

The perception among observers as 2005 ended was that a network of like-minded jihadists was carrying out the insurgency in Iraq, with AQI as perhaps first among equals. In October 2004, Zarqawi had pledged loyalty to bin Laden, and bin Laden returned the favor by anointing Zarqawi his representative. The association with bin Laden improved Zarqawi's access to outside sources of income, though the boost to recruiting was more modest, since Zarqawi already had a good pipeline. Yet, such an endorsement from the outside fed the perception that Zarqawi led a group that did not necessarily have Iraq's interests in mind.

The Tide Turns

AQI's thrust for leadership of the Sunni insurgent movement was first made evident in the January 2006 formation of the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC). The council included AQI as its de facto core, plus Victorious Sect and four lesser-known allied groups.⁹ It attempted to put an Iraqi face on an insurgency that was initiated by non-Iraqis (notably Zarqawi, a Jordanian). In October 2006, AQI formed yet another front group, merging MSC with four brigades (Fursan al-Tawhid, Knights of Monotheism, Millah Ibrahim, and Religion of Ibrahim) as well as some tribal groups.¹⁰ The result was the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which was the first step toward al Qa'ida's goal of establishing a caliphate in the region. Effective assimilation meant the end of some insurgent groups as independent entities. The reference to brigades suggests that their efforts to assimilate complete insurgent groups, such as IAI or the Mujahideen Army had failed, but they were able to peel

⁹ Not every group listed in the MSC roster (or its successor, ISI) had actually agreed to pledge loyalty.

¹⁰ Although the original October 13th announcement claimed Al-Fatihin as an alliance member, Al-Fatihin denied as much, leading MSC to counterclaim that the denial came from only one of Al-Fatihin's five brigades. Al-Fatihin continued to produce its own attack claims without reference to ISI.