

# THE LESSON OF THE SURGE: DEFEATING ISIS REQUIRES A NEW SUNNI AWAKENING

The Sunnis who were most important to the defeat of Al Qaeda seven years ago have now switched sides. Defeating ISIS will require switching them back.

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As the United States considers its options against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), we should start by reviewing our earlier war against ISIS's previous incarnation, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and remember what worked and what did not. The air power and special operations that many in Washington are now discussing can be an important component of a counterinsurgency or counterterrorism campaign, but our history with AQI/ISIS shows that by themselves they are not sufficient to put an end to the threat.\*

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## The Sunni Awakening: Key to Progress 2006-2011

From 2004 to 2006, the U.S. military conducted an astonishing number of special operations and airstrikes against AQI and other hardline insurgent groups in Iraq's Sunni areas, but despite the physical damage that these operations inflicted on AQI, the group grew stronger on the ground. By 2006, AQI was powerful enough to govern and terrorize whole towns, collect taxes, recruit fighters, and challenge Iraq's largest tribes for supremacy. Back then, it took a U.S.-led troop surge and an anti-AQI Sunni tribal "Awakening" to retake captured territory and force AQI back into the shadows, where it stayed until the outbreak of the Syrian war over three years ago.

As fighters of ISIS have swept through dozens of towns and several large cities of northern Iraq, holding terrain while outfitting themselves with captured Humvees and heavy weaponry, they have closely resembled the AQI of 2006, looking much more like an insurgent army than a shadowy

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terrorist group. And like the AQI of 2006, it will take much more than airstrikes and special operations to defeat them. The central lessons of the surge are that AQI-Syrian franchises cannot be defeated without a Sunni Awakening, and that an Awakening cannot happen without U.S. support. Any U.S. strategy that lacks a Sunni Awakening component is unlikely to bring the full defeat of ISIS that the region and the world needs.

## **AQI-ISIS: al Zarqawi's Insurgent Army Depends on Sunni Popular Support to Thrive**

Today, ISIS has made impressive gains because it is acting in concert with many other groups that were once AQI's enemies or rivals but are now allied with ISIS in armed opposition to the Maliki government. These new ISIS allies include former Ba'athists, local Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups, and, most significantly, disaffected Sunni tribal leaders—many of whom were once part of the Awakening.

This broad resistance front is the strongest and most focused Sunni uprising to date, in part because the groups that comprise it are applying insurgent “lessons learned” from the U.S. surge and from the Sunni uprising in Syria. During the surge, AQI and its hardline Islamist allies alienated their Sunni popular support base by their heavy-handed imposition of Islamic law and by indiscriminate violence against Sunni communities. They also fought turf wars with other Sunni insurgent groups, fracturing what had begun as a broad insurgent front. This AQI overreach generated a popular backlash that enabled the Awakening and its affiliated “Sons of Iraq” security initiative, in which almost 90,000 Sunni tribal fighters aligned with the U.S. military and Iraqi army to fight against AQI.<sup>1</sup> In a matter of months, the Sons of Iraq turned the tide of the war in Iraq's Sunni provinces, as it became clear that AQI and other hardline Sunni insurgent groups simply could not take on the Sons of Iraq and the Iraqi Security Forces at the same time. By 2009, AQI was nearly defeated as an army,

forced to retreat to pockets near the Iraq-Syria border, with its leadership eviscerated.

In 2014, ISIS appears to have learned from AQI's mistakes, to some degree. Thus far, ISIS has mainly avoided the measures that offended and angered Iraqi Sunnis in 2005-2006. And most importantly, they have largely avoided internecine fighting with other Sunni groups such as the Ba'ath and tribal militias. As a result, the broader Sunni Arab resistance has been more than willing to combine with the ISIS terrorist army to fight what they see as the Maliki government's Shia sectarian agenda. As the ISIS vanguard has moved through northern Iraqi cities, clearing them of government troops and police, these Sunni Arab resistance forces have moved in as the “hold” forces, consolidating rebel control of the local government and neighborhoods in Mosul and other Sunni population centers.

These “hold” forces, comprised of former Ba'ath Party leaders, military men, tribal fighters and native Iraqi Islamists, give the Sunni resistance a depth, breadth, and resilience behind the ISIS front-line troops.<sup>2</sup> Groups such as the Baathist-affiliated Naqshbandi Army (also known as JRTN) and Islamic Army, the Muslim-Brotherhood-affiliated 1920 Revolutionary Brigades, and the Salafist Ansar Al Sunna Army are reportedly playing important roles in the Sunni resistance offensive, working with former Awakening leaders and fighters as they do so. Importantly, with extensive ties in the northern Sunni communities, these groups draw broader support for the Sunni resistance from the disaffected Sunni population than ISIS would be able to garner by itself.

As long as ISIS can fall back on these broad support networks, it will prove difficult to dislodge them from northern Iraq.

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## How to Restart the Awakening

In the course of the Awakening, U.S. troops learned that the tribal leaders and fighters who formed the Sons of Iraq were primarily pragmatists rather than ideologues. Unlike ISIS and other Sunni Islamist insurgents, the tribal fighters were driven not by a desire for vast sectarian conflict, but by tribal interests and political grievances. Today, as in 2006 - 2007, some fissures have developed between ISIS and its Sunni allies, especially Sunni tribes and potentially other insurgent groups who do not support ISIS's maximalist Islamist form of governance. This divergence of aims will create opportunities for external actors to develop ties with the Sunni tribes—and thus could help restart the Awakening as well.

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In 2006 -2007, once U.S. support was offered, the Awakening tribes' strategic calculus changed. Their tough fight against AQI would be supported by the U.S.; and the tribes perceived U.S. forces as an honest broker and guarantor against any malign activities of the Iraqi Security Forces and Shia militias. From late 2006 to 2010, U.S. Army, Marine, and special operations troops worked to develop the Awakening and its security arm, the Sons of Iraq. As a result, the U.S. military developed extensive relationships and intelligence on this Sunni movement and the networks within it that should now be dusted off. If given the order, our forces would know very quickly whom among Sunni leaders to contact and what their local interests are likely to be.

In many cases, we even know which U.S. officers and non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) knew them best and may

still occasionally be in touch with them. Changing their strategic calculus again will not be easy, especially in Iraq's charged and sectarian political environment, but it would be a different matter than Syria in 2011-2012, where U.S. government officials claimed not to know enough about the Syrian Sunni opposition to distinguish between enemies and potential allies. For the most part, the Sunnis in Iraq, who are most likely to work with the U.S. are already a known quantity.

## The Danger of Seeming to Side with the Maliki Government and Iran

The Sunni Arab Awakening served two purposes: securing Sunni neighborhoods from AQI and Shia militias, and demonstrating that local Sunnis Arabs are best situated to deal with the insurgency and terrorist groups. The Awakening was able to do what the Iraqi Security Forces could not -- rid Baghdad and Sunni areas in the belts around Baghdad of AQI. However, Maliki has proceeded to methodically undermine reconciliation and reintegration programs, "brick by brick", and dismantled the Sons of Iraq program without absorbing them into the ranks of the Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>3</sup> The Sunni Arabs who were most important to the defeat of AQI seven years ago have now changed sides – and to them it looks like the U.S. might have done so as well, by supporting the Maliki government exclusively.

President Obama's dispatch of U.S. Special Operations Forces and Advisors to embed with Iraqi Security Forces along with establishing two joint operational centers to assist and coordinate with Security Forces risks sending the wrong message to the Sunni Arab community—if it is not combined with a robust effort to assist moderate Sunni Arabs fight ISIS and an aggressive engagement campaign. Why? Because Sunnis equate aiding the Iraqi Security Forces with supporting Prime Minister Maliki's sectarian agenda and endorsement of Shia militias. Previously the Sunnis have borne the brunt of the Security Forces' heavy-

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handed tactics and abuse; particularly along sectarian fault lines.

The two Joint Operational Centers facilitating intelligence, coordination and targeting must ensure the targets generated in cooperation with security forces are rigorously vetted to ensure that Sunnis aren't indiscriminately targeted, or targeted for sectarian political interests. Failure to do so will convince Sunnis that the U.S. is enabling a sectarian agenda in support of an unpopular Shia government.

## **A Limited U.S. Advisory Role Risks Yielding Primacy to Iran's Quds Force Presence, Threatening Any Sunni Arab Awakening**

Iran's General Solomeini and his Quds Force lieutenants currently appear to wield the dominant influence over the orchestration of the Iraqi Security Forces, and this most likely includes the generating of targets for both the ISF and the Shia militias.<sup>4</sup> History has shown us that the Shia militants' targeting process is most often indiscriminately aimed at the entire Sunni military age male population, rather than precisely targeted at terrorist networks. Unless this Quds Force oversight of the ISF is neutralized, U.S. embedded advisors could very well find themselves "out of the loop," yet perceived as complicit bystanders in the targeting of large numbers of Sunni military age males rather than effective targeting of ISIS fighters and leaders.

In this environment, target "packets" will almost certainly be generated by Shia militias and the Iranian Quds Force, and then handed to Shia Iraqi Army units to execute. U.S. targets will likely be subordinated to those generated by Quds Force proxies and Maliki loyalists. To avoid a skewing of U.S. targeting, the U.S. must have an extensive and robust intelligence and staff coordination effort to prevent malign sectarian influence over the process. One way to ensure the targeting effort is focused precisely on ISIS and other extremist groups, rather than bluntly toward the

Sunni population, is for U.S. intelligence to vet all targets given by the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Intelligence. Ideally, the coordination and vetting of targets will be in coordination with Kurdish Intelligence and Sunni members of the defunct Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS).<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion: To Reignite the Awakening against ISIS, a More Robust U.S. Military Presence is Needed**

The President's June 19 Iraq announcement inadequately addressed the deteriorating security environment. Hopefully it is only an initial gambit, but more likely it appears to be a minimalist approach designed to provide political cover at home rather than addressing core U.S. security interests: attacking the extremist ISIS and establishing the political way forward to maintain a stable, uniform Iraq.

U.S. security interests are tied to rolling back and neutralizing ISIS. The U.S. needs a more robust capability in Iraq to target ISIS, drive a wedge between ISIS and the broader Sunni Arab community, and to allow U.S. forces to effectively engage former Sons of Iraq and Sunni political leaders.

A Combined Joint Task Force of special operations forces; a mixed aviation brigade of attack and transport rotary wing aircraft; a robust intelligence capability, command and control advisory teams; and other medical, logistics and force protection elements should be based in Erbil, Al Sadiya Airfield in Anbar Province, and Baghdad. This is the minimum capability needed to enable effective targeting of ISIS and other extremists while enabling U.S. engagement and outreach in the Sunni Arab provinces.

The U.S. has a cadre of well-respected U.S. commanders, advisors, and diplomats who can work through the support of the Combined Task Force to engage a range of Sunni Arab leaders, many of whom are currently fighting alongside ISIS or have not taken sides yet. The U.S.

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military developed extensive relationships and intelligence on this Sunni movement and the networks within it, all of which should now be dusted off and employed. This more robust effort is what is required to rebuild stability and turn the tide against ISIS. It will take more than the President's minimalist approach envisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Benraad, Myriam. "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall." Middle East Policy Council XVIII.1 (2011) <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/iraqs-tribal-sahwa-its-rise-and-fall?print>.

<sup>2</sup> United States Institute of Peace, "Who Are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq," April 2005 <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr134.pdf>.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Levitt, Matthew. "Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West." Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2012) <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus123.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Parker, Ned. "Divided Iraq has Two Spy Agencies." Los Angeles Times. April 15, 2007. <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/apr/15/world/fg-intel15>;

Ignatius, David. "A Sectarian Spy Duel in Bagdad." The Washington Post. June 14, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/13/AR2007061301965.html>.



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