

The 2008 U.S. Elections and Sunni Insurgent Dynamics in Iraq

By Michael Gabbay

MORE THAN FIVE YEARS after the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq, the current election campaign season in the United States presents an opportunity for Sunni Arabs in Iraq to show the American public their desires for a continued U.S. troop presence. Like American voters, the Sunnis are not of one mind regarding the U.S. presence. Events in Iraq during the U.S. pre-election period, specifically with respect to the level and axes of violence, will help reveal the power balance among different Sunni factions as well as which of the three conflict logics—anti-U.S. insurgency, sectarian civil war, or intra-Sunni factional struggle—is presently the dominant organizing dynamic among Iraq's Sunni population. Regardless of the results of the upcoming U.S. presidential election, this information can help guide U.S. policy. In particular, the absence of a large increase in violence may signal that the time is ripe for formal negotiations with Sunni nationalist insurgent groups. Overall, the divergent priorities of the nationalist factions combined with the insurgency's fractious history suggest that continued factional struggles within the Sunni community will be the most likely near-term dynamic.

A Nationalist Taxonomy

The signals that will emerge prior to the elections will result from power struggles and interactions between three strains of Sunni nationalists—pro-U.S. accommodationists, anti-U.S. expulsionists and anti-Shi'a revanchists—all of whom, unlike the global jihadists of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), place value on preserving the integrity of Iraq but have different priorities within that context.

Pro-U.S. Accommodationists

The pro-U.S. accommodationist strain consists of Sunnis who have accepted the need for a continued U.S. presence in Iraq. Many are former insurgents in U.S.-backed militias known as Awakening (*sabwa*) Councils who have put their hostility toward the United States aside, at least tentatively, and are sincerely willing to give the political

process a chance. Although most would like to see expanded Sunni political and economic power as well as an eventual U.S. withdrawal, they place a priority on Iraqi stability and are willing at present to subordinate these goals for the sake of a less violent Iraq. Abu Azzam, a former leader within the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI), appears to fit the mold of an insurgent who has been incorporated into the political process; he has expressed support for a continued U.S. presence and formed a political party with the intention of participating in upcoming provincial elections.¹ All *sabwa* councils, however, are not accommodationist, and conversely some active insurgent groups likely fall into the accommodationist category (a possible example is Hamas-Iraq, which broke off from the 1920 Revolution Brigades and is reputedly linked to the largest Sunni party in the country, the Iraqi Islamic Party). The accommodationists clearly have an interest in lowering the level of violence prior to the U.S. elections.

Anti-U.S. Expulsionists

The highest priority of the expulsionists is the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. The Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) is the most vocal representative of this trend and is the religious authority for the Jihad and Change Front, a grouping of nationalist insurgents, including the 1920 Revolution Brigades. The value to which the expulsionists assign highest importance is one of Iraqi sovereignty. The expulsionists may have designs on central power, but their strategy unequivocally revolves around defeating the United States in Iraq first. If they had the capability, the pre-election period represents a tremendous opportunity to weaken American commitment via an offensive against U.S. troops. The fact that the AMS has shown signs of reaching out to Shi'a leader Muqtada al-Sadr's political organization does not attest to their strength, however; at his closing speech before the AMS General Congress in Damascus, the leader of the AMS spoke positively about nationalists in the al-Sadr movement, and an AMS

1 Elements within the Iraqi government apparently take a dimmer view of Abu Azzam as he was recently placed on an arrest list. Richard A. Oppel, "Iraq Takes Aim at Leaders of US-Tied Sunni Groups," *New York Times*, August 22, 2008.

aide seemed to dangle the prospect of cooperation if the al-Sadr movement left the political process.²

Anti-Shi'a Revanchists

The anti-Shi'a revanchists are dedicated to the goal of restoring Sunni dominance over Iraq. Although the revanchists do not explicitly state their goal of reimposing Sunni rule, they display a level of hostility toward the Shi'a and adhere to a hard line Sunni Islamism that are irreconcilable with an Iraq where the Shi'a are ascendant. The revanchist calculus regarding violence during the campaign season is unclear. It depends on whether their strategy for attaining central power hinges upon U.S. assistance and on their strength relative to the other Sunni factions.

The Islamic Army in Iraq, which appears to be an amalgam of hard line jihadists and more moderate nationalists, is the most prominent representative of the anti-Shi'a revanchist faction.³ The IAI's refrain that the "Iranian occupation" is more dangerous than the U.S. occupation is a clever rhetorical formulation that essentially asserts—under the guise of an ostensibly non-sectarian, anti-Iran slogan—the primacy of the Shi'a threat given that it portrays most of the major Shi'a actors as "stooges" of Iran.⁴ The IAI has also been widely accused by fellow insurgents of extensive participation in the *sabwa*. Typically, insurgents reserve a special wrath for those who turn against them, as witnessed by the fury that AQI unleashed against the *sabwa*.⁵ The fact that the IAI has not retaliated against figures such as Abu Azzam, who have publicly joined the ranks of the accommodationists, indicates that the leadership of the IAI's jihadist wing does not yet see the *sabwa* councils as inimical to its goals. Moreover, in an effort to contain the dissent of its hardliners, the IAI may be trying to cultivate the impression that some of the *sabwa* councils are backing

2 OSC, "Iraq's Al-Dari Addresses AMS General Congress, Says 'Resistance' in Good Shape," July 25, 2008; OSC, "AMS Aide Views Stand on Iraqi Issues, Al-Sadr Trend, Rejects US-Iraq Agreement," August 6, 2008.

3 Michael Gabbay, "Mapping the Factional Structure of the Sunni Insurgency in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 1:4 (2008).

4 OSC, "Al-Fursan Magazine Publishes Article on Iranian Occupation of Iraq," February 2, 2008.

5 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the Iraqi resistance covertly.⁶ The IAI, however, has suffered defections from its hard line jihadist wing as well as the recent departure of its long-time ally, the Mujahidin Army, from both the IAI-led Jihad and Reform Front and the broader Political Council for the Iraqi Resistance (PCIR). The IAI's participation in the PCIR, which includes Hamas-Iraq and the Islamic Front for Iraqi Resistance (JAMI)—Muslim Brotherhood groups suspected of fighting AQI alongside the United States—aroused intense dissatisfaction from hard line jihadists.⁷

Anti-Shi`a Revanchist Strategies

The anti-Shi`a revanchists appear to hold the key to the dynamics among the nationalists in the sense that they are free to align with either the accommodationists (and thereby the United States) or with the expulsionists, while still maintaining their core revanchist agenda; the latter two camps, on the other hand, are fundamentally opposed and cannot ally. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider the possible strategies for a Sunni revanche.

Although particular Sunni elites could come to power via a coup, of which Iraq has a fine tradition, such a coup would not imbue the anti-Shi`a revanchists with the mass power base required to implement the Sunni fundamentalist rule they seek, whereas a military victory over the Shi`a would. One possible strategy would be to first expel the United States from Iraq and then confront the Shi`a in a direct battle. The spokesman of the Mujahidin Army, a Salafist group whose rhetoric is often sharply anti-Shi`a, seemed to hope for this outcome, saying, "I think that the enemy [U.S.] will retreat to bases and push the forces of the sectarian government into the battlefield."⁸ This

6 A purported member of the IAI, Abu Abdullah, said: "Trust me, the *sabwas* are ultimately with the resistance, heart and mind." For details, see Sam Dagher, "In Iraq, Sunni Insurgents Still Aim to Oust U.S., Shiites," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 10, 2008. The IAI repudiated this article but this denial may have been self-serving as evidenced by the fact that Abu Abdullah's remarks also managed to gratuitously tar the 1920 Revolution Brigades and the Rashidin Army—nationalist rivals of the IAI—as Ba`athist.

7 OSC, "Jihadist Criticizes Islamic Army Political Council with HAMAS-Iraq," October 12, 2007.

8 OSC, "Jihadist Website Posts Interview with Official

would allow them to align with the expulsionists. The Mujahidin Army's exit from the Jihad and Reform Front may reflect a decision along these lines.

Sunni setbacks in the sectarian violence of 2006-2007, however, have greatly dimmed the prospects of a Sunni victory in an unassisted battle against the Shi`a. On the other hand, the support of the United States would significantly raise the chances of victory. Revanchist leaders, however, are unlikely to be under the illusion that the United States would willingly conspire with them to topple the Iraqi government. Yet, they may believe that they could entrain the United States into siding with them in a civil war if it could be coupled to the intensifying U.S.-Iran conflict; the explicitly religious nature of a renewed Sunni-Shi`a civil war would almost inevitably lead to Iran's backing of the Shi`a side. Faced with the specter of an Iranian client regime prevailing in Baghdad, U.S. support of the Sunnis is not inconceivable if, unlike in 2006-2007, the principal standard bearers on the Sunni side were not the global jihadists of AQI, but rather nationalist groups with aims limited to Iraq. Of course, the resumption of large-scale violence in Iraq would likely hasten a U.S. withdrawal, but a Sunni alliance with the United States during the withdrawal period could prove pivotal to the outcome. The Sunnis, moreover, could offer the additional incentive of not harassing U.S. forces as they withdrew. The odds are against the success of such a strategy vis-à-vis the United States, but it is probably the Sunnis' best scenario for installing an avowedly Sunni Islamist regime in Baghdad.

Although the Islamic Army in Iraq does not exult in violence to the same degree as AQI, it is fully capable of fanning the flames of sectarian warfare. Its recounting of gang-style killings of Shi`a militia members in Baghdad neighborhoods evokes images of bodies dumped in roadside ditches. Furthermore, although car bombings against Shi`a civilians are almost by default attributed to AQI, the IAI has obliquely claimed responsibility for such bombings despite its denials of engaging in this practice. Of particular note is the claim of a joint car bombing

Spokesman of Al-Mujahidin Army," October 16, 2007.

with JAMI three days after the declaration of the PCIR—an attempt to placate the IAI's hard line jihadist wing by implying that JAMI shared its core anti-Shi`a orientation and was willing to act accordingly.⁹

This is not to say that the anti-Shi`a revanchists will immediately pursue such an entrainment strategy—they may be more concerned with consolidating their power among Sunnis—but if they wish to do so, time is not on their side. A continued robust U.S. presence will have a stabilizing effect on sectarian tensions and strengthen the Iraqi security forces in terms of capabilities and as a cross-sectarian institution.¹⁰ Additionally, there is only so long the revanchists can walk the tightrope of balancing the strategic rationale of aligning with the United States against the principles of their jihadist foot soldiers, many of whom undoubtedly view such a relationship as, quite literally, an unholy alliance. In perhaps a subtle effort to provide some religious justification for such an alliance, buried within an article on the maxims of war as applied by the early Muslims, the IAI relates an incident in which the caliph `Umar allowed Arab Christians to fight alongside Muslim forces against the ruling Persians in Iraq; this stands in contrast to the Qur`anic injunction against taking Jews and Christians as allies more frequently invoked by insurgents.¹¹ Given that there are factors working against the revanchists over time, the U.S. election campaign period presents an opportunity to weaken the

9 The IAI claimed that a booby-trapped car was blown up in a "large gathering place" of "apostate criminal militias" in an attack on October 14, 2007 in Adan Square in Baghdad in which 15 "apostates" were killed or wounded. This attack correlates with a number of media accounts of a car bombing against Shi`a civilians in Adan Square producing a similar number of casualties. The claim is remarkable not just for the IAI's virtual admission of attacking civilians, but even more so for the inclusion of JAMI, a group that claims to only target U.S. forces. See OSC, "Islamic Army in Iraq Claims Cooperating With Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi Brigades," October 20, 2007; OSC, "Xinhua: Four Civilians Killed in Baghdad Car Bombing," October, 14, 2007.

10 Stephen Biddle, Michael E. O'Hanlon, and Kenneth M. Pollack, "How to Leave a Stable Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 87:5 (2008).

11 OSC, "Full Translation of 'Principles of War' Article from 12th Issue of Al-Fursan Magazine," August 23, 2007.

commitment of the American public via a flare-up of sectarian violence.¹²

Signs and Significance

The level of violence and its axis prior to the U.S. election day will yield important clues as to the nature of the conflict's organizing dynamics and the balance of power among the Sunnis. The absence of a serious spike in violence would signify that the expulsionists are weak; if they had the capability to mount a sustained campaign against the United States and its accommodationist allies, the pre-election period would be the ideal time. Conversely, a sharp increase in U.S. casualties would imply

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that the expulsionists are still strong and that the dynamic of an anti-occupation insurgency is very much alive. It would also likely signify an alliance of anti-Shi`a revanchists and expulsionists. An eruption of Sunni-Shi`a violence would imply that the revanchists were ascendant or the possible resurgence of AQI (the proportion of high-profile attacks due to suicide bombings may distinguish between the two); in either case, the logic of a sectarian civil war would be the dominant organizing dynamic of the conflict. A spike in Sunni-Sunni violence (again not characterized by AQI's hallmark suicide bombings) would likely signify a power struggle between expulsionists on one side and accommodationists and revanchists on the other, with Sunni factional dynamics providing the main conflict logic.

¹² It is encouraging that an uptick in high-profile attacks against civilians earlier this year did not lead to an escalating spiral of sectarian violence. “Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq,” Department of Defense Report to Congress, June 2008.

In terms of implications for the U.S. presence, any large-scale increase in violence, especially if sustained, would call into question the basis of the surge's success and would likely cause hard thinking about the continued utility of U.S. forces in Iraq. The absence of any spike in violence prior to the election, however, would make untenable the notions that the United States was either aggravating the conflict or powerless to divert the trajectory from an inevitable civil war; it could be said that the revanchists were biding their time, but given the risks of delay that very fact would signal that they have not yet consolidated sufficient power to make their move.

It seems that, in the absence of blatantly sectarian power grabs by Shi`a actors, continued factional struggles among the Sunnis will be the most likely near-term dynamic, possibly intensifying prior to upcoming Iraqi elections in 2009. The Sunni insurgency has had a fractious history of failed attempts at unification, splinter groups, stillborn or riven alliances, and, ultimately, open fighting with AQI, whose membership is overwhelmingly Iraqi Sunni. Perhaps this is a legacy of the Sunnis' long tenure atop Iraq, a rule characterized by rival elites accustomed to jockeying for power rather than organizing cohesively along broad communal lines.¹³

The waning of the AQI threat has brought other rivalries to the fore, both within the insurgency and paralleled outside it. For instance, prominent Anbar *sabwa* shaykhs, who have tussled with the Iraqi Islamic Party over control of the provincial council and police, claimed that the Iraqi Islamic Party's “very dangerous militia,” Hamas-Iraq, has been conducting an assassination campaign against Anbar *sabwa* leaders.¹⁴ To manage intra-Sunni violence, the United States may need to abide particular Sunni armed actors as it in essence did with the *sabwa* councils against AQI. Militias that align with the United States will have powerful advantages over their rivals, as evidenced by AQI's defeats and on the Shi`a side by the recent momentum of

the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council over the Muqtada al-Sadr movement.

If events in the near-term demonstrate expulsionist weakness and that the revanchists are not powerful enough to strike, then the opportunity and leverage may finally exist for the United States to initiate formal negotiations with major nationalist insurgent groups aimed at getting them to publicly renounce insurgency and recognize the Iraqi government in return for an explicit U.S. peacekeeping aegis. This would replace the current proliferation of ad hoc local truces that allow an ambiguity whereby insurgent groups can play a double game: claiming attacks against U.S. and Iraqi targets—thereby leaving their options open for a return to intensified insurgency and civil war—while their affiliated *sabwa* councils cooperate with the United States to consolidate local power; an ambiguity which gives the Shi`a-dominated government reason to stall integration of the *sabwa* councils into state security forces and perhaps, more aggressively, to prey upon them for sectarian advantage.

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¹³ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ OSC, “Al-Anbar Chieftains Accuse Islamic Party of Bringing Al-Qa`ida to Iraq,” April 3, 2008.