HV6431.A4 B37 2005
JZ 5524 .U55 S64 no.134

UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE www.usip.org

SPECIAL REPORT

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Amatzia Baram

Who Are the Insurgents?

Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq

About the Report

"Who Are the Insurgents?" offers insight into the breadth of Sunni Arab groups actively participating in the insurrection in Iraq and specifically examines the three broad categories of insurgents: secular/ideological, tribal, and Islamist. With the exception of the ultraradical Salafi and Wahhabi Islamists, this report finds, many rebels across these three classifications share common interests and do not sit so comfortably in any one grouping or category. This presents specific problems—and opportunities—for U.S. and coalition forces that, if handled correctly, could eventually lead to a rapprochement with some of the insurgents.

The report's author, Amatzia Baram, is a professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Haifa, Israel. He is a prolific writer and editor of several books and dozens of scholarly articles on Saddam Hussein and Iraqi politics and history. He testified about Saddam Hussein and weapons of mass destruction in September 2002 before the House Committee on Government Reform, and before the House Committee on Armed Services in April 2004. He has also consulted about Iraq with senior U.S. administration officials. He is a former Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. This report is based on a chapter in a book he is currently writing about the relationship between Islam and the state in modern Iraq.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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Summary

- Building a profile of a typical anti-coalition Sunni Arab insurgent in Iraq is a daunting task. Demographic information about the insurgents is fragmented, and the rebels themselves are marked more by their heterogeneity than by their homogeneity. Drawing from a wide array of sources, however, we can try to piece together a view of their primary motivations for taking up arms against the U.S.-led occupation.
- Sunni insurgents generally claim one of three primary identity-based impetuses for their anti-American and antigovernment violence: Ba'th Party membership or affiliation with Saddam's regime, adherence to Islam, or tribal interests, values, and norms.
- Secular/ideological, tribal, and moderate Islamist concerns are not necessarily mutually exclusive and often are even mutually reinforcing.
- Many ex-army officers, security force personnel, and Ba'th Party members lost their privileged status in the new Iraq and remain bitter, angry, and frustrated. This fact, combined with the perceived humiliation of being forced to live under foreign occupation and, worse still, the prospect of longer-term Shi'i supremacy, led many to take up arms.
- In strictly economic terms, many Sunni Arab tribes suffered following the war. While a number of tribes had once earned money through large-scale transborder smuggling, such activity has become increasingly dangerous and difficult, as U.S. troops have instituted measures to cut off all unregulated cross-border movement. Additionally, some tribes that had previously relied on payments from Saddam for "good" behavior found no such patronage from the Coalition Provisional Authority, which was not inclined to buy them off in this manner.
- By the end of 2003, U.S. military officials noted that some insurgents were attacking them to avenge the spilled blood of relatives, whether killed by accident or in guerilla attacks. In effect, U.S. success on the battlefield, while deterring some, had on other occasions only served to perpetuate the insurgency.
- In the last decade of Saddam's rule, many young Iraqi men, having realized that the Ba'th Party had lost its ideological coherence, turned away from the party's origi ideas toward a new set of beliefs. They adopted an alternative ideology, name

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fundamentalist Islam based essentially on the thought of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

- Many young Iraqi Sunni Arabs were inspired specifically by the work of the Iraqi Muslim Brother Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid. On the one hand, al-Rashid demonstrated a pragmatic approach to political action, while on the other he very clearly stated that eventually jihad with the sword is the way of the true Muslim.
- The ultraradical Salafis and Wahhabis are distinct from Iraq's moderate and even some otherwise radical Islamists. While an accord may eventually be reached between a future democratic Iraqi government and moderate and certain radical Islamist groups, the beliefs of the Salafis or Wahhabis will never allow for compromise.
- The Iraqi government may be able to substantially reduce the insurgency by appealing to the secular, tribal, and non-Salafi Islamist groups through policies that address their primary concern: the status of Sunni Arabs in the new Iraq.
- Such policies should include meaningful participation in the formulation of the permanent constitution, even though Sunni Arab representation in the National Assembly is very low, and political guarantees that oil revenues will be shared equitably, that Iranian influence will not be allowed to penetrate into Iraq, that Iraq will not become an Islamic republic, and that Sunni and Shi'i Islam will be equally respected by the state. Further, steps should be taken to ensure that Sunnis (as well as Kurds, Turkomans, and Christians) are not discriminated against in the job market or in the choice of infrastructure upgrades.

Introduction

Building a profile of a typical anti-coalition Sunni Arab insurgent is a daunting task: ready demographic information about the insurgents is fragmented, and the rebels themselves are marked more by their heterogeneity than by their homogeneity. Drawing from a wide array of sources, however, we can try to piece together a view of their primary motivations for taking up arms against the U.S.-led occupation. Sunni insurgents generally claim one of three primary identity-based impetuses for their anti-American and antigovernment violence: secular/ideological, tribal, or Islamist. Further, the Islamists can be divided into two camps: moderates and radicals who might one day reach an accord with coalition forces and the Iraqi government, and ultraradical Salafi and Wahhabi Islamists with whom a rapprochement will never occur. With the exception of this Salafi and Wahhabi minority, core ex-Ba'this—some of whom are wanted for crimes against humanity—and hardened criminals, the identity and motivations of most insurgents are elastic and multifaceted.

It may seem strange that the same person, or even community, may both express loyalty to Saddam Hussein as a symbol and hold Islamist beliefs, but this should not come as a surprise: Individuals in the Sunni Arab areas commonly call for the institution of strict Islamic rules in one breath while expressing great admiration for Saddam in the next. Consider briefly the town of Ramadi, where walls are littered with graffiti hailing Saddam Hussein as Iraq's leader, while rebel leaders there declare: "We have two missions in the city. One to defend Ramadi against the Americans...and the other to kill anyone who sells alcohol or sex CDs."[1] Likewise, a mix between Saddamism and Islam can be found in many other regions, mainly on the upper Tigris, but also in Baghdad and the upper Euphrates. For example, painted on the walls of the Sunni Arab neighborhood of A'zamiyya in Baghdad one is just as likely to find the words "Long Live Saddam!" as "Jihad Is Our Way!"[2]

This bizarre mix of loyalty to Saddam, whose secular credentials are well known to the Iraqis, and to radical non-Salafi Islam may be partially explained by Saddam's Islamization of regime and party in the last decade of his rule. Even if one questions the sincerity behind his efforts, this movement substantially lowered the walls separating party

and Japanese companies could provide the generators within a few months and, without placing their own personnel at risk, could tutor Iraqi technicians in neighboring countries. Coalition forces would help escort the generators to their destinations. The rest would be up to the Iraqis themselves.

Notes

1. Akeel Hussein and Nicholas Pelham, "Rebels' Writ Runs Large across the Troublesome Sunni Triangle," *Financial Times*, July 30, 2004, http://ft.com/.

2. Anthony Shadid, "In New Iraq, Sunnis Fear a Green Future," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, December 22, 2003.

3. See Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thi Iraq* (London: MacMillan, 1991).

4. *Al-Ittijah al-Akhar* [The Other Tendency] (Baghdad), March 13, 2004, FBIS March 14, 2004.

5. Anthony Shadid, "In New Iraq, Sunnis Fear a Green Future," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, December 22, 2003.

6. Daniel Williams reporting from Dhulu'iya, Iraq, *Washington Post Foreign Service*, January 13, 2004.

7. For details see Amatzia Baram, "Neo Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Husayn's Tribal Policies 1991–96," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997), 1–31; Amatzia Baram, *Building toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998).

8. Rajiv Chandrasekaram, *Washington Post*, October 17, 2004.

9. *Observer* (London), January 11, 2004.

10. Based on telephone conversations with Paul McGough, chief correspondent in Iraq for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 24, 2004, and Deborah Amos' National Public Radio program "All Things Considered" on August 2, 2004.

11. Agence France-Presse from Tikrit, October 18, 2003.

12. Based on a presentation by Gen. Swannack at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 30, 2004. See also WINEP's *Policywatch* No. 884, July 20, 2004.

13. Interview by Muhammad al-Baqali, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, April 23, 2004, FBIS-NES, April 23, 2004.

14. Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid, *Al-Masar: Ihya' Fiqh al-Da'wa* [Resurrecting the Call's Jurisprudence or Comprehension] (The Fifth Book, Cairo: Dar al-Bashir lil-Thaqafa wal-'Ulum, 1999), 16.

15. Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid, *Al-Masar: Ihya' Fiqh al-Da'wa* (The Fifth Book, Cairo: Dar al-Bashir lil-Thaqafa wal-'Ulum, 1999), 9. See also his earlier book, *Al-'Awa'iq* [The Obstacles], *Ihya' fiqh al-Da'wa, No. 2* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, 1997). This volume is dedicated mainly to theology. The same author also published *Al-Muntalaq* [The Point of Departure] *No. 1* in the same series.

16. Al-Rashid (pp. 67–68) provides the source for this prophetic saying as *Sahih al-Bukhari*, one of the canonical collections of the Prophet's traditions.

17. Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid, *Al-Masar: Ihya' Fiqh al-Da'wa* (The Fifth Book, Cairo: Dar al-Bashir lil-Thaqafa wal-'Ulum, 1999), 67–68.

18. Ibid., 69, 71.

19. Most of the profile provided here is based on a report by Hannah Allam, "Fallujah's Real Boss: Omar the Electrician," in Knight Ridder newspapers, November 22, 2004.

20. See an excellent account from Baghdad by Tish Durkin, *National Journal Group, Inc.*, October 16, 2004.

21. Mariam Fam, Associated Press from Mosul, November 7, 2003.

22. Anthony Shadid from Khaldiyyah, *Washington Post*, September 21, 2003.

23. Nir Rosen, "Home Rule," *New Yorker*, July 5, 2004, 50–51. And a personal interview with Rosen in Washington, DC, May 22, 2004.

24. Karl Vick, *Washington Post*, October 13, 2004.

25. See, for example, Hamza Hendawi, "Iraqi Vote May Not Resolve Sunni Dilemma," Associated Press, January 31, 2005; "Disgruntled Sunnis Could Thwart Iraq Constitution," Reuters from Amman, February 1, 2005; David Axe, "On the Sunni Side from the Besieged Sunni Triangle: The Glowing Portrait of the Iraqi Election Doesn't Hold," *Salon*, February 1, 2005, http://www.salon.com.

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