralized support and decentralized execution, which frames a core question concerning which organizational model best describes the institution responsible. A highly centralized organization that prepares VBIEDs and deploys fighters may be regarded as less organized, less capable, and less resilient than one that is merely centrally guided, comprised of multiple self-contained cells that are capable of independent operations with minimal support. As of August 2013, AQI's VBIED wave pattern suggests AQI has developed a VBIED organization involving two echelons — one to plan, support, and communicate; and one to construct and deploy VBIEDs.

The VBIED waves at the end of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign were highly controlled, of a consistent interval, and high yield, indicative of continued thoughtful planning, but also the presence of high-performing forward-deployed teams capable of executing the plan in repeatable fashion. For example, the VBIED waves that focused attacks upon Baghdad on May 15, May 20, May 27, and May 30, 2013 were not likely dependent upon a central command for all manner of support in execution; this interval does not allow time for teams to gather and disperse, for central leadership to provide training and specific guidance, or for new fighters to

err. The more likely scenario involves multiple teams already refined in their execution receiving instruction to attack on a given day and executing with little further management or interference.

In order to maintain this volume of attacks at close interval, these teams were also likely able to access VBIEDs from multiple construction sites. This hypothesis is supported by the improbability that one VBIED facility was able to maintain the throughput required for the waves seen in the later stages of the campaign. Whereas the July 2012 and September 2012 VBIED waves required a high one-time volume, such that the VBIEDs might have been manufactured centrally over time and then staged; the pattern of attacks towards the end of the campaign suggests a system more akin to multiple assembly lines for mass production. The pace of attacks is determined in part by the pace of VBIED construction, and the pace of attacks drastically increased. Decentralized VBIED construction is also easier to mask and harder to interdict, and it is an observable indicator of the expanded organizational depth of AQI's VBIED activity.

Expanding this idea further, the apparent shift in the VBIED construction system is one possible explanation for the overall shift in VBIED waveform observed over the course of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. The pattern began in Phase I as few high amplitude waves spanning a wide geographic footprint, and it shifted

Areas of Interest for AQI VBIED Operations
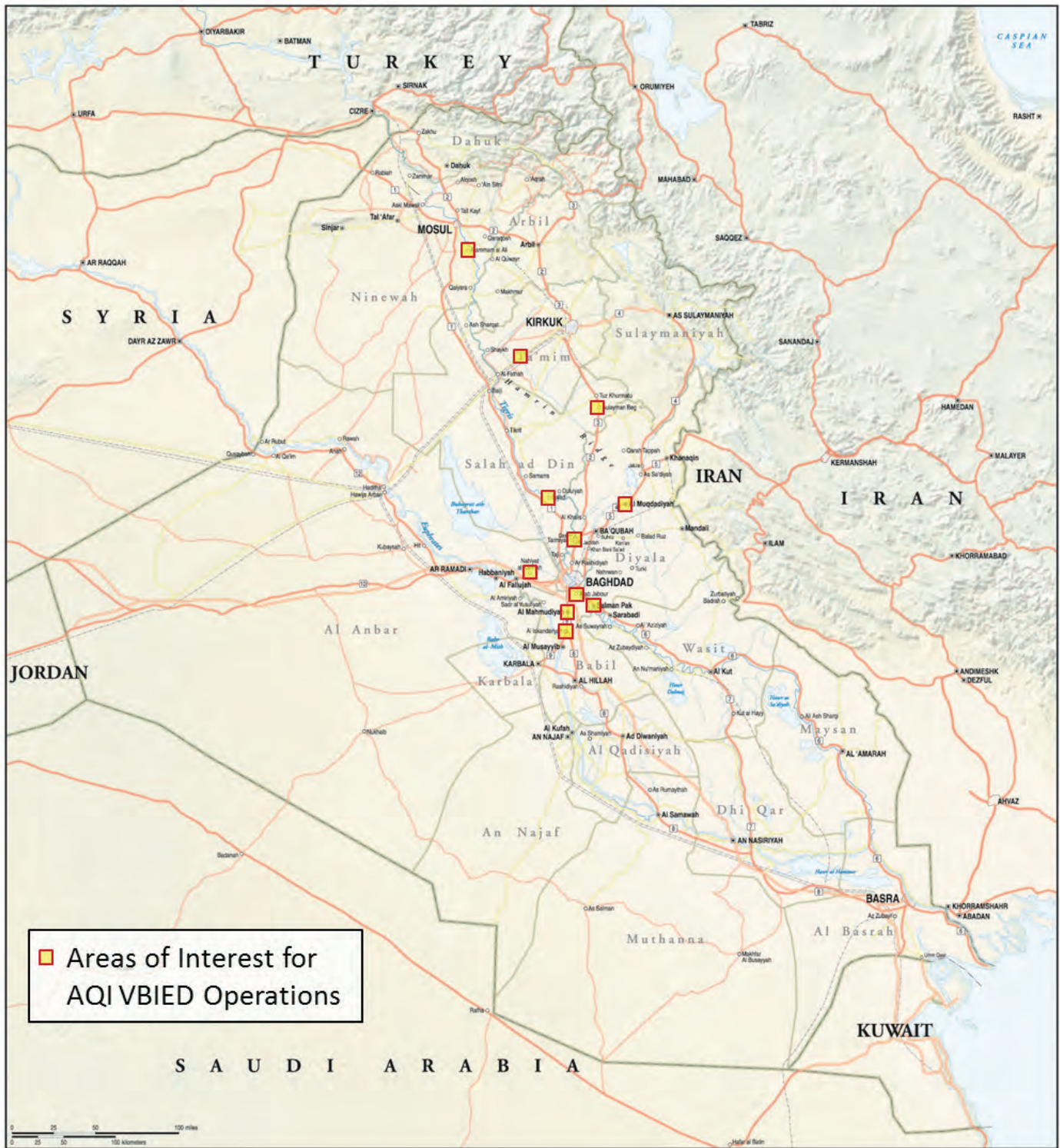
by the final phase to many successive smaller waves that were focused geographically. This waveform may depend upon many factors, to include planning guidance to accomplish phased operational objectives, resource limitations, and available combat power, but the rate-determining step for the VBIED capability is foremost VBIED construction. Increased VBIED construction may have been the principal reason for the shift over the course of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign to enable AQI to mass attacks upon Baghdad in 2013.

In addition to ready access to VBIED construction sites, forward deployed VBIED cells of the variety estimated in the summer of 2013 required a degree of internal organization to perform minimum key functions: to communicate with a higher headquarters; to receive and deploy fighters; to receive and deploy VBIEDs; and to spot and designate specific targets. The footprint of individual VBIED cells may be traced in the attack data based upon evident geographic clusters, though it does not follow that these high performing teams are tethered to local geography in every case. What a team lacks in local familiarity it must recover in preparation, and the characteristic VBIED cells observed in this study are capable of surging to new attack zones rather than being restricted to a maximum radius of attack.

The idea that VBIED cells may not be geographically delimited emerges with the campaign swing to Baghdad in February 2013. This nationwide consolidation of VBIED combat power indicates a surge role for VBIED cells that had been operating far from Baghdad prior to February 2013. Almost no VBIEDs are documented in this study between February 17 and April 14, 2013 in Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah ad-Din provinces, within or outside of VBIED waves. Attacks in Kirkuk resumed on April 15, 2013 in a wave that synchronized attacks with effects in Baghdad. The hiatus in northern VBIED activity, like the January 2013 break in VBIED waves, is not yet fully understood. These cells may have shifted to Baghdad, shifted to Syria, or been disrupted by the ISF or internal constraints. However, because they preceded a drastic rise in VBIED wave activity in Baghdad in May 2013, they may reasonably be considered as indicators of a growth step in the AQI VBIED organization and evidence that cells can lift and shift fire.

Rather than identifying VBIED cells exclusively based on geography, VBIED cells may instead be bounded by feasible attack volume.[*] It is clear from the data that smaller clusters of VBIEDs with common geography occur frequently between VBIED waves. The occurrence of small clustered VBIED activity is a key insight into the presence of VBIED cells. For example, as the graph above depicts, the high overall level of VBIED activity continued in January 2013 despite the temporary break in VBIED wave activity. This suggests that VBIED cells were capable of mounting independent groupings of attacks without guidance to synchronize with other teams. It is also clear evidence of the presence of a centralized VBIED wave planning element that was absent only during this time before resuming operations in February 2013.

VBIED construction sites are a critical vulnerability of the VBIED organization because they are not mobile like VBIED cells, and because they are laden with high visibility material resources, such as many cars, components, and explosives. It is not yet clear what explosive material comprises most VBIEDs, though the high volume of attacks suggests a steady supply chain. One report from Iraqi Police in Najaf in December 2012 indicated that a VBIED was seized containing two men and a large amount of TNT and C4.[92] Another report from the Tigris Operations Command on August 20, 2013 indicated that a raid on a VBIED factory included ammonium and C4.[93] Still another police raid in Salah ad-Din on August 20, 2013 reported seizure of an explosives factory in Suleiman Beg that involved 37 containers of DDT, TNT, and 20 motorcycles.[94] These are isolated reports at this time, though the nature of the explosives is a critical line of inquiry for further study. It is important to establish how AQI procures explosive material in order for the ISF to disrupt logistics

[*] To re-engage the definition of a VBIED "wave" as six or more VBIED attacks, which theoretically represents coordination across multiple cells, one VBIED cell is therefore not estimated to deploy more than 5 VBIEDs on one day. This threshold is reasonable because the detonation of 5 VBIEDs likely requires a team of 5-10 fighters in addition to support staff and leadership. Effective organizations larger than this require further subdivision because of the dictates of span of control. A functional team this size is therefore an effective unit of measure for a basic VBIED cell. For the purposes of framing the data, it is useful to identify smaller VBIED clusters as having structure and meaning even when they do not involve the high organization of a VBIED "wave." Organizing a VBIED wave of more than 5 VBIEDs is therefore considered to require coordination across cells. Recent reports from the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Task Force also indicated on August 21, 2013 that they conducted a raid on a 16-man VBIED cell operating IVO Baghdad.

TOTAL VBIEDS PER MONTH
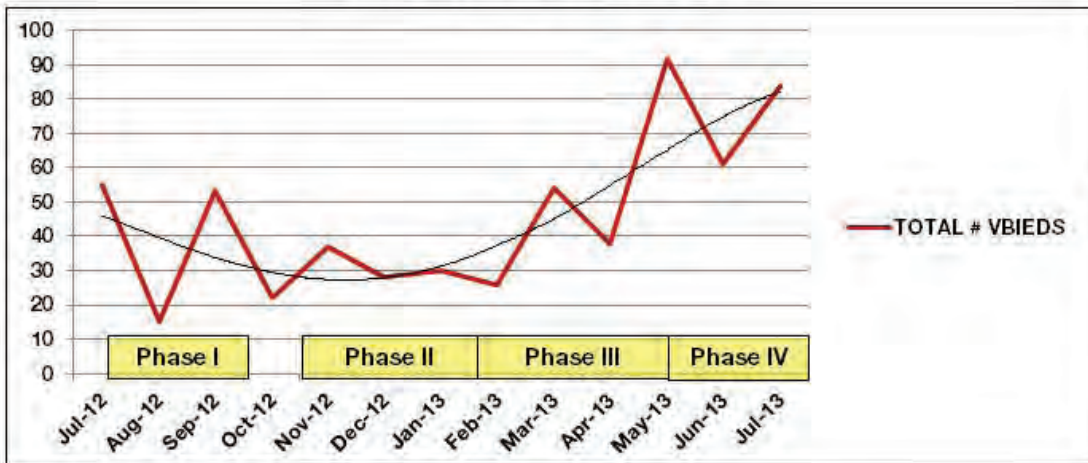
Total VBIEDS per month are expressed with a polynomial trendline expressing the four phases of the VBIED campaign.

TOTAL VBIEDS VS VBIEDS IN WAVES
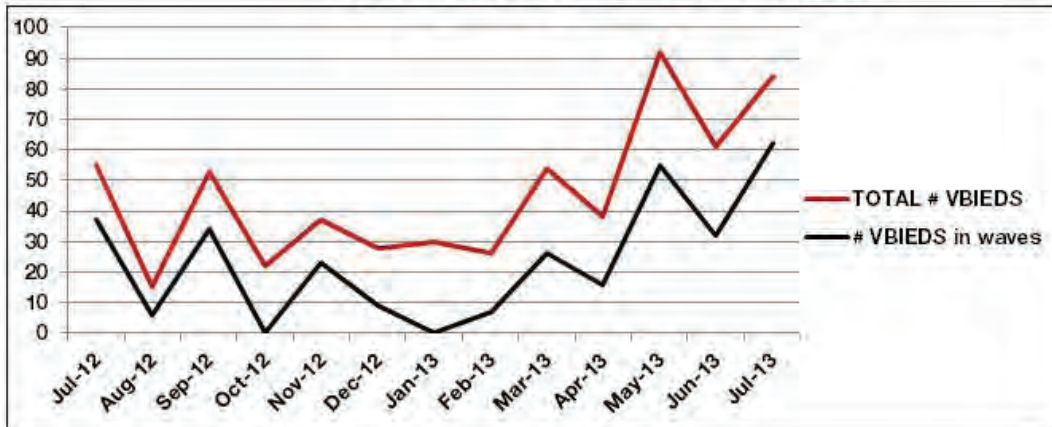
VBIEDS in waves of 6 VBIEDS on a given day or more are compared to total VBIEDS per month in order to isolate decentralized VBIED activity outside of VBIED waves.

supporting spectacular explosive attacks.

The fact that these cells are also responsive to centralized guidance to synchronize attacks further indicates the professionalization of the VBIED organization. It is unclear how they communicate, though ISF has reported confiscating motorcycles with forged documents upon site exploitation;[95] and security battalions at least reportedly receive instruction by courier.[96] AQI has also lately warned Syrian jihadist organizations to exercise communications security as a principal lesson learned from fighting Americans in Iraq.[97] Nevertheless, because the early waves of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign bear a top-down quality as compared to later waves, it becomes apparent both that the AQI VBIED command has developed new organizational depth over the last year; and that a distinct planning vision is still driving VBIED waves as of August 2013.

The enumeration of VBIED cells is critical to the estimation of AQI's combat power. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand how to match ISF operational design to eradicate AQI's VBIED capability. For example, the ISF search and raid operation into northern Baghdad on August 4, 2013 may have had the potential to disrupt a VBIED cell in the vicinity of the northern Baghdad belts; however, VBIED waves continued without interruption in August 2013. This is likely due to the presence of additional VBIED cells projecting attacks in Baghdad from the southern belts. The total volume of VBIEDs occuring within "waves" from February 2013 to August 2013 also clearly indicates the presence of multiple operational cells that cannot each produce a full wave of VBIEDs in isolation. A wave involving 10 or more VBIEDs may be estimated to involve a minimum of two, and likely three VBIED cells. The attacks mentioned below are discussed in further detail in Part II of this report.
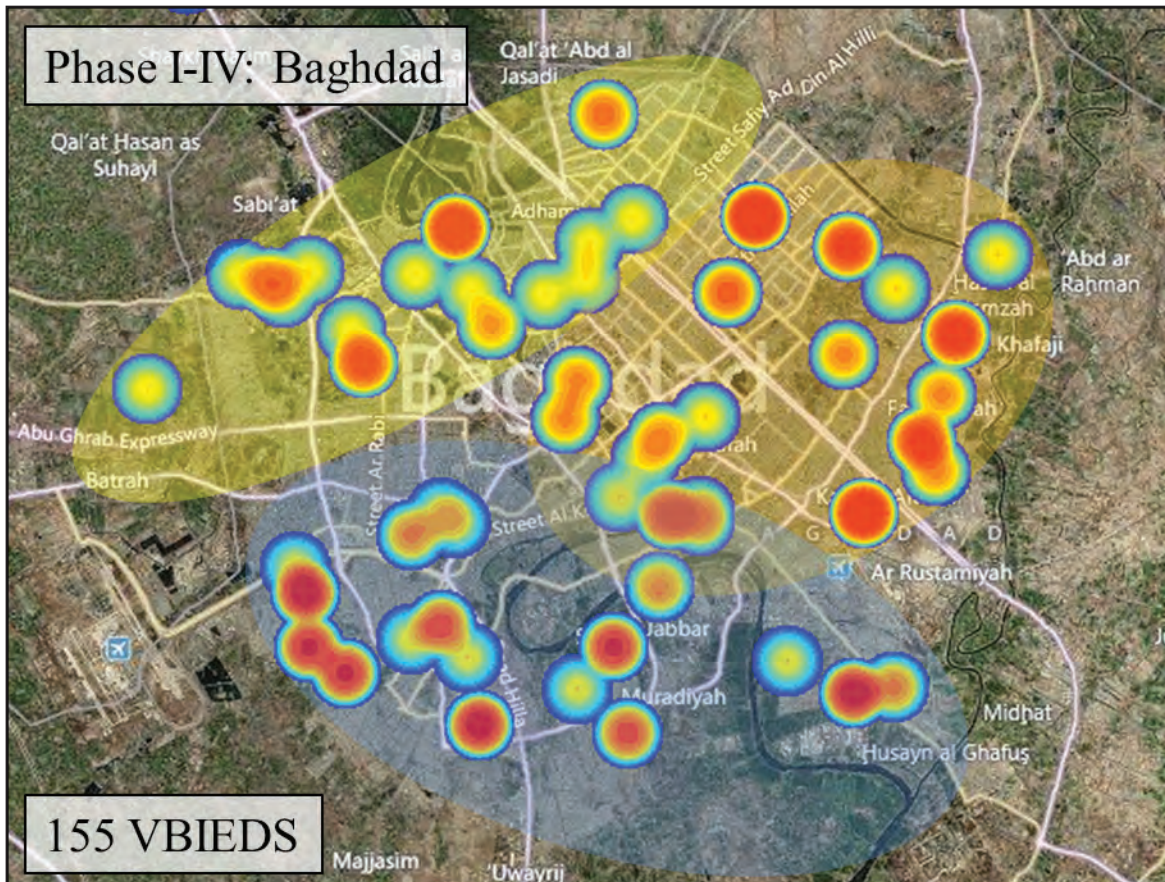
Baghdad

The dense geographic clustering into three distinct zones of Baghdad and the overall high volume of attacks, usually in excess of 12 VBIEDs per wave, suggest there may be three cells conducting attacks in the city as of August 2013. There appears to be a northern Baghdad attack zone extending from Shula in the northwest to Sadr City in the northeast; along with a southeastern zone and a southwestern zone. Considering the relative permissibility of the Baghdad belts, these cells may be operating on the periphery of Baghdad, to the north, south, and southwest, where AQI had enjoyed sanctuary historically.[98] One or both of the southern belt cells may also be responsible for attacks in downtown Baghdad, in Karrada and Sadoun, particularly.

Perhaps the best illustration of the presence of multiple cells operating in Baghdad, and in particular from the southern belts, is the spread of the Baghdad attacks on July 20, 2013, the day before the prison attacks upon Abu Ghraib and Taji base. These attacks largely avoided the traditional northern zone. This spread indicates that the northern cell was not in play that day, likely because it had been re-tasked to support one or both

prison attacks on July 21, 2013.

AQI had an operational presence in Baghdad from the beginning of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. The day before the very large July 23, 2012 wave, a smaller wave of seven VBIEDs struck a number of locations. Three of those VBIEDs detonated in Mahmoudiyah, south of Baghdad, which is a possible area of interest for further study to detect one of the southern belt VBIED cells. Northern Baghdad neighborhoods such as Sadr City, Husseiniya, and Ur were struck as part of the first large July 23, 2012 wave the following day, which may indicate that multiple staging areas had emerged in the vicinity of Baghdad from the early days of the campaign.

It is important to consider the full spectrum of possible locations for VBIED cells, and VBIED construction sites particularly, in order to focus collection of intelligence to confirm or deny. It is especially important at this time to understand the depth of AQI in the southern belts because ISF counter-AQI operations in the northern zone will fail if not synchronized with operations in the southern zones. They will also fail if they target the local Sunni population and not the high-performing VBIED teams perpetrating attacks in Baghdad. Instead, if the ISF

is able to disrupt the logistics of the VBIED apparatus, and to block their avenues of approach to Baghdad, the operations may be able to dampen the societal effects of VBIEDs long enough to generate domestic policy changes.

Northern Iraq

Next to Baghdad, Kirkuk city and its environs were slammed with VBIED attacks at intense periods at the beginning of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. Nine VBIEDs detonated in Kirkuk on July 23, 2013, along with two VBIEDs in Tuz Khurmatu to the south of the city. Three additional VBIEDs detonated in Muqdadiyah, south of Tuz Khurmatu, with further attacks in Baquba, Diyala. Again based upon estimated volume of attacks in each location, this VBIED wave appeared to involve a large number of fighters operating in the northeast of Iraq. This northern group of VBIEDs within the July 23, 2012 wave compared to four VBIEDs that detonated in Baghdad that day, and the three aforementioned VBIEDs south of Baghdad in Mahmoudiyah the day before. The relative density of attacks in the North dissipated by September 9, 2012. Attacks in the North generally matched Baghdad attacks until February 2013, when northern activity generally ceased for two months.

Northern attacks resumed in April 2013 to a lesser degree. As of August 2013, it appears that there is still a cell conducting attacks in Kirkuk city and Tuz Khurmatu. Because the volume is low and the rate inconsistent, it is possible that the same cell is responsible for attacks in Kirkuk, northern Salah ad-Din, possibly southern Salah ad-Din, and even Mosul. The assignment of a wide geographic assignment to one cell may be feasible, particularly if the VBIED cell and the construction site are based along the road that connects Kirkuk city to Baiji, or Tuz Khurmatu to Tikrit, Furthermore, the northernmost east-west route between Baiji and Kirkuk forms the southern boundary of the Za'ab triangle which stretches northwest to Mosul. This region had also been another historic support zone for AQI.[99]

By contrast, it does not appear that there is a VBIED cell operating in Diyala at this time. The last VBIED documented in Diyala province was defused by ISF on June 13, 2013.[100] Given that VBIED attacks had concentrated at various points in the early campaign in the Diyala river valley, it now appears that AQI has regained control of this support zone. A report from the Tigris Operations Command on August 20, 2013

indicated that operations in the Hamrin Mountains area beginning in northern Diyala had resulted in the arrest of 48 personnel, six vehicles, 23 motorcycles, a VBIED factory, a training camp, and 21 rifles.[101] It is possible that this had been a command and control node within AQI's support zone, and potentially that which had played a principal role at the beginning of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, when VBIED operations were likely more centralized. It is not yet clear how this ISF operation will affect AQI's combat power, but VBIED waves continued in Baghdad on August 20 and 28, 2013.[102]

Mosul

Single VBIEDs detonated intermittently in Mosul throughout the campaign until June 10, 2013, ahead of provincial elections on June 20, 2013.[103] On June 10, three VBIEDs detonated in Mosul, synchronized with attacks in Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, and Baghdad. Two days later, ISF defused two VBIEDs in East Mosul.[104] This might suggest that a cell might have formed in close proximity to Mosul, but attacks do not cluster again in Mosul as of the time of this report. This suggests first that the northern VBIED cell that likely covers Kirkuk and northern Salah ad Din also covers Mosul and Tel Afar as needed. It may also suggest that Mosul began as a permissive support zone for AQI, and thus that the organization, as in the Diyala River Valley, did not need or want VBIED attacks within their support zone.

Anbar

A VBIED cell in Anbar also appears among the original constellation of actors at the beginning of "Breaking the Walls," although the cell participated minimally in synchronized waves. Only one VBIED detonated in Anbar on July 23, 2012, and none detonated on September 9, 2012. However, a cluster of three VBIEDs in Ramadi and Fallujah occurred on September 13, 2012. Clusters of local VBIEDs occurred again on September 24, 2012 and May 1, 2013, again offset in timing from the main wave.. The apparent trend of independent cell activity and minimal participation in synchronized waves continued through August 2013. As of the time of this report, the Anbar VBIED cell never participated in a coordinated VBIED wave with more than one VBIED. This may indicate that the cell has difficulty communicating with the rest of the VBIED organization, or that it suffers from some other constraint. It may also be unresponsive to tasking.

Southern Iraq

AQI has deliberately targeted Shi'a population centers in southern Iraq since the beginning of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. This is a particularly impressive feat, given the great distance between the support zone needed to construct a VBIED and the attack zones observed. From September 9, 2012 onward, AQI struck Basra, Amara, Imam al-Sharqi, Nasiriyah, Diwaniya, Najaf, Karbala, and Shi'a communities south of Baghdad. VBIEDs began to cluster there in late December 2012, and clusters occurred several times before the February 2013 push to Baghdad began. The southern cell appeared to participate in this push to Baghdad.

On June 16, 2013, a wave of nine VBIEDs struck most of these locations in southern Iraq. A similar wave happened again on July 14, 2013. Because this concentration does not usually occur, it is reasonable to assess that the southern VBIED cell and the southern Baghdad belt cells interoperate, such that the southern Baghdad belt cells assist in waves directed at cities in southern Iraq; and that the southern Iraq cell assists in attacks upon Baghdad from the southern belts. This hypothesis accounts for the volume of attacks in southern Iraq on June 16, 2013 and July 14, 2013, which exceed the estimated capability of a single cell. It is possible but unlikely that the southern belt cells are solely responsible for the attacks in southern Iraq. Instead, there is likely an additional cell, possibly located in Iskandriyah or Mussayib in northern Babel, or Arab Jabour north of Wasit, that covers the southern zone.

Southern Salah ad-Din

Like Mosul, only single VBIEDs occurred in southern Salah ad-Din province throughout the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. Single VBIEDs occurred in the cities of Samarra, Balad, Taji, or Tarmiyah in conjunction with most of the Phase I waves, and several independent VBIEDs detonated in isolation during Phase II. This early pattern does not indicate the presence of a self-contained VBIED cell capable of conducting multiple independent attacks. Furthermore, the largest observed cluster of four VBIEDs in Taji occurred as part of the September 9, 2012 wave, and VBIEDs never clustered in this region again as of August 2013. In fact, the last VBIED documented in southern Salah ad Din occurred on June 9, 2013 in Taji.[105] Given that this region is key terrain for the northern approach to Baghdad, it is more likely that AQI has decided not to strike this area with

VBIEDs than that AQI is limited from doing so. For the same reason, this region is critically important for ISF to clear and protect in order to re-establish security in Baghdad.

WHAT WE KNOW

This study has raised many possibilities and many questions about the disposition of al-Qaeda in Iraq today. It is therefore necessary to take inventory of the facts, assessments, and remaining unknowns at this time.

Facts

It is a fact that AQI announced the beginning of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign on July 21, 2012 and its end on July 23, 2013. It is further known that AQI has claimed credit for numerous attacks in Iraq over the course of the same period, including many of the VBIED waves and prison breaks identified in this study, attributed them to an overarching campaign plan, and even published a statistical report to credit themselves with measures of their performance.[*]

It is a fact that violence levels in Iraq in 2013 by various measures, including documented casualty totals and the volume of VBIEDs documented in this study, compare to wartime levels when the U.S. military was thoroughly engaged in the fight. It is a fact that VBIEDs were chiefly responsible for the rise in casualties from December 2011 to August 2013. It is a fact that they were often synchronized to strike on the same day at locations that were sometimes geographically concentrated and sometimes widespread.

It is a fact that AQI's military organization is capable of other attacks besides VBIEDs, including IEDs,

* On August 13, 2013, AQI published a campaign update in its military periodical, "al-Naba." According to SITE Intelligence Group, AQI took inventory of its attacks from November 26, 2011 to November 15, 2012, documenting 4,500 operations broken down by region and type. The statistics in AQI's periodical have not been fully compared to those documented in this study, but the number of VBIED attacks claimed by AQI during this period greatly exceed those documented from open sources.

"ISIL Claims 4,500 Operations in One-Year Period in Iraq, Gives Statistics," translated and published by SITE Intelligence Group, August 13, 2013.

SVESTs, indirect fire, and direct fire, and that all of these capabilities have more than once been brought to bear upon a single tactical objective to achieve combined arms effects. The attack on the Abu Ghraib prison is the most visible and most recent example to demonstrate this capability.

It is therefore a fact that AQI has reconstituted as a military organization capable of planning, directing, and resourcing the attacks documented in this study. AQI capitalized upon a position of military strength in Iraq to project not only lethal force into Syria, but also to exert governance and control of territory in Syria under the banner of the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*.

Assessments

It is assessed that AQI means to assert governance and control of territory also in Iraq. It is possible that AQI already controls territory in the vicinity of northern Diyala province, the Thar Thar desert area northwest of Baghdad, the Jazeera desert west of Tikrit, and the Za'ab triangle spanning northern Salah ad-Din, southern Ninewa, and western Kirkuk. AQI likely maintains unrestricted access into Syria across the western Jazeera desert, and sanctuary and training may be established there.

It is also assessed that AQI leaves the protection of these areas to other military and security elements outside the VBIED organization, while this high-performing team and signature weapons capability are brought to bear to spearhead an offensive campaign plan in Iraq. This campaign has been successful both in stoking sectarian violence in Iraq and in demonstrating outwardly the inability of the ISF thus far to protect the population from AQI's attacks.

It is assessed that AQI's VBIED capability has grown over the course of the last 12 months in three critical ways. First, the organization likely now performs decentralized VBIED construction operations, with multiple VBIED factories deployed forward close to primary attack zones. Second, the organization now likely contains multiple independently functioning VBIED cells that are capable of mounting their own attacks. These cells can also communicate with higher military echelons and are responsive to centralized guidance to coordinate attacks on a single day or in support of a single operation. Third, the VBIED organization still appears to engage central leadership that specializes in VBIED wave planning, but has the potential and intent to broaden

its implementation to include spectacular attacks against critical infrastructure as well as complex attacks upon hardened ISF facilities.

It is assessed that AQI's VBIED operations are not the only military capability developed by AQI over the course of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. Thousands of violent events, including SVEST attacks, IEDs, small arms fire engagements, and indirect fire, have been documented and as of yet not analyzed fully. They likely contain rich insight into the shape of the overall military organization as well as its relationship to the security apparatus which undergirds AQI's burgeoning governance initiatives in Iraq.[106]

Unknowns

It is unknown at this time how AQI supplies VBIED attacks. VBIEDs require basic components, including vehicles, explosive material, and detonation triggers, among other niche components. Several reports from ISF interdiction operations indicate that military grade explosives, and not homemade explosives or munitions, comprise the explosive content of VBIEDs. This would suggest that AQI's supply chain for explosive attacks begins outside of Iraq, which would follow that AQI requires funding, and not supplies, in order to sustain operations.

If this is indeed the case, it is unknown how AQI funds VBIED attacks, though domestic and regional criminal activities, such as kidnapping, extortion, and theft, are suspected.

The personalities and relationships which comprise the human networks operating within AQI's military organization are also unknown from open sources. It is also unknown how VBIED cells communicate with central leadership in order to coordinate VBIED waves, though couriers are suspected. It is unknown how they communicate. The veteran AQI network may generally be regarded as sparse communicators, based upon AQI's historical behaviors. In addition, a recent prisoner statement claims that instructions and funding are provided by courier.[107] This demonstrates one of the most remarkable qualities of the VBIED wave phenomenon described in this report. It showcases a dependency upon communications tradecraft that may be interdicted if isolated and understood. These two critical requirements, namely finance and communications, constitute key opportunities to disrupt AQI's VBIED operations.
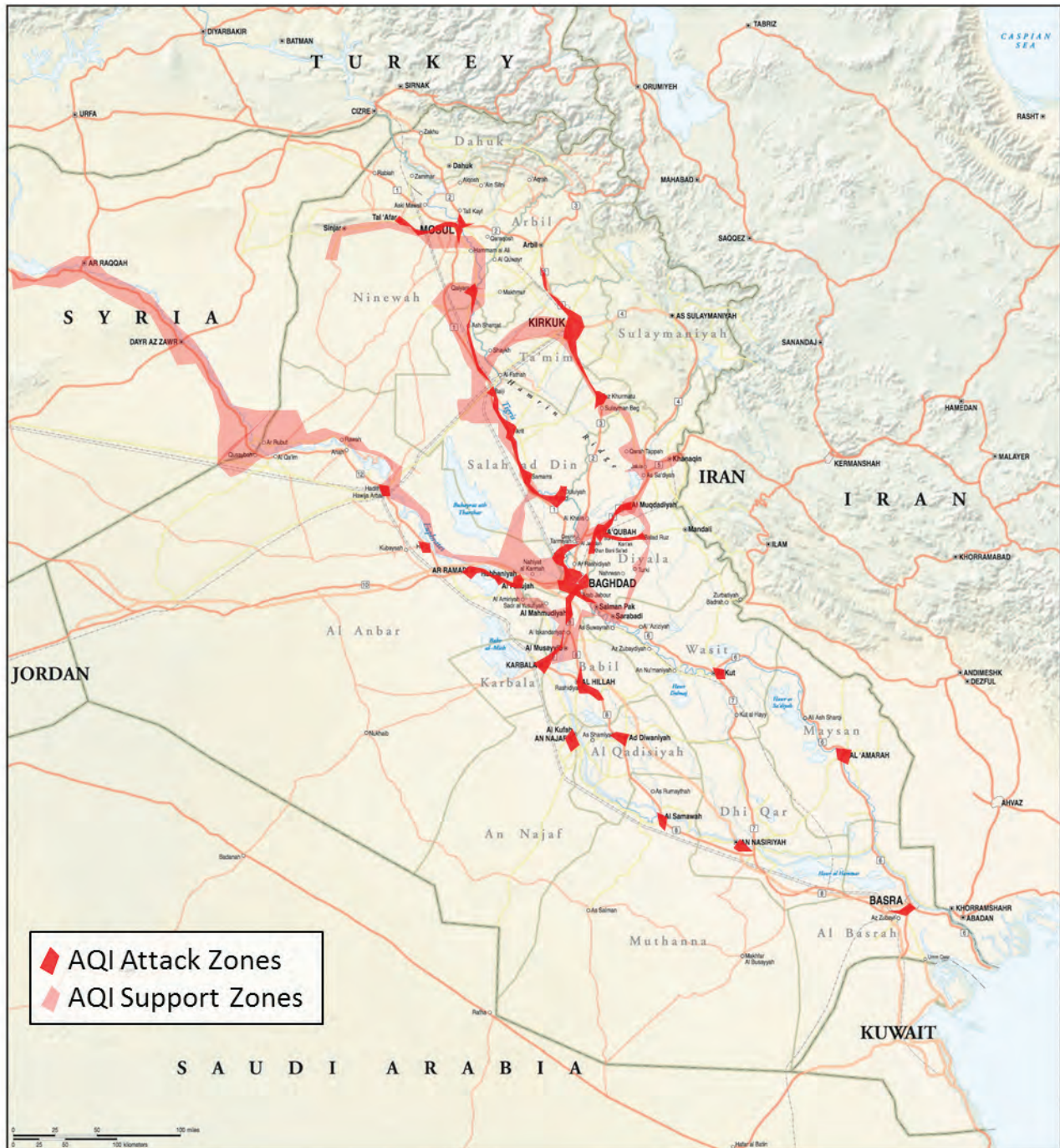
The locations of the forward VBIED cells, forward VBIED construction sites, and central VBIED leadership are yet unknown, but the adjacent map depicts named areas of interest for these locations that may focus collection for further refinement of the assessments delivered in this study. The hypothesis of many VBIED factories has lately been corroborated by ISF reporting on site exploitation during the "Revenge of the Martyrs" security operation in Northern Baghdad.[108]

Advising Iraqi Security Forces

It is necessary for ISF to reduce the VBIED threat in Iraq in order to preserve the state against the threat of al-Qaeda. VBIEDs are the single highest source of casualties in Iraq. Reducing VBIEDs requires targeting high confidence locations and disrupting operational flows. Reducing VBIEDs will not reduce AQI's force-level military command or planning capacity. In fact, one can expect that reducing VBIEDs will translate to

an increase in other attack types, such as SVESTs. Given that the VBIED effort is not demonstratively driven by suicide attacks, this would not an easy transition for AQI to accomplish, although the increase of suicide bombers in the summer of 2013, originating from Syria, suggests that the organization is already increasing this capability.[109] Disrupting AQI to this degree may shift the momentum of the counter-terrorism fight in Iraq in favor of ISF.

Reducing the military command of AQI likely means a focused desert operation. But this operation should not attempt to clear the Jazeera Desert that forms western Ninewa and Anbar provinces.[110] Instead, attacks should be focused upon regions such as Thar Thar, The Za'ab Triangle, and Hamrin where AQI has been known to establish command and control previously, and from which to project into urban centers.[111] Meanwhile, it is imperative to protect Baghdad. Focused operations to pursue VBIED cells and local security battalions in the Baghdad belts, to the north and south of Baghdad, are advised. It is also imperative to increase security of Iraq's prisons, especially Taji, which has been attacked multiple times without success.

Focused operations upon the Baghdad belts will likely cause attacks to swell in northern Iraq, namely in Ninewa and Kirkuk provinces. Particularly in Kirkuk, it is necessary to address counter-terrorism in a cooperative manner with Kurdish Peshmerga forces. AQI has likely targeted Kirkuk in order to exacerbate ethnic violence rather than to establish safe haven, but the overlapping presence of JRTN amidst protest camps represents a redundant threat to ISF. JRTN is also likely mobilized in Ninewa, particularly in Mosul. The present security situation in Mosul, which involves multiple threat streams apart from AQI, must be studied in greater detail.

Above all, it is necessary to reduce the threat of insurgency in Iraq as counter-terrorism operations increase. A counter-terrorism strategy that propels a Sunni uprising or even a Federalism effort will cripple ISF. Furthermore, history has shown that the successful defeat of AQI principally occurred at the hands of Iraq's Sunni Arabs. Likewise their alienation from the state will condemn ISF to fight all at once a terrorist threat, a secular insurgency, and a sectarian civil war. This had been the nature of the war in Iraq in 2006. This is the nature of the war in Syria today. It is imperative that such a crisis be averted in Iraq lest

the battlefronts of Iraq and Syria merge.

CONCLUSION

It is critical to the development of U.S. policy options to address the security situation created by AQI in Iraq and Syria to understand that it is both necessary and possible to interdict this threat. Interdiction depends first and foremost upon expert intelligence and operational design, both of which the U.S. can provide in mentorship as the veteran force which lately assisted ISF in the near defeat of AQI. It is foremost necessary that ISF mount effective operations to disrupt AQI's attacks upon the population if the legitimacy of the state is to endure. VBIEDs are AQI's most lethal and specialized attack vector, and it should be targeted and defeated first.

Second, defeating AQI depends upon the active participation of Iraq's Arab Sunni population in national defense, which ultimately drove AQI from its strongholds in western and northern Iraq in 2007-2008. This population is instead teetering on the edge of an uprising as of August 2013 for lack of opportunity to participate in national government exacerbated by recent mass arrests in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison break. The U.S. must ensure that support which is offered to the government of Iraq to counter AQI will not increase this risk of popular insurgency. In fact, it should be a pre-condition of any proffered security support that Maliki reconcile with the anti-government protest movement so that it participates as an enfranchised party within the Iraqi state.

Third, it is necessary that the government of Iraq approach the containment of AQI in conjunction with Kurdish security forces, given the assessed strong presence of AQI along the Green Line. AQI is effectively exploiting the territorial gap between the two erstwhile rival security forces, and this gap must be refined as a seam that is synchronously approached by ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga if AQI is to be dislodged from this linear stronghold. If AQI is instead allowed to increase in the east, it will realize its potential to develop multiple centers of gravity in Iraq and Syria and thereby become much more difficult to defeat.

Prime Minister Maliki has claimed now on multiple occasions that AQI represents a real threat to his government.[112] Taking inventory of the effects of AQI's initiative, attacks against the population have caused Shi'a militias to remobilize. Attacks against ISF

installations have successfully damaged facilities and secured the release of hundreds of prisoners, most of whom are veteran AQI fighters and leaders. Attacks against Sahwa may cause them to abandon their posts in the midst of a broader domestic potential for a new Sunni uprising. Attacks against port facilities in Iraq's south may degrade Iraq's industrial base, or threaten it enough to affect outside investment. While the international community muses over the potential for the Syrian civil war to achieve broader effects upon the region, it is also necessary to observe the effects of AQI's resurgence in Iraq, which reduces the potential for Iraq to buttress regional stability against the Syrian tide.

The resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria also presents a direct threat to U.S. interests in Iraq and the region. AQI has not expressed the intent to target U.S. interests, but it has demonstrated the capability and will to target government installations which contain U.S. citizens as well as critical infrastructure tethered to U.S. corporate interests. Furthermore, as an al-Qaeda affiliate, AQI fundamentally supports the broader al-Qaeda network with potential sanctuary which may very well serve to support attacks against the West. It is vital to U.S. national security that AQI be prevented from its goal to establish a caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

NOTES

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7. "Background Briefing on U.S.-Iraq Political and Diplomatic JCC Meeting and the U.S.-Iraq Bilateral Relationship Under the Strategic Framework Agreement,"August 15, 2013, accessed September 7, 2013 and available at http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/08/213182.htm.

8. "Background Briefing on U.S.-Iraq Political and Diplomatic JCC Meeting and the U.S.-Iraq Bilateral Relationship Under the Strategic Framework Agreement,"August 15, 2013, accessed September 7, 2013 and available at http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/08/213182.htm.

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