The Re-Awakening of Anbar

Introduction

Whether sectarian and ethnic polarisation are long established features of the Iraqi political landscape, or constructed by the post-2003 architects of Iraq’s political system, these two forces now define the political life, actions and future of Iraq, suggests the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). One decade after the US-led invasion and one year after the end of the US occupation, Iraq grapples with an escalating sectarian crisis between the Shi’ite-led government of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and an increasingly disaffected Sunni minority. The country is also experiencing the spill over effects of the crisis in neighbouring Syria and an intensifying ethnic crisis in an increasingly defiant and heavily armed Kurdish region. Individually, these issues challenge the fragile and politically polarised Iraqi government but collectively the issues could be the impetus for dramatic escalation into renewed conflict.

Bordering Syria, Anbar province has become increasingly restless since the withdrawal of US troops in December 2011. Anbar is considered the “epicentre” in Iraq’s Sunni insurgency of 2007-2009. Anbar is the birthplace of the Sunni Sahwa\(^1\), the movement responsible for helping US troops extinguish the al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)-led insurgency, thereby largely ending the sectarian violence in Iraq. However, since protests erupted in Anbar in December 2012, Anbar province has once again re-emerged as the focal point of manifest Sunni dissatisfaction over its minority status in Iraq. This paper will discuss recent events within Anbar province and surrounding provinces that have led to the re-awakening of Anbar in 2013.

Whither Al-Anbar Province?

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\(^1\) According to Middle East Policy Council, from 2007 to 2008, Iraq’s tribal Sahwa (Arabic for “Awakening”) is considered a key component of the US surge strategy in efforts to reduce violence across the country. The tribal mobilisation took shape in late 2005, but was formalised in September 2006 with the creation, by tribes from Ramadi, of an alliance; the “al Anbar Salvation Council”. The Sahwa quickly took root with other tribal leaders and imams joining the movement, at first in Anbar, then throughout the country.

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A [RAND report](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR173.html) titled *Whither Al-Anbar Province? Five Scenarios Through 2011* coincided with the drawdown of US forces from Iraq in 2010. The RAND Corporation convened a series of three, one-day stakeholder workshops to identify key security, political, economic and cultural factors that would influence Anbar province’s future in a post-US Iraq. The 2010 report identified five possible trajectories for the province (Figure 1), with outcomes running the spectrum from the worst case to best case. For the purposes of this report, we will consider the worst case scenario – the “Sunni Fight for Survival”.

**Sunni Fight for Survival**

In this scenario, Anbar province descends into the central front of a Sunni-led insurgency against the Iraqi central government. The return to violence is motivated by perceptions that the Shi’ite-led central government of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki is an instrument of sectarian interests, operating in a punitive manner toward Iraq’s Sunni communities. In turn, AQI and other militant groups exploit the grievances to reconstitute the insurgency, which may also be supported by external actors (e.g., al Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, Syria). In this worst case scenario, both Sunni cohesion and Sunni-Shi’ite hostility are high. This is the most violent outcome envisioned by the RAND workshop participants and the most destabilising of the five outcomes for the future of Iraq.

**Figure 1: Five Plausible Scenarios for al-Anbar Province**

Source: RAND Corporation

**The Re-Awakening of Anbar Province**

Since 2003, Anbar province has been a home to powerful forces that have altered the direction of political developments in Iraq at key moments. For example, changing allegiances and the positions of key tribes and groups facilitated the creation of the Sahwa in Anbar province. The movement eventually paved the way for the “Anbar Awakening” which ultimately led to a broader Sunni awakening in 2006-2007, according to RUSI. The Sunni-awareness, in conjunction with the suspension of the Mahdi Army, were key contributors to US forces’ success in curtailing AQI operations in the country.

Once again, Anbar province seems to be re-awakening, but the awakening of 2013 is far different. Instead of fighting against AQI insurgents, the Sunnis, who comprise an estimated one-third of Iraq’s 33 million population, now assert that the Shi’ite-majority government of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki treats them as second-class citizens; a cry that could re-ignite the vicious Sunni-Shi’ite civil war of six years ago, according to *The Telegraph*. A decade ago, when US forces entered Ramadi in tanks and Humvees, Abu Saleh, a former Saddam regime security officer, led a group of Sunni fighters against “the occupiers” with improvised explosive device (IEDs) and ambush tactics. Saleh admits, however, in hindsight that the Sunni insurgency was riddled with missteps. “We randomly abducted people for funds, we planted IEDs in front of civilians homes”, says Saleh. Ultimately, the Sunni insurgency fractured into competing smaller groups and Sahwa fighters and the population eventually turned on the insurgents. By 2009, Saleh says the insurgency had been “run out of town by a local militia hunting them on behalf of the US troops”. Like thousands of other Iraqi Sunnis, Abu Saleh took refuge in neighbouring Syria.

Things are different in Anbar now says Saleh. He is back in Ramadi, riding a tide “sprung from the revolutions of Tahrir Square and Benghazi and gathering force amid the bloodshed in Syria”, reports *The Guardian*. Abu Saleh and other Iraqi Sunnis believe this tide of change could “flow all the way to Baghdad; sweeping away the Shi’ite-

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2 Mahdi Army was created by Shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and Imad Mughniyah in April 2003 following the end of Saddam Hussein's regime. The group remained relatively unknown until April 2004 when it came into the spotlight during a violent battle against American forces in Najaf. This battle was the first major attack by a Shi’ite militia against the coalition forces in Iraq. After this battle and as late as 2008, the Mahdi Army was regarded as "the most powerful force on the streets of Iraq after the American military", according to profile by Stanford University.
led government they despise”. The re-awakening is strikingly different this time in that Saleh, along with other Sunni fighters commanding the remnants of Sunni insurgent groups, coordinates meetings to form pacts with tribal leaders and to work among groups in order to effectively leverage the momentum generated from demonstrations in Sunni cities. Saleh observes, “[t]he Sunnis were never united like this from the fall of Baghdad until now. This is a new stage we are going through: first came the American occupation, then the resistance, then AQI dominated us, and then came internal fighting and the awakening ... now there is a truce even with the tribal sheikhs who fought and killed our cousins and brothers”. Even “the politicians have joined us and we have the legitimacy of the street” boosts Saleh, who claims that once allowed back into Ramadi, he and his men formed three battalions, which attacked convoys carrying supplies to Syria and an Iraqi army helicopter, according to The Guardian.

According to The National, imams also play an important role in this re-awakening. In Fallujah, one imam addressing a massive cheering crowd during Friday prayers told a story of a tyrant who tormented his people. The imam stated, that he was cautioned about what to preach but “...now, I am warning politicians, all of them who wanted to burn us: go back to God and repent because there will come a day when nothing will help you”. Worshippers yelled and many waved Saddam-era Iraqi and black Islamist flags and displayed signs saying, “Baghdad, we are coming”. The National reports, “as quickly as the worshippers were “whipped into euphoria”, the atmosphere calmed as the men silently organised themselves in lines for prayers. Worship in Fallujah is now a “passionate, thinly disguised, weekly protest” against the government.

Tribal leaders are responding to the province’s re-awakening in creative ways, reports Al Monitor. One tribal leader slaughtered 200 sheep on a Friday in order to provide demonstrators with food. On another Friday in the city of Hit approximately fifty miles from Ramadi, tribal leaders served 2,000 dishes of meat and rice for lunch. Quasay Zain, a spokesperson for the protests said that tribal leaders in Ramadi compete to serve lunch to protesters, stating “this time many tribal leaders in Anbar have taken honourable stances [versus their previous support for the Sahwa movement]”. Some activists and protesters speculate how tribal leaders have found the funds to provide such generous support for protests. In Ramadi, some protesters assert that the protests were sustained by leaders funded by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Turkey. “The fact that 200 sheep were slaughtered in a single day, by tribal leaders in Ramadi, in order to prepare a banquet for 100,000 people raises suspicions”, said one young activist. In the city of Fallujah, located between Ramadi and Baghdad, another Sunni activist said that a tribal leader had received funds from a Gulf country to prepare a big banquet for the sit-in. “This tribal leader wanted to prepare a banquet and found that other tribes had reserved their turn for the coming days”, he said. Ultimately, the leader received an earlier date for the banquet by paying a bribe to an influential person in the square.

The influence of apparent foreign funding is compounded by the presence of AQI in Anbar. Iraqi army forces arrested seven suspected AQI gunmen on 05 January in a raid targeting one of the organisations’ hideouts in Anbar province. Three of the captured gunmen were wanted by the Iraqi judiciary. During the arrest, Iraq security forces seized weapons, explosives and videos of attacks. According to The Guardian, “in Anbar province you can feel the growing influence of al Qaeda” said Saad al Muttalibi a senior Dawa² party official close to Maliki. “We [Iraqi officials] agreed with the local authorities to pull back from Fallujah and let them [local security] police it, but as soon as we did al Qaeda were back within five minutes. And you have to ask who benefits from the instability – al Qaeda and the Ba’athists”.

Origins of the Re-awakening - Anbar Province post-2011
What has spawned this re-awakening? Since the US troop withdrawal, a series of events within the country has fostered growing Sunni frustration and dissatisfaction with the Shia-led government of Nouri al Maliki. Inhabitants of Anbar province, primarily Sunni in composition, perceive national developments to be largely anti-Suni, citing political and institutional marginalisation, discrimination, and continued false imprisonment. Additionally, many Iraqis express frustration with an oil rich government that has enormous income from its resources but fails to deliver electricity, clean water and sewage. As a result, and understandably so, it is viewed as one of the most corrupt in the world, writes McClatchy. In the absence of economic and banking reforms, government spending dominates the economy, local businesses are restricted in borrowing, the real estate market is marginal and forty per cent of the working-age population is unemployed or underemployed across Iraq.

² Al Dawa (“The Call”), or the Islamic Dawa Party (“Hizb al-Da’wa al-Islamiya”), is Iraq’s ruling Shiite party, headed by Nur al Maliki. Al Dawa began as a revivalist Shiite movement in Najaf, Iraq, in 1957, as the political vessel of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr’s Islamic ideology.
Political Purging
Just one day after the official departure of US troops from Iraq on 21 December 2011, an arrest warrant was issued for Iraq's highest-ranking Sunni official, Vice President Tariq al Hashemi, on charges of terrorism, according to the Daily Mail. For many Sunnis, the move signalled a new phase in the country's simmering sectarian tensions and lent credence to a widely held Sunni opinion that the Shi'ite-led government of Nouri al Maliki was attempting to “side line” Sunnis within Iraqi society. Further escalating tensions, Maliki asked parliament to hold a no-confidence vote that would dismiss the Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al Mutlaq. At the time, Maliki told Shi’ite leaders “he could no longer work with Mutlaq”, who had reportedly insulted Maliki by describing him as a “dictator” during a television interview, according to the International Business Times. Imar al Saleh, an Al Jazeera correspondent in Baghdad at the time commented, “[t]he government says [the arrest of Hashemi] has nothing to do with the US withdrawal, that this has nothing to do with the Prime Minister consolidating his grip on power. However, members of the Iraqiya bloc, of whom Hashemi is a member, say ‘No [Maliki] is trying to become a dictator’”. Ahmed al Alwani, an Iraqiya member, told Reuters that Maliki was conducting a “kind of purge” against his opponents, particularly against the Sunni minority.

Shortly thereafter, on 18 January 2012, Iraqi Special Forces arrested Riya al Adad, a Sunni, and the vice president of Baghdad’s Provincial Council, on terrorism charges. Then, on 20 January 2012, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported two additional attempted arrests in the central Iraqi province of Diyala. The majority of Diyala’s Sunni provincial council members had recently signed a document notifying Baghdad of Diyala’s plans to seek greater autonomy. Two prominent Sunni arrests - the deputy governor in charge of investment, Ghadban al Khazraji, and the failed arrest of Talal al Juburi, deputy governor of administrative affairs - appeared to be retribution toward the Sunni minority for Diyala’s declaration; an accusation Baghdad vehemently denied. Later in 2012, the Iraqi Prime Minister ordered the arrest of several bodyguards of Minister of Finance Rafi al Issawi on charges of terrorism. It was not the first time that Maliki had levied the accusation. In 2010, during tense negotiations over the formation of the government, Maliki accused Issawi of leading a terrorist group, a claim that the US military investigated and found baseless. Issawi ultimately resigned from the Maliki government on 01 March in front of Anbar demonstrators. Then on 08 March 2013, Iraq’s agriculture minister, Ezzedine al Dawleh, resigned from the Maliki government in response to the killing of a protester in the northern Sunni-majority city of Mosul.

By no means a complete account, these arrests underscore the sectarian tensions in Iraq’s political system. Political analyst Hadi Jalo noted that the Iraqi sectarian conflict has shifted from once manifest conflict to a “soft conflict” found in the state institutions, government ministries. Jalo suggests that Maliki is suspicious of all Sunnis, even those who resisted joining the insurgency in 2005-2007 against Shi’ites.

Institutional Marginalisation
Sunnis claim that Maliki has an uncompromising strategy to sideline his opponents using the vast powers of his office. Since the start of his second term as Prime Minister in 2010, Maliki, who already controls the country’s army and security forces, extended his control to other key state institutions, including the media, election commission, Commission on Integrity and human rights violations. The Prime Minister also controls Iraq’s Central Bank and the Federal Supreme Court.

Many Sunnis are reportedly “locked out” of key jobs at universities and in government. Those Sunnis who currently hold positions in the Maliki government have been “banned from Cabinet meetings”. There is recurring discrimination when competing for jobs and provincial projects that provide electricity, water and healthcare in Sunni provinces. Widespread misapplication of anti-Ba’athist legislation is common and meant to target leading members of the Ba’ath Party under Saddam Hussein (1968 to 2003). The De-Ba’athification law is used as a sectarian weapon to rescind jobs and pensions of Sunni teachers and minor civil servants.

According to Sunnis, sectarian discrimination has manifested more noticeably since Iraq’s Higher Education Minister Ali al Adeeb, a close Maliki ally, assumed the ministry position. Several deans and heads of academic departments lost their positions “because they are Sunni”. Further, there are claims that enrolment for post

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4 One of the strongest contenders in the 2010 elections was the Iraqiya coalition, led by Iyad Allawi a former prime minister in the post-Saddam government. Among Iraqiya’s chief campaign platforms is its strong opposition to “regional” interference in Iraqi affairs, a veiled reference to Iran.

5 Minister of Finance Rafi al Issawi is considered to be one of the most influential and respected Sunni leaders in Iraq, according to Foreign Affairs.
graduate studies is decided along sectarian lines. Nearly 200 academic and administrative staff from University of Tikrit, the Iraqi university in mainly-Sunni Salahaddin province, lost their jobs, according to local tribal leaders and officials. Reuters reports that Ghassan al-Atiyyah, a political scientist and activist, says he visited a teacher in the Sunni district of Abu Ghraib in Baghdad who “after 30 years as a school teacher is out of a job and a pension. They just sent him a message written on a scrap of paper saying ‘Go home’. He is penniless. If he was younger he would get a gun”. Frustrated by events, and briefly touched upon earlier, the mainly Sunni provinces of Diyala, Salahaddin and Anbar announced intent to seek semi-autonomous status similar to the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan, a move strongly opposed by Maliki.

**Detentions**

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on 15 May 2012 that Iraq’s government has been carrying out mass arrests and unlawfully detaining people in the notorious Camp Honor prison facility in Baghdad’s Green Zone. Interviews conducted by the rights organisation reveal that while the Iraqi government announced the prison’s closure in 2011, the facility has in fact remained open. Since October 2011, the Maliki government has carried out several waves of detentions and “regular arrest campaigns have taken place, often in largely Sunni neighbourhoods in Baghdad as well as in several outlying provinces”. According to a 02 March article by The Economist, Iraq’s security forces have held an estimated 10,000 people in recent months. Those detained are disproportionately Sunni, in custody on terrorism-related grounds. Residents of some Sunni areas of Baghdad are subjected to “humiliating searches when leaving their neighbourhoods”. On Fridays, days of prayer and protest, Iraqi forces prevent Sunnis from leaving their neighbourhoods.

Sheikh Qassim al-Kerbulli, a tribal leader in Anbar, says, “I know a Sunni teacher in Baghdad who threw a Shi’ite student out of an examination because he caught [the student] cheating. The student told the security forces the teacher was a terrorist and he is now in prison”. Undoubtedly, Sunnis see the anti-terrorism provision in Iraq as disproportionately harming them: a tool utilised by the government for “legally pursuing [Sunnis] and Maliki’s political opponents and enemies”, writes Al Monitor.

**Sahwa Fighters (Anti-Al Qaeda Fighters)**

Sahwa fighters are Sunni tribesmen who sided with the US military in late 2006 against al Qaeda. The Sahwa played a key role in efforts to quell Iraq's insurgency. The US paid USD 300 a month to an estimated 100,000 Sahwa members nationwide to assist in restoring Iraq's stability, reports The National. The US plan was to relegate control of the Sahwa militias to Baghdad authorities. However, the US military and the Sahwa were concerned that the Iraqi government would disband the councils, potentially pushing the former insurgents back into the role of active insurgents.

In 2008, The National reported that Sahwa fighters wanted “the government to accept all of [its] members into the ranks of the army, police and [sought] permanent incomes and permanent work contracts,” said Sheikh Abu Ahmed al Sudani, head of a Sahwa council in the al Borr area of north Baghdad. “We need this to make sure that social stability is maintained in Iraq. It is certainly not in the best interests of the government or of Iraq to abandon us”. At the time, Iraqi authorities had not clearly stated what they planned to do with the Sahwa members, other than an unknown number were to be hired into the official security forces. In 2008, it seemed unlikely that all Sahwa fighters would be offered salaried posts. Sheikh Saeed Jassim Hameed al Mashhadani, head of a Sahwa Council in the Tarmiea area of north-western Baghdad, said they should not be treated with suspicion. “Some Shi’ite political parties say the Sahwa are Sunni militias, but this is wrong”, Sheikh Mashhadani said. “It is us who freed many Iraqi cities from al Qaeda control and we have given our share of martyrs for Iraq, including my son who died for the Sahwa”.

With the departure of US troops in 2011, Sahwa fighters found themselves in a “state of political and administrative limbo”. The Iraqi government suspended salaries paid to Sahwa fighters in Anbar, reports The Economist. Over the past two years, Sahwa fighters have warned the Maliki government they would abandon their positions in the field unless they became registered in the official defence system and received a monthly salary similar to their Iraqi security counterparts in the Interior and Defence ministries. Their role in fighting against Sunni insurgent groups has placed the fighters at risk. Today, Sahwa remain primary targets of al Qaeda as they are considered traitors by the terrorist group.

As Sunni tribesmen grow disillusioned by the Maliki government, al Qaeda fills in the void offering jobs to unemployed Sahwa members. AQI has outbid government wages in some cases. With the US gone, many Sahwa join AQI as the only alternative to avoid AQI assassination. The marginalisation of the Sahwa in the Maliki...
government, along with the continued presence of AQI, has resulted in renewed support for AQI - a network perceived as defeated in Iraq. Former AQI strongholds, such as Anbar province, have been particularly susceptible to the influence according the article, Al-Qaeda and the Faltering Sahwa Movement.

Postponed Elections
On 19 March 2013, the Iraqi Council of Ministers, headed by Prime Minister Maliki announced that the country-wide provincial elections scheduled for 20 April were postponed in Anbar and Nineveh provinces, the epicentre of Sunni discord. The decision to postpone elections took into consideration the 11 March statement issued by the Anbar Provincial Council calling for a delay, citing their concerns that the environment was not secure for campaigning, reports the Institute for the Study of War. Major news outlets report that over eleven political candidates in Iraq have been assassinated over the past several weeks. Member of Parliament Ahmed al Alwani surmised that the “post postponement of provincial elections is an open plan to buy time to prevent the arrival of the supporters of the demonstrations to the power in the province”, and asserts that those currently holding provincial seats understand “Anbar people will not [re]elect them even after a thousand years”. Undoubtedly, the delays could enhance the provincial campaigns of Maliki and his allies and directly limit key Sunni rivals, such as Osama al-Nujaifi and Rafi al-Issawi, whose support derives from these provinces, asserts Stephen Wicken and Ahmend Ali at the Institute for the Study of War. US Secretary of State John Kerry urged Maliki’s government to revisit its decision, and a US diplomat speaking on condition of anonymity said that postponement “risks depriving voters of an opportunity to effect peaceful change at the ballot box, and in a part of the country that is experiencing ongoing political tensions and protests”, reports AFP.

Election-related assassinations reveal a power struggle within the Sunni community. As of 07 April, eleven Sunni Muslim candidates were assassinated in the run-up to the 20 April provincial elections. Six of those candidates are from the Sunni-backed political block Iraqiya and nearly all supported the growing anti-Maliki protests. Yahya al Qubaisi, a political analyst at the Iraqi Center for Strategic Studies suggest there is a link between the pre-election violence and the disintegration of the Iraqiya party “plagued by defections since Sunnis launched daily mass demonstrations against Maliki’s government”. According to Qubaisi, the power struggle in Anbar province has divided Sunni tribal leaders. On one side of the Anbar rift are tribal leaders with alliances to the Sunni militias that Maliki incorporated into the central government. On the other side are politicians and tribal leaders side-lined by the Shi’ite-led central government.

The Rise of Militant Groups in Anbar

The resurgence of Sunni-militant groups in Anbar and the wave of terrorist attacks is partly a result of “what is going on in Iraq” but, “partly the result of the Syrian civil war”, asserts Kenneth M. Pollack a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution’s Saban Center for Middle East Policy. Pollack adds, “[w]hat you’re seeing in Iraq is that these Sunni terrorist groups are trying to shake up the country. They would like to drive the country back to civil war. They're trying to cause people to panic”. The rise in the death rate is disconcerting to many Iraqis. According to Iraq Body Count, there were 4,147 civilian deaths in 2011 however by 2012 civilian deaths rose by over 10 per cent to 4,573.

Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) & Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)6

Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a jihadist group of predominately Sunni fighters, rose to prominence in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The group’s power base peaked in 2006-2007 and subsequently diminished in the face of US counter-terrorism operations, supported by the Sunni Tribal Sahwa, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. AQI, however, never disappeared and since the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, the group has exploited sectarian divisions through a series of attacks on Shi’ite targets in early 2012.

Following an “ambitiously staged sequence of forty attacks that covered a broad area of the country” killing an estimated 100 people on 24 July 2012, AQI leader Abu Bakir al Baghdadi announced the group’s new campaign of terror called Breaking Down Walls. Baghdadi, capitalising on Sunni anger at the Shi’ite-led Iraqi government and the predominately Sunni revolt against Syrian President Bashar al Assad, outlined his renewed campaign in Iraq as part of a battle by Sunnis against Iraq’s Shi’ite leaders and people. AQI remains a persistent threat to Iraqi stability.

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6 During the Iraq Insurgency from 2005-2007, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) splintered with competing leadership. Today, AQI and the Islamic State of Iraq are considered by most experts to be one in the same organisation.

7 Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is also known as Abu Du’a.
US intelligence officials stated in February 2012 they believed most of the high profile bombings carried out in Aleppo and Damascus Syria, against the Assad government at the time, were coordinated by AQI. One Iraqi fighter, Abu Saleh, confirms US intelligence claims and recalls when arriving in Syria, he found himself helping “novice Syrian rebels and joined the fight commanding a unit of his own, operating in Aleppo and the countryside north of the city”. Iraqi insurgents taught Syrian rebels “how to cook phosphate and make IEDs”. Saleh believes that the Iraqi struggle is the same struggle as in Syria. He asserts that “[i]f Syria falls, we are liberated; if we are liberated, Syria will be liberated. We have the same battle with Iran – by defeating them we break the Shi’ite crescent of Iran, Syria and Lebanon”, reports The Guardian.

According to the Robin Simcox of the Harry Jackson Foundation, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was founded in October 2006 by Abu Ayyub al-Masri after the death of AQI leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi. The Council on Foreign Relations states that its creation was meant to increase AQI’s local appeal and embody its “caliphate”, or political arm. However, Simcox suggests “Abu Ayyub’s declaration of an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) – when it was patent clear no such state existed – was a significant misstep which one al Qaeda member regarded as leading to ‘divisions among jihadists and their supporters inside and outside Iraq’”. A March 2007 document discovered in bin Laden’s compound described ISI as ‘extremists’ and the speeches of ISI leader, Abu Ayyub, as “repulsive and lacking wisdom”, reports Simcox. In April 2010, Abu Ayyub was killed in a US missile strike and replaced by Abu Du’a who is the first Iraqi leader of ISI. There is a USD 10 million reward for the capture of Abu Du’a making him one of the most wanted terrorists in the world.

Today, ISI professes similar aims as AQI and has maintained a steady rate of attacks in Iraq over the last several months8, according to Jamestown Foundation. Attacks during the Shi’ite holiday of Arba’een in Karbala, and attacks in Shi’ite neighbourhoods of Baghdad, along with several attacks in Kirkuk, have been attributed to ISI. Additionally, a suicide attack targeting Ifan Saadoun al Issawi, an important Sunni member of parliament from Anbar province and once a prominent member of the anti-al Qaeda Sahwa movement, was killed on 15 January 2013. In a statement several days after the assassination, ISI described Issawi as an “American dog”, an unbeliever and a tool of Safavid9 aggression against Sunnis.

Like AQI, the ISI is attempting to capitalise on widespread Sunni Muslim political dissatisfaction against the Shi’ite and Kurdish dominated central Iraqi government in order to foment sectarian strife in the country, writes the Jamestown Foundation. A statement released by ISI spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani exhorted Iraqi Sunnis to take up weapons against “apostates” which include Iraq’s Shi’ite community, the Maliki led government and Sunnis opposed to the ISI. Further, ISI accuses the Iraqi government of committing “atrocities” including property seizure, raids and arrests, torture and displacement of Sunnis.

Most recently, ISI took credit for the killing of 48 Syrian soldiers who had fled across the border into Iraq from a Syrian rebel advance and were being escorted by Iraqi security forces when they were ambushed in Anbar province in early March. In a statement posted online, ISI stated, “military detachments succeeded in annihilating an entire column of the Safavid army”. ISI maintains that the presence of Assad troops in Anbar showed Baghdad’s firm cooperation with Assad.

Jabhat Al Nusra Connection

In December 2012, the US State Department reported close links between Jabhatal al Nusra (al Nusra) operating in Syria and AQI and stated that al Nusra “sought to portray itself as part of the legitimate Syrian opposition while it is, in fact, an attempt by AQI to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes”. Nada Bakos, a former US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent, told CNN in January 2013 that Syrians were part of the AQI inner circle when led by al Zarqawi. Bakos suggests the two groups are likely replicating the flexible and resilient networks Zarqawi established. As a result, Bakos believes the Al Nusra/AQI linkages make the network a powerful force in the region. The US State Department also suspected that AQI leader Abu Du’a12 is in control of both AQI and al Nusra which was confirmed on 10 April when AQI officially announced the merger of al Nusra and AQI, according to Christian Science Monitor. The two groups, now united,

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9 Savafid refers to the dynasty that ruled Shi’ite Iran from the 16th to 18th Centuries.
10 Jabhat al Nusra (al Nusra) is a Syrian jihadist group and has a shared history with al Qaeda of Iraq (AQI). The US considers Al Nusra a foreign terror organisation linked to al Qaeda in Iraq.
11 It is important to note that in the research of this topic, the terms AQI and ISI were often used interchangeably. Earlier, Abu Du’a is presented as the leader of ISI, here however US State Department refers to Abu Du’a as the leader of AQI.
refer to themselves as “the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant”. Al Nusra is widely seen as one of the best supplied militant groups fighting on behalf of the Syrian opposition.

Free Iraqi Army (FIA)
A new military organisation called the “Free Iraqi Army” (FIA) was formed in the summer of 2012. Created to support the Syrian rebels fighting against the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the FIA share the goal of ending “Shi’ite expansion in the region”, according to Abu Ahmad, FIA member. Analysts suggest the group forged ties with latent al Qaeda elements still operating inside the Sunni-dominated Anbar province; while others believe the FIA is comprised of marginalised former officers of the Sahwa (Awakening) councils, who claim that the current Shi’ite government in Baghdad has “side-lined them” according to the Daily Star. The main goals of the FIA are to: (1) fight against the Iranian (Safavid) invasion in Iraq, (2) support the Syrian people and the FSA; and (3) gather mujahedeen in Iraq under a single group. The founding document asserts that because Iraq was “invaded by Iran in political, economic and social terms and that Iran took control of all military and civilian government agencies, the current situation in Iraq required all Iraqis to fight for their dignity, religion and country”. In FIA communication from 01 September 2012, the organisation accused the Shi’ite-led government of unlawfully executing thousands of Sunnis and promised to avenge the deaths. According to FIA, the fall of Assad will bring the demise of Maliki’s government along with Shi’ite Hezbollah and the fall of the “Shi’ite expansion”. The group intends to operate in former Sahwa hot spots of Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, Mosul and Salahaddin. According to reports, training camps for FIA army members are located in Anbar province and the vicinity of Mosul. Following a security operation carried out in southeast Kirkuk province, Iraqi forces announced the capture of a Free Iraqi Army leader on 07 February 2013.

Other Sunni Groups
Many Shi’ite and Sunni armed groups laid down their weapons after US troops pulled out of Iraq; however, six prominent Sunni armed groups refused to cease hostilities. The six groups claimed to fight on to drive the last Americans from Iraqi soil and topple “the occupation government”, reports Reuters. However, these six groups remain active and continue to carry arms despite the US withdrawal in 2011, says Deputy Interior Minister Adnan al-Asadi. The groups operate throughout the country but are primarily stationed in Mosul, Diyala, Anbar, Salahaddin, Baghdad, Babil, and the outskirts of Basra and Kut. The groups include al Qaeda’s Iraq wing (AQI), the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, the Islamic Army, the Mujahedeen Army, the Rashideen Army and Ansar al-Sunnah, says Asadi.

The Sunni Protests in Anbar
Widely seen as a potential triggering event, on 21 December 2012, Iraqi authorities arrested ten bodyguards of Sunni Finance Minister Raifia al Issawi on terrorism charges. Mr. Issawi, a prominent member of the Iraqiya political bloc, denounced the arrests as a “deliberate and premeditated act” by Maliki. Issawi accused the prime minister of being a man “who does not believe in partnership and does not respect the law and the constitution”, reports BBC. In the week that followed, angry Sunnis took to the streets after Friday prayers in the Anbar cities of Ramadi and Fallujah chanting anti-Maliki slogans.

Since then, countless protests, mostly concentrated in the largely Sunni provinces of Anbar, Diyala, Salahaddin and Sunni neighbourhoods in Baghdad have continued. Tens of thousands of protesters have taken to the streets to protest against perceived mistreatment due to their minority status (see Annex I for protest maps). Initially non-violent, protests turned deadly on 25 January when Iraqi troops shot and killed at least four demonstrators in clashes with Sunni protesters in Fallujah, Anbar province, reports Reuters. In response to the killings, the al Qaeda affiliated ISI attacked Iraqi Army posts in Fallujah, forcing the army to withdraw and on 30 January, the organisation released a video statement calling for Iraqi Sunnis to “take up arms against the Maliki government”. The Institute for the Study of War created a rendering of the 25 January protests, called the “Friday of No Return” (see Figure 2). Without question, the fatal shooting in Fallujah increased fears of escalating violence and prompted Maliki to utilise a combination of concessions and repression to de-escalate tensions and attempt the gradual reduction of anti-government protests.

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12 Mujahideen are Islamic guerrilla fighters according to Merriam-Webster.
13 The Council on Foreign Relations states that Hezbollah is a Shi’ite Muslim political group with a militant wing. The United States and Israel consider it a terrorist organisation.
Undeterred, protesters have prevailed. Growing numbers of demonstrators raise the “old three-star” Iraqi flag from the Saddam-era, the black flag of al Qaeda’s local affiliate the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and the Syrian rebel flag. Protests have seen an increase in violence from Sunni Islamist insurgents. The growing unrest is quickly becoming a major political challenge for the Maliki government. Again, on 08 March the Sunni-dominated Nineveh province saw one government protester killed in Mosul and five others wounded when witnesses said that Iraq security forces fired on an anti-government protest, according to AFP. The violence prompted Iraq’s Agriculture Minister, Sunni, Ezzedine al Dawleh to step down from his post stating, “I stand in front of my people...in Nineveh and I announce that I resign from this government because there is no way I can continue in a government that does not respond to the people’s demands”. Tens of thousands of demonstrators turned public squares into prayer grounds in Mosul, Samarra, Baquba, and other Sunni communities and cities throughout the month of March 2013.

**Ramadi Highway**

Since the onset of protests in December 2012, the main highway to Ramadi, a transit of government supplies along a key trade route to and from Jordan and Syria, has been a flash-point for demonstrators, according to Reuters. In the earliest days of protests, thousands of Sunni protesters blocked the highway. Months later, the highway continues to be the focus of demonstrators who pitch massive tents on the sides of the highway while blocking traffic. To accommodate the continued presence of protesters along the highway, small bathrooms and stalls to sell snacks, tea and cigarettes have sprung up. McClatchy reports that in a massive show of sustained civil disobedience, shortly before noon every Friday, men and boys with prayer rugs in hand march by the thousands through the main highway junction in the city of Ramadi and stake out patches of pavement. Soon they are prostrating themselves “as far as the eye can see”. Along both shoulders of the road, Anbar tribal leaders have erected more than 100 canvas tents, where they display posters with their 17 demands. There is a threat, however, of other means: A hand-painted banner at a political rally communicated the mood: “Beware the patient man, if he gets angry.”

Iraqi authorities concerned over the growing and sustained nature of protests deployed security forces on 09 March around the “main rallying point” of Sunni protests, justifying the move with claims that the highway area had become a haven for terrorists, reports Associated Press. However, witnesses in Ramadi reported that the appearance of twenty government Humvees into the area were a direct result of violent clashes between protesters and Iraqi security forces in Mosul on 08 March that resulted in the death of an activist. Some experts speculated that the operation in Ramadi was likely to further heighten sectarian tensions as Iraqi security forces arrested protesters carrying al Qaeda flags. A group of Anbar college students participating in protests shot their hands into the air when a reporter asked whether they would prefer Saddam to the present government, reports McClatchy. “In Saddam’s day, there was a government and law. Now there is no real government, or law,” one said. Members of AQI also attend the rallies. Recently, at the end of a political rally, the open stage, which straddled the eastbound half of the Ramadi highway, was suddenly occupied by a small group of men who had been hovering in the background, carrying black, jihadist flags. They announced that it was “time for al Qaeda to come and start the beheadings”; tribal leaders quickly ushered them off stage.

So far, Maliki avoids direct confrontation and acquiesced rerouting vehicular traffic to secondary roads. Maliki provoked furor by initially denouncing protesters as “bubbleheads” but as protests spread, he established several committees to examine the demands which are legitimate to most elsewhere in Iraq.
Maliki’s Response

Maliki responded to Sunni protests with a mixture of concessions, promises and veiled threats. Anbar protesters selected a delegation to engage in talks with the Maliki government. The delegation is comprised of outsiders to the political Ramadi circles; however, they are well known and respected by citizens of Ramadi. In turn, in January Maliki announced the formation of a five person14 advisory committee tasked to find a consensual approach to meet the demands of the demonstrators, according to Al Monitor. In addition to the Anbar delegation, Maliki received a tribal delegation from Iraq’s central and southern provinces.

Meanwhile, The Economist reports that the Shi’ite government released more than 2,000 prisoners and resumed paying or increased salaries for 74,000 Sahwa militiamen in efforts to address tribal grievances. In early January 2013, Iraqi authorities ordered the release of an estimated eleven female detainees facing criminal charges and promised to transfer women prisoners to jails in their home provinces, reports Arab News.

Most recently, on 07 April, Maliki’s cabinet unveiled sweeping reforms to the De-Ba’athification law which bans members of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath party from participating in political life15, reports Middle East Online. The reforms must still be passed by Iraq’s parliament where the reforms are expected to face stiff resistance. Nevertheless, in a statement delivered by Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al Mutlaq, a Sunni, the Maliki government maintains “[the De-Ba’athification Law] has excluded many talented people and prevented the country from benefiting from their services”. The move is understood only as “a step towards moving to a new phase” and more must follow, reports AFP.

Sunni Fight for Survival

Returning to the RAND Corporation report “Whither Anbar”, the worst case “Sunni Fight for Survival” scenario describes Anbar province becoming the primary front of a Sunni-led insurgency against the Shi’ite-led Iraqi government. RAND predicted that a return to sectarian violence would be motivated by perceptions of a Shi’ite-led government operating under sectarian interests. Sunni grievances, RAND argued, would be exploited by AQI and other militant groups to reconstitute the insurgency. In RAND’s worst case scenario, both Sunni cohesion and Sunni-Shi’ite hostility are high.

Indeed, Anbar province is exhibiting many of the descriptors outlined by RAND. Clearly, the commencement in December 2012 of demonstrations in Anbar are manifestations of widespread Sunni discontent over ostracism by the Maliki government and concern over growing influence of Shi’ite-Iran in Iraq’s future. In July 2012, AQI/ISI announced an attempt to re-awaken Anbar and reconstitute the insurgency in order to reclaim Iraq from the influence of Iran and the Shi’ite-led government. Sunni grievances are indeed being leveraged by AQI/ISI and other insurgent groups as evidenced by news articles describing AQI/ISIs peripheral demonstration involvement and the increase in demonstrations that display black jihadist flags.

AQI/ISI’s renewed campaigns in Iraq, targeting the increasingly autocratic Maliki government and its Iranian-backed Shi’ite security services, as well as the majority Shi’ite community, is placing tremendous strain on Iraq and raising the possibility of “sectarian savagery” that ripped through the country after the 2003 US-led invasion, and ended decades of minority Sunni domination, according to United Press International (UPI). Ramzy Baroud, a Palestinian-American journalist, suggests, “Sectarian strife...which was responsible for the death of tens of thousands, is making a comeback. Iraqi Sunnis, including leading tribes and political parties, are demanding equality and the end to their disenfranchisement in the relatively new, skewed political system under Maliki”.

Sabah al Mukhtar, an Iraqi political analyst, explains that while tensions in Iraq are largely sectarian in nature, grievances go well beyond sectarianism. Mukhtar states that not just Sunnis, “but all Iraqis are very unhappy with the present regime” noting the continued breakdown of political dynamics between Sunni, Shi’ites and Kurds, along with the lack of infrastructure and the government’s failure to provide basic services to the public. Combined, these issues are making all of the Iraqis wanting change”. The massive protests in Iraq, originating in Anbar province, are organised and unified in message. However, Ramzy Baroud posits that numerous

14 Maliki’s committee includes Hassan Chird of the Iraqi National Accord, Qais al-Shazar, head of the Parliamentary Reconciliation Commission, from the “Solution” movement- part of the Iraqiya list, Mohsen al-Sadoun from the “the Kurdistan Alliance”, Khalid al-Attiyah, representing Maliki’s point of view in the committee and finally, the fifth member, Transport Minister Hadi al Amiri, who is also the leader of the Badr Organisation- an offshoot of the Islamic Supreme Council.

15 Passed in 2008, and also known as the Accountability and Justice Law, the “De-Ba’athification law”, and its notorious use by Shi’ite politicians to ban Sunni opponents from office, has been a “long-standing thorn in the side” of sectarian relations in Iraq.
stakeholders currently exploit the polarisation in order to “settle old scores, to push the country back to the brink of civil war, to amplify mayhem under way in various Arab countries, most notably Syria, and in some instances to adjust sectarian boundaries in ways that could create good business opportunities”.

On a broader geostrategic level, Kenneth Pollack says, “I suspect the Iranians are going to be very dismayed by the collapse of Syria...and will redouble their efforts in Iraq”. The surge in AQI/ISI attacks may possibly reflect a new assertiveness by Sunnis across the Arab world in order to thwart Iran’s expansionist objectives. According to UPI, Iran seeks to “carve out a Shi’ite land corridor running westward across Shi’ite-majority Iraq to link with Syria and ultimately Hezbollah in Lebanon” (see Figure 3). By most accounts, Syrian rebels continue to advance; seizing territory in the south and even firing one of the heaviest mortar volleys yet into the heart of Damascus on 25 March, reports National Public Radio. The Syrian rebels (mostly Sunni) and global Sunni jihadists threaten Tehran’s plan for regional hegemony, according to Khilafah. Each month, Iraqi officials report an estimated 300 Islamists cross from Iraq into Syria. Officials assert that most Islamists cross to join Jabhat al Nusra in Syria. Some observers project that AQI attacks in Iraq will escalate as Syria’s war moves toward its final stages, reports UPI. Oxford Analytica states “the collapse of the Assad regime would mean not just an increase in jihadist actions, but also a boost to the self-confidence of all Iraqi-Sunnis”. Anbar Sunnis are indeed fighting for survival, but the fight for survival is for all Sunnis rather than the Iraqi-Sunnis.

**Conclusion**

Anbar province, while never truly asleep, has re-awakened. Experts point to the gaining momentum of demonstrations and the continuance of Syria’s civil war as a source for raising tensions. Together these two situations form an explosive amalgamation for Anbar province which forms a bridge of sorts between Syria and greater Iraq. Reports indicate there is legitimate growing fear of civil conflict due to unaddressed grievances in Anbar and other Sunni-majority provinces. At his most vulnerable position, Saddam Hussein used sectarianism and nationalism as weapons against his internal enemies. Today’s Iraqi Shi’ite parties and government appear to be doing far worse as governmental rule is justified on a sectarian basis. Prime Minister Maliki seems to have abandoned the idea of a multi-ethnic country; a trend that may spread to Syria as well. While the Sunni demonstrations are described as “Arab Spring-style” civil actions, the display of discontent could be the greatest threat posed to Iraq since the exit of US troops in 2011. The sectarian legacy of the Saddam Regime appears to be at risk of tearing the country apart. David Alpher’s article *Awakening the Demons* poignantly states: “These are sectarian demonstrations, not political demonstrations; Sunni demonstrations, not Iraqi demonstrations. They are not seen as demonstrations against a government – they are seen as demonstrations against the Shi’ites in government and by extension the Shi’ite majority in Iraq”.

**Figure 3: A Potential Iranian Land Corridor**

![Figure 3: A Potential Iranian Land Corridor](source: Cambridge Forecast)
Protests in Iraq

Overview: During the second week, demonstrations maintained strength in Ramadi and Samarra, and Moad while also spreading throughout the predominantly Sunni provinces of Salah ad-Din and Diyala. Tribal delegations to Anbar continued, drawing supporters from Kirkuk, Karbala, and Muthanna. After minor concessions failed to quell protests, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki heightened his rhetoric and warned that demonstrations would not be allowed to continue indefinitely.

ANNEX 1: Maps of Sunni Protests (source: The Institute for the Study of War)

Protests in Iraq
Week 3: January 5 – January 11, 2013

Overview: As anti-government protests continued in Anbar, Nineawa, and Salah ad-Din, pro-government counter-protests were held in the southern cities of Karbala, Kut, Diwaniyah, Samawa, Najaf, and Basra. Additional military cordons were established in Anbar, Baghdad, Salah ad-Din, and Nineawa to contain the anti-government demonstrations.
Protests in Iraq
Week 4: January 12 – January 17, 2013

Overview: Anti-government sit-ins continued in provinces Anbar, Salah ad-Din, and Nineveh while pro-government demonstrations drew smaller-than-expected crowds. Attacks against Sunni officials and Kurdish political offices threaten to exacerbate already strained ethno-sectarian tensions.