

1920s Revolution Brigades

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 2003

Disbanded: Likely inactive

First Attack: October 2004: The 1920s RB set off a car-bomb outside the Baghdad offices of the Al-Arabiya television station. (19 Wounded, 7 Killed)¹

Latest Attack: June 2014: The 1920s RB assisted ISIS in the invasion of Mosul. (Unknown Wounded, Unknown Killed)²

OVERVIEW

Founded in 2003, the 1920s Revolution Brigades (1920s RB) was a nationalist, Sunni organization whose main goal was to free Iraq of foreign occupation, particularly from American military and political presence. Specifically, the group sought to eliminate the outside influence of the United States and Iran, as well as remove the Iraqi President conspiring with these foreign entities. Once Iraq was free of this outside influence, the 1920s RB aimed to install a true Iraqi government guided by Sunni Islamist principles. Since 2014, the 1920s RB conducted fewer operations due to the rise of ISIS but maintained an operational stronghold in former Republican Guard communities in Eastern Baqubah until 2016. As of February 2019, there had been no recent activity by the 1920s RB. The group is likely inactive, as there have been no significant attacks since 2014, and no recent publications or political activity from the group since 2017.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

In 2003, former members of the Iraqi military founded the 1920s Revolution Brigades (1920s RB), an Iraqi nationalist group guided by Sunni Islamist principles. The group's

name comes from the 1920 Iraqi uprising against British colonial occupation.³ Unlike other groups in the region that seek to establish an Islamic caliphate, the 1920s RB strove to purge Iraq of any foreign influence, which it saw primarily emanating from the U.S. and Iran, and to create a new state. Between 2003 and 2007, the 1920s RB focused the majority of its resources on attacking U.S. soldiers and bases. The group also conducted many successful attacks against various foreign targets, such as the explosion of a car bomb outside the Al-Arabiya television station and the kidnapping of a Sudanese interpreter working for an American company.⁴ The most widely publicized attack attributed to the group in this period was the alleged capture of a U.S. Marine, Wassef Ali Hassoun, for three weeks in June 2004. However, investigators later deemed the incident a hoax in which Hassoun was complicit. The Marine was ultimately charged with desertion.⁵

In 2007, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) assassinated several members of the 1920s RB who had denounced an AQI chlorine gas attack.⁶ Shortly after, AQI operatives killed the 1920s RB's leader, Harith al-Dari. The increasing brutality and extremism of AQI split the 1920s RB between those who wanted to openly oppose AQI and cooperate with the U.S. and those who preferred to remain focused on targeting U.S. forces and simply denounce AQI. The latter faction split from the group and founded Hamas Iraq.⁷

Further splits formed over members' willingness to cooperate with the United States. Even as elements of the 1920s RB attacked Al Qaeda – sources do not make clear whether this was AQI or other Al Qaeda-affiliated militants – the 1920s RB's leadership officially denied any cooperation with U.S. efforts. The group publicly declared its disapproval of the *Sahwa*, or awakening councils, comprised of Sunni citizens that have fought with U.S. forces against Al Qaeda.⁸ In an apparent break from the leadership, significant portions of the 1920s RB shifted their focus to combatting AQI alongside the American supported Sons of Iraq (SOI). U.S. forces even dubbed these factions 'Baquba Guardians,' alluding to their impressive defense of the provincial capital Baquba alongside U.S. troops.⁹ The members from the 1920s RB proved to be a capable and effective force both in providing reconnaissance against Al Qaeda targets and assisting with reconstruction efforts.¹⁰

The assassinations by AQI, the split with Hamas Iraq, and the defection of many group members to the various awakening councils appears to have caused serious attrition for the 1920s RB. From 2009 to 2014, it is difficult to find evidence of any significant military activity. However, despite their shrinking influence, the group claimed they remained "in armed resistance and [continued] to conduct attacks against U.S. and Iraqi forces."¹¹ In April 2010, representatives from the 1920s RB met with more than 200 people from 19 other Sunni insurgent groups at a conference in Istanbul "to find common ground" and "to plot a comeback" after the U.S. presence in Iraq drove some leaders into exile and forced others to help the United States.¹² At the end of the conference the groups stated that they were not in favor of using force against Iraqis; however, if the Iraqi government did not attempt to reconcile with extremist groups, they would resort to force to defend themselves.¹³

Following the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the 1920s RB did not participate in the political reconstruction of the nation despite American attempts to persuade Sunni extremist groups to participate.¹⁴ Although the 1920s RB leadership decided not to participate in reconstruction, the Iraqi minister of reconciliation alleged that 2,200 members of the 1920s RB gave up their weapons in an apparent refusal to follow the leadership and continue fighting.¹⁵ Despite continued social media activity, it is difficult to find evidence of any significant militant activities from the 1920s RB aside from a few arrests of members during this time.¹⁶ In 2013, the 1920s RB joined the General Military Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR), an umbrella group spearheaded by the Naqshbandi Army (JRTN).¹⁷ Since this union, much of the 1920s RB's online activity has been reposting the GMCIR's messages, even though in 2013 there still was no significant activity from the group.¹⁸

In 2014, the 1920s RB, along with the GMCIR, assisted ISIS in the Fallujah offensive.¹⁹ The 1920s RB later supported the Islamic State (IS) in the seizure of Mosul in June 2014 as part of the GMCIR and gained control of some of the surrounding territory.²⁰

The group's relationship with IS grew tense since 2014. IS's adherence to harsh Islamic law in Mosul directly clashed with the Baathist philosophy to which the GMCIR and the 1920s RB subscribe.²¹ IS allegedly asked GMCIR militants to surrender their weapons, which a 1920s RB spokesman alluded to as being a major sticking point between the organization and IS.²² A leader of the 1920s RB stated in 2015 that the group supports neither the international coalition against IS or IS itself. However, he stated that if the Iraqi army or Shia militias were to attack Sunni areas, the 1920s RB would retaliate with force.²³

In 2017-2018, the 1920s RB did not appear to have a significant militant presence in Iraq.²⁴ The 1920s RB maintained recruiting in Republican Guard communities in Eastern Baqubah.²⁵ Despite assistance in the 2014 offensive, subsequent actions taken by IS limited the 1920s RB organizational power.²⁶ Dr. Abdullah Suleiman, spokesman for the 1920s RB, stated that the organization had been "forced to leave the scene on many fronts." However, he stated that the group plans to return and conduct attacks as soon as it is able.²⁷ The group maintains an active media presence, publishing magazines issuing communiques. These publications disseminate its nationalist critique of the Iraqi government, repeatedly questioning the legitimacy of the Iraqi elections process and calling for violence against them and other foreign invaders.²⁸

As of February 2019, there had been no recent activity by the 1920s RB. The group is likely inactive, as there have been no significant attacks since 2014 and no recent publications or political activity from the group since 2017.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

There is little information about the leadership of this group. Various individuals have been reported as "leaders" of the 1920s RB when killed, but it is not known how highly these individuals ranked in the organization before their death.

Hatim al-Zawbai (Unknown-2005): Al-Zawbai was reported to be commander of the 1920s Revolution Brigades by the Iraqi Defense Ministry when he was captured in January 2005. It is unclear how long he had been in command.²⁹

Aswad Kamil Al-Falahi (Unknown-February 2007): A senior commander of the 1920s RB, Al-Falahi was killed by an AQI suicide attack in Habbaniyah in February 2007.³⁰

Ahmed Sabah (Unknown-February 2007): A senior commander of the 1920s RB, Sabah was killed in an AQI suicide attack in Habbaniyah in February 2007.³¹

Harith al-Dari (Unknown-March 2007): al-Dari was killed by a car bomb in a mass attack on the city of Talafar in March 2007 that was attributed to AQI. He is the nephew of the notable cleric Harith al-Dari.³²

Sheik Ahmed al-Tamer (Unknown-September 2007): Al-Tamer was killed by a suicide bomb in Diyala province in September 2007. He had been attending a peace meeting between the United Jihad Factions Council, the Madhi Army, and a Sunni coalition militia.³³

Naim al-Dulaimi (Unknown-July 2008): A local, high-ranking leader of the 1920s RB, al-Dulaimi was killed by a female suicide bomber outside Baqubah in July 2008.³⁴

Unknown (2005-2006): The Iraqi government reported the capture and arrest of a senior officer of the 1920s RB in 2006. The leader's identity remains unknown.³⁵

Muthanna Harith Sulayman al-Dari (2008-Unknown): Muthanna is a member of AQI and is on the UN sanctions list. He is the cousin of the Harith al-Dari who was leader until 2007 and the son of the notable cleric Harith al-Dari. He is the leader of a particular faction of the 1920s RB of unknown size.³⁶ As of February 2019, sources suggest Muthanni is still alive.

Dr. Abdullah Suleiman Omary (Unknown-Current): He is the spokesperson for the 1920s RB.³⁷ As of February 2019, sources suggest Omary is still alive.

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no known name changes for the 1920s Revolution Brigades.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2007: Several Thousand (Washington Post)³⁸

- There are no reliable public sources of information about the updated size of the 1920s Revolution Brigades, although most analysts think it is in serious decline.³⁹

D. RESOURCES

Muthanna Harith Sulayman al-Dari (see leadership section) reportedly provided financial assistance to the 1920s RB.⁴⁰ The group's other sources of funding, if any, are unknown.

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

1920s RB was active in the areas of Abu Ghraib, Khan Dari, Western Baghdad, and Fallujah in Iraq.⁴¹ It was also active in the Ninwi, Diyali and Anbar provinces. As late as 2016, the 1920s RB was primarily concentrated in Republican Guard communities in Eastern Baqubah.⁴² However, as of February 2019 there had been no recent activity from the group for several years and it is likely inactive.

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

The 1920s RB was a nationalist, Sunni organization whose main goal was to free Iraq of foreign occupation, particularly from American military and political presence.⁴³ Once free of outside influence, the 1920s RB aimed to install an Iraqi state guided by Sunni Islamist principles.⁴⁴ The 1920s RB condoned targeting Iraqi civilians that support or are complicit with occupying forces.⁴⁵ Further, the 1920s RB harshly criticized the U.S., Iran, and the Iraqi government for being interfering foreign powers.⁴⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Despite American attempts to persuade Sunni extremist groups to participate in the political reconstruction in Iraq from 2009-2011, the 1920s RB was not politically active in Iraq.⁴⁷

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The 1920s RB focused its attacks on American forces and other foreign influences in Iraq. However, in 2007, the group cooperated with U.S. forces in fighting AQI.⁴⁸ The group used roadside bombs, mortar attacks, and rocket-propelled grenades, but avoided suicide bombings.⁴⁹ The 1920s RB condoned targeting Iraqi civilians that are in alignment with occupying forces.⁵⁰

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

June 2004: The 1920s Revolution Brigade kidnapped and held U.S. Marine Wassef Ali Hassoun for three weeks in June 2004. The organization threatened to kill Hassoun in a video shown on Al Arabiya television. It is unclear if Hassoun worked with the group to stage the kidnapping to avoid desertion charges. He was found at the Beirut embassy on July 7, 2004 and was charged for desertion by the U.S. Navy. Dr. Abdullah Suleiman Omary claims that he was released after he swore on the Koran that he would no longer help the U.S. (0 wounded, 0 killed)⁵¹

June 2007: The 1920s RB, as part of the Anbar Salvation Council, fought AQI in the Anbar Province. (unknown wounded, unknown killed)⁵²

June 2007: The group fought AQI in the Diyala province in their first attack following the split from Hamas Iraq. The city of Buhriz in Diyala was a stronghold of AQI's power, but the 1920s RB successfully drove the group out of the city in this attack. (unknown wounded, unknown killed)⁵³

August 2008: The 1920s RB took down an American drone in Kirkuk. (0 wounded, 0 killed)⁵⁴

June 2009: The 1920s RB claimed responsibility for bombing an American military vehicle in northern Iraq. (unknown wounded, unknown killed)⁵⁵

December 2009: The 1920s RB bombed an American military vehicle in Western Baghdad. (unknown wounded, unknown killed)⁵⁶

January 2014: The 1920s RB helped IS take control of the city of Fallujah. (unknown wounded, unknown killed)⁵⁷

June 2014: The 1920s RB helped IS take control of the city of Mosul. (unknown wounded, unknown killed)⁵⁸

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

The 1920s Revolutionary Brigades is not a designated as terrorist organization by the United States.⁵⁹

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The 1920s RB was reportedly able to sustain recruitment efforts in Eastern Baqubah in Republican Guard communities. Additionally, according to the Counterterrorism Center at West Point, the high rates of poverty in the region and the presence of harvesting cycles – which imply that a large portion of the work force rotates in and out of work seasonally and strangers come and go – further facilitated the 1920s RB's presence in the community.⁶⁰

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

In 2007, members of the 1920s RB splintered to form Hamas Iraq because of disagreements over ideology, cooperation with American troops, and opposition to AQI. The groups had little interaction since the split, except for an incident in 2007 during the anti-AQI Diyala campaign. An American military official stated that the American government cooperated with the 1920s RB, but the 1920s RB countered that this was a “very big lie” and that Hamas Iraq was actually the organization that cooperated with the American troops.⁶¹

Later in 2007, the 1920s RB joined with Mohammed al-Fatih Brigades and six other groups to form the umbrella group, the Reform and Jihad Front. The goal of this coalition was to preemptively diffuse a power vacuum should the U.S. withdraw and the Iraqi government collapse.⁶²

In April 2010, members from the 1920s RB met with representatives from 19 other Iraqi groups in Turkey, including the al-Rashideen Army, to plan a comeback following the U.S. withdrawal.⁶³ The groups agreed that they were not in favor of using force against Iraqis, but if the Iraqi government did not attempt to reconcile with extremist groups, they would resort to force to defend themselves.⁶⁴

Members of the 1920s RB comprised the majority of both the general body and the leadership of the Anbar Salvation Council, which was a group of 25 Sunni tribes formed in 2006 that sought to fight with the Iraqi government against Al Qaeda forces.⁶⁵ The 1920s RB helped the Council eradicate AQI from the Anbar Province in 2007.⁶⁶ In June 2007, former members of the 1920s RB drove AQI out of the city of Buhriz in their first independent military conflict against the organization.⁶⁷ Elements from the 1920s RB also fought alongside Iraqi government forces against AQI and openly denounced AQI for terrorizing civilians in Salahadin, Diyala, and Babil in late 2007.⁶⁸

The 1920s RB helped form the General Military Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR) in 2013.⁶⁹ This coalition consisted of roughly 75,000 fighters in 2014. The components making up this force could broadly be reduced into two categories: tribal units and neo-Baathists. (The 1920s RB falls into the latter category.)⁷⁰

The 1920s RB played a significant role in the attack on Mosul under the GCMIR banner, and it also joined a military council with IS to control territory in Fallujah.⁷¹ IS soon started to ask the GMCIR to give up its weapons, but the GMCIR refused. The last known activity of the GMCIR occurred in 2016.⁷² The 1920s RB displayed wariness of the Islamic State’s attempts to exert power of the group and carefully distanced themselves while simultaneously avoiding direct opposition with IS. The 1920s RB remained opposed to the Islamic State’s violent actions against Iraqi citizens, such as the massacre of the Yazidis or its imposition of Sharia law.⁷³ However, the 1920s RB also opposed the participation of Arab States in the coalition against IS because the coalition conducted air strikes on the Sunni areas of Iraq in 2014.⁷⁴

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

There is no evidence of outside influence on the group.

MAPS

- Iraq

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