THE INSTITUTE
FOR THE
STUDY OF WAR
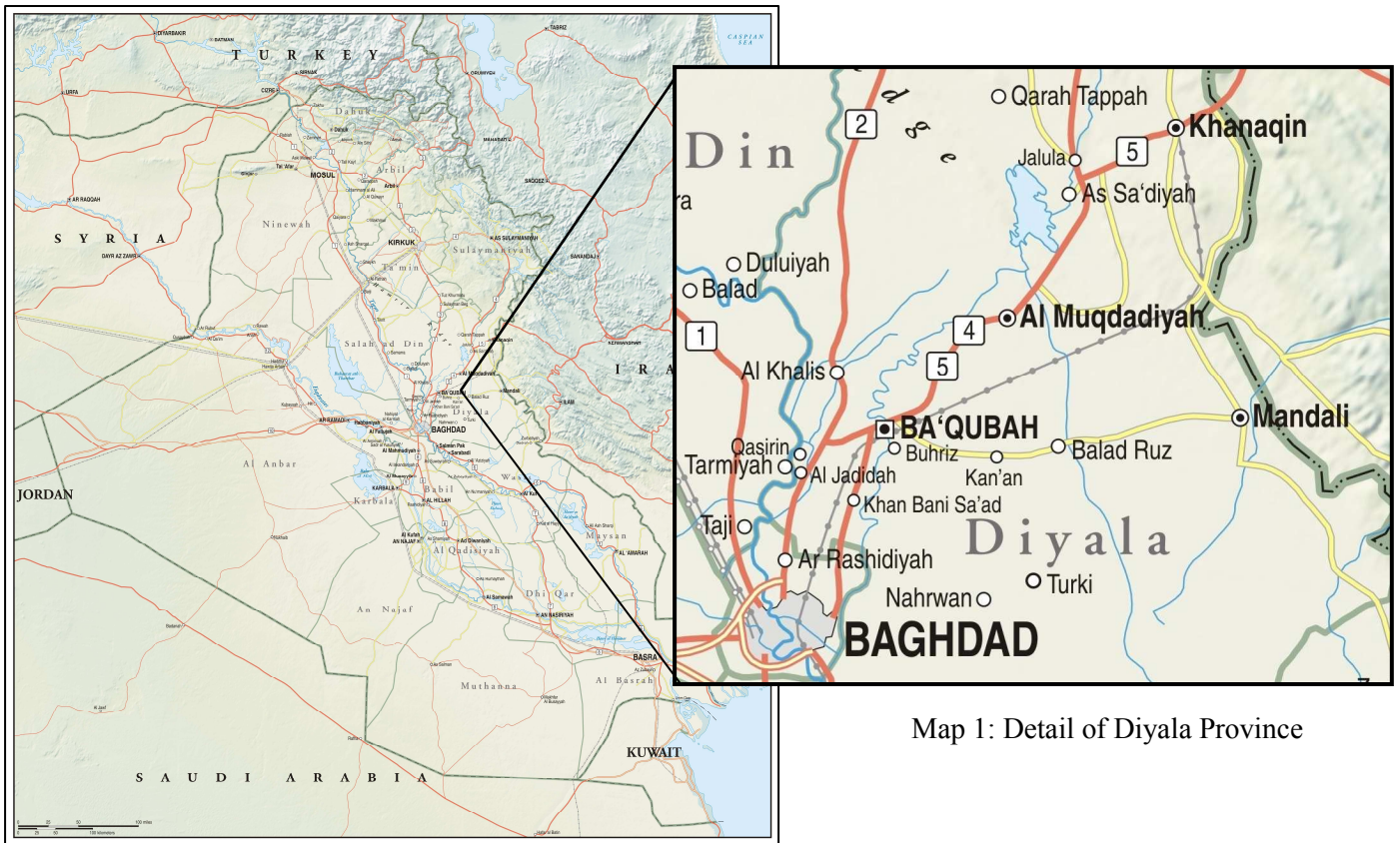
IRAQ
★ ★ ★
PROJECT

Backgrounder #18

December Operations in Muqdadiyah

Eric Hamilton, Researcher, Institute for the Study of War

Diyala province is a critical front in the fight against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In mid-2007 Coalition operations and the Awakening movement in Anbar province drove AQI into Diyala. After a violent spring, U.S. and Iraqi forces successfully cleared Baqubah in June and July 2007. They prevented al Qaeda from establishing new safe havens north and west of that city as they escaped from it. In August, major operations expelled al Qaeda from the villages of the Diyala River Valley. In October, U.S. forces cleared Muqdadiyah, the population center on the river. As a result of this campaign, U.S. and Iraqi forces secured the main roads and settlements in Diyala. Al Qaeda in Iraq regrouped along the remote and sparsely populated Hamrin Ridge and on the east and north sides of Lake Hamrin.

Attacks in Multi-National Division-North (MND-North) have decreased overall, but the north "still has the highest number of attacks in all of Iraq,"[1] according to Major General Mark Hertling, Commander, MND-North and 1st Armored Division. As a result, maintaining security in Diyala, and elsewhere in northern Iraq, required aggressive military operations. To combat the "shift" of AQI to the north, Coalition Forces have conducted two division level operations across northern Iraq since November – Operation Iron Hammer and Operation Iron Reaper. These operations aimed to disrupt and dismantle AQI operations in northern Iraq and set the conditions for tribal reconciliation and the establishment of local governance.[2]

Coalition operations in Diyala in December aimed to maintain the successes of these previous operations. This backgrounder will deal with the operations in the northern Diyala River Valley – specifically the area north of Muqdadiyah, which has been the most active in December 2007.

Map 1: Detail of Diyala Province

Maps by Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping

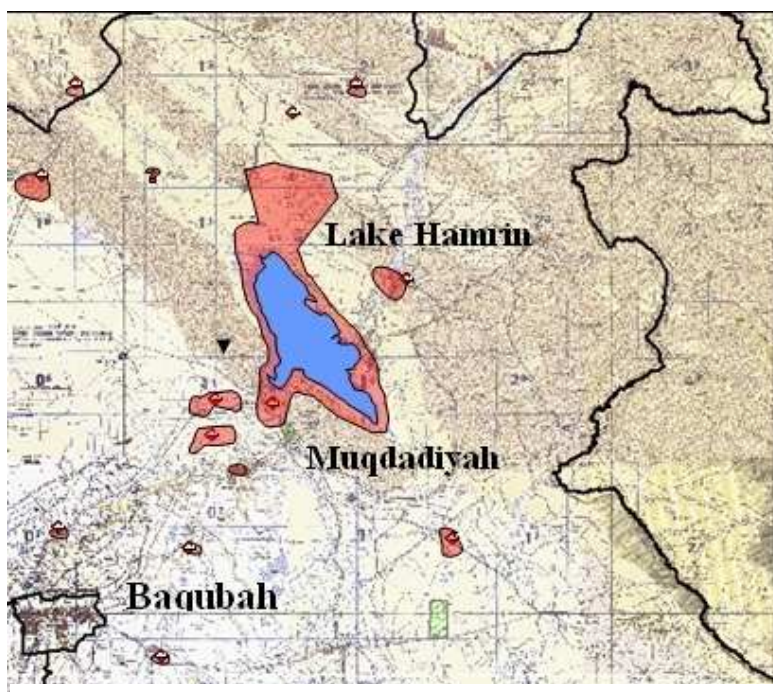### Context of the December Operations

Diyala, and Baqubah in particular, "is an area of significant interest by Al Qaeda."[3] Diyala is considered "a little Iraq" representing many of the major tribal, sectarian and ethnic divisions across the country and has accordingly been a fertile area for both AQI and Shia militias to stoke sectarian violence. In early 2006 Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the former leader of AQI, located his headquarters at Hebheb village northeast of Baqubah and designated Diyala the capital of the caliphate that he hoped to establish in Iraq. Even after he was killed by Coalition Forces in Baqubah in June 2006, Diyala remained a staging ground for AQI and a potential capital for the future envisioned Islamic State of Iraq.

At the end of 2006 AQI had an established presence in Diyala and the Diyala River Valley network was well connected to the Baghdad belt and into the capital. AQI operated relatively freely in: 1. The Khalis Corridor, which connects the Tigris and Diyala River Valleys and runs from Khalis through Hebheb into northern Baghdad. 2. Baqubah, which connects east-west with the Khalis Corridor and south through Khan Bani Sa'ad into eastern Baghdad. 3. Northeast of Baqubah in Muqdadiyah with established lines of communication and facilitation from Lake Hamrin and the Khanaqin area. 4. In Balad Ruz through Turki village to Salman Pak in the southern belt. In the last year Coalition and Iraqi Forces cleared Balad Ruz and the Turki village area in January, Baqubah and Khalis in June, Muqdadiyah in October and disrupted AQI activities throughout the province.[4]

As Coalition forces cleared Khalis, Baqubah and Muqdadiyah, AQI became fragmented. Part of the organization was pushed over to the Tigris River Valley, and part of the organization north to the area above Muqdadiyah stretching up to the Lake Hamrin region and behind the Hamrin Ridge. With Coalition forces in control of Baqubah and Muqdadiyah, AQI has not been able to operate freely within or between both cities. Instead, al Qaeda has been working to reestablish itself to the west and east of Baqubah and to the north of Muqdadiyah.

Muqdadiyah is the bottleneck at the bottom of the northern Diyala River Valley region. It is located about 60 miles northeast of Baghdad above Baqubah on the main highway that leads from Baghdad to Baqubah and then through Muqdadiyah to the north. After Muqdadiyah, the highway leads over the Hamrin Ridge where it splits after Saydiyah into Highway 5, which goes northeast through Khanaqin to the Iranian border, and Highway 4, which goes north through Jalula to Sulaymaniyah. From this region the Hamrin Ridge runs northeast across the middle of northern Iraq to the upper Tigris River just north of Bayji and south of the Za'ab triangle connecting well known areas of operation for AQI. Thus Muqdadiyah is a key link in the strategic line of communications and facilitation in the upper Diyala River Valley.

As AQI has been pushed up to Lake Hamrin, the area north of Muqdadiyah has become an important position for AQI to project force back down the valley into Muqdadiyah. On December 7th a woman detonated an explosives packed vest at a popular committee headquarters in the al Mualimeen neighborhood of Muqdadiyah killing 16 and wounding 27. On the same day a suicide car bomb targeted an army checkpoint just northwest of Muqdadiyah in Mansuriyah killing 10 and wounding 8.[5] It is not clear how severed AQI's area of operations north of Muqdadiyah is from the east-west corridor around Baqubah, but it is possible that AQI is also projecting force from north of Muqdadiyah into Baqubah contributing to the spate of attacks there in the last month.

Map 2: Areas of AQI influence in Northern Diyala Province, November 2007 (Source: MNC-I)

December Operations in Muqdadiyah

During Operation Iron Reaper in early December Coalition Forces swept the area north of Muqdadiyah. The area was an AQI safe haven with multiple AQI operating bases. In operations between December 8th and 11th Coalition Forces discovered a detention and torture complex, based on intelligence provided by local Iraqis. The complex consisted of three detention buildings, one of which doubled as both a headquarters and torture facility. Inside the torture facility soldiers discovered "chains on the walls and ceilings, a bed still hooked up to an electrical system and several blood-stained items."[6] Graffiti written on a wall of one of the buildings said "Long Live the Islamic State" – a clear reference to the caliphate sought by AQI and associated extremist groups.[7]

While clearing the area around the detention and torture complex Coalition forces also found several bodies and an execution site. In total 26 bodies were found in what turned out to be a mass grave. According to Multi-National Forces – Iraq (MNF-Iraq), "evidence of murder, torture and intimidation against local villagers was found throughout the area.[8]" In fact local villagers acknowledged that they knew about the torture site but were previously too intimated by the extremists to go to the authorities.[9]

During these four days of operations Coalition forces also discovered nine weapons caches containing "anti-aircraft weapons, sniper rifles, more than 65 machine guns and pistols, 50 grenades, a surface-to-air missile launcher and platform, 98 personnel mines, 170 pipe bombs, 130 pounds of homemade explosives, 21 rocket propelled grenades, numerous mortar tubes and rounds."[10] These weapons were destroyed to prevent their future use by enemy forces.

Soldiers from Alpha Company, 2-23 Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division take cover behind a barrier while looking for the direction of fire they received, in West Muqdadiyah, Iraq. Photo Credit: Spc. Shawn Cassatt, US Army

At the same time, U.S. and Iraqi Security Forces were also involved in multiple engagements with armed groups of men in the area, indicating that the enemy intended to defend

the position. Upon returning to the area on December 12th and 13th to follow up on the previous operations Coalition forces again were involved in engagements with armed groups of men.[11] Instead of fleeing in the face of Coalition operations between December 8th and 11th, the succeeding engagements on December 12th and 13th indicate that the enemy was reinforcing the area.

Based on tips from local Iraqis, the finding of the detention and torture complex, the mass grave, the weapons caches, and the large presence of armed individuals engaging Coalition forces, the area was confirmed to be "an al-Qaeda operations area used for training and facilitation activities." [12] As a result, Coalition forces conducted a series of coordinated operations aimed at disrupting AQI activities north of Muqdadiyah that began on December 14th.

During operations between December 14th and 17th Coalition forces focused on the area north and northeast of Muqdadiyah, targeting the groups of armed men involved in the recent firefights, which included an AQI leader in the Diyala River Valley network and his associates and a cell leader operating in Shirween. During all four days of operations Coalition forces were attacked with small arms fire and on one occasion engaged two individuals armed with suicide vests. Thirteen terrorists were killed and 5 suspects were detained. Two safe houses were discovered and a vehicle packed with explosives was also destroyed.[13] Coinciding with these operations, Coalition forces lost an MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicle while it was conducting an armed reconnaissance mission near Muqdadiyah on December 17.[14]

Then on December 22nd Coalition Forces launched a four day operation to continue to disrupt the AQI network around Muqdadiyah, based on intelligence gathered during the previous operations and intelligence provided by local Iraqi citizens. During the course of the multi-day operation, Coalition forces were involved in multiple engagements with groups of armed men, during which 12 terrorists were killed and 37 suspects detained.[15]

Coalition forces also discovered a number of important finds during the four day operation. On December 22nd, the first day of the operation, a local Iraqi citizen led Coalition forces to a compound "assessed to be a terrorist medical facility, complete with surgical equipment, numerous medical supplies and medication." [16] Ammunition, maps of the area, and instructions for making improvised explosive devices (IED) were also discovered in the compound. The following day Coalition forces discovered a building used as an AQI car-bomb making factory. Inside the building they found numerous car-bomb making materials, in addition to a hostage locked inside a room. Over the four days of operations, two buildings rigged with explosives, five additional buildings, a water tower used as a sniper position, and eight weapons caches were destroyed. A number of hidden sites used to conduct IED and small arms attacks were also discovered and destroyed. One of these sites had wires running through a hole that looked out on a nearby intersection and was assessed to be "a firing point for IED attacks." [17]

Following up on these operations, Coalition forces continued to target the AQI network in the northeast region of the Diyala River Valley. On December 28th and 29th Coalition forces again targeted a group of individuals associated with those involved in recent engagements during previous operations north of Muqdadiyah. In operations on both days armed individuals

fled when Coalition forces arrived at their target areas. Eight terrorists were killed and 6 detained in these operations. One building and a number of small arms materials were also destroyed to prevent their further use.[18] On the 30th Coalition forces swept the area north of Muqdadiyah again targeting alleged associates of the individuals killed on the 29th. Coalition forces were met by enemy fire and killed two terrorists in the ensuing engagement. Upon clearing the area seven suspected individuals were detained and two weapons caches were destroyed.[19]

Coalition forces continued operations against AQI north of Muqdadiyah in the new year. On January 2nd Coalition forces detained four individuals associated with the network north of Muqdadiyah.[20] On January 3rd an AQI safe house in Muqdadiyah was targeted in the morning and then another terrorist group operating in the region was engaged in the afternoon. In these two operations 7 terrorists were killed. [21] The next day, on January 4th, Coalition forces conducted two coordinated operations north of Muqdadiyah targeting individuals associated with "the leader allegedly responsible for directing a large terrorist group that conducts executions in the region." [22] Intelligence reports indicated that this group had executed two individuals in the previous few days and was the same group involved in firefights with Coalition forces in the preceding weeks. In the two separate operations Coalition forces killed 2 terrorists, detained 2 others and destroyed an AQI safe house. [23]

A U.S. Army Soldier from Alpha Company, 2-23rd Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, keeps his weapon aimed while his partner confronts a local man with a weapon approaching them from the vine groves in west Muqdadiyah, Iraq, Dec. 12, 2007. Photo Credit: Spc. Shawn Cassatt, US Army

The operations north of Muqdadiyah confirmed that AQI had regrouped there in large numbers. AQI set up a detention and torture complex to intimidate and control the local population. Safe houses and a car bomb making factory were established to conduct operations. And numerous weapons and explosives caches were distributed around the area to supply enemy fighters. Moreover, the firefights immediately after Coalition operations between December 8th and 11th confirmed that AQI intended to reinforce the area. The repeated engagements over the course of the entire month indicate it was an area they were willing to defend at high costs.

It is likely that AQI was planning to use the area to launch offensive operations back down the Diyala River Valley. Two attacks into Muqdadiyah and Mansuriyah just prior to Coalition operations demonstrated this capability. In particular, AQI likely intended to use a secure base of operations to construct Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED) for use in attacks these attacks as suggested by the VBIED used in the December 7th attack against an army checkpoint in Mansuriyah and the car bomb factory and car bomb making materials discovered on December 23rd. After the attacks on December 7th the aggressive pursuit of AQI by Coalition Forces decreased the organization's ability to continue to project force into Muqdadiyah and Mansuriyah.

Jalula and Saydiyah

During the operations north of Muqdadiyah, Coalition forces targeted a number of individuals "believed to be involved in the terrorist networks operating in the Hamrin Mountains and Diyala River Valley region." [24] At the same time, a number of facilitators operating both above Lake Hamrin and down in the Diyala River Valley region were also detained north of Jalula and in Saydiyah during December. Jalula and Saydiyah are important cities on the road network leading north to cities like Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk and east to Khanaqin and Mandali on the border with Iran. This road network is an important part of AQI's lines of communication, supply and facilitation in Diyala.

On December 8th Coalition forces targeted an AQI member north of Jalula "believed to be involved in the terrorist network operating in the Diyala River Valley." [25] On December 14th north of Jalula Coalition forces captured a "wanted individual believed to be involved in facilitating materials for use in al-Qaeda in Iraq attacks against Coalition forces." [26] And then on January 2 north of Jalula again Coalition forces captured "a wanted individual believed to be involved in the facilitation of foreign terrorists and weapons for Ansar al Sunna groups operating in Kirkuk." This individual was also "associated with several terrorists operating in the Diyala area." [27]

In Saydiyah on December 18th Iraqi Security Forces and U.S. Special Forces detained an Iraqi Police Captain "believed to support al-Qaeda in Iraq activities by facilitating early warning and intelligence operations for the terrorist organization." [28] Then on January 4th Coalition forces captured "a wanted individual believed to be involved in an al-Qaeda in Iraq media cell north of Muqdadiyah." This individual was also associated with other terrorists operating in the Diyala River Valley region. Three other individuals were also detained during this operation.[29]

The activity around Jalula and Saydiyah show that AQI not only attempted to reestablish itself north of Muqdadiyah, but also around Lake Hamrin and in the cities on the main road network in this area. The individuals picked up north of Muqdadiyah that were also operating in the Hamrin area and the individuals picked up in Jalula and Saydiyah involved in operations and facilitation below Hamrin suggest that regular movement and facilitation was occurring between these areas. It also sheds light on the possible collaboration between Ansar al Sunna and AQI who are both using the same networks and lines of operation in the region.

Conclusion

After a series of large offensive operations in the last few months, AQI has been fragmented and stifled in northern Diyala by the bottleneck created by Coalition control of Muqdadiyah. AQI has attempted to reestablish itself with a base of operations north of Muqdadiyah and a facilitation network up through Jalula. From here the organization continues to wage its campaign of terror and intimidation against local citizens as demonstrated by the discovery of the detention and torture complex on December 8th – 11th and local Iraqis accounts of the extremists. AQI was attempting to use this area to establish a base of operations from which to project force into Muqdadiyah and Mansuriyah.

Coalition operations north of Muqdadiyah have now been ongoing since the beginning of December and are likely to continue as Coalition forces continue to target and disrupt AQI activities in the area. We should expect to hear more about December's operations in the coming weeks and see more operations unfold as Coalition forces continue to degrade the AQI network in the Diyala River Valley.

---

[1] Major General Mark Hertling, Briefing, Pentagon Briefing Room, November 19, 2007.

[2] See the Institute for the Study of War Website www.understandingwar.org for more information on Operation Iron Hammer and Operation Iron Reaper.

[3] Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Director of Communications, Deputy Spokesman, Multi-National Corps – Iraq, Operational Update, December 30, 2007.

[4] See Iraq Reports I, IV and VII.

[5] Ali al-Tuwajri, "26 Killed in Iraq Bomb Attacks on Anti-Qaeda Fronts," Agence France Presse – English, December 7, 2007.

[6] Multi-National Corps – Iraq Press Release 20071220-03. "MND-N Soldiers Find Atrocity Site, Torture Complex and Weapons Cache's During Operation Iron Reaper," December 20, 2007.

[7] Bradley Brooks, "Torture Chamber Found in Iraq," Associated Press, December 20, 2007.

[8] Multi-National Corps – Iraq Press Release 20071220-03. "MND-N Soldiers Find Atrocity Site, Torture Complex and Weapons Cache's During Operation Iron Reaper," December 20, 2007.

[9] Bradley Brooks, "Torture Chamber Found in Iraq," Associated Press, December 20, 2007.

[10] Multi-National Corps – Iraq Press Release 20071220-03. "MND-N Soldiers Find Atrocity Site, Torture Complex and Weapons Cache's During Operation Iron Reaper," December 20, 2007.

[11] Multi-National Corps – Iraq Press Release 20071220-03. "MND-N Soldiers Find Atrocity Site, Torture Complex and Weapons Cache's During Operation Iron Reaper," December 20, 2007; Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071226b. "Coalition Forces Target Terrorists in Diyala, Tarmiyah," December 26.

[12] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071226b. "Coalition Forces Target Terrorists in Diyala, Tarmiyah," December 26, 2007.

[13] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071215a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Operations," December 15, 2007; Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071216a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Operations," December 16, 2007; Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071217a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Operations," December 17, 2007.

[14] Release 071217.01

[15] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071227c. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala," December 27, 2007.

[16] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071227c. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala," December 27, 2007.

[17] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071227c. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala," December 27, 2007.

[18] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071228a. "Coalition forces Disrupt al-Qaeda in Iraq Operations," December 28, 2007; Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071230a. "Coalition forces Disrupt al-Qaeda in Iraq Operations," December 30, 2007.

[19] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071230a. "Coalition forces Disrupt al-Qaeda in Iraq Operations," December 30, 2007.

[20] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A080102a. "Coalition Targets al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala, Samarra," January 2, 2008.

[21] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release 080103b. "Coalition Forces Target al-Qaeda Safe House," January 3, 2008.

[22] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A080104a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala, Mosul," January 4, 2007.

[23] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A080104a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala, Mosul," January 4, 2007.

[24] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071223a. "Coalition Forces Target al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala," December 23, 2007.

[25] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071208a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Networks," December 8, 2007.

[26] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A071214a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Operations," December 14, 2007.

[27] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A080102a. "Coalition Targets al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala, Samarra," January 2, 2008.

[28] Multi-National Corps – Iraq Press Release 20071218-04. "Iraqi Forces, U.S. Special Forces Detain Extremist Leader and Corrupt Officer in Separate Operations," December 18, 2007.

[29] Multi-National Force – Iraq Press Release A080104a. "Coalition Forces Disrupt al-Qaeda Networks in Diyala, Mosul," January 4, 2007.