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Insurgency in Iraq 2003–10

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US forces entered Iraq on 19 March 2003 in an invasion dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in order to overthrow the regime of Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, who was viewed as a recalcitrant and irredeemable tyrannical ruler. By the end of the year Iraq was in the throes of a full-scale insurgency by a section of its population, the Sunnis, against the Coalition presence. Irregular warfare was something that the superb conventional US military neither expected nor knew how to deal with. Lacking effective doctrine for countering insurgencies, the United States flailed around and became frustrated; its early failures contributed to fanning the flames of anger and humiliation (see Burton and Nagl 2008: 303–27; Sepp 2007: 217–30). The fighting was so extensive and bitter that between 2003 and 2005 it has produced nearly ten times as many Coalition casualties as the fight to topple the regime and defeat Iraq’s army. After 2006 the insurgency evolved into a bitter civil war between Sunnis and Shiites that has only gradually been brought under control in the last two years. The purpose of this chapter is to address the origins/causes, ideologies, goals and evolution of the insurgency after 2003 and assess the factors behind its failures and ultimate decline.

Cradle of civilization

The origins of the Sunni insurgency cannot be understood without reference to the evolution of the Iraqi policy from Ottoman and Persian times to the present. The Ottomans were responsible for the emergence of the Sunni Arabs as the dominant political community in Mesopotamia from the mid-nineteenth century as a ‘shield’ against the Persian Safavids, a Shiite dynasty. Sunnis in turn took full advantage of the Ottoman educational system, sending their sons through the system to become officers in the Ottoman Army garrisons in the province. The establishment of secular schooling in 1869 was for the Sunni Arabs a way of compensating for their demographic weakness and enhancing their political status.

This situation continued after the First World War when Britain gained control over Mesopotamia. The British formed an interim government in November 1920 predominantly comprised of Sunni Arabs who had curried favour with them. In 1932, Iraq gained its ‘independence’ although the British still maintained a dominant position within the power structure. The Sunni elite continued to remain entrenched in power despite the emergence of an educated Shiite political class, which did manage to move into key positions such as the premiership. This situation continued after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 and the Sunni elite ruled Iraq until 2003.
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The onset of insurgency

The insurgency in Iraq can be viewed as a ‘communal’ insurgency as only one community, the Sunnis, really leads it. It could also be qualified as an ‘ethnic’ insurgency, as many Sunni insurgents consider themselves as fighting the empowerment of both non-Arab Kurds and Shiite Arabs. It did not emerge from a politically and socioeconomically marginalized ethnic or communal group. Rather, it is a rare phenomenon, an insurgency by a hitherto dominant group seeking to restore its former position of power: a restorationist or ‘reactionary’ insurgency.

There is a clear set of factors behind the onset of the Sunni insurgency. In a structural sense, the origins of the insurgency in Iraq must be found in the nature of Iraqi state formation and nation-building and the issue of identity politics. Ottoman, British and then Iraqi policies worked in a way to ensure that the Shiites, despite their demographic weight in the country, became a ‘minority’ in the sense that they were politically marginalized and removed from the centres of political and economic power (Jabar 2003). For the Shiite Arabs Sunni-dominated Iraqi Arab nationalism was a further vehicle for their reduction to the status of a minority within their country (Beinin and Stork 1995: 18–22). The Kurdish population in the north also remained removed from power; it is true that during the early history of modern Iraq they were better represented than the more demographically significant Shiites in the corridors of power. Kurds were recruited into the armed forces and government bureaucracy. They were Sunnis, but they were not Arabs; with the emergence of nationalism among segments of the Kurdish population, there also appeared a desire for autonomy or even independence. This highly skewed and troublesome edifice that had been set up by the Ottomans, reinforced by the British, and consolidated by the Sunni minority came crashing down around the Sunni Arabs in April 2003. It was a massive psychological and physical dislocation to which they have been unable to effectively adjust. It was this massive threat to identity which provided the impetus for the eruption of Sunni insurrection. At its heart, the Sunni insurgency arose out of a loss of Sunni identity.

The Sunnis not only lost their positions in government due to marginal Ba’athist affiliation, but their entire way of life had been upended with the invasion. Additionally, the primacy of the Sunni in governing Iraq was taken away and given to the Shiite majority, further compounding the Sunni loss of prestige. The Bush Administration desired to implement a pluralist democratic society in Iraq, further compounding the loss of Sunni identity.

Among the earliest adherents of the insurgency were members of the former regime, Ba’athist security personnel and officials who had the most to lose from the downfall of the regime. Initially, they were very disorganized and merely lashed out wildly at their perceived tormentors. As Shiite-dominated and US-sponsored national governments were formed, Sunni resistance took on a defensive character, as Sunnis began to fear Shiite retribution for years of Sunni rule over Iraq. Yet while indigenous factors – a loss of identity and the need to restore a sense of social balance – were critical in the development and growth of the Sunni insurgency, mistakes by Coalition forces made at the tactical, operational and strategic levels contributed to increasing levels of Sunni resistance to the presence of the United States and its allies in Iraq.

At the tactical level, the lack of cultural understanding of Iraqi society was largely absent from Coalition forces’ interaction with the population after the fall of the Ba’ath regime. The insensitive manner in which soldiers conducted house-to-house searches and handled detainees inflamed Iraqi sensitivities. The absence of any coherent post-invasion planning done in the run up to the invasion, including the failure to consider the possibility of an insurgency and the Bush Administration’s ill-conceived policy to impose the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) (in Iraqi eyes a governing apparatus much akin to the British Mandate of the previous century) also
contributed to the rapid growth of the insurgency through the summer and autumn of 2003. Yet, even in the midst of these grave errors, the ignominious actions at Abu Ghraib prison in the autumn and winter of 2003, and its shoddy handling, stand out as a key accelerant to the growth of a nascent Sunni insurgency.

An important factor in initiating Sunni resistance was the early American policy of either ignoring the Sunnis or of perceiving them collectively as the ‘enemy’ because they had been the mainstay of the deposed regime. The American indifference and hostility towards the Sunnis was deliberate in the early days of the occupation; and it led to their marginalization in accordance with the Bush Administration’s strategy of relying on the more ‘reliable’ Shiite Arabs and Kurds, who together constituted a majority of the population. The first post-Saddam ruling structure, the CPA, under ‘proconsul’ Paul Bremer, took the highly inflammatory and ideologically-driven step of dissolving the Iraqi army because it was heavily identified with the former regime and thus with the Sunni community. This was not how Iraqi army officers saw it; for the vast majority of them, the defunct Iraqi military was a professional force that had been founded in 1923, long before Saddam, and had been corrupted and misused by the Iraqi dictator. The decision to disband the armed forces was ultimately to ensure that large numbers of officers and enlisted men were to become insurgents beginning in the autumn of 2003.

The rise of Islamist feelings within the Sunni community strengthened the power and voice of the Sunni clerics and preachers who began to take an activist political role in order to articulate Sunni grievances and goals and to present a cohesive Islamist narrative legitimizing resistance to foreign occupation. However, the impetus for the rise of Islamism within what was ostensibly a secular state lies within the political and socio-cultural dynamics of Iraqi society in the 1990s. The political activism of the Sunni clerical establishment started in the 1990s under the former regime when clerics began to rail against the sanctions regime and the ‘moral’ and ethical collapse of Iraqi society. Those clerics who deigned to attack the regime, whether implicitly or explicitly, were imprisoned or exiled (Hottiger 2004). With the downfall of the regime, Sunni clerics began to take charge of the sociopolitical space because there was a distinct lack of worthy or decisive political leaders to act on behalf of the community or to negotiate with other political forces in the post-Saddam Iraqi political scene.

The clerics adopted a Salafist interpretation of Islam promoting their views among the Sunni population, particularly during Friday sermons (Shihab 2003). With the capture of Saddam in late 2003, the local Salafists believed that this was their opportunity to pick up the torch of resistance ideologically from the dominant Ba’athist and nationalist strands. The invasion and occupation had led to a steady increase in recruits. In 2004 local Salafists were ‘on the rise’ among the ranks of the resistance. Although still modest, their networks grew, aided by the fact that a handful of senior officers joined the Islamists while many former soldiers also returned to religion.

The majority of early Sunni insurgent groups had a nationalist aspect to their rhetoric. The core groups of the secular Sunni nationalists formed around former Ba’athists and are known by Coalition forces as Former Regime Elements (FRE) or Former Regime Loyalists (FRL), with the capture of Saddam in December 2003, the secular nationalists were largely discredited. As they tried to cast off the ties to Ba’ath secularism, many moved towards the Islamist nationalist camp.

In the spring of 2004 Shia elements under the leadership of the young populist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr joined in the violence against the Coalition forces. Coalition forces were hard-pressed to deal with what was seemingly becoming a national liberation struggle. But there was little, if any, coordination between Sunni and Shia insurgents. The growing mutual alienation between Sunni and Shiites provided a backdrop to the infiltration into Iraq of transnational Islamists who
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were to declare allegiance to the al-Qaeda movement of Osama bin Laden. These groups subscribed to a rigid and inflexible form of Salafist Islamism. Unlike the more ‘moderate’ local Salafists these groups did not hesitate to pronounce takfir (excommunication, i.e. rendering non-Muslim) against Muslims who do not subscribe to their ideology. This group has been profoundly hostile to the Shias who are referred to as Rafidis or rejectionists (of Islam).

The presence of a plethora of insurgent groups in Iraq has had adverse implications for the articulation of a unified ideology and set of goals. It is not clear what the myriad groups had in common with one another at the beginning of the insurgency beyond a desire to rid the country of the foreign presence, fight the rise of the Shia majority and ensure a return to Sunni hegemony. The wide variety of ideological currents within the insurgency was a reflection of deep divisions and fissures within the Sunni community, divisions which had barely been kept in check during the last decade of Saddam’s rule.

Internal structures and organizational dynamics

When addressing Iraqi insurgent internal structures and organizational dynamics, two major structural characteristics stand out. The first one is the fact that the Iraqi insurgent organizations are hybrids in that the vast majority of them consist of a mix of hierarchical and decentralized structures. No Iraqi insurgent organization or group, not even the hitherto rigidly hierarchical Ba’ath party, is purely hierarchical. If they were they would be susceptible to penetration by hostile forces and to leadership decapitation. Similarly, none is completely decentralized without a leadership structure. Such organizations would not be able to undertake operations effectively or exercise some form of command, control and coordination. They would collapse due to endogenous weaknesses.

The second structural characteristic is the range of functional specialization. The largest insurgent organizations, often characterized by a substantial cadre of personnel with special skills, prevalence of bureaucratic skills, sufficient funding, an ability to undertake a wide range of operations ranging from the simple to the complex ambushes and raids. They have a nationwide reach and can be defined as having high functional specialization because they are able to create a wide range of specialized combat and combat support cells.

The Ba’athists and their affiliates are characterized by high functional specialization for a wide variety of reasons. They used to control the state and its various institutions; they re-created some of them in a decentralized manner in order to conduct an insurgency. One of the better-known insurgent groups, Jaysh al-Fatihi or Al-Fatihih Army (AFA), seems to have developed an extensive and highly functionally specialized organizational structure. This may have been due to the fact that it learned from its parent organization, the IAI. The AFA claims to have a wide variety of internal institutions and councils. These include Leadership, General Command, Shura, Sharia, Military and Media councils. Its military council is allegedly in charge of ten combat brigades which operate in various cities in central and northern Iraq (OSC Report, 28 November 2006). al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) developed an advanced level of functional specialization which it passed on to the umbrella organization, the MSC and then the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

The military wing has combatant battalions, security and reconnaissance units which carefully examine new members, collect intelligence about the enemy, recruit agents in the Iraqi security forces, the contractor companies and the transportation and logistics support for the Coalition. Those groups that cannot afford to have a wide range of specialized cadre and may be forced to ‘borrow’ such cadre from other groups (Improvised Explosive Device or IED-makers), do not have the ability to undertake a wide range of operations, and may, by choice,
be dedicated to ‘defending’ their local turf against Coalition forces, Iraqi Security Forces, Shi’a militia, and increasingly AQI and its affiliates, rather than fighting in a nationwide insurgency, can be defined as organizations of low functional specialization. The tribal insurgents and very small localized ‘kata’ibs’ (brigades) are characterized by low functional specialization. For many this is not a particularly onerous constraint as they do not aspire to do more.

**Targeting, operational art and tactics**

The Iraqi insurgency has a large range of targets available to them. These include Coalition forces and their associated networks and infrastructure such as supply convoys, and private security companies. They also include the foreign companies and foreign workers who flooded into Iraq in the wake of the invasion to participate in the expected windfall from reconstruction, development and the provision of services to the enormous Coalition military and civilian presence.

In the case of the Sunni insurgents in Iraq terrorism has also increased as the insurgency gathered steam. There are groups whose entire modus operandi has been predicated on the use of terror through the use of ‘suicide’ or martyrdom operations, large-scale assassinations of individuals or groups associated with or collaborating with the Coalition, and kidnapping and execution of foreigners.

Most of Iraq’s suicide bombers are foreigners, with the highest percentage coming from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Since August 2003, as the US-led coalition forces gradually strengthened their defences, suicide car bombs have been increasingly used as weapons by guerrilla forces. There have also been many attacks on non-military and civilian targets, beginning in earnest in August 2003 and steadily increasing since then. Kidnapping, and in some cases beheadings, have also emerged as another insurgent tactic since April 2004. Foreign civilians have borne the brunt of the kidnappings, although US military personnel have also been targeted.

**Guerilla tactics**

Iraqi insurgents use the traditional guerilla tactics of hit-and-run, raids, ambushes, the use of car bombs and IEDs, and assassinations. Usually, Iraqi insurgents operate in small teams of five to ten men. This facilitates mobility, reduces complexity in command and control and the chances of detection; but it improves the ability to escape capture. However, it also lessens the amount of firepower they can bring to bear against heavily armed Coalition forces. The improved training of the insurgents was reflected in the increase in written tactical manuals and instructions issued by insurgent groups. These are often distributed electronically on the Internet where many other groups can access them.

Not surprisingly, the insurgents’ ability to learn was reflected in their developing the skills to launch larger, more complex and well-executed attacks involving as many as 150 men. This happened in and around the large city of Ramadi in Al-Anbar province where complex attacks were led by former Iraqi army commanders. In April 2005 two particularly audacious attacks by large insurgent forces occurred against Abu Ghraib prison south of Baghdad and against a US Marine outpost. In the first attack two separate columns of insurgent forces launched an assault against the prison following an accurate and sustained bombardment of US positions by 80mm and 120mm mortars and two VBIED assaults aimed at breaching the prison walls. In the second case a group of 100 insurgents launched a well-coordinated complex attack on a US Marine base at Husaybah (Galloway 2005; Knickmeyer 2005: A1). The guerrillas in Diyala became increasingly
well organized and trained, and the province was the third deadliest place for US troops in Iraq in 2006 after Baghdad and Anbar.

This ability to learn and adapt is very evident in the insurgents’ deployment of IEDs and in the ways they have countered US attempts to defeat the IED threat. The first-generation IEDs were relatively small and simple, often a 155mm or 152mm artillery shell hidden in a wall or embankment along a road. Insurgents would run wires from the device to a hand-held trigger, which they could activate from a nearby hiding place. As US troops devised countermeasures to detect those IEDs, by spotting the wires or suspicious individuals nearby, insurgents changed their approach and began using remote triggers – garage door openers, cell phones – to detonate the devices from greater distances. They also turned to more powerful explosives, sometimes ‘daisy-chaining’ multiple artillery rounds to boost destructive force.

By March 2004, the insurgents were using daisy chains, emplacing 155mm rounds in a row. In the spring of 2004 US troops also started getting their first large-scale deliveries of jammers: devices that can be mounted in a vehicle or, in some cases, carried in a backpack, to block the wireless signals insurgents used to set off IEDs. The insurgents adapted faster. By early 2004, they began burying IEDs under roads, so they would blast up through the thin floors that proved to be the Achilles heel of even the armoured Humvees. The triggers changed, too. As more jammers arrived, insurgents switched to hard-wired devices or pressure-plate IEDs, which explode when a vehicle goes over them. By 2007 they were adapting again and using explosively formed projectiles (Eisler 2007: 1).

The Iraqi insurgency has been responsible for one innovation: the efforts of some groups to formulate and implement insurgent chemical warfare. The first indication of interest in the creation of an insurgent chemical warfare capability came in March 2004 when a series of site exploitations and detentions of men intrigued the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) which then began investigating a network of Iraqi insurgents – referred to as the al-Aboud network – who had begun to actively seek a chemical weapons capability in late 2003. ISG created a team of experts to investigate and dismantle the al-Aboud network. By June 2004, ISG was able to identify and neutralize the chemical suppliers and chemists, including former regime members, who supported the al-Aboud network. A series of raids, interrogations and detentions managed to disrupt key activities at al-Aboud-related laboratories and safe-houses. But the leaders of the network eluded capture.

The ‘surge’ strategy

By the autumn of 2006 many observers in Washington concluded that Iraq’s future was bleak. It was increasingly dawning upon the Bush Administration that the United States was headed for a monumental defeat in Iraq. Bush declared that failure in Iraq was not an option; but domestic forces were clamouring for the United States to do something decisive, preferably such as creating a definite timetable for withdrawal. The grim situation forced the Bush administration to consider the few options remaining. The Administration decided, on the advice of retired officers and civilian strategic analysts, on a ‘surge’ of US troops. President Bush articulated this in January 2007. The purpose of the surge of US troops was to damp down the violence and establish the conditions for the Iraqis to bring about national reconciliation.

However other factors weighed in to help the surge strategy. The homogenization of neighbourhoods by 2007 due to ‘ethnic cleansing’ meant that there was less opportunity for Sunnis and Shia to kill each other. The decision in August 2007 of Moqtada al-Sadr to stand down his militia which had been heavily engaged in fighting the Sunnis and in provoking US forces was another significant factor in the diminution of the violence. Moqtada and his senior commanders
then went after alleged rogue elements within the Mahdi Army (AM) and weeded them out through the simple expedient of gunning them down. The AM’s history begins in a most unlikely place. In September 2006, Ramadi was arguably the most dangerous city in Iraq. AQI and local Sunni insurgents were so active that the number of attacks against Coalition and Iraqi forces per capita was three times higher than in any other part of the country. Insurgents enjoyed complete freedom of movement in the city and the Iraqi government’s authority extended no further than the government centre in the heart of downtown. US and Iraqi forces in the area operated from large Forward Operating Bases in the area, patrolling periodically and then returning to base. This non-persistent presence failed to secure the population or provide protection for local leadership, allowing insurgents to retain control of the city. The ability of insurgents to operate with impunity allowed them to deploy extensive IED belts making the city even more forbidding for US and Iraqi forces.

Early US efforts in Ramadi focused on establishing political alliances with local political and tribal leaders designed to isolate and defeat the insurgency. In November 2005, US commanders met with local sheiks and convinced them to break with AQI. Since late 2007, scholars have offered a multitude of explanations for the decline of violence and the abatement of AQI. As this debate has played out over time, the positions have largely gelled into two distinct positions – those actions that originated with the US-led Coalition and those actions that originated indigenously.

By looking at the literature from a broader perspective, we can see similar causes that leap out in explaining the demise of AQI and can be roughly classified as belonging in either one of these two positions. It appears that the Sunni revolt against AQI was at its heart a reaction to protect local identity from being subsumed by an outside group. As much as the demonization of Sunni identity by the United States and its Iraqi quislings created the insurgency in 2003–4, the perceived belief by the Sunnis that AQI would destroy their identity caused AQI’s demise. The Sunnis attempted to resist this imposition of a new identity on numerous occasions, only to see each attempt quickly suppressed by AQI, and it was not until the Ramadi-based Anbar Salvation Council in late 2006 that the Sunni resistance to AQI actually stood firm.

The widening of sectarian conflict

The most important factor, however, in promoting the diminution of violence was the dramatic change in the Sunni insurgency. Even as Sunni and Shiite were busy killing each other, there were signs of a split within the Sunni insurgency between local insurgents including the tribes – who see themselves as fighting to rid Iraq of foreign occupation and to restore Sunni dominance – on the one side and the Salafi-Jihadist strain – fighting to establish a purist Islamist political system – coalescing around al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its creation the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) on the other. Many of the local insurgents, including even some of the most Islamist in orientation, were annoyed with the AQI extremists because of differences in goals, strategies and modus operandi.

The Sunni tribes in particular bore the brunt of AQI’s disruptive strategies and tactics in the rural hinterlands; slowly but surely the tribes began to turn against the extremism of AQI which was disrupting their way of life, beliefs and mores, and economic activities. As a result of the growing distaste with AQI in Anbar province by the summer of 2007 several tribal sheiks had created armed ‘Awakening Councils’ throughout the province of Al-Anbar. These were known in Arabic as the Sahwa. These councils pitted their militias against the transnational jihadists – foreign Islamists from other Arab countries – and their Iraqi allies. Initially, the tribal forces made little headway due to the better armaments of the AQI/MSC/ISI fighters. The brutality
of the jihadists’ response to the challenge posed by the ‘contemptible’ tribesmen only further strengthened the latter group’s determination to eradicate the extremists in their midst. In a practical application of the old cliché that the ‘enemy of my enemy is my friend’, the tribes turned to their former foe, the US forces, for aid.

There was no core ideological set of principles vis-à-vis the Americans espoused by the tribes that would preclude a pragmatic quid pro quo between the two sides. This is not say that the tribes viewed the American presence in Iraq and specifically in their respective tribal areas in any positive light; but they proved that they were willing to bargain with the occupier, if the latter satisfied both material and ideational interests. The impetus for the emergence of collective bargaining between tribe and occupier was provided by AQI whose actions threatened the entire spectrum of tribal interests and identity. The extremists muscled in on tribal economic interests, extracted ‘protection money’ from merchants and travelers, they imposed taxes, they shut down barber shops and coffee shops. As AQI’s funding needs increased – in order to finance operations and recruit members – the greater the exactions against the tribes.

The Americans had deeper pockets and were willing to part with the money, to involve the tribes in reconstruction projects, and to hire the men of the tribes. AQI imposed strict and doctrinal principles on tribal culture, they trod on tribal norms, honour and dignity by publicly flogging or beheading tribesmen who ‘strayed’. And lastly, they committed horrific acts of terror. The Americans may have been boorish, particularly in the early days of the insurgency. They were not interested in imposing doctrinaire ideas upon the tribes. In the final analysis, as several tribal sheiks put it when tribal–AQI relations were frayed and turned to violence: the Americans maybe an enemy, but AQI is the worst enemy (author observations in Iraq November–April 2003, July–September 2005 and October–November 2007; Baram 1997: 1–31; Glain 2000; Pope and Spindle 2002; Kilcullen 2007; Jabar and Dawood 2003).

In autumn 2007 US forces seized letters written by Sahwa or AQI leaders which documented the startling turnaround in AQI fortunes due to the rise of the Awakening movement in the Sunni province. One letter by ‘Abu Tariq’, details how his force of 600 men had shrunk to less than 20 and proceeded to lament the fact that the organization had been ‘mistreated’ and duped by the Iraqi insurgent groups and the tribes. Americans may have been naive in their understanding of tribal dynamics, but AQI and its leadership was even more naïve and ignorant of culture and history of tribal behaviour and of Iraqi needs. They finally recognized that their ideology and tactics had succeeded in turning the populace against the movement and allowed the Americans to recruit them to their side. This helped turn the tide. The successes of the tribal councils in Anbar contributed to the rise of copycat awakening councils in Baghdad itself and other provinces such as Salahedin and Diyala where the inhabitants and local insurgents had finally had enough of the depredations of the extremists. They took the initiative to organize their struggle against the extremists in their midst.

It was not long before the US military began to recognize the benefits of providing support in the shape of arms and money to these groups. The decline of the insurgency is largely attributable to the incorporation of mainly Sunni tribal leaders and their militias in the Sahwa (‘Awakening’) movement (assisted by the increasing rifts between the Sunni insurgency and AQI). This marks the latest in a series of oscillations in Iraqi history between attempts to build a strong centralized state (as under the revolutionary government of Abd al-Karim Qasim from 1958 to 1963 and, most successfully, between the 1973 oil price rise and the Iran–Iraq War) and a reliance on relations of patronage with tribal sheiks (as under the British Mandate, the Hashemite monarchy and the latter years of Saddam Hussein’s rule) (Tripp 2000; Dodge 2003; Hechter and Kabiri 2008).

The American military, having at first attempted to impose a direct rule regime in complete disregard of local institutions, now appear to have invented the system of tribal patronage.
They have been aided by the ineptitude of AQI, which, having at first successfully allied itself with the Sunni insurgency, proceeded to alienate many of these allies by its indiscriminate violence, by challenging the authority of tribal power structures it perceived as un-Islamic, and by attempting to take control of the insurgency (ICG 2008; Simon 2008). At first referred to by the Americans as ‘concerned local citizens’, the ‘Awakening Councils were rebranded as abna al-Iraq’ or ‘Sons of Iraq’. These concerned citizens were, in fact, largely former Sunni insurgents, although 18–20 per cent of the 100,000 officially registered ‘Sons’ are Shia (O’Hanlon and Campbell 2008: 12). The United States was paying $360 for each, of which up to 20 per cent went to tribal leaders, allowing some to amass considerable wealth (Simon 2008) and some to restore the powers of patronage. There was a significant reduction in violence and a return to near normalcy in 2008, but the situation in Iraq remained very fragile.

As the former Sunni insurgents celebrated their victories against AQI, touted their alliance with the Americans, and expanded their militia organizations, tension emerged between them and the government of Nuri al-Maliki. Neither side had the highest regard for the other. The Sunnis viewed with distaste the entrenchment of the Shia in the Iraqi body politic. Some were still fanatically dedicated to removing that domination; others were more pragmatically demanding resources for reconstruction in their areas and the absorption of militia personnel into the security services. Having helped the Americans defeat a common enemy in the fanatics of AQI, the Sunni militias were now wondering whether they would be facing their second biggest enemy once again, the Shia, but this time one that dominates the state and is increasingly self-confident. Ironically, members of the Sunni militia, abna’ al-Iraq (Sons of Iraq) do not want to see the Americans leave, such is their distrust of and hostility towards the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki which they see as a tool of Shia Iran. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that the United States has signed with the Iraqi government was actually not welcomed by many within the Sunni community, despite the public statements of Sunni leaders and politicians that this was a good step towards full sovereignty.

The government of Nuri al-Maliki does not feel the need to ‘reward’ the Sunni militias, whom it sees as former insurgents with blood on their hands. There is also the hidden fear that a massive re-entry of Sunnis into the armed forces could threaten the hard-won Shia dominance of the military; like the Sunnis before them, the now dominant Shiite elite recognize that one of the key structures of power in Iraq remain the security forces. The existence of a large group of armed former Sunni insurgents led by men with political ambitions has worried the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. This would give these groups considerable clout should they effectively execute an entry into national politics. The deep-seated hostility sets the stage for a possible renewed outbreak of violence.

A number of prominent mainstream Sunni insurgent organizations – not AQI whose remnants continue to bluster and threaten the Awakening Councils (AC) – have suggested that the ACs should reconsider rejoining the ranks of the insurgency in order to revitalize it. There was also great concern in spring 2008 that AQI showed signs of revival. Much of the concern was expressed by the Sons of Iraq leadership. It was not clear if this were true or merely a tactic in order to promote their relevance and importance to the maintenance of security. However, a letter found in a raid on an AQI hideout in March 2008, by an unknown operative named Abu Sufiyan outlined a strategy to destabilize the country by targeting Awakening members, economic infrastructure and Shia. Dozens of Awakening Council members were killed in the early months of 2008. The head of ISI issued a call for the Sunnis to return to the fold of AQI or to face certain death.

Many members of the ACs – particularly those leaders who were prominent within the ranks of the mainstream insurgency – felt betrayed by the US decision to leave them at the mercy of the Shia-dominated government. An umbrella organization of Sunni insurgent groups, The
Front for Change and Jihad has been in the forefront in expressing and highlighting the alleged betrayal and in suggesting that the Sunnis as a community should prepare to fight the government in Baghdad. The government’s stubbornness stems in part from the perception, probably accurate, that the balance of power in the country has turned almost irrevocably in favour of the Shia majority; and that they do not need to curry favour with the heavily-armed Sunni groups. This is dangerous and although the Shia are likely to ultimately triumph – particularly in light of the build-up of the military and because of support from neighbouring Iran – a possible renewal of the civil war as the United States slowly but surely reduces its presence is likely to make the ‘undeclared’ civil war of 2005–06 look tame by comparison.

Note

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Recommended readings


References


