

First Person: My Life as an Insurgent

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Former member of al-Qaeda tells IWPR why he joined the insurgency in Iraq and why he eventually left.

I never thought of fighting the Americans because I didn't regard the United States as a colonising country. I thought it was a civilised state. Unfortunately, after the invasion, the opposite proved true.

President Bush didn't send doctors and engineers, or construction and democracy specialists, or experts from NASA and Google. Instead, he sent uneducated gangsters who didn't know anything about Arabic and Iraqi traditions. This was one of the main issues that triggered the resistance.

When I saw the first US tanks in Fallujah in 2003 I opposed their presence, but at the same time I had always been against Saddam Hussein's regime. I just wished that change would not have come from the outside. A perfect change would have been through a coup or an assassination, not an occupation.

I joined al-Qaeda on April 28, 2003, after several US soldiers killed more than 13 Iraqi civilians from the rooftop of an elementary school in Hay al-Nazzal, south of Fallujah. The Iraqis were staging a demonstration and demanded that the Americans leave the school.

The Americans killed the civilians and then refused to let us remove the dead bodies. It was then that I felt the rush to fight. (Editor's note: The US military maintained that its soldiers were returning fire.)

I met several young men who were thinking of attacking the school. At 1 am, eight of us went to the school carrying RPG7s and AK-47s, which we found at deserted Iraqi army bases. We were surprised to find another group preparing an attack.

We quickly agreed to launch a coordinated assault. It lasted several minutes and we fled quickly, fearing strikes from Apaches and Blackhawks.

The group we met was from al-Qaeda.

DRIVEN BY VENGEANCE

My goal in fighting the Americans was to force them to leave.

The event that made me angry and committed to killing was when my best friend was killed in an air strike on a house in central Fallujah. He was passing by that house.

My anger quickly subsided when I opened fire on a Marine and saw him collapse. I thought, "I've avenged my friend."

My brigade was responsible for engaging the Americans at a distance of less than 200 metres. We were 120 fighters in Fallujah. Only a few are still alive and even fewer would be objective and fair in telling the story.

I had more than 60 engagements with the Americans while I was with al-Qaeda. I did not go out on a mission unless it was to fight them. I feel very lucky to have survived all of these operations. Perhaps it was God's will that allowed me to survive and tell my story.

Al-Qaeda's combat technique is similar to guerrilla warfare. It is not systematic, which made it difficult for the Americans to fight back. If we were a regular army the Americans would have then be able to defeat us, but we were like the liquid that slips through your fingers.

Some operations required a lot of planning while others only needed a few hours. The most difficult thing was staging a tactical retreat. Most of our casualties occurred not during our attack but when retreating. The Americans react quickly. Within a few minutes after each operation, their choppers and soldiers would show up and we would come under fire.

As a result, we devised strategies such as wearing black clothing, hiding in trees and orchards and parking getaway cars at a distance.

We received intelligence by bribing police, army and Shia sources. The Americans considered [Shia] more trustworthy than Sunni.

We used to communicate using Thuraya (satellite) phones or through human contacts. We would meet as needed. Sometimes, we would have three meetings over several days, but a week could pass without a single gathering.

One of the things we witnessed was how a 100 US dollar improvised explosive device, IED, was capable of destroying an armoured vehicle that cost one million dollars. The IEDs were the best weapon for al-Qaeda and the insurgents in Iraq.

I never planted IEDs in cars. I was in a combat brigade against the Americans and this is why I am at ease with myself.

I was seriously wounded four times. We had a small clinic in central Fallujah that treated wounded Arab fighters who couldn't go to public hospitals. This clinic had medical supplies and medicine donated by pharmacies. The doctors were in Fallujah. Some of them volunteered to treat the wounded. Others were sent for and would show up minutes later.

Islam teaches us to tell the truth, even if it is against us. There was a Marine who fought bravely against us in 2004. He fiercely repelled many of our attacks on his own. But he couldn't keep it up for long because he was outnumbered by al-Qaeda fighters.

He went down during the engagement, clutching his dog tag. I respected him a lot because of his fighting. I wished that the Iraqi government had half of this Marine's courage and his sacrifice. Iraq would have been a better place.

ARAB "MARTYRS"

My brigade consisted of Iraqis and foreign Arabs. The foreign Arabs didn't want to spend time with us. They carried out their duties and went to their special headquarters in Fallujah, the location of which was constantly changing.

This was one of the main reasons why we did not have strong relations with them. Iraqi (insurgency) leaders were always in direct contact with them.

The sole mission of the foreign Arabs was to fight and die in Iraq. They looked at death as a wish that they wanted to come true so that they could go to heaven.

Suicide or martyr operations, call them what you want, were carried out regularly. Sometimes, it got so competitive that every fighter wanted to drive a detonated car and attack an American or an Iraqi target. They even resorted to drawing lots.

Before a suicide mission is carried out a ceremony is performed, a kind of party in which everyone bids farewell to the driver. During the farewell, there are religious songs, food, laughing and congratulations on his martyrdom. The ceremony concludes with the taping of his will, which is sent to his wife and family.

In every ceremony that was held, I was assured that the Americans had found themselves in a real quagmire because al-Qaeda had come to Iraq to fight the Americans. They would go to Mars if they knew the Americans were there. There is so much hatred and I think it's because of President Bush, the father and the son. It's President Obama's bad luck that he is burdened with past mistakes.

The secret of al-Qaeda's power was the Sunni tribes. They were aware of our plans and operations, and when we lost this factor we became weak. The Americans realised that and they bought them off.

Al-Qaeda didn't pay anyone. The fighting was voluntary and based on deep convictions. No one would take such extraordinary risks with his life for money or power.

Back then, I worked as a teacher once or twice a week. The situation was unstable in Anbar so we only worked part-time. No one would go after you if you didn't show up.

My family was living in fear and apprehension. I felt how much my wife loved me then, more than at any other time. My wife, my son and my brother-in-law asked me to quit fighting because they feared for my life. But I ignored them just as a smoker ignores a doctor's orders to quit.

QUESTIONING AL-QAEDA

My time with al-Qaeda was a bit unusual because I disagreed with them about many things, such as bombing markets, killing civilians, imposing fatwas (edicts) from Afghanistan and killing Shia. I did not think they should target Christians, American civilians and construction workers. This was very important

to them.

I was never involved in killing Iraqi forces, and this was one of the reasons I left al-Qaeda. I used to tell them that I was only fighting the occupiers, just like the Vietnamese, Somalis and Chechens who fought the Russians. They accused me of tarnishing my Islamic faith.

I believed that a ceasefire was imperative for the Iraqi forces to take over security from the Americans. I thought that targeting the Iraqi forces would lengthen the occupation.

Over time, things changed a lot. al-Qaeda was no longer supported among Sunni. It carried out executions and killed hundreds of people in markets.

If al-Qaeda were to rule Iraq, it would not have succeeded because it prohibited so many things and imposed new rules. They saw Shia as infidels who should be killed. Christians were given three options: to pay tribute, convert to Islam or be killed.

Iraq is a complex country. It is impossible to apply al-Qaeda's rules here because this is a diverse nation. Al-Qaeda would mean the end of Iraq. Everyone would have to flee or be killed. Barely one quarter of the population would have remained.

I left al-Qaeda when I realised that things started to get out of control. Some of the fighters started to disobey orders after [local al-Qaeda leader] Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed.

Zarqawi was a strongman who directed battles in Mosul and in Tal Afar through phone calls from Fallujah. No one dared to act without consulting him. I think if al-Qaeda finds a man with the same characteristics it will stage a huge comeback.

The night I left, I told my neighbours and friends, including a fighter who was very close to me. I had always confided in him about my fears and my opposition to the future of the resistance and jihad because of the actions of some al-Qaeda fighters.

I called another fighter and told him that my son was seriously ill. I said I would have to leave quickly for Syria and stay there for a long time. He told me that my wife could take care of my son, but I told him that she couldn't survive without me. He was angry and I knew he didn't believe me.

I left quietly, as anyone with al-Qaeda should. I travelled at night with my family to Syria and stayed there for nine months. I rented my furnished house to a Baghdad displaced family. The rent helped me survive in Syria.

RETURN TO IRAQ

When I came back to Iraq, I discovered that all of the fighters I knew were killed, imprisoned or their whereabouts were unknown.

I went to live with one of my relatives in another province. My wife and children went straight to our house to check the situation and see if I could return.

After a few days, my wife confirmed that I was not being chased by the Sahwa (Sunni Awakening Councils) or al-Qaeda. I returned. The Sahwa didn't pursue any of the fighters who killed Americans, but instead hunted those who carried operations against the tribes.

Al-Qaeda's biggest strength is its rigidity – its uncompromising, unyielding, non-negotiable stance. If al-Qaeda decides to assassinate someone, they will do it even if ten years have passed. Even if [a politician] leaves office, even if he is on deathbed, they will kill him with a kitchen knife because they see this as a religious obligation, just like praying, fasting and jihad.

I am afraid of being assassinated by those who might believe that I betrayed them. For them, betrayal has many faces, and one is deserting the battlefield. Few people outside my circle of trust know about my involvement with the resistance and I fear them.

Now it's better to stand back and watch because the battle is not over yet. I worry that the Sunni may ask us to take up arms again if Iran gains political power after the US pullout.

I used to support the US withdrawal but now I don't want it to happen so quickly. They (the Americans) should end the Iranian influence before they pull out. If they withdraw and Iran is in Iraq this will create a new Sunni armed uprising.

The US, the Iraqi government and a large number of al-Qaeda fighters damaged Iraq. This period of history

will be revealed by me. I will tell the truth, as I saw it, to future generations.

Abu Najim is the nom de guerre of a former Iraqi member of al-Qaeda in Anbar province. He told his story to an IWPR-trained journalist whose identity is not revealed due to security concerns.

Location: [Iraq](#)

Focus: [Iraq](#)

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