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Backgrounder #10

The Knights of Ameriya: Concerned Citizens in Baghdad

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They call themselves *Farsan Al Rafidayn*, the Knights of the Two Rivers. And in Ameriya, a formerly wealthy district of western Baghdad, they have turned on al Qaeda, routing with the help of the coalition, approximately 90% of the terrorist operatives.¹

The process itself started in 2004. The siege of Fallujah caused an outpouring of al Qaeda members, many of whom came to Ameriya initially seeking shelter, but soon took to 'reforming' the quarter to their liking. Prayer leaders amenable to al Qaeda's message of violent jihad started appearing in the mosques, and jihadist veterans regaled the local young men with stories of American atrocities and the need to fight.

Bodies began to appear shortly thereafter. Al Qaeda fixed its sights on easier targets this time, killing in substantial numbers the Shia residents of Ameriya. Bodies, often bound and mutilated, turned up in the streets - one Shia family was butchered even as they attempted to flee the neighborhood. But Sunnis were not exempt either, especially if they didn't fully adopt al Qaeda's strict Islamic program. Hundreds, if not thousands, died in al Qaeda's quest to retool and reshape the Ameriya populace.²

But, as in so many other locales, al Qaeda significantly over-estimated its mandate for change. The use of "deep buried IEDs" which killed civilians as easily as they killed Coalition forces, the incessant murders, the execution of contractors, and al Qaeda's continued efforts to deny the people essential services created a hostility that boiled over from muted disapproval to armed resistance.

In some ways tied to the larger break of Jaysh al Islami from al Qaeda, and conspicuously non-tribal in organization, the Knights started their operation earlier this year, notifying American forces in Ameriya that they were planning an assault on the terrorists. Coordination between the U.S. and the Knights, according to local sources, solidifies more every week. Currently a U.S. Army company commander is responsible for the daily oversight of the Knights' activities.³ To celebrate their success against al Qaeda and to help build on their developing relationship, U.S. forces and the Knights

came together in late August with a seemingly innocuous, but actually quite significant event - a barbecue.⁴

Now 240 strong, the Knights conduct regular operations, with an American escort. They are not permitted to operate independently any longer. They have also signed a security contract with U.S. officials and are showing other signs of progress, especially in overcoming sectarian division. The leader of the Knights has evidently agreed to allow former Shia residents of Ameriya to return, provided, however, that they agree to not support JAM.⁵

Recognizing the danger of armed groups operating beyond the bounds of the recognized government, coalition forces have already made efforts to incorporate the Knights into legitimate structures. In August several members of the Knights were given training in community policing, ethics, crime scene management and detainee processing by instructors from the Monsour District Police Department.⁶ It is hoped that this will become part of a continuing effort to eventually transform the Knights into a legitimate police force. The members themselves say that this is their intention.

The road to legitimacy, however, is not proving to be easy. Still exclusively Sunni in composition and having just expelled al Qaeda, the Shia-dominated central government of Iraq is hesitant to work with groups like the Knights. In other arenas attempts to bridge the sectarian divide have been described as pleasantly “surprising.” By way of example, the Knights have been able to work well alongside the largely Shia Iraqi Army.⁷

With security returning to Ameriya, citizens have been more willing to help clear their quarter of the remnants of the insurgency. On Aug 14, MND-B soldiers, acting on a tip from a resident, discovered the largest cache yet found in Ameriya.⁸ On the economic front, businesses in Ameriya are reopening and the local government has been able to go out and start repairing broken water lines.⁹ Simple services, like trash collection, long denied by al Qaeda’s violence, have also returned.¹⁰

Challenges remain. In addition to the lingering distrust of the central government for groups like the Knights, power for most business owners is still limited to about an hour a day. But with violence down from 2-3 attacks per day to 1 in four weeks, outside contractors are finally returning, bringing hope that Ameriya can once again thrive.¹¹

¹ Levasseur, David E, Captain. 2007. Interview by author. 1 September 2007.

² Dan Murphy and Awadh al-Tee, “In the struggle for Iraq, tug of war over one Baghdad neighborhood,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 1, 2006.

³ Levasseur, David E, Captain. 2007. Interview by author. 1 September 2007

⁴ Multi-National Division - Baghdad Press Release No. 20070822-10. “U.S., Iraqi, civilian volunteers celebrate success, brotherhood in Ameriya.” Aug 22, 2007.

⁵ Levasseur, David E, Captain. 2007. Interview by author. 1 September 2007

⁶ SGT John Androski. “Volunteer Security Force Receives Police Training,” *1st Cavalry Division Daily Charge*, Aug 24, 2007.

⁷ Levasseur, David E, Captain. 2007. Interview by author. 1 September 2007

⁸ Multi-National Division - Baghdad Press Release No. 20070818-07. “Tip leads to largest cache uncovered in western Baghdad neighborhood.” Aug 18, 2007.

⁹ Levasseur, David E, Captain. 2007. Interview by author. 1 September 2007

¹⁰ SGT Jack Androski. “Ameriya Leaders Establish Trash Collection Program.” *1st Cavalry Division Daily Charge*, Aug 27, 2007.

¹¹ Levasseur, David E, Captain. 2007. Interview by author. 1 September 2007