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A Saudi beacon for Iraq's Sunni militias

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Iraq is less violent and more stable than it was at the height of the insurgency, but it is still plagued by bombings and sectarian tensions. In recent weeks, Shi'ite militias have been attacking United States troops - perhaps on the direction of Iran, perhaps simply to take claim for their departure scheduled for the end of this year.

Sunni forces have been at work as well, targeting Shi'ite marketplaces and security personnel. Sunni militancy is no longer the diffuse anti-US insurgency it was after the fall of Baghdad, nor is it held in check any longer by benefits that the US surge once bestowed upon it.

Over the past year or two, the Sunni resistance has demonstrated considerable discipline and control in attacking Shi'ite targets and, most remarkably and puzzlingly, in not attacking US personnel. For an answer to this puzzle one might look next door to Saudi Arabia.

The Sunni insurgency, 2003-2007

In the four years between the fall of Baghdad and the success of the surge, various groups fought the Western forces. The Shi'ite militias were led by a handful of indigenous leaders and supported by Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Leadership in the Sunni movement, however, was less concentrated. It was based on a confused array of former army officers, tribal chieftains, Ba'ath party figures, religious authorities, local power holders, and al-Qaeda lieutenants.

The rank and file came from former soldiers angered by the US's demobilization of the army, Salafist faithful who opposed the Western presence, foreign fighters from across the Middle East, and tribal youth seeking pay and adventure when elders lost the revenue and patronage system that Saddam Hussein had given them. All found a cause and steady pay.

Most fighters were undisciplined, and the insurgency showed it. Attacks demonstrated little knowledge of small-unit tactics and US troops often described Sunni fighters as no more than armed gangs. Coordination among rival Sunni groups was limited to sharing bomb-making skills and some supplies, though some tactical coordination emerged.

The Sunni insurgency was funded by Ba'ath party caches secreted about the country, wealthy contractors who had benefited from the old regime, and foreign sources in the Sunni Arab world. The money of the Ba'ath party and the contractors are thought to be long gone.

The Sunni opposition today

Most of the conditions that brought the old insurgency are still in existence. The Sunnis endure loss of privilege and status as the regimes they dominated since the 1920s are gone. Salafism remains strong and indeed it has strengthened as Sunnis turn to austere religion to explain their defeats and offer answers.

Perhaps most significantly, young men from the tribes have lost the jobs that Saddam's state and later the US surge had given them. The Shi'ite state ended these support systems and many young men are once again available - or they are supported through clandestine revenues from abroad.

Yet Sunni militants today operate in a far more controlled manner than in the past. They bomb Shi'ite markets and security forces, but refrain from the violent firefights and ambushes. The rivalries that divided various insurgent groups five years ago and led to rash competition for popular support are no longer in evidence. Whereas foreign fighters once fought openly with locals, they cooperate today.

There are few if any boastful manifestoes or propaganda videos from sundry leaders. The days of former colonels, neighborhood toughs, and foreign jihadis issuing proclamation after proclamation are gone. There is sufficient structure to prevent Sunni groups from attacking US troops.

This discipline and restraint cannot be rightly attributed to Iraqi political leadership. Sunni leaders are largely excluded from power. They are hounded, jailed, or even killed by Shi'ite security forces. Tribal elders no longer have the state or US revenue to keep their young men in line.

Why are al-Qaeda forces refraining from attacking US troops? They are not known for restraint. They despise the US intensely and generally follow the strategy of tying US forces down across the world so as to ruin the US financially - a goal that might seem less than far-fetched just now.

Perhaps al-Qaeda in Iraq has come to an understanding with a foreign power reluctant to be tied to killing US soldiers.

Saudi influence

All roads in the Gulf region lead to Riyadh. With the rising Shi'ite fortunes of late, Saudi Arabia is repaving and expanding those roads, especially the financial and intelligence ones running into Iraq's Sunni triangle. The Saudis are enlisting co-religionists - former soldiers, Salafists, and tribal elders of the old insurgency - to serve in their sacred cause of containing Shi'ism and Iran.

Saudi involvement in Iraq is deep and longstanding, dating back at least to supporting Saddam's war with Iran (1980-1988). Later, at the height of the insurgency, US intelligence detected money coming in from Sunni states in the region, though it wasn't clear if the money came from governments or prosperous individuals.

The Saudi government played an important role in easing the insurgency and sectarian violence that threatened to spread into other countries and expand Iranian power. Saudi diplomacy and money pressed the Dulayim tribes, a highly militarized confederation that straddles the Iraqi-Saudi border and predominates in Anbar province - the center of the insurgency. Saudi efforts, largely overshadowed by parallel US ones, greatly reduced the fighting.

The Sunnis of Iraq now play an important role in Riyadh's policy of containing Iran - a policy given more urgency by the perception - almost certainly erroneous - that Tehran has been encouraging uprisings by disaffected Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Bahrain, and elsewhere in the Gulf.

The Saudis support the Kurds of northwestern Iran, the Arabs of Khuzestan in western Iran, and the Balochi in the southeast. Saudi Arabia is encouraging opposition among other non-Persian tribes with long histories of opposing Tehran whether a shah or mullah is in power. In Afghanistan, the Saudis are also enlisting Pashtun tribes to counter Iranian influence in the north and west. Iraq is but one front.

The Sunni campaign may seek to establish an autonomous region in Iraq for the increasingly marginalized Sunni Arabs. Perhaps a fully separate state is in mind, one that will serve as a buffer between Shi'ite states and Sunni ones. Such a country could rely on financial support from Sunni petro-states for quite some time, though Anbar province is thought to hold impressive hydrocarbon resources.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq?

The position of al-Qaeda in all this is puzzling. The dogged enemy of both the United States and Saudi Arabia is thought to be operating in substantial numbers in Iraq, yet it refrains from attacking the former and accepts the latter. Clearly, this is a different al-Qaeda than the one the world has come to know over the last ten years - so much so that it might be better seen as a different entity altogether.

The implication is that Saudi Arabia and the foreign fighters inside Iraq have established common ground and that these foreign fighters have been diverted from an anti-Western cause to an anti-Shi'ite one - at least temporarily, one must add. This might initially seem good news to many in the West, but it augurs poorly for stability in the Gulf as it implies protracted and well-funded irregular warfare in Iraq and with Iran.
The mechanics of such an arrangement are not hard to define. Saudi security forces have for years maintained ties with fellow countrymen who served in the ranks of the anti-Soviet mujahideen. Some of them joined or knew members in Osama bin Laden's veteran league, which of course became al-Qaeda. Wahhabi clerics, through their interrelated preaching and recruiting, have been important parts of jihadi networks since the Afghan war emerged in 1980.

Further, Saudi security forces were able to infiltrate and defeat al-Qaeda-Arabian Peninsula when it turned on the House of Saud following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Many of those fighters were captured or turned themselves in and have since provided useful intelligence.

If indeed the Saudis have converted a guerrilla force inside Iraq into a partner against Shi'ite power, they would do well to remain on guard. Working with zealous fighters has proven problematic over the years as the Arab mujahideen have turned against Pashtun mujahideen, the United States, the Afghan north, and now increasingly Pakistan. And of course they have in the past turned against the House of Saud as well.