

Sunni tribes, the Islamic State and recurrent miscalculations

Lessons from the al-Anbar Awakening 2003-2009



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The spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) over the territories of Iraq and Syria is both an extremely worrying and very familiar development. Looking at the history of the region we can easily trace the patterns and the origins of IS. Similar scenarios have occurred in Iraq even though they were contained to a smaller scale and eventually suffocated. In this brief I will focus on the key role Sunni tribes hold in Iraqi politics and trace the triangular relationship between the US, terrorist organisations and the Sunni tribes after the invasion of Iraq, and how it resembles and points to things to come.

I. The Sunni tribes

Even though they comprise only about 30% of the total Iraqi population, the immense importance of Sunnites is embedded in the country's history.¹ The majority of the Sunnites are located in Iraq's Al-Anbar province and the so-called Sunni Triangle, an area locked between the three edges of Ramadi on the south-western side, Baghdad on the south-eastern, and Tikrit in the north.

Tribes in this region are organised in a strict hierarchical, patriarchal structure. There are four levels of tribal organisation, each led by a male figure: the *bayt*, or house, representing the smallest and most closely knit structure of the extended family; the *fakhdh*, or clan, which represents a grouping of several bayts (*buyūt*); *ashīra*, or tribe, gathering several clans; and *qabīla*, or confederation, the largest and highest level of this pyramid, headed by a paramount sheikh who unites several tribes. Within this structure, the lineage that a tribesman comes from is of crucial importance to his status. In essence, the tribal

leader is selected based on his level of influence, wealth, prominence and ancestry.

The largest *qabīlas* (*qabā'il*) in Iraq are the Dulaymi, Shammar, Al-Jubur and Tikriti. Among the more prominent tribes are the Albu Fahd, Albu Issa, Albu Mahal, Albu Faraj, Albu Risha, Aethawi and Albu Alwan.

Historically speaking, the relationship between the Sunni tribes and the central government can be traced from the early days of Islam in Mesopotamia through the Arab conquest and the Ottoman and British rules to the times of Saddam Hussein and the consequent US invasion.

II. State-tribal relationship

The distinct pattern of the state-tribal relationship was quite vivid and clear during the rule of Saddam Hussein (1937-2006) from 1979 until 2003. This relationship is easily traceable through various historic documents, and it also serves as a benchmark for future tribal politics.

Hussein, himself a Sunni from the Albu Nasir tribe, which is part of the Tikriti federation, relied heavily on his tribal base for support. In his various political manoeuvres to attract Sunni tribesmen, he used incentive-based policies from providing material gifts and political power to handpicked sheikhs. His actions managed to offset the traditional tribal structure of Iraqi society. An example of such policies was introduced in 1968, when the use of tribal names was banned in the country.² Although the purpose of this policy was to put Iraqi politics in line with the provisions of equality prescribed in the socialist manifestos,

¹ For the population's composition cf. CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

² MacFarquhar, *Unpredictable force awaits U.S. in Iraq* *Storied tribes of the Middle East Devout, armed and nationalistic*, 2003, 2.

the aim of this act was to enable Saddam Hussein and then-President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr (1914-1982, in office 1968-1979) to employ members of chosen tribes without being scrutinised.³

Even though Hussein relied on Sunni tribes for a firm grip over the country, he still feared influential sheikhs, a fear that was later shared by the US forces, which is why he created the Tribal Affairs Office in the 1980s. Sheikhs were registered and graded based on their prominence, influence, strength and power. This allowed Hussein to change the dynamics of each region by empowering tribal leaders that were loyal to him, even if they lacked influence among their tribes, over the more prominent and free-thinking sheikhs. He allocated economic resources to his puppet sheikhs, and thus used power dynamics – that a tribe is based on economy and security – to elevate the status of his puppets.

These actions bear a striking resemblance to the activities that the US officials were involved in after they removed Hussein from power. The term that local people used for these newly created leaders was “fake sheikhs”.⁴

Hussein had helped to empower the processes of reliance on a hierarchical structure of patronage-based relationships in the tribes, which saw the members of a tribe relying economically on the sheikh, who had the same relationship with the central government. This patronage structure was employed to good effect when the US invaded Iraq and became the dominant incentive provider.

The 1990’s saw Saddam Hussein’s tribal politics backfire as economic sanctions and devastating regional wars dragged the economy into the swamps. Favouring Sunnis over the

majority Shi’a population destabilised the country and slowly created vast division lines between the peoples of Iraq. Furthermore, Hussein’s meddling with the traditional fabric of tribal organisation and naturally established hierarchical structure based on core values and traditions led to a complete distrust in his abilities.⁵

This situation of tribal and political chaos allowed both Al-Qa’eda in Iraq (AQI) and the Coalition forces in the post-Hussein era to continue to exploit the tribes by using the same methods that the dictator used. If such actions might be what were to be expected from an organisation such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s at-Tawhīd wal-Jihād, it is interesting to explore how the US acquired the support and backing of some former criminals and even former supporters of terrorist organisations, who saw fit to switch to the more economically attractive side at a later stage.

III. Insurgency groups in Iraq between 2003 and 2009

Iraq’s insurgent groups can be placed under distinct categories based on their origins, aims and religious beliefs, for example. The primary groups included: foreign-born insurgents, such as at-Tawhīd wal-Jihād; former Ba’athist forces or nationalists; Shi’a militias; Kurdish Peshmerga forces; Yazidi militia groups; and others.⁶

The origins of the contemporary foreign-based insurgency in Iraq can be traced back to the last days of Hussein, when border-crossings became hard to control and therefore terrorists could move more freely between countries. After the invasion and the deposing of Hussein, this process of insurgency creation was catalysed by a decision made by the US officials: the de-Ba’athifica-

³ Wing, *Overview of Iraq’s Tribes*, 2009.

⁴ Marine Corps, *Al-Anbar Awakening - Volume II*, 2009, 4.

⁵ Wing, *Overview of Iraq’s Tribes*, 2009.

⁶ Ridolfo, *Iraq: Christian Population Dwindling Due To Threats, Attacks*, 2007.

tion law, which released around 400,000 soldiers, mainly Sunni, to the streets.⁷

Most of these various forces in the initial period of the invasion were fighting against the Coalition forces. However, none of them were able to reach the level of prominence and effectiveness that at-Tawhīd wal-Jihād did. This group was established in 1999 by Jordanian-born al-Zarqawi (1966-2006) and later became known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the predecessor of IS, when al-Zarqawi declared his allegiance to al-Qa'eda on 17 October 2004. This organisation managed to amass a large number of foreign fighters as well as many local tribes to fight under its banners against the invaders.

IV. The al-Anbar Awakening

The so-called al-Anbar Awakening was the result of a combination of factors: AQI's brutal policies against tribes; the suffocating of the latter's smuggling activities; and the intensification of the material- and incentive-based cooperation between the US and the Sunnites. The official beginning of the Awakening – *Ṣaḥwat al-Anbar* – was on 14 September 2006, when Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha (1972-2007) and prominent sheikhs from the province declared they would fight against AQI.⁸ However, the movement itself originated long before this announcement, when a US-tribal patronage relationship began to blossom and become a prominent feature of Al-Anbar's political landscape.

There were numerous attempts by the Coalition to attract local citizens after the fight for Al-Anbar began in 2003.⁹ However, due to the indiscriminate violence that came along with the military strikes, and the arrest of virtually everyone who looked suspicious, the soldiers on the ground managed only to alienate local people. The sheikhs decided it would be more

beneficial to side with AQI, whose ideology and goals at that time appealed to the majority of Sunnites.

There are two primary reasons why, in the initial stages of the war against the insurgents, the Sunni tribes chose to side with the local and foreign insurgents. The first reason may relate to who the nationalist insurgents were. The groups that were based in al-Anbar were comprised of former high echelon Ba'ath military and political leaders. After the disbanding of the Iraqi army, many soldiers joined the ranks of these organisations in order to oppose the US forces.¹⁰ Even the founder of the Awakening, Sheikh Sattar, was part of such groups. These nationalist insurgents did not always see eye to eye with AQI but proved very attractive to local Sunnites because of their moderate religious standing, unlike that of AQI, and because the former Iraqi army was well respected by the Sunni population.

The second factor was the conduct of US soldiers, who were involved in various activities which undermined their image and credibility in the eyes of the local population, for example disarming every civilian, depriving them of any means of defending themselves against AQI. Furthermore, because of the constant and indiscriminate arrests – with disregard for the tribal sense of honour, respect and tradition – local people were alienated, which hampered any chance of aligning with the 'Westerners'.

Slowly, the situation began to change in late 2004 and the beginning of 2005, and the idea of an Awakening was taking root. An example of such an initiative is the Anbar Revolutionaries group, which although tiny – around 22 joined – was cooperating with the US forces. Their main activities included providing intelligence information as well as assistance in some military operations in exchange for se-

⁷ With *Order Number 2*, signed by the head of the occupational authority Paul Bremer on May 23, 2003.

⁸ Marine Corps, *Al-Anbar Awakening - Volume II*, 2009, 58.

⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

¹⁰ *Order Number 5*, signed by the head of the occupational authority Paul Bremer on May 25, 2003

curity and the opportunity to keep their weapons.¹¹

Following their initial cooperation with AQI, the tribes were exposed to two main developments that later on forced the tribesmen to shift their position and begin to cooperate with the Americans – the brutality of AQI and the economic potential of a US friendship. The ideology of AQI envisioned the enforcement of strong Shari'a law through intimidation and brutality. Al-Zarqawi's organisation was very keen on implementing its interpretation of Islam, and anyone who did not adhere was punished. Furthermore, anyone who was suspected of cooperating with the Coalition forces was subject to threats, torture and murder. There are numerous graphic examples of beheadings and tortures of such suspects, conducted by AQI. These provide a striking resemblance to the actions that IS is currently perpetrating. A further correlation between the actions of the two is AQI's use of women dressed as seamstresses in order to spy and provide intelligence for the organisation about the activities of people by gaining access to their houses, a place forbidden to male insurgents. The same tactics are now used by IS, who have established a female jihadist group called al-Khamsa.¹²

These brutal tactics triggered the magnetic forces of the tribe, and they drove Sunnites to seek its support, which was the only way they could feel protected and gain moral, economic and military support. As one Iraqi put it, "with the tribe you are someone, without the tribe you are nothing."¹³ On the other hand, the dire situation of the tribesmen forced the sheikhs to seek the support of the most convenient partner that could help their interests come to fruition – the Americans.

Sheikhs, who were themselves victims of attacks by AQI, had their own reason to switch positions: al-Zarqawi's group was suffocating their main source of income and therefore a source of prestige and influence for the sheikh within his peer group – smuggling. Without this lucrative income, tribal leaders risked being replaced.¹⁴

For their part, the Americans realised their initial mistakes in dealing with the locals and recognised the value that these people held for their purposes against AQI. US soldiers were unprepared to deal with the tribal culture of the al-Anbar province because they lacked even the basic knowledge of tribal customs and traditions. This is quite easily spotted in the soldiers' main source of reference, which included outdated and completely irrelevant information about how to interact with the locals.¹⁵

Americans began to rely on benefit-based practices, which became the norm in the Sunni-American relationship. Tribes and sheikhs realised that the "Yankees" provided them with a greater opportunity to continue to hold their leadership positions in the province by offering their temporary allegiance in exchange for acquiring protection and economic gains. Through such actions, the loyalties of Sheikh Abdul Sattar and his brother Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha were obtained. The two brothers owned a contracting business, and the Americans used the opportunity to offer them a business prospect: the removal of rubble laying in the town of Ramadi. The brothers were ultimately awarded the whole contract, worth millions of dollars.¹⁶

The realisation that short-term cooperation is beneficial to both parties, in addition to the alienation process that was driving a wedge

¹¹ U.S. Marine Corps, *Al-Anbar Awakening - Volume II*, 2009, 230.

¹² Sinjab, *Syrian female who fled 'road of crimes' to escape IS*, 2015.

¹³ Al-Mohammad, *Relying on one's tribe: A Snippet of Life in Basra Since the 2003 Invasion*, 2010, 4.

¹⁴ Baram, *The Iraqi Tribes and the Post-Saddam System*, 2003.

¹⁵ United States Army 1st Infantry Division, *Soldier's Handbook to Iraq*, 2004.

¹⁶ U.S. Marine Corps, *Al-Anbar Awakening - Volume II*, 2009, 209.

into the ties with AQI, led to the formation of small models of the Awakening movement in various places in al-Anbar, beginning with the town of al-Qaim. The cooperation between tribes and US soldiers in this town served as a predecessor to the better known Awakening, as started by Sheikh Sattar.

The success of the Awakening movement managed to suffocate AQI's activities, which were attempting to establish an Islamic State. The power of the tribes was proven by the sharp increase in the number of Sunnites who joined the US-established tribal police force: before the establishment of the Awakening, only around 150 people had joined; between September and November of 2006, there were around 1,500 new policemen, increasing to around 28,000 by the end of 2006.

The relationship between the US and the tribes, however, proved to be extremely superficial and based on the shared need for cooperation to deal with a mutual enemy. Once the threat from AQI was no longer substantial, the cooperation ground to a halt, the money flowing to the tribes dried out and the US left it up to the government of Nouri al-Maliki – a Shi'a who had around 100,000 armed and US-trained members of the Awakening – to integrate into the Iraqi security apparatus. By 2009 only around 9,000 had been appointed to the Iraqi Security Forces and 30,000 employed in other ministries. In addition to all of the forces left on the street, much like after the de-Ba'athification law, sheikhs who relied on money from the US now had to return to their previous illegal practices in order to provide for their tribesmen. This worrying picture and the possible consequences it carries was summed up quite well by Colonel Sean MacFarland, a US officer central to the establishment of the Awakening, who said speaking of the tribes: "Down the road, would they fight us if we overstayed our welcome? They might very well."¹⁷

V. The governments of Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's Sunnites and the rise of the Islamic State

Nouri al-Maliki was the Prime Minister of Iraq between 2006 and 2014, and in this period he formed two governments which illustrated the Sunni-Shi'a divide in the country very clearly. During the formation and rule of his first cabinet 2006-2010, the Sunnites were well represented and held high offices. This was partially due to the presence and influence of American forces in the country, and the still very prominent threat of AQI and its affiliates. Maliki recognised the fact that the Sons of Iraq, and therefore its Sunni leaders, were a needed ally. However, tides quickly began to change as soon as this threat started to disappear, and US soldiers began to pull out of the country. Maliki, who was himself a victim of the sectarian divide in the Iraq during Saddam's rule, held a deep personal distrust and animosity towards Sunnites.¹⁸ As one of his chief ministers and a prominent Sunni tribal leader, Rafi al-Issawi¹⁹ testified immediately after the US withdrawal that "everything started to collapse", and Maliki began a process of "cleansing" his government of all those Sunni elements that might oppose him or that held a prominent position within their sect. The most notable example was the arrest of two of Tariq al-Hashemi's bodyguards and the arrest warrant issued for the long-standing vice-president himself on December 15, 2011. Hashemi fled the country and was tried in absentia, sentenced to death.

The fact that Maliki allied himself with the Sunni population of his country was only driven by the need to defeat AQI, and that he never held any deeper desire or plans to include that part of Iraq's population in the future of the state, is evident from his actions after 2009. For one, he was deeply distrustful of the Sons of Iraq and considered them

¹⁷Kukis, *Turning Iraq's Tribes, Against Al-Qaeda*, 2006.

¹⁸Boghani, *In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Maliki's Iraq*, 2014.

¹⁹Rafi al-Issawi was minister of finance in the first Maliki government.

to be a hazardous militia that could threaten his position in the country, which explains why he began disbanding the force. He complied with US-made promises to the Sons that they would be included in the government apparatus, but managed to hamper the process through a number of restrictions and by offering an unsustainably low pay to those who chose to “integrate”.²⁰ This however, was only one instance of Maliki’s intentions towards the Sunnites. He began a policy of mass arrests and detentions, keeping people in prison for extended periods of time without any prosecution or trial. There are many testimonies from detainees that have been subjected to torture, the most prominent example of which probably being the guards of the former vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi, who claim that this is how they were forced to make false confessions of terrorist attacks they were ordered to perpetrate against Shiites.²¹

These indiscriminate attacks and arrests against the Sunnites led to a foreseeable outcome: the alienation of the Sunni population. The result of this was the mounting of a protest movement by late 2011. By the end of 2012 the protest-wave had reached its pinnacle and those Sunni centres that had earlier been in the epicentre of the uprising against AQI were now where people were gathering against al-Maliki’s government – namely Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul, Kirkuk, Samarra and others. These towns were also the breeding ground in the emergence of IS. According to Rafi al-Issawi, this new wave of angst against the Shi’a government was driven by the tribal enclave within the Al-Anbar province and was naturally brewed thanks to the discrimination and violence brought about by the Maliki government.²² This implies that we once again witnessed a resurgence of the tribal connection as well as the alienation of the population from the central government and their conse-

quent drift towards the radical elements in the country.

By this time AQI had managed to bandage its wounds and regain parts of its presence in Iraq. A familiar development was occurring in the country. The Sunni population began to feel drawn to this terror force, which provided a necessary counterbalance to the government’s oppression against the Sunni minority. By this time IS had already begun to take shape and by the end of 2011 the organisation was widely active in Syria. The first major breakthrough that IS achieved in Iraq came as a result of the actions of the Maliki government. In December 2013, Iraqi security forces kidnapped MP Ahmed al-Alwani, a Sunni from the Dulaim tribe, and later killed some of his relatives. On the next day, the same forces attacked a Sunni anti-government protest camp in Ramadi, which was organised by the same tribal federation and had been there for nearly a year. These actions led to a military stand-off between the tribes and the security forces, and to the eventual defeat and withdrawal from al-Anbar province of the latter. In conjunction with and thanks to these developments, IS fighters entered the city of Ramadi shortly afterwards and claimed it in the name of their caliphate after elements of the Dulaimi federation pledged allegiance to the terrorists.²³

Oddly enough, Iraq had once again in a very short period of time managed to go back to the unstable political and security situation of 2003-2004. As Tariq al-Hashemi stated, the Sunnis did not like the strict and even brutal application of Shari’a law by IS, yet they realised that the terrorist organisation served as the lesser of two evils, a way to oppose and fight the Maliki-led government responsible for the oppressions of so many. And perhaps even more revealing and in line with the developments in Iraq portrayed in this article is

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Tariq al-Hashemi claims this in an interview given for a documentary filmed by PBS.

²²Boghani, *In Their Own Words*, 2014.

²³The Daily Star Lebanon, *Iraqi forces, tribesmen battle Qaeda-linked militants*, 2014.

the following statement by Rafi al-Issawi: “To me, at the end of the day, it is the Sunnis who will defeat ISIS, exactly like in 2007 and ’08 when the Sunnis made the decision of fighting Al Qaeda.”²⁴

VI. Conclusion

Iraq’s political developments since the invasion have followed a somewhat circular trajectory, one that unfortunately has not propelled the country forward towards establishing a stable and secure country for all the various religions, sects, ethnicities and peoples, but rather kept sending it towards chaos.

- In the centre of this downwards spiral, is the deep rooted divide between the two main sects of the dominant religion in Iraq. Shiites and Sunnites have been divided and used against each other for decades by the various policies and actions of the country’s ruling governments and leaders. This process was at the centre of Saddam Hussein’s dominance in the country and was only extended after his removal from power by the American forces and the subsequent governments of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.
- This divide and animosity between the two sects was skilfully used by the foreign terrorist groups in Iraq, who were looking for a way to establish their presence in the region. Iraq provided a fruitful ground for AQI and later the Islamic State to set up bases of operation and to easily recruit soldiers under its banners from the local population, who were disillusioned and tired of the mistreatment and hopelessness that the central government provided.
- The situation in Iraq after the pull-out of the US troops in 2009 clearly proves this point, as tens of thousands of former Awakening members were left unemployed and angered by false promises of integration into the Iraqi army, a situation that much resembled the dissolution of the army in 2003. The similarities, however, do not stop there, as plenty of common threads can be found between the situation in Iraq in 2003 and the current situation. For one, a resurgence of AQI was beginning to take shape, as could be seen by the number of terror attacks per day, which in the period after 2009 were in higher numbers than between 2003 and 2004.²⁵
- Furthermore, plenty of reports suggest that tribes and sheikhs decided to realign their position in the conflict and support AQI’s actions, especially during the leadership of Prime Minister al-Maliki.²⁶ This tribal support helped create the fertile ground upon which IS was able to flourish. This distorted cycle of events seems to indiscriminately repeat itself, as we can now see another familiar occurrence beginning to take shape: tribal alienation from IS and realignment with the central government, which is now seen as the lesser of two evils, and the increasing presence of foreign military assistance, including that of the US, European and Gulf powers as well as Russia.
- However, the situation within Iraq, and Syria for that matter, has to be solved by the locals, because no lasting peace and prosperity can be established based on military occupation and oppression, or by the segregation of the people of Iraq.

²⁴Boghani, *In Their Own Words*, 2014.

²⁵The data can be retrieved via <http://www.statista.com>.

²⁶Ali, *Anbar Tribal Leader: Maliki Is ‘More Dangerous’ Than ISIS*, 2014; Banco, *Some Iraqi Sunni Tribal Leaders Allied With The US Are Working With ISIS*, 2015.

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