

In Iraqi Danger Zone, Violence Resists a Timetable



Holly Pickett for The New York Times

A vendor waiting for customers at his shop in Mosul, Iraq. Whatever the reason, no one has been able to quell Mosul's violence.

By [TIMOTHY WILLIAMS](#)

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MOSUL, Iraq — Staff Col. Ismail Khalif Jasim, the top intelligence officer in Nineveh Province, was scrutinizing faces last week as he walked through what the police say is the most dangerous neighborhood in [Iraq](#)'s most violent city. The place is so risky that some of his colleagues apologetically offered reasons why they would be unable to accompany him there.

One major admitted he was simply too scared. He was forced, though, along with more than 200 other soldiers and police officers, to go to the neighborhood, Amil. Iraqi security forces claim to control it. But in reality Amil is in the throes of another spate of killings, as the American military works to root out Islamist militants from the area before it reduces the number of its troops in Iraq to 50,000 from about 90,000 by the end of August.

Colonel Jasim's visit there was aimed at persuading groups of stone-faced residents to cooperate with the Iraqi Army — an entity almost universally loathed here for its unapologetically rough treatment of the area's people. But, he suggested, the authorities were better than the insurgents holed up there.

"They are not just outlaws," the colonel was saying, suggesting that they were far more dangerous and had none of the romance sometimes associated with criminals. The men regarded him impassively.

“They say you have to slaughter soldiers and police,” he said. “We found information that they want to slaughter more people. Do you want more people killed?”

No luck. The men did not answer. The colonel, his sunglasses hiding his eyes but not the look of contempt that curled around his lips, moved on to the next cluster of men.

Soldiers walked on either side of him, and in front and behind. Armored police and military vehicles were parked on every corner in the neighborhood, its entrance points blocked to traffic. The street had been strung with concertina wire. Only a few people dared to leave their houses.

Amil is a stronghold for [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#), a largely homegrown group of Sunni insurgents, but that is something the neighborhood does not want to discuss. Questions about the group elicit only nervous, evasive responses in the largely Sunni Arab enclave. No one dares mention its name.

During the past several weeks, United States forces have aggressively begun to try to root out Qaeda operatives in Amil before the last of the American combat troops leaves. This month, the American military said in a statement that it had arrested a man who had committed “assassinations against Iraqi judicial and police officials, and has allegedly coordinated improvised explosive device attacks against” the Iraqi police and army. The man’s identity was not released.

Four days later, gunfire in an adjoining neighborhood killed two Iraqi police officers on patrol. The same day, in central Mosul, the deputy governor survived a bomb blast that demolished his armored car. The next day, a bomb in a public market near Amil killed 2 people and wounded 27.

Several days later, United States forces announced the arrest in Mosul of another senior member of [Al Qaeda](#), along with several other men.

The violence goes on, however, seemingly unabated. There are car bombs every day. Some are defused. Some blow up.

Colonel Jasim’s patrol posed a specific problem for people in Amil: Being seen talking to an Iraqi Army or police officer, regular targets for Al Qaeda, would mean trouble. Talking to an American soldier, even exchanging hellos, could mean torture and death.

“We believe they have many supporters in the neighborhood, so we’re afraid of them,” Majid Riyadh Ahmed, 40, said about a group of men who in broad daylight recently gunned down a politician on a sidewalk.

“It is a hot spot,” he said, using the term that has become synonymous with Amil.

Like many here, Mr. Ahmed differentiated between the types of violence that take place.

“There are some terror actions and there are some jihad actions,” he said. Jihad actions are those aimed at American forces or their Iraqi security force allies. Terror actions are those directed at residents.

Asked if he felt safe, Mr. Ahmed, a father of four, did not hesitate. “I am scared,” he said.

On this warm morning, Amil was swarming with soldiers and police officers. People peered through their windows and expressed amazement. They said there were normally very few security force

members around, leaving members of Al Qaeda to roam freely, extorting shop owners and intimidating everyone else.

“I’m wondering why the police, who know this area is dangerous, don’t move on it,” one resident said.

But Atheel al-Nujaifi, the provincial governor, said the issue was more complicated.

“The security forces are deployed everywhere in Mosul, but there are areas we call unsafe because it is easy for Al Qaeda to commit actions, and then to hide among the people in those areas,” he said. “A hot spot doesn’t mean there isn’t any army or police. The neighborhood is under the control of the federal police.”

He said Al Qaeda was able to operate in Amil because “the people are either sympathetic or afraid.”

Whatever the reason, no one has been able to quell Mosul’s violence: It is one of the few urban areas in Iraq where American combat troops patrol the streets. Some 18 Iraqi Army battalions are stationed in the city, and hundreds of Iraqi police officers staff checkpoints.

But in Amil, people say they want nothing to do with the Iraqi Army in particular — which in Mosul is composed primarily of Shiites from southern Iraq. Residents complain the soldiers do not understand their culture, and are rude at best, brutal at worst, suspecting everyone in the neighborhood of being a member of Al Qaeda.

“There’s no trust between the security forces and the people,” said one resident, Hazim Mahmud al-Sahan, whose son was recently killed in Amil, not far from an Iraqi Army checkpoint.

For years, though, the greater scorn was poured on Americans. But in a few months they will be gone, it seems regardless of whether places like Amil descend into worse violence.

“There will be greater problems when the Americans leave,” said Didar Abdulla al-Zibari, a member of the local provincial council. He paused for effect, before saying that America “will be blamed” for leaving.

Zaid Thaker contributed reporting.

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