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A Marriage of Convenience: The Many Faces of Iraq's Sunni Insurgency; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 12 Issue: 15

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The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) may have stolen the limelight, but the current Sunni insurgency in Iraq is dominated by a number of Sunni groups, with ISIS forming possibly less than a third of rebel forces. Each group has its own reason and motivation for siding with ISIS, but far from sharing ideology or a common end goal, the main binding factor is hatred of the Shiite government and Iraq's prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki (Middle East Monitor, June 17; Rudaw [Erbil], July 7).

The key to ousting ISIS and arriving at a peaceful solution ultimately lies in the hands of the Sunni tribes and the local Sunni population, not in the guns of the Shiites. It was the Sunnis that turned the tide against al-Qaeda once before, but wary Sunnis may not bail out Baghdad so easily again. The danger now after 11 years of bloodshed and Sunni marginalization is that Baghdad may find it impossible to resurrect the notion of a united Iraq, let alone heal the gulf of sectarian mistrust and animosity.

A number of the Sunni armed groups currently fighting Baghdad are remnants of the previous insurgency against U.S. occupation. Many of these groups have formed alliances and grown in strength since the revitalized Sunni uprising evolved from popular protests at the end of 2012 to renewed armed conflict and sectarian war. Indeed for this reason, many Sunni tribal leaders discount ISIS as the spark of the revolution and accuse them of taking advantage by jumping on the Iraqi Sunni bandwagon.

· General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR)

One of the main groups that fought alongside ISIS is the GMCIR. This group was formed in early 2014 from an alliance of various other military councils or tribal revolutionary groups with the aim of establishing a unified command as a result of renewed fighting with Baghdad (al-Ahram Weekly [Cairo], March 20). The GMCIR includes a large number of former officers of the disbanded Iraqi army and has the general aim of establishing a Sunni autonomous entity without compelling any break-up of Iraq. The group is associated with the Muslim Scholars' Association led by the influential Shaykh Harith Sulayman al-Dhari. GMCIR has an uneasy cooperation with ISIS that saw large areas of northern Iraq slip from the control of Baghdad, but differences between the groups are discernible in their approach to governance in Mosul and the issue of ISIS' dominant role on the ground (al-Akhbar [Beirut], June 16).

Days after the occupation of Mosul, GMCIR spokesman and former general Muzhir al-Qaisi described ISIS as "barbarians" (BBC, June 14). Distancing themselves from ISIS' extremist ideology, the GMCIR has tried to emphasize a non-sectarian agenda and a political solution to the crisis.

· Military Council of the Tribal Revolutionaries (MCTR)

The MCTR is the largest non-ISIS force and is believed to include a coalition of approximately 80 Sunni Arab tribes and 41 armed groups, including former officers from the Saddam era. Its presence is especially strong in Fallujah, Ramadi and parts of Nineweh and Salahuddin (al-Araby al-Jadid [Beirut], June 14).

· Military Council of Anbar Tribal Revolutionaries (MCATR)

One of the main military councils, the MCATR was formed in early 2014 (Journal of Turkish Weekly, June 25). The MCATR has pressed the remaining Sahwa (Awakening) forces to fight for their cause – many of the groups that comprise MCATR today relinquished their Sahwa allegiance after key demands were not fulfilled by al-Maliki and the prime minister ordered a violent crackdown of sit-in protestors. However, in the battles for Ramadi and Fallujah earlier this year, it was clear that remnants of the Sahwa forces battled insurgents on the side of the government.

Shaykh Hatim al-Sulayman is the leader of the MCATR and chief of the powerful Dulaim tribe in Ramadi (with significant influence in Anbar). The Dulaim tribe, including the al-Bou Nimr, al-Farraaj, al-Bou Issa and al-Fallaha sub-tribes as well as gunmen from the al-Jamilat, al-Jabour and al-Janabat clans, has played a central role in the uprising since last year (Al-Monitor, January 8).

Al-Sulayman, like many other tribal leaders, is hardly full of praise for ISIS but sees al-Maliki as more dangerous. Pointing out various disagreements with ISIS, he signalled that the inevitable fight against ISIS was merely postponed (Rudaw [Erbil], July 7). For al-Sulayman, ISIS came only to take advantage of the Sunni revolution and their quest to win back Sunni rights.

· Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandia (JRTN - Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Path)

Another major group, with particular influence in the provinces of Nineweh and Kirkuk, is the JRTN, which has a close alliance with the GMCIR. The JRTN, spearheaded by Saddam Hussein's former deputy, Izzat al-Douri, is based on a mix of old Ba'athist pan-Arab secular nationalism and Naqshabandi Sufi Islam (see Terrorism Focus, July 28, 2008).

The goals of the JRTN are the return to power of the Ba'ath party and the safeguarding of Iraqi sovereignty through the simultaneous end of the strong Iranian influence in Baghdad. Their key aim is to "fight for the unity of Iraq's land and people to preserve the Arab and Islamic identity." [1]

· Al-Jaysh al-Islami fi'l-Iraq (JII – Islamic Army of Iraq)

The JII was particularly potent at the height of the initial uprising against U.S. military occupation (Telegraph, June 20). The movement went from being a thorn in the side of the Americans to being a key player in the Sunni Sahwa (Awakening) councils that turned the tide against al-Qaeda before later turning full circle by re-joining the anti-Baghdad insurgency.

Shaykh Ahmad al-Dabash, founder of the Islamic Army of Iraq and an influential imam from the Batawi family, is determined to accept nothing less than the removal of al-Maliki and has noted his movement's common interest with ISIS in removing the Shiite prime minister (al-Sharq al-Awsat, June 27). Its demands, like those made by the majority of Sunni groups, include a political solution to the ongoing crisis, the establishment of a Sunni federal region and the removal of al-Maliki.

· Jama'at Ansar al-Islam (JAI)

JAI is a jihadist group from the post-2003 era that shares the general ISIS goal of a caliphate, but rejects a leading role for ISIS in an Islamic state (BBC, July 1).

· Jaysh al-Mujahideen (JAM)

JAM is another group that dates back to the early post-Saddam era with an anti-Shiite agenda and the goal of overthrowing the central government (BBC, July 1). It is known to have disagreements with ISIS and the Islamic Army of Iraq.

· Kata'ib Thawarat al-Ashrayn (KTA – 1920 Revolution Brigades)

Named for an anti-British nationalist uprising during the British mandate in Iraq, the 1920 Revolution Brigades is a lesser known Sunni militia originally formed in 2005 to fight the American occupation (al-Jazeera, June 27).

There is a growing unease between Sunni tribes and ISIS. ISIS recently executed 30 people, including a tribal leader and his son, after they refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and pay “royalties” (Shafaq News [Erbil], July 10).

Most of the Sunni groups have insisted that they are in control of key areas and facilities and have pushed back ISIS where necessary. For example, the Islamic Army of Iraq prevented ISIS from entering Dulu'iya after they took control of it due to ideological differences between the movements (al-Arabiya [Dubai], June 11). Al-Maliki has tried to manipulate Sunni tribal anxiety by encouraging Arab tribal leaders in northern areas to fight ISIS (BasNews [Erbil], July 8). There have been skirmishes between these tribes and ISIS militants but for any real impact on the ground Sunnis must turn against ISIS in much greater numbers.

What is clear, however, is the increasing tension between former the Ba'ath party, JRTN factions and ISIS. These groups have already been involved in deadly clashes in the Kirkuk area with reports of JRTN assassination campaigns against ISIS leaders in the Diyala region (al-Sumaria [Baghdad], June 22; Shafaq News [Erbil] July 9). There are other reports of generalized clashes between tribal forces and ISIS in Mosul, Salahuddin and in other areas (al-Mustakbal [Baghdad], July 12; al-Estiqama [Baghdad], July 11).

With so many groups and varying end games, the danger of Sunni infighting can only grow. Furthermore, the more Sunni groups in the field, the more difficult it becomes to establish a negotiating partner. Sunni tribes have to find a solution to ISIS, but are more likely to deal with that problem when al-Maliki is removed from power and a Sunni region is endorsed under an agreement. Either way, Sunni tribes have learned their lesson from the disappointments of the first Awakening initiative and Sunni support to expel ISIS or offer Baghdad any respite will not come cheap this time around.

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Note

1. See the JRTN official website, July 12, <http://www.alnakshabandia.net/army/>.