

By Scott Stewart

On Oct. 25, militants in Iraq conducted a coordinated attack in which they detonated large vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) at the federal Ministry of Justice building and the Baghdad Provincial Council building nearly simultaneously. The two ministries are located in central Baghdad near the Green Zone and are just over a quarter of a mile apart.

The bomb-laden vehicles were driven by suicide operatives who managed to detonate them in close proximity to the exterior security walls of the targeted buildings. The attack occurred just before 10:30 a.m. on a workday, indicating that it was clearly designed to cause maximum casualties -- which it did. The twin bombing killed more than 150 people and wounded hundreds of others, making it the deadliest attack in Baghdad since the April 18, 2007, attacks against Shiite neighborhoods that killed more than 180 people.

The Oct. 25 attack was very similar in design and target set to an attack on Aug. 19, in which coordinated VBIEDs were detonated at the Iraqi Foreign Ministry and Finance Ministry buildings, along with a string of smaller attacks in other areas of the city. The Foreign Ministry building is located in the same part of Baghdad as the Ministry of Justice and the Baghdad Provincial Council, while the Finance Ministry is located a short distance away and across the river. The Aug. 19 attacks, which also were launched shortly after 10 a.m., killed at least 95 people and wounded hundreds.

On Oct. 26, in a statement posted to the jihadist al-Fallujah Web site, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) claimed responsibility for the attack against the Justice Ministry and Baghdad Provincial Council. The group had also previously claimed responsibility for the Aug. 19 attack against the Foreign and Finance ministries. Judging from the targets chosen and the use of suicide bombers, it is likely that the ISI was indeed responsible for both attacks.

These recent attacks in Baghdad reveal a great deal about the ISI and its capabilities. They also provide a glimpse of what might be in store for Iraq in the run-up to the 2010 national parliamentary and general elections, which are scheduled to be held in January.

The Islamic State of Iraq

The ISI is not a single entity but a coalition of groups that includes al Qaeda's Iraqi franchise. This coalition was formed as a result of a conscious decision by jihadist leaders to put an Iraqi face on jihadist efforts in the country rather than have the movement characterized by foreign leaders such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. This transformation was illustrated by the fact that an Iraqi named Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was named to lead the ISI and that Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the Egyptian leader of al Qaeda in Iraq who succeeded Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pledged his allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the ISI in November 2006. This change enabled the ISI coalition

to build stronger ties to the local Sunni tribal elders and to expand its support network in the Sunni-controlled areas of the country.

This link to the local Sunni leadership backfired when the Awakening Councils composed of Sunni Iraqis -- many of whom were former militants -- helped clamp down on the ISI. Because of this, large suicide attacks are less common than they were at the peak of the insurgency (and of overall violence) in 2007. But the Sunni elders never allowed the ISI to be totally dismantled. They saw the coalition as a useful tool in their negotiations with the Shia and Kurds, to ensure that they got what they saw as their fair share of power.

During the crackdown on the ISI that accompanied the U.S. surge of troops into Iraq, many of the foreign fighters were forced to leave the country and flee to greener pastures (many of them went to Pakistan and Afghanistan). However, the core jihadist operatives associated with ISI who survived and remained in Iraq were both battle-hardened and highly skilled after years of combat against coalition forces. As seen by these recent attacks, the ISI retains a great deal of its capability. It has demonstrated that it is still able to gather intelligence, plan attacks, acquire ordnance, build reliable IEDs and execute spectacular attacks in the center of Baghdad against government ministry buildings.

Tactical Clues

A tactical look at the Oct. 25 attack can tell us a great deal about the state of ISI. Perhaps the most obvious thing that can be ascertained is that ISI appears to have no problem securing large quantities of explosives. The two vehicles used in the attack are reported to have contained approximately 1,500 and 2,200 pounds of high explosives. (The larger of the two vehicles was apparently used to target the Justice Ministry.) The photos and videos of the two attack sites would seem roughly consistent with those estimates. From the damage done, it is obvious that the devices employed in the attack were very large and not merely 50 or 100 pounds of high explosives stuffed in the trunk of a car. The ISI not only needs money to purchase such explosive material (or a facility to produce it), but it also must be able to discreetly transport and store the material. So we are talking about vehicles for moving explosives around, places for caching the material and shops where the VBIEDs can be fabricated without detection.

It is also important to note that the two devices functioned as designed -- they did not malfunction or have a low-order detonation where only a portion of the main charge exploded. Whoever built these two large devices (and the two from the August attack) not only had access to thousands of pounds of high explosives but knew what they were doing. Assembling a large VBIED and getting it to actually function as designed is not as easy as it might seem; it takes a great deal of expertise. And the ISI's various bombmakers have accumulated a wealth of bombmaking experience while constructing IEDs of all sorts -- including a large number of massive VBIEDs -- used in many of the hundreds, if not thousands, of terrorist attacks that the ISI's constituent groups have conducted since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Reports suggest that the devices used in the Oct. 25 attack were hidden in two small passenger buses, and that those buses were new enough to blend into the traffic in the government sector

of Baghdad. It appears that the ISI used the buses to get around the greater scrutiny paid to vehicles used in past attacks like cargo and tanker trucks. It will be interesting to see whether the buses can be traced and where the ISI obtained them. Following the attack, small buses will now be placed under heightened scrutiny -- meaning we can anticipate that the group may switch to another type of vehicle for the next round of attacks. (Jihadists in Iraq have used everything from bicycles to ambulances for their VBIEDs.)

We have not seen a final report on how the completed devices got to Baghdad -- whether they were manufactured outside Baghdad and then smuggled through the various security checkpoints, or if they were constructed in Baghdad from explosives smuggled into the city in smaller quantities. There are some Iraqi politicians who are saying that devices of this size could only have passed through security with inside collaboration, and there are certainly some members of the Iraqi security forces who are either sympathetic to the jihadist cause or have been placed into the security forces to act as agents of influence. However, if the explosives were well-hidden in a nice, new passenger bus with proper documentation, or if the explosives were brought into the city in smaller quantities and the VBIEDs were constructed in Baghdad, it is quite possible that the attackers did not require high-level inside assistance to conduct the attack.

Of course, if the ISI did not have high-level inside assistance for this attack, then it means that it possesses a sophisticated network capable of gathering intelligence, planning attacks and acquiring and smuggling large quantities of explosives into the heart of Baghdad without detection -- which is not an inconsequential thing. If the ISI conducted this attack without any significant inside help, the problem is far greater than if it had; regardless of political settlements or purges of the security forces, the network will remain in place. It will be much harder to ferret out if it is external.

The ministry buildings that were attacked were secured by exterior security perimeters that prevented the vehicles carrying the explosive devices from getting right up next to them. However, they were not hardened facilities and did not present a truly hard target for the attackers. The buildings were standard office buildings built during more peaceful times in Iraq and had lots of windows. They were also built in close proximity to the street and did not have the standoff distance required to provide protection against a large VBIED. Standoff distance had been provided for these buildings previously when the streets around them were closed to traffic, but the streets were opened up a few months back by the Iraqi government as a sign that things were returning to normal in Baghdad. In past VBIED attacks in Baghdad, the ISI was forced to attack soft targets or targets on the perimeter of secure zones. The opening of many streets to traffic in 2009 has expanded the group's targeting possibilities -- especially if it can use large devices to overcome the limited protection that short standoff distance affords at targets like those recently struck.

Hardened construction, protective window film, and perimeter walls and barricades are useful, and such measures can be effective in protecting a facility against a small IED. They also certainly saved lives on Oct. 25 by not allowing the VBIEDs to pull up right next to the facilities, where they could have caused more direct structural damage and killed more people inside the buildings. (It appears that many of those killed were commuters on the street.) However,

distance is the most critical thing that protects a facility against an attack with a very large VBIED, and the ministry buildings attacked by the ISI on Oct. 25 lacked sufficient standoff distance to protect them from 1,500- and 2,200-pound VBIEDs.

In practical terms, there are very few capital cities anywhere in the world that provide the space for effective standoff distance for their ministry-level buildings. Even in Washington, streets had to be closed to traffic around buildings like the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon to provide adequate standoff. There is often a great deal of tension between city officials who desire a smooth flow of traffic and security officials attempting to guard facilities against attack.

Following the Oct. 25 attacks, the Iraqi government has increased security around government facilities (as it did after the Aug. 19 attack), but the steps taken are mainly just short-term security measures that tend to gloss over the larger long-term problem of balancing security with feelings of normalcy in Baghdad and throughout Iraq.

Implications

Since August, the ISI has attacked the Iraqi Finance Ministry, Foreign Ministry and Justice Ministry and the Baghdad Provincial Council, and these attacks are being used to send a number of signals.

First, the jihadists in the ISI are attempting to split the existing power-sharing agreement in Baghdad. If the Sunni, Shia and Kurds can reach a final understanding, the jihadists lose their value as a bargaining lever for the Sunni elders and will rapidly lose their operational space (and likely their lives). Second, if the Sunni, Shia and Kurds can form a stable government, the jihadists lose all hope of forming their aspired-for caliphate in Iraq. The ISI needs chaos in Iraq to have any hope of stepping into power like the Taliban did in Afghanistan.

The local Sunni leaders likely are providing at least some level of support to the ISI -- or, at the very least, they are turning a blind eye to the various ISI activities that are almost certainly based out of Sunni-controlled areas. The Sunni sheikhs are using the ISI to send a message to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that the Sunnis must be accommodated if there is to be real peace and stability in Iraq. One sticking point for the Sunni elders is that a large percentage of the Awakening Council members have not been integrated into the security forces as promised. Of course, the Shia and Kurds then use these attacks as an excuse for why the Sunnis cannot be trusted -- and it all becomes a vicious circle.

The political situation that is driving the security problems in Iraq is complex and cannot be easily resolved. There are many internal and external players who are all trying to influence the final outcome in Iraq for their own benefit. In addition to the internal squabbles over power and oil wealth, Iraq is also a proxy battleground where the United States and Iran are attempting to maintain and assert influence. Regional players like the Saudis, Syrians and Turks also will take a keen interest in the elections and will certainly attempt to influence them to whatever degree they can. The end result of all this meddling is that peace and stability will be hard to obtain.

This means that terrorist attacks likely will continue for the foreseeable future, including attacks by the ISI. If the attacks in August and October are any indication, the remainder of the run-up to the January elections could prove quite bloody.

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