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Who Represents the Iraqi Sunnis?

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Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Sunnis in Anbar and other western Iraqi provinces have struggled to develop a coherent and representative political leadership. The recently formed Iraqi Awakening Convention (IAC) -- a collective of so-called "Awakening council" leaders -- could represent the next step in that evolution and, if nurtured, make a significant contribution to broader political reconciliation. It will also mean, however, that current elected leaders will have to give way to new local leaders or compete politically with them, since it is pointless to compete violently given the asymmetry of the current power balance.

Anbar's Political Scene

Anbar, Iraq's largest province, borders Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia and contains the important cities of Ramadi and Falluja. For years, the province was the stronghold of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) before a tribal revolt led to the formation of the "Awakening" councils in 2007.

As a result of the Sunni boycott of the 2005 provincial election, only around four thousand ballots were cast out of a population of more than a million. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) -- the Iraqi equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, boasting a nationalistic outlook and elite Sunni constituencies and led by Iraqi vice president Tariq al-Hashimi -- agreed to participate in Anbar's newly emergent political process despite the boycott. As a result of being the first on the field, the IIP came to dominate not only Anbar's provincial council, but also the governor's office and almost every senior administrative position in the province. This gave the party a huge advantage in the national elections, allowing it to win a disproportionate number of seats in the Sunni parliamentary bloc (twenty-three out of a total of fifty-five Sunni representatives).

The other major Sunni player in Anbar has been the Muslim Scholars Association (MSA), which quickly emerged after the 2003 coalition invasion in an effort to balance the political influence of the "Shiite clerical establishment." Led by Harith al-Dari, MSA provided al-Qaeda with religious and, more critically, Iraqi nationalist backing to continue the insurgency against both the United States and the new Iraqi government.

The "Awakening" Effect

Despite the fairness of the electoral process, Anbar's provincial council and its representatives in the Iraqi parliament were elected by too few people to be truly legitimate. Perceived by locals as "Green Zone politicians," these representatives seldom -- if ever -- visit their constituencies and rarely receive delegations in Baghdad. In contrast, the Awakening movement reflects the core of tribalism in Anbar, with leaders who are from the region -- something that is true for only some of the current elected representatives -- and who have gained credibility and sympathy in their struggle against AQI. As a result, de facto leadership has been thrust upon them.

For those outside Anbar, the Awakening leaders' determination to purge their neighborhoods of AQI and its Taliban-style rule has gained the group new constituencies. Sheikh Abdul-Sattar Abu Risha, founder of the original Anbar Awakening Council -- which later spread throughout Iraq's Sunni provinces -- gained his

position through such support. After the sheikh's assassination by AQI ten days after he met with President Bush, his younger brother Ahmad Abu Risha took over, vowing vengeance. His deliberate efforts to inflict losses on AQI in Anbar demonstrated his seriousness and proved his credibility as a leader. At the February 12 convention of Awakening councils -- at which the IAC was formally established as a political entity -- he was elected unanimously as its leader.

In Baghdad, the Shiite-led government perceived the Awakening councils apprehensively, seeing them as composed of insurgents and Baathists. Despite Baghdad's skepticism, the support of Sunni politicians and U.S. commanders proved decisive. As the councils continued to build a record of success against AQI -- especially in predominantly Sunni neighborhoods -- the al-Maliki government cautiously came to recognize their role and began adopting a more supportive attitude.

Ironically, these very successes drove a wedge between the councils' leaders and the elected Sunni leadership, especially when the former tried to capitalize on their broad-based support. In November 2007, Hamid al-Hayis, leader of the Anbar Salvation Council -- an umbrella organization for the province's Awakening councils -- announced the nomination of Awakening candidates for vacant ministerial positions in al-Maliki's government. These posts were formerly occupied by ministers from "al-Tawafiq" -- the largest Sunni bloc in parliament, with forty-four members. They withdrew from the posts last year in protest of the prime minister's policies. Adnan al-Dulaimy, al-Tawafiq's leader, responded negatively to the news that Awakening candidates would attempt to fill the vacancies, and signs of a confrontation seemed imminent until he backed off a week later.

In a more recent development, a federal judge in Ramadi issued an arrest warrant for al-Hayis and Ali Hatem Salman, the paramount sheikh of Dulaim who is also known as the "Prince of the Dulaim Tribes." The warrant was issued on the basis of article 430 -- a criminal law that deals with terrorism and incitement -- but critics say the move was politically motivated. In the unlikely event the arrests are carried out, clashes between the Awakening councils and the government could break out, especially since Salman is held in especially high regard by his tribal supporters.

The Muslim Scholars Association is threatened by the Awakening's rise to power as well. According to the MSA, Awakening members are traitors and infidels because of their fight against AQI. As the association's leader put it, "al-Qaeda is from us and we are from al-Qaeda." This statement undermined MSA's appeal among Sunnis in Anbar throughout 2007, given that they had suffered greatly under the mainly foreigner-led AQI.

Preparing for New Elections

These divisions will likely grow in coming months, especially as the prospect of provincial elections becomes a reality. Although disputes continue about the recently passed "Governorates Not Organized into a Region" law, even its political critics in the Iraqi Presidency Council -- which has the power to veto all legislation unless overridden by a two-thirds parliamentary majority -- agree that provincial elections should be held by October 2008. If such elections take place, the IAC has made clear that it will participate. In doing so, it would compete directly with the IIP and would likely draw wide support, especially in Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Ninawa provinces.

Although a showdown between the newly formed IAC and al-Tawafiq (which includes the IIP) seems inevitable, the conflict's nature is unclear. Al-Hayis's antagonistic comment about the IIP -- "We demand that IIP leave Anbar and close its offices within a month, or else" -- a week before the IAC leadership election was clearly an attempt to gain political support. Fortunately, it did not resonate well among voters, and he was not elected to the group's top leadership as a result -- though he remains a de facto leader. Such slights would have led to violence in the past, but that has not been the case so far. This restraint should be considered a positive indicator that Sunnis and their leadership (elected and unelected) are maturing politically and are looking for nonviolent means to resolve their differences. If this development can be capitalized on, Iraq may be on its

way to true political reconciliation and, hopefully, a more inclusive political process after the upcoming elections.

The Iraqi government, however, will have to do its part to secure these benefits. In order for meaningful elections to take place, a new election law is necessary, replacing the "party based" system with a "constituency based" one that would allow greater dissemination of power. Also, the more support provided to the Independent Electoral Commission by the UN mission in Iraq, the more likely elections would be successful. The electoral planning phase should be well underway already, but there is little indication that anything has begun. On the political front, all parties should put a hold on bickering and refrain from using the judiciary as a political tool, since such behavior undermines the whole system. Holding provincial and national elections in Iraq as soon as possible is essential to adding legitimacy and credibility to the shaky political process. It would also be a considerable step toward reconciliation among Iraqi factions.

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