

# Cohesion and disintegration in the war for Iraq, 2014

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In June of 2014, well equipped Iraqi troops, trained by the US and other powers, broke and ran before a smaller and less well equipped force led by men who had little military experience until they plunged into wars in Iraq and Syria. Shadows of doubt have been cast on the reliability of other armies in the region, Saudi Arabia's foremost among them. Training missions can get troops to shoot well and march crisply, especially in front of politicians and media, but they cannot ensure cohesion or prevent disintegration. Effective armies are based on social systems, not simply on training programs.

Kurdistan has effectively broken free of Baghdad and it will vote on formal independence in coming months. This leaves three armed groups of very different structure and efficacy operating in Iraq. The Shia army is organized as a modern standing army; ISIS is a warrior cult reminiscent of monastic fighting orders of the distant past; and the Sunni force is a classic insurgency with strong support from the populace. The clash of these three forces is decisively shaping the future of the country and the borders of the region as well.

## **The Shia army**

Iraq has had an army since the country's inception after World War One. It showed considerable tenacity and logistical skill in the long war with Iran (1980-88) and surprised western intelligence organizations with its swift (though ultimately disastrous) move into Kuwait in 1990. The army, from inception to Saddam's ouster, was dominated by Sunni Arabs who constituted about 18% of 2003 Iraq's population. Generals and NCOs, battalion commanders and support unit leaders, were chiefly Sunni. The US disbanded the Sunni army shortly after Baghdad fell and a new Shia-dominated army had to be rapidly put together.

Rapidly building or greatly expanding an army is a difficult undertaking. The US discovered this during World War Two when its army grew from 260,000 in 1940 to 8.3 million five years later. Many talented people rose swiftly and performed ably and the war was successfully prosecuted, however many people with ordinary or worse talents also rose rapidly. A postwar study conducted by the future general Ernest Dupuy admitted the problem – as did countless veterans in their novels, plays, and storytelling of inept and martinetish leaders.

The rapid construction of the Shia army had several further problems that the US did not experience. Appointments and promotions were too often made on the bases of payment, connections, and loyalty to established political and military leaders. The Shia tribes are even more fractious than those in the much smaller, less heterogeneous Sunni population. That makes for conflict across the ranks, from the general staff in Baghdad to the infantry company on patrol near

Mosul.

An officer corps based on corruption, factionalism, and cronyism cannot rely on the respect of the rank and file. Soldiers in line outfits are less willing to take risks in combat. Tactical operations will meet with hesitation and anxious looks, not with assurance and instant responses. Even well led units will suffer doubts as soldiers wonder if sister units can be relied upon to come to their aid in difficult spots.

Many Shia look upon local clerics with at least as much respect as they do their officers or elected officials in Baghdad. A mullah in Sadr City might speak more authoritatively and command more respect than a battalion commander or even a prime minister. This is all the more problematic as many Shia units were once urban militias fighting the Americans, Sunni militias, or each other, and they have been unsatisfactorily detached from neighborhood clerics and perhaps Iranian cadres.

The Iraqi military today continues to bear the burden of the Sunni past. It is still seen by many Shias less as an institution of national unity and purpose than as a burdensome imposition, an instrument of sectarian domination, and a plodding organization that hurled millions of them into a protracted war against Iran from which a few hundred thousand did not return.

The Shia have fielded effective armies. Hisbollah, the Lebanese politico-military movement, wore down the Israeli Defense Force in the eighties and deters it from further lengthy incursions. Hisbollah has been critical to staving off Assad's fall in Syria and even turning the tide there. Iranian troops fought back Iraq's 1980 invasion and endured eight years of high casualties. As presently constituted, however, the Shia army of Iraq has severe flaws that make many soldiers reluctant to fight. It is unable to hold the country together. Indeed, its failures are leading to national fragmentation and the reemergence of local militias as the only reliable forces – often the death knell of a state.

### **ISIS bands**

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has demonstrated remarkable fighting ability in both Syria and Iraq. Despite its small size, it put the better equipped and much larger Iraqi military into full flight in the north and took several cities including Mosul. Though its individual soldiers are zealous and its leaders' goals are quixotic, they nonetheless operate as a disciplined force, not as dervishes or berserkers. What accounts for ISIS's remarkable success? The answer lies in its ideological devotion, which transcends many of the problems inside the Iraqi army.

Salafism, the core of ISIS's religious and political beliefs, is an austere sect of Islam that has significant affinities with, and ties to, Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia – itself the creed of a warrior cult in years past. Salafism calls for strict discipline, a return to the uncontaminated beliefs of early Islam, resistance to westernization, and a struggle for personal purity.

Many adherents are “lost souls” who come to the sect in search of discipline and commitment in their lives. Acceptance of the sect's creed entails a break with mundane concerns and personal

vanities and the adoption of a commitment to ascetic discipline. Though most Salafis devote themselves to a personal struggle for purity, many seek to prove their faith through warfare. And for them death in battle is the supreme act of faith and purification. In recent years events in the Middle East have understandably cast considerably more light on the warrior side of Salafism than on the side devoted to personal virtue.

A disciplined and dedicated recruitment base augurs well for military efficacy and confers critical advantages over less motivated rivals. In many respects, Salafism's discipline and commitment parallel what military societies and organizations have long instilled – Sparta, Prussia, Cromwell's Puritan army, and the rigid faith of communist insurgents in the previous century. Such people are more willing to accept the privations of military life, the authority of commanders, and the hardships of war. They are also more likely to accept the prospect of death in battle.

Members of the sect share a sense of community based on shared beliefs, outlooks, lifestyles, attire, and appearance. This breaks down or overrides familial and tribal and ethnic antagonisms which have long weakened militaries and political systems in the Islamic world and which plagues, say, the Afghan army today, where Pashtun officers and Tajik enlisted personnel serve together uneasily. A Salafi fighter may be from the Otaibah of Saudi Arabia or the Murabtin of Libya or the Dulayim of Iraq, but parochial identities recede in significance while among the brethren, especially while in battle. To fight is to take part in a martial hajj – akin to that of the Prophet's bands as they stormed out of Mecca and Medina and conquered a vast empire.

As a revivalist group, calling upon people to return to ways of the original believers of centuries past, Salafist fighters see themselves as akin to warriors of epochs past who have returned to austere religion then gone on to win great victories. The medieval Almoravids blamed past defeats on impiety and with their new austere beliefs, conquered an empire in North Africa and Spain. The Wahhabi religion inspired Saudi princes to arise, gather the Ikhwan bands, and conquer the Arabian peninsula. The Taliban began in the mid-90s as an austere religious sect devoted to suppressing banditry and warlordism before sweeping across much of Afghanistan.

Salafi fighters of ISIS, then, enjoy far greater unit cohesion than do their rivals in the Iraqi, Syrian, or Free Syrian Army. This makes for greater trust, higher morale, and more endurance in the face of the hardships that protracted fighting heaps upon them.

### **Sunni insurgents**

The insurgents who battled US forces, then allied with them in the short-lived Sunni Awakening, are once more fighting the Shia government. They have been shielding ISIS during its bloody bombing campaign in Baghdad and serving alongside its troops during its recent drive into Northern Iraq. Indeed, ISIS could never have allocated so many of its forces to the recent daring offensive had it not trusted Sunni Iraqis in the havens of western Iraq. The Sunni insurgents, from the early days following Saddam's ouster to the present, have several overlapping power bases.

The army of Iraq, as noted, was Sunni-dominated until 2003. With the army disbanded two months

after Baghdad's fall, former officers, NCOs, and soldiers were humiliated, dispirited, and unemployed. Many were eager to fight coalition forces and the Shias coming to power. Former soldiers knew basic discipline, marksmanship, crew-served weaponry such as mortars, and small-unit infantry tactics. Some knew how to make bombs – a skill they diffused throughout the insurgency which then spread to Afghanistan and Syria. Soldiers retained ties with many NCOs and officers hence a command structure could be assembled.

The Baath Party developed from an underground cell structure in its early days of clandestine activities against the monarchy. It retained the ability to return to its underground past in the event of being driven from power. Events did not refuse them. Like the officers and NCOs, the Baathists were driven from power and they too were eager to reassert themselves. They provided information networks and financial support for the insurgency – the latter based on strategically placed money caches and businessmen who'd benefited from government contracts.

Iraq is based on tribal structures – Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish alike. They are the basis of much of the country's social, political, and economic life and they are key parts of the insurgency. They raise and finance levies of young men to wage war. Elders also serve as political leaders, sending signals to the Coalition Government and Baghdad. It was tribal leaders who negotiated the volte-face known as the Sunni Awakening, which saw Sunni fighters ally with US troops to fight al Qaeda. It was they who felt betrayed when the Awakening failed to lead to adequate Sunni participation in the army and state, and it was they who then returned to insurgency and realignment with al Qaeda.

Smuggling networks are key to insurgencies. Those skilled at surreptitiously transporting consumer goods and drugs can readily switch to more lethal commodities such as Kalashnikovs and explosives. This has been shown along the Af-Pak frontier, Chechnya, and Syria. The Iraqi smuggler trade enjoyed tremendous growth during the period of UN sanctions between 1991 and 2003. Anbar Province in western Iraq was especially active, bringing in banned goods from Syria and Jordan. Army officers, Baath officials, and tribal chieftains were well represented in smuggling networks. With the end of sanctions and the rise of insurgency, Anbar smugglers deftly switched their product line to the more lethal commodities.

Salafism is at the core of ISIS, the al Nusra Front, and other militant groups. It is also important in Sunni groups fighting today in Iraq. The crushing defeat of the First Gulf War led many soldiers to personal anguish which led many to the discipline, purity, and promise of the future at the core of Salafism. The same process took place after the Second Gulf War and the collapse of the Sunni social order. The ensuing period of despair and uncertainty had the same effect on the general Sunni population.

War with western invaders was a noble calling that promised integration into hopeful events unfolding before them in which they could take part. Salafism established common elements with ISIS fighters and perhaps more importantly with international Salafi networks extending to wealthy donors in the Gulf monarchies.

Few insurgencies thrive let alone succeed without foreign support – chiefly weapons and money. The Sunnis who fought US troops after 2003 benefited from individual foreign donors from many parts of the Islamic world. Today, however, they benefit from state support from the Gulf monarchies who wish to fight Shiism and Iran. The monarchies would dearly love to break the Shia Crescent running from Iran and Iraq in the east to Syria and Lebanon in the west. With the breakdown of Baghdad's control over western Iraq and of Damascus's control over eastern Syria, this buffer is coming into place. It will be more powerful if those regions became autonomous regions or independent states. Such outcomes would have been judged absurd five years ago; they are today within reach.

Sunni insurgents operate in a supportive environment. The collapse of Sunni power in 2003 and the ensuing Shia ascendance had a centripetal effect on the Sunni people, binding them together in common purpose. Sunni fighters enjoy local support in northern and western Iraq and in the Sunni cities around the capital. ISIS fighters enjoy the same support, at least so far.

Indeed, ISIS troops and indigenous counterparts are fighting together in many engagements and combined they may solidify their positions around Baghdad then either negotiate independence or drive the Shia government south to Basra. There is overlap in ideology, though not in ultimate objectives for Iraq. This raises the question of how long a group seeking its own state can collaborate with an ally seeking to destroy all states and achieve the more grandiose goal of a new caliphate.

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