

The Map of Insurgency in Iraq: The Armed Groups

CAN ACUN

- How has the rebellion against the Maliki administration in Iraq started?
 - Who are the Sunni groups other than ISIS fighting in the field?
 - What is the ultimate goal of these groups?

INTRODUCTION

The military offensive, Operation Iraqi Liberation (OIL), launched in 2003 by a multi-national coalition force of about 40 countries under the leadership of the United States, culminated in the occupation of all Iraq and eventually put an end to the Saddam Hussein regime in the country.

A new era as well has begun in Iraq after the occupation of the country by the U.S. and Britain on the grounds that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) - later it was proven that the claim was false¹ - and that the WMDs posed a serious threat to the security of the “free world”, the coalition countries in particular. However, Iraq has continuously suffered an administrative crisis along with ethnic-sectarian crises that have gradually increased in the post-occupation period since 2003. The Sunni-led asymmetrical military insurgency and the policies thereagainst implemented by the occupation forces and their local allies have caused the spread of scrimmage countrywide and the loss of lives of many Iraqis.

1. Martin Chulov and Helen Pidd, “Defector admits to WMD lies that triggered Iraq war”, *The Guardian*, February 15, 2011.

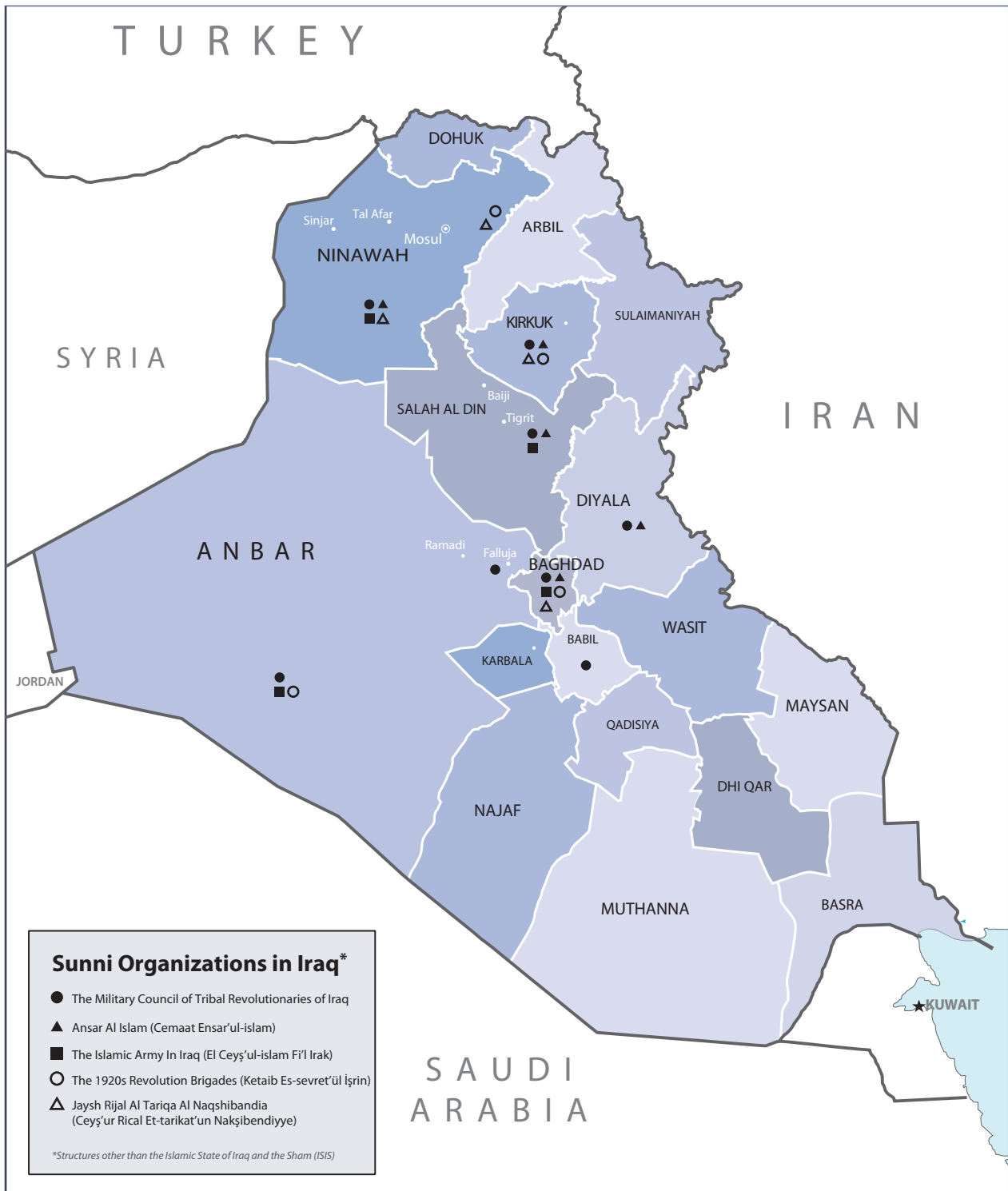
In such an environment, the US tried to draw a new political map of Iraq according to ethnic and sectarian balances in the country; however, Sunnis were equated to the Baath and failed to escape from “otherization”. Although the Iraqi Constitution prepared in 2005 granted the citizens of Iraq the right to form political parties and join political activities, and envisaged a political pluralism and disallowed adoption of racism, terrorism, the calling of others infidels, and sectarianism; political dynamics have been shaped through ethnic and sectarian differences.

The most important development to change the fate of Iraq was that Sunni Arabs boycotted the elections in 2005 and, with US interference, Nouri al Maliki was assigned to form the new government. As Maliki slowly took political and military powers under control, he did not hesitate to bring the sectarian card into play in politics.² Iran pulled the ropes and Maliki managed to remain in office although the Iraqiyyah Alliance won the second parliamentary elections held in 2010. After the elections in particular, the Alliance

2. Mete Çubukçu, Taha Özhan, İşgal Altında İstikrar Arayışları, 2010 Irak Seçimleri, *Seta Analiz*, April 2010.

CAN ACUN

SETA Foreign Policy Research Assistant, Ankara.



was considered as the last chance for Iraq to keep its territorial integrity since it united ethnic and sectarian diversities under one roof. Until the appointments of ministers of the Interior, Defense and State responsible for national security, al Maliki also occupied their seats, and somehow the final Cabinet could not be shaped. Therefore, the Iraqi government which had already failed to settle a firm and sound institutional structure and suffered structural issues, also faced the problem of remaining half-completed.

As the Iranian influence over Iraq increased together with the withdrawal of US troops from the country on December 18, policies were toughened to intimidate opponents of Maliki.³ The tension continued to escalate when one of the key Sunni leaders, Vice President Tariq al Hashimi, had to leave the country⁴ and another key Sunni figure again, Finance Minister Rafi al Isawi, was subdued. In the last quarter of 2012, Sunni groups frequently held protests [in Baghdad] against the Maliki government accusing him of excluding Sunnis; the protests, however, were suppressed gorily. As demonstrations spread to other cities, Sunnis were massacred in the northern Iraqi town of Havija in May 2013, and murders of dozens of people investigated the acts of violence. After the arrest of Sunni Parliamentary Representative Ahmad al Alwani on December 28, 2013, the Iraqi Army raided the square where anti-government protests were held for over a year in Ramadi, the largest city of Anbar Province. Thereupon, Sunni tribes, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS)⁵ staged a riot involved in hot encounters with the Iraqi army in Falluja and Ramadi. The Iraqi army in these regions massacred

militants and civilians without any exceptions. Since there remained no political ground for Sunnis, 44 Sunni members of the Iraqi Parliament announced their resignation.

As the clashes spread in the country, civilian losses⁶ that had relatively decreased in number, according to the United Nations, began to rapidly increase again. Throughout 2014, a total of 618 civilians were killed in January, 564 in February, 484 in March, 610 in April and 798 in May, and as many military officers and militants were murdered.⁷ Over half a million people left their houses in the province of al Anbar and became refugees.⁸ As the effects of the civil war in Syria have gradually pulled Iraq into more of a sectarian power struggle every passing day, the State of Law Coalition led by Maliki's Dawa Party won⁹ the parliamentary elections in 2014, held in an environment of passive Sunnis and some Shiite opposition. As a consequence, tribes that were tired of discriminatory policies, former insurgency groups and Iraqi military officers of the Baath period uniting under various umbrella organizations¹⁰, such as the Jihad and Change Front, the Islamic Salvation Front, Jihad and Reform Front raised the red flag against the Central Government of Iraq. They acted together with ISIS in several Sunni cities such as Ramadi and Falluja, and formed many armed groups and organized attacks.

The Sunni insurgency gaining momentum against the Shiite-weighted al Maliki government in Iraq lead to a takeover of the largest northern city Mosul, on June 11, 2014 and managed to clear a considerable part of the Central Iraqi Army out of the provinces

3. Furkan Torlak, Ufuk Ulutaş, Çekilme Sonrası Irak'ta Düzen Arayışları, *Seta Analiz*, December 2011.

4. A member of the Iraqiyah Bloc Vice President Tariq Hashimi faced a detention attempt at the Baghdad Airport where he was about to depart for the capital of the Northern Iraq Kurdish Administration, Arbil, on December 19, 2011, the day after the withdrawal of the US forces. Hashimi was sentenced to capital punishment in September 2012 for murders by setting up death squads.

5. For detailed information about ISIS, see: Can ACUN, Neo al Qaeda: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), *Seta Perspektif*, <http://setav.org/en/neo-al-qaeda-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-the-sham-isis/perspective/16006>

6. The occupation of Iraq had caused amplitude of civilian losses since day one and the death toll jumped up to 3,000 during the most intensive times of the insurgency in 2006 and 2007. The death toll relatively decreased afterwards but has started to rise again as of 2012 and approached to the toll of 2006 and 2007 in 2014.

7. "UN Casualty Figures for May 2014", *UNAMI*, June 1, 2014.

8. "El-iktital el-mutawasil fi muhafazaat el-anbar el-irakiyye yetashabab fi nezuh havali 500,000 şahs", *UNHCR*, April 2, 2014.

9. "Mufudat el-intihabat ta'len 'an netaic el-tasvit el-has, el-intihabat meclis el-nuwab el-iraki", Irak High Electoral Commission, May 23, 2014.

10. Fatih Öner, "Musul Olayı ve Irak'ta Gelişmeler 3", *Yeni Şark*, June 16, 2014.

mostly populated by Sunni-Arabs such as Ninova, Anbar, Diala and Salahaddin. It is an undeniable fact that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), the existence of which has been strongly felt in both Iraq and Syria, was operative during a substantial time period of the said offensive. ISIS was quite effective to a degree that it planned and carried out the operation in Mosul. However, it will be inadequate and a mistake to read the developments in Iraq only through ISIS and “terror” perspective.¹¹ The incidents taking place following the withdrawal of the Iraqi Army from Mosul and the administrative structure built are among the significant manifestations of this.¹²

In this study; in order to reveal the real face of the Sunni Uprising and make an inference about prospective developments, an assessment will be made on the courses of establishment, philosophies and areas of activities of the organizations that have taken multiple points under control and are currently mobilized in Iraq, such as: Ansar al Islam (AI, or *Cemaat Ensar’ul-Islam* in Arabic), Jaysh al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN, or *Jeyş’ur Rical et-Tarikat’un Nakşibendiyye*), The Islamic Army in Iraq (*Al Ceyş’ul-İslam fi’l Irak*), The Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries of Iraq, and the 1920s Revolution Brigades (*Ketaib es-Sevret’ül-İşrin*).

ANSAR AL ISLAM (CEMAAT ENSAR’UL-İSLAM)

One of the oldest jihadist groups in Iraq Ansar al Islam (AI) was formed in December 2001 by Mullah

11. The Iraqi Muslim Scholars Association led by Professor Haris Suleiman al Dari in a statement made an assessment that liberation of Mosul is a critical turning point and requested people to avoid sectarianism and stressed that the developments are a popular revolution. The Mufti of Iraq, Dr. Rafi al Ruafi similarly declared a jihad along with the incidents in Mosul and called Iraqis to ward off, kick out and exile Maliki forces and militia. The Mufti emphasized that the incidents were clearly self-defense against the atrocity, torture and the war Sunnis suffered and that it should continue to the end and until the high-handed militia were kicked out. The World Muslim Scholars Association led by Yusuf al Kardawi as well issued a similar statement and regarded the developments as a Sunni Uprising. Former Vice President Tariq Hashimi described the incidents as the “revolution of the aggrieved”.

12. Leaders of the revolution and prominent figures in Mosul held a meeting with a subject title “Governance of the City” and ISIS attended the meeting as one of the four main groups. “Iraklı Gazetecinin Değerlendirmeleri”, *Yeni Şark*, June 20, 2014.

Fatih Krekar and remained active in Northern Iraq, particularly in the Kurdish regions and the Halabaja periphery. Its formation was the result of a merger of the Islah, al-Tawhid Islamic Front and Jund al-Islam. Krekar departing from the Kurdistan Islamic Movement merged with the Jund al-Islam of Abu Abdullah al Shafi and declared the establishment of Ansar al Islam in 2001. Some AI members are Kurdish and Arab fighters who have participated in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation of the country in particular. The group has fought against the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani and the Kurdistan Democracy Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani in particular. Since its area of activity is close to Suleymaniyah and Halabaja periphery, Ansar al Islam mostly clashes with Talabani forces.

As it is the case with most of the other jihadist groups, the historic development of Ansar al Islam has changed dramatically in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The Counter-Terrorism operation worldwide has made Ansar al Islam a target and the group has become a center of attention when the jihadists who left Afghanistan following the occupation and arrived in Northern Iraq via Iran. Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al Zarqawi was among others coming from Afghanistan, but was not known very well then.

The US intervention in Iraq in 2003 has become a turning point for Ansar al Islam and the US bombardment targeting capital Baghdad simultaneously struck the Ansar camps in Northern Iraq. These attacks hit a heavy blow on the group. However, Ansar al Islam withdrew to the Iranian border, recuperated and actively participated in the insurgency that had broken out following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s Baath regime in the nick of time. After 2003, the group changed its name to *Ansar al Sunna* and adopted a “more Iraqi” identity, and activities of the group in Northern Iraq have been weakened considerably. Ansar al Islam took a more active role in the period of 2004-2007 and orchestrated massive attacks in the Sunni

regions starting with Mosul and Kirkuk. In 2007, the group returned to its earlier name *Jamaat Ansar al Islam* (JAI) and looked for ways to reorganize and recover from earlier failures. After 2007, however, AI suffered a setback due to massive US attacks and arrests as some of the group members joined ISIS. It is seen that in those days the US forces and the Iraqi forces substantially took the insurgency under control. *Sahwa* (The Awakening) Councils formed by the US forces played a big role in this.

Stationed as the chief of the US Central Command in Iraq, General David Petraeus adopted strategies to pull moderate insurgency groups into Sahwa councils and increased (surged) the number of US troops; the Iraqi insurgency was isolated as a result and came to the point of breakdown. Participation of tribes and almost all of the groups –except ISI and JAI – in the Sahwa councils and quitting resistance marginalized the Iraqi insurgency to a great extent. The JAI periodically resumed attacks (although not offensive) in the north of the country, Mosul and Kirkuk in particular, until the US forces left the country at the end of 2011. With the US pullout, however, JAI increased the attacks considerably and expanded the areas of activity. The group, mainly concentrating in Mosul and Kirkuk, orchestrated attacks in the south, in the Sunni regions such as Diala and Salahaddin, and even left its mark on a few attacks in Baghdad.

The current leader of Ansar al Islam is Sheikh Abu Hashim al Ibrahim following the capture of Abu Abdullah Shafii in 2010 who is being kept in a high security prison in Baghdad. Along with the uprising and armed struggle starting in Syria, JAI have become active in this country as well and formed “Ansar al Sham” to fight next to the Syrian opposition against the Bashar al Asad regime.

JAI have had problems with ISI especially after 2011 and some Ansar members were killed by ISI in Mosul. The group wrote a letter of complaint to Al Qaeda Center criticizing the attitude of ISI. Upon transformation of ISI into ISIS in Syria, and ISIS’ having problems with al Qaeda have caused

speculations that JAI would join al Qaeda in the near future especially in Iraq, and therefore would run against ISIS as the al Qaeda branch in Iraq. Ansar al Islam is on the terrorist organizations list of the US and the United Nations. Although there is no information about whether or not the group obeys al Qaeda, the two substantially overlap in terms of organic ties and ideological and intellectual similarities and adopts the global caliphate and jihad ideology as its vision. It is commented that the number of JAI members has not reached thousands yet. However, it may be said that number of group members is beyond estimates as far as the field and area of operations are concerned.

The group claimed innumerable weapons, ammunition, equipment and tanks from the Iraqi Army who ran away after being defeated in the Operation in Mosul. It has been recently observed that JAI acts along with Jaysh al Mujahideen both of which have similarities in ideology. JAI aims to increase the area of influence in the regions evacuated by the Iraqi Army and avoids confrontation with ISIS although they are rivals. On the other hand, the prediction is that JAI may target the Kurdish groups who entered Kirkuk after the Iraqi Army left the region and increase the number of operations in the area. Again the group, which is also active in Diala and Salahaddin provinces, may prefer not to spread into other regions, though they avoid direct confrontation with ISIS. JAI has been active in Anbar Province on occasion since January 2014 in particular; its presence, however, is quite limited. In the future, JAI is the second strongest alternative after ISIS in Iraq, and if ISIS falls back, JAI is among the first groups who can fill the gap. A similar ideological background and discourse and its connections with global jihadist entities differentiate JAI from other Sunni groups.

**JAYSH RIJAL al TARIQA al NAQSHIBANDIA
(JRTN, or CEYŞ’UR RİCAL ET-TARİKAT’UN
NAKŞİBENDİYYE)**

Jaysh Rijal al Tariqa al Naqshibandia (JRTN) is a Sufi insurgent group established by the Iraqi Baathists. The

leader of the group is Izzaddin Ibrahim al Duri, a former general of Saddam Hussein, who was abolished by the US forces after the intervention. The group has been active since 2006 and organized several attacks against the US forces, but mainly remained underground and could not find a chance to come to the forefront. The unpleasant reputation of the Baath in the country played a role in this. JRTN has been active in the central and northern regions of the country and joins clashes in the western province of Anbar. Suleiman Beg, Havija, Ramadi and Falluja are the regions where the JRTN remains active. However, it is known that JRTN also participated in the Operation in Mosul recently and tries to create its own area of influence in the city.

Group ideology is a mixture of Baatist and Sufi, but at the same time underlines Arab and Iraqi nationalism. Although JRTN seems to be acting along with some other jihadist Sunni groups against the Maliki administration in the country (ISIS being on top), it is completely different in terms of ideological background and vision, and it may have conflicts with these groups in the long run. In fact, there are news stating that conflicts have begun to occur between JRTN and the other groups.¹³ It has been claimed that al Duri remains in contact with the former Baathists who fought in the ISIS fronts and has reached an agreement with these top notch ISIS figures. Although it is likely that Izzaddin Ibrahim personally favors such an agreement-if any, the confrontation between JRTN and ISIS seems inevitable due to the differences in ideological backgrounds and ISIS' unwillingness to share the power.

The Jaysh al Naqshibandia is also an opponent of jihadist groups, such as Ansar al Islam and Jaysh al Muhajideen, in terms of ideology; and it will become crystal-clear that these groups have irreconcilable differences if insurgents gain an upper hand in Sunni regions evacuated by the Iraqi Army. Despite everything, Baathists' members of JRTN have a strong

13. "17 katile fi iştebeker beyne DAŞ ve Cemaa Sünne muterafe fi el-'Irak", *Alwasat*, June 23, 2014.

communication network among Sunnis – among tribes in particular – and it may be predicted that they can have firm alliances with Sunni groups who disapprove of the global jihad project in the country. It is also not to be forgotten that JRTN currently keeps in touch with these groups.

THE ISLAMIC ARMY IN IRAQ (EL CEYŞ'UL-İSLAM Fİ'L IRAK)

The Islamic Army in Iraq held plenty of attacks in the peak periods of the Iraqi insurgency against the US forces and remained active in a big part of the country. Established in 2003, the Islamic Army occupied the agenda with the attacks held in Sunni regions of Anbar, Diala, Salahaddin and the Sunni neighborhoods of Baghdad. Although it has a discourse of Salafi Iraqi nationalism, the group has adopted a vision of a civilian constitution and a laic state to a certain degree. Ismael al Juburi is the current leader of the organization the military wing of which has been idle for quite sometime, but resumed activities during the latest incidents in the country.

In the course of the invasion of Iraq, the group fought together with al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) against the US forces, but had conflicts with this organization after a while. Although the two signed a ceasefire, confrontations between the Islamic Army and AQI (converted into ISI and ISIS later on) continued sporadically. The organization that set up a political bureau has been involved in politics aside, from its military activities, and made contacts with the US officials on occasion. Soon after, military activities of the Islamic Army came to a halt and majority of its members joined Sahwa councils, sided with the US and Iraqi forces and fought against ISI. As a consequence, the group has lost popularity to a large extent and Sunnis accused the Islamic Army of making concessions to the US and Shiite groups.

In parallel with the recent developments, the Islamic Army in Iraq has become active again. Although it stays in touch with local Sunni forces in Iraq, the group is not popular anymore. The leaders of

the organization in various statements envision a three-party federal structure, and announce objection to the unjust policies adopted against Sunnis by the Shiite-dominant Iraqi government, but they do not support sectarian animosity.¹⁴ The group stated that they are open to communication with the US and global figures overtly adopt a hostile attitude against ISIS. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that the Islamic Army in Iraq avoids confrontation with ISIS.

THE MILITARY COUNCIL OF TRIBAL REVOLUTIONARIES OF IRAQ

Established on December 30, 2013 the Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries of Iraq consists of a total of 78 tribes and clans, including the largest tribes of the country, such as Dulaymi, Shammar, Tiqriti and Duri¹⁵ in addition to tens of thousands of militias. Tribes that were functioning under the name of Local Councils united to form the Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries of Iraq. It is known that the Council remains effective in al Anbar and Ninova provinces in particular, and organized in the districts of Yusufiyah, Abu Garaib, Taji and Tarimiyah in the capital Baghdad.

It appears that the Council acted along with ISIS during the attack against Mosul, although they reject this claim.¹⁶ The Chairman of the Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries of Iraq, Ali Hatem al Suleimani announced that “the popular revolution will continue until the Nouri al Maliki government resigns and an interim government of independents

are formed.” Again, al Suleimani stresses that “the real factor behind the Sunni uprising in Iraq is not ISIS but the coalition of Sunni tribes”. Reportedly many Sunni troops escaping from the Iraqi Army have joined the Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries of Iraq. For instance, the military unit responsible for the protection of the oil wells in al Fatha region in Baji County ran away and joined the Council. Again, all check-points, centers and military targets in the town of Havija in addition to all weapons, munitions and equipment in the 46th Brigade near the village of al Basal, Havija, have been taken over by the armed units of the Council.¹⁷

THE 1920s REVOLUTION BRIGADES (KETAİB ES-SEVRET'ÜL İŞİRİN)

As the first armed group formed against the US invasion of Iraq, the 1920s Revolution Brigades is described as an Islamic jihadist movement. It was established by the members of the former Baath army of the Saddam Hussein period in 2003. The headquarters of the Brigades is located in the province of al Anbar. The group has been active in Baghdad, Abu Garaib, Han Dari and Falluja, sheltering many different armed groups. The Brigades who had clashes with the AQI in 2007 lost many leaders during the suicide attacks organized by AQI. The commander of the Brigades is Mousanna al Dari, the son of the President of the Iraqi Muslim Scholars Association, Haris al Dair. The 1920s Revolution Brigades was formed together with Sahwas through the strategies of General Petraeus who also fought against al Qaeda.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

It will be most accurate to read the latest developments in Iraq as a revolt of Sunnis against ethnic-sectarian and autocratic policies of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki rather than just an ISIS activity. There exist many important mobilized Sunni groups, controlling many points in the field and dominating more areas

14. An excerpt from an interview of the Spokesman of the Iraqi Islamic Army to *al Jazeera-Arabic*, see, “El-Şamari: el-Ceyş el-Ameriki ve el-İrani waraa ekser el-mufafahet fi el Irak.” <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/d2195031-aaff-4924-ae29-a3e89b6d6a08/>

15. The Dulaymi tribe heavily populated in the western parts of Iraq, having a major branch in Baghdad. The Dulaymis is a confederation consisting of 100 small tribes and considered to have a population of three millions. The leader of the largest confederation of the Iraqi tribes, Dulaymis, is Ali Hatem al Suleimani.

16. Ali Hatem El Süleymani, “...bu devrim bir İŞİD devrimi değil, aşiretler devrimidir, zulme karşı bir başkaldırıdır. Askeri konsey de bu başkaldırının bir kısmıdır, İŞİD ile aramızda hiçbir bağlantı ve koordinasyon yok” açıklaması yapmıştır. Bkz., “Bu bir sünni devrim”, *Press Medya*, June 21, 2014.

17. “Irak'ta hangi silahlı gruplar etkili”, *AA*, June 17, 2014.

18. “Irak'ta hangi silahlı gruplar etkili”, *AA*, June 17, 2014.

and crowds than ISIS in terms of human power. Although they are not as professional as ISIS when it comes to command and control structures and combat effectiveness, Sunni groups still have a critical weight in the field. The nature of relations of these groups with ISIS is not known fully but it appears that they partly act in a coordinated fashion. To the contrary of its attitude against the opponent groups in Syria, ISIS – for now – seems to tolerate more the other groups and tries to maintain the joint position against Shiite entities and Baghdad. The ISIS policy of not to alienate its own Iraqi Sunni ranks plays a critical role in this.

However, sustainability of the situation is also a matter of question. ISIS is an organization that structurally demands absolute obedience and domination, and ideologically adopts straightlaced “gospel truth” ideas. Of ISIS describing itself as a state

is also important in order to see the prospective goals of the group. In this case, it may be said that ISIS will demand obedience of other Sunni groups in the near future and is likely to have clashes with those who refuse obedience, as it is the case with the opponent groups in Syria. However, a common goal of ISIS and all Sunni groups aforementioned in this study is to consolidate the field dominance in the Sunni regions, overthrow Maliki and take over Baghdad. Therefore, it appears that they will act together for a while in the presence of the big enemy. Still, in any case, it is impossible for ISIS to single-handedly undertake the Sunni insurgency in Iraq.

Original Title: Irak'ta İsyanın Haritası: Silahlı Gruplar
Translated by Handan Öz



SIYASET, EKONOMİ VE TOPLUM ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI
FOUNDATION FOR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH
مركز الدراسات السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية

www.setav.org | info@setav.org | [@setavakfi](https://twitter.com/setavakfi)

SETA | Ankara
Nenehatun Caddesi No: 66 GOP Çankaya
06700 Ankara TURKEY
Tel: +90 312.551 21 00 | Fax: +90 312.551 21 90

SETA | İstanbul
Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı
No: 41-43 Eyüp İstanbul TURKEY
Tel: +90 212 395 11 00 | Fax: +90 212 395 11 11

SETA | Washington D.C.
1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite
1106 Washington, D.C., 20036 USA
Tel: 202-223-9885 | Fax: 202-223-6099

SETA | Kahire
21 Fahmi Street Bab al Luq Abdeen
Flat No 19 Kahire EGYPT
Tel: 00202 279 56866 | 00202 279 56985