



The Tribal Component of Iraq's Sunni Rebellion: The General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries

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Following the Iraqi armed opposition's seizure of Mosul on June 10 and the subsequent capture of large areas of Ninewah, Salah al-Din and Ta'mim governorates from the Nuri al-Maliki government, several Iraqi organizations have proclaimed their role in the fighting. Emerging as one of the most powerful Iraqi armed opposition organizations in this rebel offensive is al-Majlis al-Askari al-Amm li-Thuwar al-Iraq (GMCIR - General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries) and its affiliated tribal militias, organized as al-Majlis al-Askari li-Thuwar al-Asha'ir al-Iraq (Military Council of Iraqi Tribal Revolutionaries). GMCIR members state that the organization has existed since the summer of 2013 and announced its existence in January 2014 in order to respond militarily against Iraqi security forces for firing on Sunni demonstrators in Anbar governorate. [1]

GMCIR members assert that their leadership is composed predominately of a network of Sunni former Iraq Army officers of tribal Arab origin that maintain a hierarchical chain-of-command inside Iraq in order to oversee the day-to-day operations of the organization. They estimate that there are 75,000 fighters affiliated with the GMCIR, mostly concentrated in Anbar, Salah al-Din and Ninewah governorates, with GMCIR-affiliated armed groups also located in Ta'mim, Baghdad, Diyala, Karbala, Dhi Qar and Maysan governorates. [2] GMCIR officers, including Iraqis exiled by sectarian conflict in their country, are also reported to be located throughout the Middle East region, including in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (al-Mustaqbal [Beirut], January 17; al-Jazeera [Doha], January 16). [3]

Ideologically, the GMCIR is staunchly anti-Maliki and anti-Iranian. It opposes the significant role played by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-organized militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah in the Iraqi security forces. [4] The GMCIR's first public declaration on January 15 outlined its political program. This declaration emphasized that the GMCIR is an Iraqi nationalist, non-sectarian movement that is drawn from Iraq's tribes and that it seeks the

removal of Nuri al-Maliki as prime minister of Iraq. The GMCIR also seeks support from the people of southern Iraq (i.e. Shi'a Arab tribesmen) to help remove al-Maliki from power. [5] GMCIR members assert that the second-in-command of the organization is a Shi'a from southern Iraq and that the GMCIR is actively seeking the assistance of southern Iraqi Shi'a tribes in Basra, Dhi Qar and Maysan, which they claim are as disenfranchised by al-Maliki's government as they are. [6]

According to GMCIR members and media produced by the organization, the rank-and-file of the GMCIR consists of predominately Arab and Sunni tribal fighters, including a significant number of Sahwa (Awakening) council veterans mobilized as part of the "Sons of Iraq" and Iraqi military officers that served in the Iraqi Army prior to its May 2003 disbandment by Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 2. [7] GMCIR members state that the majority of its first cohort of fighters were local protestors, mainly from Anbar governorate, that actively demonstrated against the al-Maliki government and decided to join an armed uprising against the Iraqi government following the December 2013 arrest of popular Anbari MP and member of the Iraqiya bloc, Ahmad al-Awlani, and the ongoing Iraqi security force operations that resulted in Anbari protestors being fired on (Reuters, December 28, 2013). [8]

In keeping with the GMCIR's official declarations, representatives of the organization state that its participation in the current conflict is intended to seize Baghdad in order to remove "Tehran's spoiled boy," Nuri al-Maliki (Nashwan News [Baghdad], June 14). The GMCIR's opponents claim that the group is strongly influenced by former Ba'athist officers affiliated with groups such as the Jaysh Rajaal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandia (JRTN - Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Path), which is particularly powerful in Ninewah governorate and the city of Mosul (al-Safir [Beirut], June 15; Iraq al-Qanoon [Baghdad], February 1). GMCIR members state that JTRN members and former Ba'athist officers are represented in their organization, including in its Political Council; however, they assert that these officers are not the most important figures within it. [9] Arabic media report that social media sites affiliated with JRTN claim it is operating in Ninewah and Salah al-Din governorates in close cooperation with the GMCIR and its affiliate, the Military Council of Iraqi Tribal Revolutionaries (Dunya al-Watan [Ramallah], June 12). In addition to JRTN and tribal militias, it is reported that the GMCIR maintains close contact with the Iraqi Sunni socio-political movement Hay'at al-Ulama al-Muslimeen (Association of Muslim Scholars), which serves as a political ally of the organization (Dunya al-Watan [Ramallah], June 12).

The GMCIR's relationship with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is also a controversial subject. GMCIR members admit to an operational relationship with ISIS, particularly in Anbar, Ninewah and Salah al-Din governorates. [10] It is reported that two former Iraqi generals associated with the GMCIR were appointed to serve as governing administrators of territory seized by the Iraqi armed opposition in Anbar and Salah al-Din governorates, with approval for their appointments given by ISIS in consultation with local Sunni Arab tribes (Elaph [London], June 18). A GMCIR spokesman stated that ISIS in Iraq was a small organization and could not have seized Mosul without the support of the Iraqi armed opposition. The spokesman further claimed that the GMCIR was stronger than ISIS, better organized than ISIS, and fought under the laws of war established by the Geneva Convention (BBC News, June 14).

At its core a political movement that seeks substantial changes in Iraq's current socio-political system, the GMCIR's strongly anti-Maliki and anti-Iranian political platform, which it has emphasized in a succession of declarations that its leadership has issued since January 2014, makes the organization an unlikely participant in any peace negotiations that do not promise to conclude with the removal of al-Maliki from the post of prime minister. In order to accomplish these political objectives, the GMCIR will need to be able to network effectively with other anti-Maliki factions inside Iraq, including Iyad Allawi's al-Iraqiya bloc, the Kurds and Shi'a political figures and groups such as Ahmad Chalabi and his allies in al-Majlis al-A'ala al-Islami al-Iraqi (ISCI - Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) and Muqtada al-Sadr and his allied al-Ahrar bloc.

One likely future difficulty that the GMCIR will need to address is how to appeal to Iraqi Shi'a socio-political actors when there is a popular perception that the organization is allied with ISIS and must be fought against in the context of the mobilization of predominately Shi'a volunteers for militias intended to serve as auxiliaries to the Iraqi military. The GMCIR's potential partners in forming a post-Maliki Iraqi government will likely need to give the organization guarantees they will work to reduce the influence of the powerful IRGC-backed militias within the Iraqi Army and Special Forces (see Terrorism Monitor, May 15).

The GMCIR will also need to resolve potential political and military conflicts that could arise and divide its own predominately Sunni constituency. In the face of potential challenges to its influence over the Iraqi Sunni community and its role in post-conflict negotiations over the future direction of Iraq, it is highly likely that GMCIR leaders will seek to maintain the allegiance of associated tribal militias organized under the Higher Military Council of Iraqi Tribal Revolutionaries. It will also need to demonstrate to Iraqis in general that it can be a partner for a negotiated and peaceful settlement to the current conflict and that, if called upon, it can effectively confront ISIS forces in Iraq.

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Notes

1. Interviews conducted with GMCIR members in Amman, Jordan in January 2014 and April 2014. Interviews conducted by the author and Carole A. O'Leary.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. "First Declaration of the General Military Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries," Al-Rafidain TV YouTube page, January 15, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV-y5B_Vbl0.
6. Interviews conducted with GMCIR members, op cit.
7. Interviews conducted with GMCIR members, op cit. For the GMCIR's Twitter account see: <https://twitter.com/militarycounci1> and for the GMCIR'S YouTube page see: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJmoeAnehTlrmulRFu4ZhHQ>.
8. Interviews conducted with GMCIR members, op cit.
9. Ibid.

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