



## Al-Qaeda in Iraq Turns to Extortion

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MOSUL, Iraq (AFP) -- Al-Qaeda has increasingly turned to extortion and organised crime to fund its activities, with businesses bearing the brunt of intimidation, US and Iraqi commanders in northern Iraq told AFP.

While the number of attacks in Mosul and the surrounding province of Nineveh has dropped and the smuggling of weapons across Iraq's western border with Syria has declined, threats and coercion targeting locals remains commonplace.

"Everyone pays, and no one objects or delays because their vehicles will be seized and their shops closed, until they pay up," said Abdullah Ahmed Ali, who owns a market stall in the Prophet Younis neighbourhood of central Mosul.

Trucks carrying food from Syria or Baghdad are levied a 200-dollar charge, while smaller vehicles incur a 100-dollar fee. Outright refusal is not an option, the 44-year-old Ali said.

"Those who refuse to pay," he added, "end up like Abu Mohammed" a fellow shopkeeper who, according to Ali, reputedly declined to hand over money to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Al-Qaeda's front group.

Abu Mohammed was shot dead, and his son was injured, six months ago.

Tales of similar intimidation abound in Mosul -- which translates loosely as "the junction" in Arabic, and for centuries has been a Middle East trading hub.

The city, however, is now better known as a centre for the smuggling of illicit goods from Syria -- mostly innocuous items such as cigarettes, but also occasionally weapons.

Captain Keith Benoit, commander of the 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment's Apache Troop, which jointly patrols much of western Nineveh with Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers, said there were "weapons facilitation" problems.

"You also see extortion -- they have resorted to that because flows of military-grade explosives and weapons have been closed off," he said.

Benoit compared organised crime in Nineveh to a well-known scene in the 1972 film "The Godfather."

"It's like the horse's head in the bed," Benoit said, while on a joint patrol of the village of Ayn-Zalah north of Mosul. "They'll threaten you -- 'cooperate with us, or we'll kill you'."

Iraqi police also confirmed the ISI's use of extortion tactics.

"They either get taxes from people by force, or they get help from (people in other) countries to fund their attacks," said Colonel Hamid Abdullah, who works in a combined US-Iraqi-Kurdish military centre on Contingency Operating Site Marez, an American army base on Mosul's outskirts.

According to US figures, attacks are sharply down in Nineveh -- 24 roadside bombs were reported from February to April, but just six were counted in the subsequent three months.

Violence in Mosul has also dropped in the longer term, according to figures from Iraq Body Count -- a British non-governmental organisation -- though the city remains on IBC's reckoning much more violent than Baghdad and the rest of Iraq on a per capita basis.

Mosul saw its lowest death toll last year since 2006, which is as far back as the IBC data goes, and the first six months of this year saw 20 percent fewer fatalities than the same half-year period in 2009.

"They (ISI) are mutating into a completely criminal, monetarily driven organisation with very very loose ideological drive and purpose," said Colonel Charles Sexton, commander of the US army's 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division on COS Marez.

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"Their primary focus is to gain money for their leadership and their underlings, and what we're seeing is people attempting to better themselves economically as opposed to any kind of ideological, religious bend."

During a July 27 patrol of west Mosul's Maaj market, traders complained of extortion to the commander of Iraq's 3rd Federal Police Division, Staff Major General Mohammed Latif, according to US Lieutenant Colonel Dan Reid.

"General Mohammed pulled all the shop owners out (and told them) ... 'Call me directly if anybody tries to extort money from you because the money that is being extorted is going either towards organised crime or towards terrorist activities'," Reid said.

"The results of that have been a few phone calls from these guys, a little bit more information, but no big catches or anything like that, yet."

Reid, who leads a team of US military advisers, said cooperation and the sharing of intelligence among the city's various security forces remains poor, hampering wider efforts to quell crime.

"Nobody trusts anybody here," he said. "If you're not wearing the same uniform as me, then you're not trustworthy, is kind of the thought process."

Mistrust also exists between traders and the security forces.

Ameen Jameel Ahmed, who operates a neighbourhood generator in Mosul, said he had to pay 50 dollars a month to insurgents claiming to be from ISI.

He has no option but to do so.

"Local officials know very well what is going on," the 37-year-old said. "If there was a strong security force with good intelligence, they would be able to arrest them. No one refuses. Everyone pays."

By Prashant Rao

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