

Analysis No. 197, September 2013

IRAQ'S SECURITY OUTLOOK FOR 2013

Ibrahim Al-Marashi

A variety of indicators at the political and military level explain Iraq's deteriorating security situation in 2013. First, in terms of the violent physical conflict, the resurgence of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and its bombing campaign has reached a level unprecedented since the 2006-2008 sectarian conflict, and was highlighted by the recent raids on the Abu Ghraib and Taji prisons. Second, armed clashes between the Iraqi security forces and Arab Sunni protestors have led to calls to reactivate Arab Sunni militias. Third, in the face of these threats, both the regular armed forces and the intelligence agencies remain divided, with various units either reporting directly to Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki or the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Fourth, the security forces suffer from the problem of divided loyalties, where members use the coercive arms of the state to pursue the interests of militias, such as the Shi'a Badr Corps, Muqtada's Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, the Arab Sunni Reawakening militias, or the Peshmerga forces of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) or the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

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1. A worsening security and socio-political scenario

In 2011 the Maliki government precipitated a domestic crisis in Iraq after lodging accusations against Vice President Tariq Al-Hashimi for inciting violence. A prominent Sunni Arab politician, Hashimi fled to Istanbul, Turkey, to avoid arrest. Following the arrest of several bodyguards of another prominent Sunni Arab politician, Rafi Al-Issawi, in December 2012 sustained protests began among disaffected Arab Sunni Iraqis, particularly in the Anbar province.

The protesters have been emboldened by the rise of Arab Sunni resistance against the Alawite Shia government in Syria, demonstrating that if the Shia-led government in Iraq fails to address their grievances then support can be forthcoming from their sectarian co-religionists across the border. The conflict in Syria not only boosts the morale of the Iraqi protestors, but the unregulated arms market that emerged as a result of the insurgency against Damascus means that military material can easily flow from Syria into the bordering Anbar province. Disaffected tribes in Iraq also straddle the border into Syria, offering another linkage between the Syrian conflict and the worsening situation in Iraq.

Concurrent with the conflict in Syria and protests in Anbar, Iraqi religious centers, security forces' headquarters and checkpoints, crowded markets, and politicians have been targeted by bombings and assassinations, affecting both Shi'a and Sunni districts. In April 2013 more than 20 bombings occurred throughout Iraq in the capital Baghdad, Hilla and Nasiriya in the south, Baquba, Falluja and Tikrit in the center, and Kirkuk in the north. In the same month 15 candidates running in local elections were assassinated, and on April 23, 44 people were killed in clashes between security forces and Arab Sunni protestors in the town of Hawija, only creating greater indignation among the Arab Sunnis of Iraq and swelling the ranks of the disaffected. The month of May was followed by more bombings, in particular on May 27 when a wave of explosions occurred in Shi'a neighborhoods around Baghdad such as Sadr City and Kadhimiyya. In mid-June, bomb attacks targeted five southern Iraqi provinces in addition to cities such as Tikrit and Mosul¹. Between April and mid-June 2013 approximately 2,000 people have died, making this the worst level of violence since the sectarian civil war².

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¹ B. DREYFUSS, *The Agony of Iraq and Its Lesson for Syria*, «The Nation», June 19, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/174881/agonies-iraq-and-its-lesson-syria#axzz2YN7hZIQD>.

² S. AL-SALHY - P. MARKEY, *Al Qaeda, Sunni Insurgents Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Woes*, Reuters, June 11, 2013, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/06/11/uk-iraq-alqaeda-idUKBRE95A0T120130611>.

The proliferation of domestic terror attacks coincides with renewed Iraqi Arab Sunni grievances and fears from the Iraqi state. Al-Qaida in Iraq and the Naqshabandi Army, a primarily Iraqi group led by the former Ba'athist Ibrahim 'Izzat al-Duri, have asserted their presence, drawing recruits from disaffected Iraqis, and more ominously, local Iraqis permitting these groups to operate from within their neighborhoods.

2. The Iraqi Security Forces

While having benefitted from US training, the Iraqi security forces no longer have direct US air support and have morphed into several competing factions that fail to coordinate intelligence sharing and develop an effective counter-terrorism strategy³. A system of parallel militarism and the existence of parallel intelligence agencies in post-Ba'athist Iraq came into being as part of the post-2003 de-Baathification process. The former security agencies and elite military units, made up primarily of members of the Ba'ath Party, were dismantled after 2003 Iraq war⁴. Due to security concerns over allowing former Baathists into the machinery of the state, the nascent Iraqi government lacked a pool of trained security officers and intelligence analysts. The dismissal of thousands of experienced mid-level intelligence officers and analysts affected Iraq's security by depriving it of a talented pool that could monitor emerging threats⁵, such as cross-border infiltration from Syria and Iran and the emergence of al-Qaida in Iraq.

In 2004, a new security agency was created under the title of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS)⁶. The INIS was initially understaffed and lacked experience, and even though the US government allocated billions of dollars in funds to the agency, time was needed for the training of new Iraqi agents in a period when the insurgency was rapidly spreading throughout the nation. To meet the security needs of post-war Iraq, the INIS sought to recruit former intelligence agents from the Saddam Hussein era, as long as they were not responsible for major crimes against the Iraqi people.

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³ N. PARKER, *Divided Iraq has Two Spy Agencies*, «Los Angeles Times», April 15, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/apr/15/world/fg-intel15>.

⁴ J.P. PFIFFNER, *US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army*, «Intelligence and National Security», vol. 25, no. 1, February 2010, pp. 76.

⁵ C. FERGUSON, *No End in Sight: Iraq's Descent into Chaos*, New York, Public Affairs, 2008, pp. 184.

⁶ See Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 69: <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/iraq/cpa69.pdf> and Charter for the Iraqi National Intelligence Service: <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/iraq/inis.pdf>.

the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. Al-Shahwani, from the ethnic Turkmen minority, had served as a successful commander of the Iraqi Special Forces during the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam Hussein was wary of skilled officers whose popularity could outstrip that of the Iraqi leader and al-Shahwani fled Iraq prior to the 1990 invasion of Kuwait and became an opponent of the Saddam Hussein regime. On his return to Iraq after 2003, Al-Shahwani headed the INIS and began to recruit former intelligence officers into the new INIS⁷.

The Shi'a political parties that emerged victorious following Iraq's first elections in 2005 viewed the INIS as a body that was not impartial. Their fear was that Al-Shahwani belonged to the Sunni Muslim community in Iraq, albeit his coming from the ethnic Turkmen community, and that by recruiting former Saddam-era intelligence officers had reintegrated former-Ba'athists, who happened to be primarily Sunni Arabs, into the institutions that had repressed the Shi'a in the past⁸. When the US government encouraged the new Shi'a cabinet not to interfere with the leadership and activities of the INIS, in 2007 Iraq's Shi'a leaders created a parallel security organization called the Ministry of Security (MoS).

Within a period of only three years after the 2003 war, the Iraqi state witnessed an institutional practice that characterized Saddam Hussein's rule. From the rise of Hussein to his demise, most of the security services *tended* to be Arab Sunnis, whereas the new security apparatus in Iraq is divided along sectarian and ethnic lines⁹.

Within the new Iraqi security bureaucracy, a shadow state prevalent during the Ba'athist era re-emerged, in which bureaucrats used their positions to advance their own agendas (often sectarian) and personal influence. Post-2003 bureaucracy served as a reflection of the neo-patrimonial system, characterized by patronage and favoritism. Najim Abed al-Jabouri, the mayor of Tal Afar from 2005 to 2008 and a research fellow at National Defense University in Washington DC, predicted that Anbar was a "tinderbox waiting to explode" back in 2009. In his analysis, one of the myriad problems at that time was that of divided loyalties within the security services. He wrote: Both the military and the police remain heavily politicized. The police and border officials, for example, are largely answerable to the Interior Ministry, which has been seen (often correctly) as a pawn of Shiite political movements. Members of

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⁷ See e.g. G. BENNETT, *Iraq's Security and Intelligence Structures: More Problems*, Conflict Studies Research Center, May 2006.

⁸ A.H. CORDESMAN, *Iraqi Force Development*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September, 2007, pp. 78-79.

⁹ E. BLANCHE, *Shades of Saddam*, «The Middle East Magazine», Issue 431, April, 2012, p. 14.

the security forces are often loyal not to the state but to the person or political party that gave them their jobs¹⁰.

What he wrote in 2009 still holds true in 2013. While this divided system augments the interests of the ethno-sectarian parties, it hinders democratization as the state's resources are distributed through the networks of a shadow state within two competing security agencies.

As in the Saddam Hussein era, Iraq's Ministry of Interior forces or militia members who joined Iraq's military and police forces have employed illegal violence to pursue their own political factions' agendas¹¹. These forces often engage in illegally sanctioned violence without any accountability to the government.

Furthermore, the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) have transformed their parties' intelligence agencies into official security agencies of the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government). This division of labor would bring the number of Iraqi intelligence services to four, created within a period of ten years. The INIS, MoS, and the two agencies affiliated with the KDP and PUK rarely coordinate their activities¹². While these agencies are not in the service of a dictator, the fact that they pursue their own agendas is equally troubling for a state still suffering from suicide attacks in the capital, a Syria collapsing on its borders, and an assertive Iran seeking to dominate affairs in Baghdad.

The new security apparatus that emerged since 2003 differs from its predecessor, even though one component may have recruited former *Mukhabarat* agents. The new security structure is not devoted to sustaining the rule of a single dictator – Saddam Hussein. On the contrary, some Iraqis say that the intelligence services support multiple “Saddams” as the scholar Charles Tripp recounted in an interview with the *Guardian*¹³. What this popular saying communicates is a feeling in Iraq that Saddam was replaced by a series of competing tribal chiefs, warlords turned members of parliament, and religious leaders. Thus the popular sentiment emerged that one Saddam was replaced by many tyrants.

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¹⁰ N.A. AL-JABOURI, *For Every Iraqi Party an Army of Its Own*, «New York Times», October 28, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/opinion/29abed.html?page_wanted=all&r=0.

¹¹ R.M. PERITO, *The Iraq Federal Police*, Special Report by United States Institute of Peace, October 2011, pp. 5-6.

¹² E. BLANCHE, *Maliki Takes Control*, «The Middle East Magazine», January 1, 2010, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Maliki+takes+control%3A+Iraq's+prime+minister+take+s+control+of+the...-a0216960265>.

¹³ I. BLACK, *You Got Rid of One Saddam and You Left Us with 50*, «The Guardian», September 21, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/sep/21/historybooks.iraq>.

The growing military in Iraq still faces a formidable challenge - to form a professional ideology and ethics that prevent it from interfering in affairs of the state and loyalty to the nation that supersedes that of narrow communal loyalties. Iraq now has a federal army that operates alongside regional security forces. However, “alongside” does not mean that these forces necessarily cooperate with each other on national security issues. In the area under the jurisdiction of the Kurdish Regional Government, local armies recruited from the ranks of the KDP and PUK *Peshmerga* operate in place of the Iraqi military¹⁴. In fact, tense armed stand-offs have occurred between Iraqi Arab military divisions and Iraqi Kurdish military divisions in contested cities such as Khanaqin.

This trend of divided loyalties in the armed forces was highlighted by Al-Jabouri, who provides the examples of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), a Shi’a party, dominating the Fifth Army Division in the Diyala Province; the Da’wa, the Shi’a party of Nuri al-Maliki, controlling the Eighth Division in Diwaniyya and Al-Kut; and the PUK controlling the Fourth Division in the Salah al-Din Province¹⁵.

The ideal future for the Iraqi military would be to follow the example of the Lebanese military. Despite the sectarian divisions among its citizens, the Lebanese military is seen by the nation as the embodiment of a national institution that remains above the fray of sectarian politics in post-civil war Lebanon. However, the caveat should be added that in the Lebanese case, while the army has transformed itself into a national institution, it still does not enjoy a monopoly of violence given the heavily armed strength of Hizballah.

3. Tribal Politics and the Reemergence of al-Qaida in Iraq

The Anbar province is home to several tribes that served as the backbone of the state under Saddam Hussein. The collapse of the Ba’athist state in 2003 ended these tribes’ privileged status as the state elites, and in the ensuing security vacuum they reasserted their authority in their home base of Anbar province, that emerged as a de-facto state when the state in Baghdad was being reconstituted.

The emergence of the Iraqi insurgency began among these disaffected tribes, yet groups like al-Qaida in Iraq could have not have operated from urban settings without the support of the tribes as well. At the beginning of the insurgency, the tribes supporting it and AQI shared the same goals of fighting the US forces and a predominantly Shi’a-Kurdish government.

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¹⁴ J. DEVIGNE, *Iraqoncilable Differences? The Political Nature of the Peshmerga*, «NIMEP Insights», New Initiative for Middle East Peace, vol. 6, Fall 2011, pp. 48-64.

¹⁵ N.A. AL-JABOURI, *op. cit.*

The modus vivendi broke down when AQI started to enforce harsh Islamic living codes in these areas and threaten tribal smuggling networks. In coordination with US forces, Iraqi tribal elements coalesced in the Reawakening (*Sahwa*) and Sons of Iraq forces and turned against AQI in 2008.

Tensions soon emerged between the Maliki government and these tribal forces, with the latter arguing that the state had failed to support them or allow them into the armed forces under the control of the Ministries of Defense and Interior. Tensions still exist, with the Sahwa forces arguing that Shi'a and Kurdish parties are preventing the Arab Sunni community from holding an institutional role within the armed forces.

In mid-June Maliki accused unspecified tribes of harboring elements of al-Qaida in Iraq¹⁶. The author made three trips to Iraq in 2003, 2004, and 2010 and in his assessment AQI could never have emerged in Iraq without the tribes' consent and AQI could not be conducting the violence in 2013 without local Iraqi support. This collusion is further corroborated in one account which highlights how support for AQI emerged due to tribal support that began as far back as 2004¹⁷. Furthermore, beyond the tribal areas, districts in cities such as Baghdad and Mosul are close-knit communities where a foreigner's presence rarely goes unnoticed. In certain districts in Baghdad for example, locals knew of "foreigners", as members of al-Qaida were called, operating from their neighborhoods. During the sectarian violence of 2006 to 2008, these foreigners in al-Qaida, who were also Sunni co-religionists, were given local support and refuge in these Iraqi neighborhoods.

Based on this past precedent, the increase in attacks across Iraq in 2013 has to factor in local Iraqi support. By allowing the reemergence of AQI, disaffected Iraqi factions can communicate to the Maliki government that they have a bargaining tool vis-à-vis the state, while claiming plausible deniability. Maliki's legitimacy as prime minister was based on his record of providing relative stability to Iraq since his tenure began, and the increase in violence not only undermines his position but also that of his party and allies during the next elections for the premier. Granted, Arab Sunnis have also been targeted by AQI, but usually for the "crime" of collaborating with the government.

¹⁶ S. AL-SALHY – P. MARKEY, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ A. LONG, *The Anbar Awakening*, «Survival», vol. 50, no. 2, 2008, p. 74.

4. The Syrian Civil War

Most commentaries on the effect of the Syrian civil war on Iraq's Sunni population argue that the rise of Syria's Sunnis has emboldened their co-religionists across the border, providing a morale boost to the Iraqi community that feels marginalized by a Shi'a dominated Iraqi state, closely allied to Shi'a Iran. However, what is neglected in these assessments of the Syrian civil war are the concrete, material ramifications of the Syrian conflict on Iraq. The Arab Sunnis in Syria and Iraq inhabit a contiguous geographic region between the Tigris and Euphrates, known as Al-Jazira. Conflicts on both sides of the border have the potential to create a security situation analogous to what Washington insiders refer to as "Afpak", an abbreviation that acknowledges how Afghani and Pakistani affairs are intricately linked. The Afpak problem is a legacy of Anglo-Russian colonial policy during the Great Game, dividing the ethnic Pathan tribes along the Durand line, a border that reflected imperial compromise without taking into account the tribes divided along this line. The Iraqi-Syrian border was formed in the same manner, out of British-French collusion after World War One, dividing Arab Sunni tribes as well as the historic link between the cities of Mosul (in today's Iraq) and Aleppo (in today's Syria).

The unrest in the Anbar province as well as in the Ninawa province where Mosul is located, has made it difficult for Iraqi forces to police these areas, and thus has allowed Iraqi Arab Sunnis a space to rearm, as well as provide support to the Syrian rebels. Arms can flow in both directions across the Syria-Iraq border. Iraqi exiles who escaped to Syria after the US invasion have returned to these Iraqi areas as government control has weakened. In an International Crisis Group interview a former Iraqi insurgent said, "Iraqi resistance fighters have been scattered across the country, but we are counting on the success of the Syrian revolution to acquire more weapons and mobilise more fighters"¹⁸. Another person in Ramadi said, "we and the Syrians are part of the same struggle. Both our governments are very close to Tehran, and both of us oppose Iranian plans in the region. Iran wants to turn Baghdad and Damascus into its provinces and form a Shiite axis stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea"¹⁹. As previously mentioned, the resurgence of al-Qaida in Iraq or any armed Iraqi groups occurs with the support of the local population. The above statements are indicative of a trend whereby the Iraqi and Syrian governments are being conflated into a Shi'a axis. As long as this perception continues, there is the risk that the Jazira area will evolve into

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¹⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Syria's Metastasizing Conflicts*, «Middle East Report», no. 143, June 27, 2013, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

the conflict-ridden Pashtun areas that straddle the Afghan-Pakistani border. This zone of tensions straddling both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border can be termed the “Syrac” conflict, a security situation analogous to the “Afpak” neologism used to describe this crisis-ridden area in South Asia.

The al-Qaida raid on Iraqi prisons to free their captured comrades in late July 2013 only exacerbates the looming danger with ramifications for both Syria and Iraq. Those freed detainees only increase the pool of commanders and foot soldiers fighting on both sides of the border.

5. Future Trends and Lessons for Iraq’s Stability

Ultimately the solution to the insecurity in Iraq cannot depend on military solutions alone. The new Iraqi government has still failed to engage in the all-elusive process of national reconciliation between the various ethno-sectarian communities²⁰.

Unfortunately, at a delicate juncture in summer 2012 when al-Qaida in Iraq was strengthening its presence in that country, Iraq’s security forces needed to cooperate and share intelligence to monitor the threat rather than compete among themselves – a challenge it failed to meet.

Solutions to the tensions in Iraq will depend on creating a security force that can restore the public’s trust. To create a force with an effective, vigorous, and streamlined intelligence capability for the Iraqi leadership, politicians will have to create a system based on merit rather than continue the Saddam-era patronage-based system that favored party, ethnicity or sect. The ultimate lesson for stability in Iraq’s future and the new Iraqi security forces is that given the history of Saddam’s multiple security agencies and parallel militaries, the emergence of a multiplicity of such organs in post-2003 Iraq has created competition in producing results and has ultimately increased the repression of the civilian population, such as that of elements of the Arab Sunni tribes in Al-Anbar in 2013.

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²⁰ I. AL-MARASHI · A. KESKIN, *Reconciliation Dilemmas in post-Baathist Iraq: Truth Commissions, Media and Ethno-sectarian Conflicts*, «Mediterranean Politics», vol. 13, no. 2, Summer 2008, pp. 243-259.



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