

**IRAQ AFTER THE SURGE I:
THE NEW SUNNI LANDSCAPE**

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IRAQ AFTER THE SURGE I: THE NEW SUNNI LANDSCAPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This is the first of two companion reports on Iraq after the Surge, which Crisis Group is publishing simultaneously, with identical Executive Summaries and policy Recommendations. Part I analyses changes in the Sunni landscape. Part II analyses the state of political progress.

Against the odds, the U.S. military surge contributed to a significant reduction in violence. Its achievements should not be understated. But in the absence of the fundamental political changes in Iraq the surge was meant to facilitate, its successes will remain insufficient, fragile and reversible. The ever-more relative lull is an opportunity for the U.S. to focus on two missing ingredients: pressuring the Iraqi government to take long overdue steps toward political compromise and altering the regional climate so that Iraq's neighbours use their leverage to encourage that compromise and make it stick. As shown in these two companion reports, this entails ceasing to provide the Iraqi government with unconditional military support; reaching out to what remains of the insurgency; using its leverage to encourage free and fair provincial elections and progress toward a broad national dialogue and compact; and engaging in real diplomacy with all Iraq's neighbours, Iran and Syria included.

Many factors account for the reduction in violence: the surge in some cases benefited from, in others encouraged, and in the remainder produced, a series of politico-military shifts affecting the Sunni and Shiite communities. But there is little doubt that U.S. field commanders displayed sophistication and knowledge of local dynamics without precedent during a conflict characterised from the outset by U.S. policy misguided in its assumptions and flawed in its execution. A conceptual revolution within the military leadership gave U.S. forces the ability to carry out new policies and take advantage of new dynamics. Had they remained mired in past conceptions, propitious evolutions on the ground notwithstanding, the situation today would be far bleaker.

One of the more remarkable changes has been the realignment of tribal elements in Anbar, known as the *sahwat*, and of former insurgents, collectively known as the "Sons of Iraq". This was largely due to increased friction over al-Qaeda in Iraq's brutal tactics,

proclamation of an Islamic state and escalating assaults on ordinary citizens. But the tribal and insurgent decisions also were aided by enhanced military pressure on the jihadi movement resulting from augmented U.S. troops: in both instances U.S. forces demonstrated more subtle understanding of existing tensions and intra-Sunni fault lines. Overall, the military campaign calmed areas that had become particularly violent and inaccessible, such as Anbar and several Baghdad neighbourhoods, and essentially halted sectarian warfare.

But on their own, without an overarching strategy for Iraq and the region, these tactical victories cannot turn into lasting success. The mood among Sunnis could alter. The turn against al-Qaeda in Iraq is not necessarily the end of the story. While some tribal chiefs, left in the cold after Saddam's fall, found in the U.S. a new patron ready and able to provide resources, this hardly equates with a genuine, durable trend toward Sunni Arab acceptance of the political process. For these chiefs, as for the former insurgents, it mainly is a tactical alliance, forged to confront an immediate enemy (al-Qaeda in Iraq) or the central one (Iran). Any accommodation has been with the U.S., not between them and their government. It risks unravelling if the ruling parties do not agree to greater power sharing and if Sunni Arabs become convinced the U.S. is not prepared to side with them against Iran or its perceived proxies; at that point, confronting the greater foe (Shiite militias or the Shiite-dominated government) once again will take precedence.

Forces combating the U.S. have been weakened but not vanquished. The insurgency has been cut down to more manageable size and, after believing victory was within reach, now appears eager for negotiations with the U.S. Still, what remains is an enduring source of violence and instability that could be revived should political progress lag or the Sons of Iraq experiment falter. Even al-Qaeda in Iraq cannot be decisively defeated through U.S. military means

alone. While the organisation has been significantly weakened and its operational capacity severely degraded, its deep pockets, fluid structure and ideological appeal to many young Iraqis mean it will not be irrevocably vanquished. The only lasting solution is a state that extends its intelligence and coercive apparatus throughout its territory, while offering credible alternatives and socio-economic opportunities to younger generations.

The U.S. approach suffers from another drawback. It is bolstering a set of local actors operating beyond the state's realm or the rule of law and who impose their authority by force of arms. The *sahwat* in particular has generated new divisions in an already divided society and new potential sources of violence in an already multilayered conflict. Some tribes have benefited heavily from U.S. assistance, others less so. This redistribution of power almost certainly will engender instability and rivalry, which in turn could trigger intense feuds – an outcome on which still-active insurgent groups are banking. None of this constitutes progress toward consolidation of the central government or institutions; all of it could amount to little more than the U.S. boosting specific actors in an increasingly fragmented civil war and unbridled scramble for power and resources. Short-term achievement could threaten long-term stability.

By President Bush's own standards, the military surge was useful primarily insofar as it led the Iraqi government to forge a national consensus, recalibrate power relations and provide Sunni Arabs in particular with a sense their future was secure. Observers may legitimately differ over how many of the administration's so-called benchmarks have been met. None could reasonably dispute that the government's performance has been utterly lacking. Its absence of capacity cannot conceal or excuse its absence of will. True to its sectarian nature and loath to share power, the ruling coalition has actively resisted compromise. Why not? It has no reason to alienate its constituency, jeopardise its political makeup or relinquish its perks and privileges when inaction has no consequence and the U.S. will always back it.

The surge is the latest instalment in a stop-and-start project to build a functioning state and legitimate institutions. All along, the fundamental challenge has been to settle major disputes and end a chaotic scramble for power, positions and resources in a society that, after a reign of terror, finds itself without accepted rules of the game or means to enforce them. Politically, this conflict has expressed itself in disputes, both violent and non-violent, over the structure of the state system (federalism/regionalisation and the degree of power devolution); ownership, management and

distribution of oil and gas wealth (a hydrocarbons law); internal boundaries (particularly of the Kurdistan region); mechanisms for settling relations between post-Saddam "winners" and "losers" (for example, de-Baathification, amnesty, reintegration); and the way in which groups gain power (elections vs. force).

A small number of agreements have been reached and are regularly trumpeted. But they have made virtually no difference. Without basic political consensus over the nature of the state and the distribution of power and resources, passage of legislation is only the first step, and often the least meaningful one. Most of these laws are ambiguous enough to ensure that implementation is postponed, or that the battle over substance becomes a struggle over interpretation. Moreover, in the absence of legitimate and effective state and local institutions, implementation by definition will be partisan and politicised. What matters is not principally whether a law is passed in the Green Zone. It is how the law is carried out in the Red Zone.

Three things are becoming increasingly clear: First, the issues at the heart of the political struggle cannot be solved individually or sequentially. Secondly, the current governing structure does not want, nor is it able, to take advantage of the surge to produce agreement on fundamentals. Thirdly, without cooperation from regional actors, progress will be unsustainable, with dissatisfied groups seeking help from neighbouring states to promote their interests. All this suggests that the current piecemeal approach toward deal making should be replaced with efforts to bring about a broad agreement that deals with federalism, oil and internal boundaries; encourages reconciliation/accommodation; and ensures provincial and national elections as a means of renewing and expanding the political class. It also suggests yet again the need for the U.S. to engage in both genuine negotiations with the insurgency and for vigorous regional diplomacy to achieve agreement on rules of the game for outside actors in Iraq.

In the U.S., much of the debate has focused on whether to maintain or withdraw troops. But this puts the question the wrong way, and spawns misguided answers. The issue, rather, should be whether the U.S. is pursuing a policy that, by laying the foundations of legitimate, functional institutions and rules of the game, will minimise the costs to itself, the Iraqi people and regional stability of a withdrawal that sooner or later must occur – or whether it is simply postponing a scenario of Iraq's collapse into a failed and fragmented state, protracted and multilayered violence, as well as increased foreign meddling.

The surge clearly has contributed to a series of notable successes. But the question is: Now what?

What higher purpose will they serve? For the first four years of the war, the U.S. administration pursued a lofty strategy – the spread of democracy; Iraq as a regional model – detached from any realistic tactics. The risk today is that, having finally adopted a set of smart, pragmatic tactics, it finds itself devoid of any overarching strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Iraq:

1. Organise provincial council elections no later than 1 October 2008, and ensure these are inclusive of all parties, groups and individuals that publicly accept non-violence (rather than, at this stage, disband their militias).
2. Create an environment in which these elections will be free and fair, specifically by:
 - (a) allowing and encouraging refugees and the internally displaced to vote in their places of current abode;
 - (b) providing free and equal state media access to all parties and individual candidates; and
 - (c) encouraging independent Iraqi and international election monitors to attend elections preparations and be present at polling stations on election day.
3. Remove officials and commanders guilty of sectarian behaviour from government agencies, the security forces and intelligence services.
4. Engage with a wide spectrum of political actors, both within and outside the council of representatives, to reach a broad new integrated political accord on issues of territory, power and resources, key elements of which should include:
 - (a) the status of so-called disputed territories: by recognising the rights of all their communities and inhabitants, including through power-sharing arrangements and protection of minority rights;
 - (b) the hydrocarbons law: by allowing and encouraging the Kurdistan Regional Government to explore and exploit the oil and gas resources located in the Kurdistan region through production-sharing contracts;
 - (c) federalism: by encouraging asymmetric federalism that recognises the Kurdistan region but decentralises power in the rest of

Iraq by governorates rather than regions; and

- (d) constitutional review: by revising the constitution according to agreements reached on the above three elements and submitting the package deal to popular referendum.

5. Encourage reconciliation by:

- (a) amending the January 2008 de-Baathification law to allow former Baath officials who committed no crimes to regain positions in the government and security agencies;
- (b) implementing on a non-partisan basis the February 2008 amnesty law and calling on the U.S. to transfer detainees held in Iraq to government custody; and
- (c) integrating (through vetting and retraining) Sons of Iraq into the civil service and security agencies on condition they make a public commitment to refrain from violence, and create jobs for those who cannot so be integrated.

To the U.S. Government:

6. Press and assist the Iraqi government in organising free, fair, inclusive and secure provincial council elections by 1 October 2008.
7. Adjust the basis on which military support is provided by:
 - (a) only supporting Iraqi military operations consistent with its own strategy and objectives;
 - (b) conditioning training and assistance on the professionalism and non-partisan behaviour of its recipients;
 - (c) refusing to back sectarian ministers or sectarian army units and their commanders; and
 - (d) focusing on vetting and retraining existing units.
8. Press Iraqi political actors to reach a comprehensive political accord, and assist them to do so, in particular by:
 - (a) conditioning support to the government and its allies on their agreeing to the political compromises on disputed territories, federalism, the hydrocarbon law and reconciliation as described above;

- (b) seeking through UN mediation to engage in negotiations with what remains of the insurgency (minus al-Qaeda in Iraq), making clear at the outset that it intends to bring its military presence to an end and not to establish permanent bases; and
 - (c) undertaking regional diplomacy with a view to reducing interference in Iraq and agreeing on rules of the game, notably through engaging Iran and Syria (as described in earlier Crisis Group reports) and encouraging Iranian-Saudi dialogue.
9. Adopt as a goal, should these efforts fail, the convening, under UN auspices, of a broad and inclusive conference bringing together Iraqi actors, regional states and key members of the international community with a view to reaching a new political compact.

To the United Nations Secretary-General:

10. Assist the government of Iraq in preparing free, fair and inclusive provincial council elections to be held no later than 1 October 2008 (and national elections before the end of 2009) by:
- (a) providing independent monitors;

- (b) publicly withdrawing support if these elections threaten to be less than inclusive, free and fair, or take place in a non-permissive security environment; and
 - (c) publicly condemning the results if elections are carried out under such conditions.
11. Assist the U.S. and other members of the international community in engaging Iraq's neighbours in discussions over Iraq's future with a view to lessening tensions and interference.
12. Mandate an envoy to reach out to the insurgency (al-Qaeda in Iraq excepted) to pave the way for negotiations with the U.S.
13. Encourage and assist Iraqi political actors in reaching a comprehensive political accord as described above.
14. Adopt as a goal, should these efforts fail, the convening of a broad and inclusive conference bringing together Iraqi actors, regional states and key members of the international community with a view to reaching a new political compact.
15. Increase staff and resources to reflect the UN's growing political role in Iraq.

**Baghdad/Istanbul/Damascus/Brussels,
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IRAQ AFTER THE SURGE I: THE NEW SUNNI LANDSCAPE

I. INTRODUCTION

At the time the surge was first announced, U.S. forces in Iraq faced a determined and increasingly dangerous insurgency. By the U.S. military's count, attacks – excluding those targeting civilians – reached a peak in mid-2007 of some 1,500 per week. Although the civilian toll dropped slightly as of late 2006, U.S. and Iraqi military casualties only began their sharp decline after July 2007.¹ Key to this phenomenon were the sweeping changes affecting a Sunni Arab population that had unequivocally rejected both the occupation and the political process it spawned. By year's end, al-Qaeda in Iraq, which not long before had felt sufficiently confident to try to rally all insurgent groups under its banner, had been driven out of nearly all its strongholds. Numerous tribes were openly cooperating with the U.S., engaging in economic activity and local politics. Armed groups and insurgent leaders that had eschewed all forms of collaboration with the US joined its fight against al-Qaeda in Iraq, assumed policing functions and considered participating in upcoming local elections. An insurgency that seemed on the verge of strategic victory today appears splintered and in disarray.

It would be just as simplistic to attribute these facts to the surge alone as it would be to deny any causation between the two. Without a doubt, supplementary troops helped increase security, alter the balance of power and embolden those opposed to al-Qaeda in Iraq to switch sides. But the addition of some 35,000 troops to the 130,000 already there could have only a marginal direct impact; indeed, some of these changes occurred in areas that saw no increase in U.S. military presence. The developments that took place could have come about neither as swiftly nor as massively without concurrent, profound internal transformations. The U.S. did not generate them; rather, and importantly, it showed the subtlety and flexibility necessary to turn them to its advantage. The surge is one element in a set of mutually reinforcing dynamics, the complexities and ambiguities of which must be understood if the current

window of opportunity is to be transformed into more sustainable progress.²

¹ SIGACTS III Database (Coalition Reports only) as of 23 February 2008.

² Much of the progress relates to the unilateral ceasefire decreed by Muqtada al-Sadr, a dimension that falls outside the scope of this report but was covered in Crisis Group Middle East Report N°72, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, 7 February 2008.

II. AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ'S SELF-DEFEATING MUTATION

A. THE U.S. OFFENSIVE AND AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ'S OVERREACH

When, in early 2006, Crisis Group published a study of the insurgency, al-Qaeda in Iraq – then under the leadership of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi – appeared remarkably strong. It perpetrated many of the more spectacular and sophisticated attacks against the U.S., Iraqi forces and civilians, especially Shiites. Its rhetoric and modus operandi inspired and motivated large segments of the Sunni insurgency. Although there were deep-seated disagreements and rivalry with other groups, for the most part they were kept under wraps;³ most armed organisations were prepared to close ranks, not out of loyalty toward al-Qaeda but out of fear of the consequences of disunity. They also were ready to face a U.S. enemy whose defeat at the time seemed imminent. For unity's sake, al-Qaeda in Iraq downplayed some of its particularly controversial tactics; it denied involvement in attacks targeting civilians and ended its once prevalent practice of videotaped decapitation. It also strove to "Iraqify" its image, setting up all-Iraqi units and merging with more "nationalistic" groups to form the Mujahidin Advisory Council (*Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin*), whose emir, official spokesman and military commander were said to be Iraqi nationals.⁴

At the time, al-Qaeda in Iraq also took advantage of the wave of anti-Sunni violence which had intensified in 2005, in no small measure in response to the group's own brutal anti-Shiite attacks.⁵ The growing sectarian polarisation played into the movement's hands, enabling it and other insurgent groups to rally support by evoking the massacre of Sunni Arabs.⁶ The all-out civil war that engulfed the country in 2006 further promoted al-Qaeda in Iraq's aims. Sectarian bloodshed made its tactics appear at once more acceptable and more useful in the face of a powerful

Shiite enemy.⁷ In January 2007, as the sectarian battle raged, an Iraqi journalist with close access to insurgents in Anbar stressed the extent to which sectarianism had become a mobilising theme:

Since Saddam Hussein's execution in December 2006, a number of declarations and communiqués suggest that several insurgent groups are willing to move closer to al-Qaeda. Of course, they are driven by funding needs. But most of all, they are determined to counter the growing influence of Shiite militias which are gaining ground in Baghdad. I know of one small group comprising perhaps 30 fighters that used to operate in Falluja. When they first heard Zarqawi declare a "total war" against the Shiites, they deserted the resistance, saying they wanted nothing to do with that kind of mentality. Now, I see them looking for weapons in order to resume the fight where they had left it off.⁸

For all its apparent success, al-Qaeda in Iraq faced serious challenges. U.S. forces were concentrating their resources and firepower on the group,⁹ and the toll began to show as early as 2006. A sustained American effort to eliminate its leadership led to the killing or capture of a large number of commanders, culminating on 7 June 2006 with Zarqawi's death. It would take further developments within the Sunni community for al-Qaeda in Iraq to suffer truly serious setbacks, but there is little doubt that the elimination of the upper cadre facilitated this. The elimination of Zarqawi – who enjoyed superior authority and could impose a sense of cohesion within the movement – reportedly prompted increased internal disagreement as well as individual rivalries.¹⁰

Although al-Qaeda in Iraq proved remarkably resilient, replenishing its ranks as quickly as U.S. forces depleted them and relentlessly conducting operations throughout this period, over time the net effect of the campaign was to radically transform it. As leaders were removed, they were replaced by less experienced, more undisciplined

3 "Such tensions have tended to be viewed as precursors of growing and irreversible fragmentation. Yet, for all their undeniable differences, what is remarkable is that the at times violent friction between groups, far from precipitating the insurgency's implosion, has increased its coherence, at least in rhetoric", Crisis Group Middle East Report N°50, *In Their Own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency*, 15 February 2006, p. 10.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See, eg, Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006.

⁶ Crisis Group monitoring of insurgent web-based and other publications, February-March 2006.

⁷ For a description of how the February 2006 destruction of the Samarra' mausoleum and its aftermath bolstered the insurgency's unity, see eg, Peter Harling and Mathieu Guidère, "Qui sont les insurgés irakiens ?", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2006.

⁸ Crisis Group email communication, Iraqi journalist with access to Anbar insurgents, January 2007.

⁹ Officials in the Pentagon's Iraq task force displayed keen interest in and detailed knowledge of al-Qaeda in Iraq; in contrast, their understanding of other insurgent groups appeared relatively superficial. Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, February 2006.

¹⁰ Crisis Group email communication, Iraqi journalist with access to insurgents in Anbar and Ninawa, April 2008.

and increasingly brutal younger militants who typically resorted to random, savage violence. Some foreigners reportedly remained in top leadership positions but the “middle-management” levels were essentially staffed by Iraqis. In various cases, self-proclaimed local “emirs” were little more than juvenile gang leaders with scant knowledge or understanding of Islam. Yet, they wrapped their acts of terror in esoteric – and often preposterous – religious pronouncements.¹¹

Bereft of traditional sources of social or spiritual legitimacy, their power was grounded in the most ruthless and primitive version of Salafist Islam. They escalated assaults on Iraqis routinely labelled traitors and apostates, whether these were police officers or mere cigarette smokers;¹² meanwhile, resistance against the occupation increasingly appeared a secondary concern.¹³ At the same time, al-Qaeda in Iraq’s crude and vicious tactics, which had long alienated many more seasoned insurgents, were seen as ever more unnecessary and even counterproductive.¹⁴ As time went on, the movement’s leadership appeared increasingly oblivious to the need to preserve its relations with the local population and other insurgent groups.

One of the largest armed groups, the Islamic Army, whose rhetoric had been virtually identical to al-Qaeda in Iraq’s, began to take strong issue with the movement’s inflexibility. A spokesman said:

Al-Qaeda [in Iraq] claims to be a Salafist movement, but we believe it is far from Salafism, which is more moderate and flexible.

¹¹ A Mosul student with ties to al-Qaeda militants recalled: “I remember hearing from them about this young emir. His henchmen would drag whomever they caught to him and request his ruling on how to deal with him. Whatever the reason for his capture, whatever his profile or circumstances, the emir’s ‘religious’ ruling was always the same: ‘under the tree’ (*tahta al-shajara*), which meant execute him”, Crisis Group interview, September 2007.

¹² A Baathist angrily remarked: “Even a Sunni cannot walk into neighbourhoods fully controlled by al-Qaeda and purged of its Shiite inhabitants”, Crisis Group interview, Mosul, May 2007.

¹³ In the words of an insurgent, “Al-Qaeda’s role in Mosul is entirely negative. Occasionally they undertake operations against the occupiers, but it’s become rare. Mainly, they focus on policemen, collaborators, Kurds, politicians – all Iraqis. No one is safe. You can hardly walk in the street or trust your friends”, Crisis Group interview, fighter aligned with no particular group, Mosul, May 2007.

¹⁴ “They don’t know a thing about religion, politics or military strategy. They have a single logic. It’s: there’s the enemy. I will fight him. And I will go to paradise”, quoted in Peter Harling, “Iraq’s Lost Generation”, *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 11 December 2007.

In al-Qaeda’s view, everything is extreme: people are either Muslims or apostates; all women must wear the *niqab* [a veil that covers both head and body] even though it is impractical at this time and would draw the enemy’s attention. Al-Qaeda’s people are ignorant of politics and religion, and this ignorance has direct military implications. If one American sits in the midst of a crowd of Iraqi civilians, al-Qaeda sees it as a legitimate and justified target. These ideas were imported by foreign mujahidin. They are inconsistent with local traditions and culture. Many of our youth were influenced because the jihad generated a huge wave of enthusiasm. But their ways are contrary to both our reading of Sharia [Islamic law] and our political and military goals.¹⁵

Local residents and tribal leaders also reacted strongly to al-Qaeda in Iraq militants who were seen as alien – not necessarily foreigners, but influenced by them¹⁶ and often foreign to the environment in which they operated: peasants in an urban setting; city-dwellers in a rural surrounding or, more broadly, Iraqis from other parts of Iraq.¹⁷ Urban notables, tribal leaders and religious dignitaries were challenged, subdued or killed.¹⁸ In many instances, al-Qaeda in Iraq’s

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Islamic Army spokesman, May 2007. On the Islamic Army’s rhetoric, see Pascale Combelles Siegel, “Partner or Spoiler: The Case of the Islamic Army in Iraq”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 1, no. 2 (January 2008), pp.12-14.

¹⁶ Foreigners were not wholly absent despite al-Qaeda’s overall “Iraqification”. According to a former sympathiser, “the Arab fighters within al-Qaeda [in Iraq] don’t represent more than 5 per cent of its total membership, and usually they are not simple combatants. Some took the lead of small groups, and others were in top leadership positions. And they remained one of the reasons why al-Qaeda behaved in such aggravating ways toward regular Iraqis”. Crisis Group interview, former al-Qaeda sympathiser, March 2008. Official U.S. sources generally indicate a strong percentage of foreigners among suicide bombers who, by definition, did not spend much time within the organisation. Moreover, their handling entails a vast, local logistical network to smuggle them in, accommodate them, provide them with explosives (and in some cases cars), identify targets, film the attack and so forth.

¹⁷ “Al-Qaeda seized the town from its real owners. Jihadis killed our tribal leaders, imams, doctors and schoolteachers. They killed our policemen and kidnapped our families, so much so that people who had lived here for generations were forced to leave their city. And al-Qaeda’s agenda itself was alien to us”, Crisis Group interview, former officer who took the lead in the fight against al-Qaeda in the Jolan neighbourhood, Falluja, December 2007.

¹⁸ A Baq’uba resident explained, “al-Qaeda abused the people and committed many crimes. The militants generated much hatred against them simply by telling everybody they

extreme practices did more than decapitate the local elite; they forced a large proportion of the population to leave the areas they had long lived in.¹⁹

By mid-2007, an observer was describing a mixed picture:

Al-Qaeda has taken on different faces. In some regions, its emir seeks to build ties with the local population, knowing that their support constitutes his only protection. In others, he is a firebrand who doesn't care about being protected because he wants to die anyway. If it suits him, he will fire a mortar from a courtyard, and if the home or farm owner tries to stop him out of fear of U.S. retaliation, the emir will tell him that nothing belongs to him, that it is all God's property. And if the owner persists, the emir will simply kill him.²⁰

Tensions did not stem solely from friction at the grassroots level. They also grew out of a change in al-Qaeda in Iraq's earlier, more conciliatory stance toward other segments of the insurgency. Its 15 October 2006 proclamation of an independent Islamic state proved particularly divisive, removing any residual ambiguity as to al-Qaeda in Iraq's ultimate aims. Dismissing the notion of Iraq as a state fighting for its independence, it viewed it as a mere battleground in a broader struggle; by basing itself explicitly and exclusively in Sunni areas and on an ideology inherently incompatible with Iraq's diversity, it came to be seen by many insurgents as further undermining unity and promoting de facto partition. In the words of an insurgent:

We used to successfully undertake joint operations with al-Qaeda. But it has strayed from the right path by announcing the establishment of an Islamic state. Other armed groups see this state as highly divisive, an instrument of a sectarian agenda. Our goal is Iraq's unity and

knew better. The authority of tribal leaders and other dignitaries, including highly respected non-Salafist clergymen, was defied. In our old, mixed city, publicly targeting the Shiites at large, rather than the Shiite parties that came atop American tanks, was also unpopular", Crisis Group telephone interview, Ba'quba police officer, December 2007.

¹⁹ An American officer remarked: "In August and September, Hawr Rajab was a ghost city because al-Qaeda has a very strong presence in town. Headless bodies were strewn in the streets", Crisis Group interview, U.S. military commander, Hawr Rajab, March 2008.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, insurgent sympathiser who enjoyed close al-Qaeda ties, June 2007.

freedom. The Islamic state has no reality on our soil and no popular backing.²¹

Opposition from the insurgency's more nationalistic strands was particularly intense. A former officer with ties to local armed groups said, "the Islamic state has no future in a country where it has scared off a majority of Sunnis. More importantly, Iraq is multi-ethnic and multi-confessional. Such a state cannot achieve genuine popular support".²² Criticism of al-Qaeda in Iraq's "foreign" agenda increasingly was expressed through accusations that the jihadi movement deliberately served either U.S. or Iranian ambitions by undermining the country's cohesion and Arab character,²³ tarnishing the resistance's reputation or providing Shiite militias with a pretext to strike back at Sunnis.²⁴

Such reactions notwithstanding, al-Qaeda in Iraq persisted in seeking to impose its way and assert its supremacy.²⁵ Its militants tried to force other groups to pledge allegiance to the Islamic state, triggering repeated clashes. Some turned into enduring vendettas, particularly when involving assassination of well-known insurgent figures.²⁶

²¹ Crisis Group interview, insurgent not aligned with any particular group, Falluja, May 2007.

²² Crisis Group interview, former officer with close ties to local armed groups, Falluja, May 2007. "The Islamic State, which forgets we have Christians and other minorities, is nothing but a propaganda operation. Only the genuine national resistance has a real vision for this country", Crisis Group interview, fighter belonging to 1920 Revolution Brigades (a medium-sized insurgent group which grew out of the Zawba' tribe), Ramadi, May 2007.

²³ "It was clear to us from the beginning that al-Qaeda was behind the kidnapping and killing of Arab diplomats (Egyptians, Sudanese, Moroccans and Algerians). We came to believe that the underlying goal was to rid Iraq of all Arab influence, so that Iran would remain the only player. We cannot understand these deeds other than in the context of an Iranian plan", Crisis Group interview, prominent tribal leader from Falluja, formerly involved in the insurgency, March 2008.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, members of the insurgency, Mosul, Ramadi and Falluja, May 2007.

²⁵ "Al-Qaeda now insists on being recognised by all armed groups as their leader. To that end, it resorts to coercion and violence", Crisis Group interview, former officer with close ties to insurgent groups, Falluja, May 2007.

²⁶ Harith Dhahir al-Dhari, reportedly a leader of the 1920 Revolution Brigades, was killed in an ambush on 27 March 2007. Muthanna Harith al-Dhari, his relative and spokesman for the Association of Muslim Scholars (a political-religious organisation formed in 2003 and enjoying close ties to some strands of the insurgency), openly accused al-Qaeda. Al Jazeera interview, 27 March 2007. Ongoing violence ensued. In September, al-Qaeda claimed the Brigades had executed

The rift between al-Qaeda in Iraq and insurgent groups progressed in stages. At first, it was resisted by many, due to both al-Qaeda's considerable largesse and a commitment to unity against a common enemy.²⁷ Opposing the jihadi movement implied de facto siding with the U.S., a red line for most insurgent groups; any such suggestion promptly triggered a flurry of insurgent group communiqués accusing those who criticised al-Qaeda in Iraq of collaborating with the occupier and denying that they had done so.²⁸ Of particular importance to some was al-Qaeda in Iraq's role in defending Baghdad against Shiite militias (despite criticism by others that it was insufficiently effective in that regard).²⁹ An insurgent group spokesman explained, "notwithstanding problems with al-Qaeda, we cannot deny that it plays an important tactical role in terms of maintaining a balance with pro-government militias in the fight for Baghdad and elsewhere".³⁰ While some groups played down their concern over the so-called Islamic state,³¹ others kept silent out of fear.

its fighters. Internet communiqué released by the Islamic State, 22 September 2007.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, insurgent not aligned with any particular group, Mosul, May 2007. "Problems emerge between armed groups, but the presence of a common enemy doesn't give us the luxury of wasting time over these squabbles. We exchange information and technical assistance in the context of a difficult fight against the biggest world power. This is the link that unites us", Crisis Group interview, insurgent not aligned with any particular group, Falluja, May 2007.

²⁸ For example, on 16 September 2007 the Iraqi Resistance's Islamic Front (known as Jami') responded to al-Qaeda's accusations of collaboration with the U.S.; on 20 August 2007, the Mujahidin Army and the Jihad and Reform Front harshly denounced those groups working alongside U.S. forces in Diyala. Communiqués obtained by Crisis Group.

²⁹ Steven Biddle, a U.S. analyst, argues that al-Qaeda's failure to effectively counter Shiite militias' expanding control of Baghdad helped convince the bulk of the insurgency to side with the U.S. "Before the Battle of Baghdad, most Sunnis tolerated these costs on the assumption that AQI's [al-Qaeda in Iraq] combat value against Shiites and Americans outweighed its disadvantages. As defeat in Baghdad became clearer, however, it also became clear that AQI could not deliver real protection. By late 2006 AQI's inability to prevent defeat in Baghdad and the costs it imposed on co-religionists had thus convinced many Sunnis that they needed to look for new allies. And the only possible choice was the United States", testimony before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2 April 2008.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, insurgent group spokesman, May 2007.

³¹ "Al-Qaeda's retrograde vision frightens many Iraqis. But this Islamic State is a myth and a comedy of sorts. For one thing, al-Qaeda doesn't enjoy majority support for this option. And it's absurd to declare the existence of an Islamic

Some insurgents remained in denial, alleging that claims of al-Qaeda brutality were nothing but U.S. fabrications aimed to "to divide and conquer".³² In May 2007, as Crisis Group did fieldwork in Anbar, the situation remained undecided: although the rift between al-Qaeda in Iraq and certain tribes already had emerged into the open (see below), tensions with insurgent groups were simmering but appeared to be contained.³³ However, the underlying dynamics and strain were serious enough to facilitate a sudden switch if and when momentum built.

B. THE AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ/INSURGENCY SPLIT

The rift deepened as al-Qaeda in Iraq – ignorant of or oblivious to the consequences of its behaviour – failed to change course.³⁴ Unmistakable warnings were addressed to the movement's leadership. As Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, the Islamic state's emir, called on all armed groups involved in jihad to rally under its banner, the Islamic Army – one of the more powerful insurgent groups – publicly excoriated al-Qaeda in Iraq. It minimised al-Qaeda's role in resisting the occupation, criticised its divisive tactics, complained of its reflexive denunciation

State while the whole country is still under occupation", Crisis Group interview, insurgent not aligned with any particular group, Falluja, May 2007.

³² "With all my criticism of al-Qaeda, I still believe it is better than the occupier, if only because we share the same American and Iranian enemies. What serious tensions arise result from U.S. efforts. They commit the crimes in order to tarnish the resistance's image and foster internal division. Anyhow, all anti-occupation forces are welcome. If I was told the devil was fighting the Americans, I would work with him hand in hand", Crisis Group interview, fighter not aligned with any particular group, Ramadi, May 2007.

³³ "In most 'Sunni' zones there are no serious tensions. Ramadi is very much an exception. That's the only place where we've seen a sustained pattern of killings between al-Qaeda and other fighters. It's now spreading to Falluja. But this is really the result of a divide-and-rule policy pursued by the occupier and its Iraqi allies. I don't expect it to have much success. There are many disagreements between us and al-Qaeda, but from that to fighting each other, there's a huge step", Crisis Group interview, fighter unaffiliated with any particular group, Falluja, May 2007.

³⁴ In May 2007, the spokesman for one of the largest armed coalitions, the Jihad and Reform Front, said, "our duty at present is to defend our capital. We call upon all Sunnis of Iraq to defend Baghdad. We even call upon al-Qaeda to defend Baghdad instead of focusing on secondary issues. In this respect, there seems to have been a positive rhetorical response from al-Qaeda, but in the field we are far from that. The reality is that there is little command and control within that organisation, so it all depends on the behaviour of local commanders", Crisis Group interview, May 2007.

of any opponent as an apostate or traitor and denounced its hegemonic aspirations. It also asserted that al-Qaeda had already killed more than 30 of its members. Justifying its long silence by the need to combat Americans, “Persians” and their local allies, it called upon the jihadi movement’s leadership in Iraq and abroad to revert to the right path.³⁵

A series of exchanges followed. On 17 April 2007, Baghdadi issued a statement denying any knowledge of misconduct and instructing his gunmen not to consider as enemies combatants who disagreed with them. The Islamic Army’s spokesman responded the same day, insisting upon a clearer act of contrition and offering to provide Baghdadi “hundreds of pieces of evidence” to back up the claims.³⁶

Opposition to al-Qaeda in Iraq took more than rhetorical forms. Various insurgent groups formed coalitions, thereby implicitly challenging the Islamic state’s desired monopoly. On 2 May 2007, three of the largest groups (the Islamic Army, the Mujahidin Army and Ansar al-Islam) established the “Jihad and Reform Front”, whose program directly contradicted al-Qaeda in Iraq’s.³⁷ All three soon were admonished by Abu Ayub al-Masri, al-Qaeda in Iraq’s leader, for collaborating with the Nouri al-Maliki government.³⁸ Despite several reconciliation attempts,³⁹ the confrontation – both verbal and physical

– escalated throughout 2007. Ultimately, virtually every armed group of any significance turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq. In May, a spokesman for the Murabitin Army, a mid-sized group, said:

We are working on a platform to unify all resistance factions except al-Qaeda. In principle, we have no issue with any group working to liberate Iraq, and we refrain from raising any disagreement over our respective visions or methods. But we have real problems with al-Qaeda. We have differing views over how to deal with civilians, but we also have problems with individual instances of misbehaviour. We don’t see it as the policy of al-Qaeda’s leadership; the movement is fractured, with moderate strands, elements linked to the Afghan jihad, segments manipulated by Iran and even groups we suspect of being under U.S. control. We cannot tolerate all these crimes against civilians – be they Sunni or Shiite. We’ve been involved in the resistance for four years and have matured. We know Iraq cannot be liberated without greater unity within the resistance and, more importantly, without giving the resistance a clear identity. We need to reassert Iraq’s unity and cultural identity.⁴⁰

As discussed in further detail below, al-Qaeda in Iraq’s relations with Sunni tribes had been marred by mutual dislike and suspicion from the outset; the jihadi movement condemned tribal traditions as un-Islamic and challenged the sheikhs’ authority.⁴¹ Long before the surge, neither the killings of tribal leaders

³⁵ Al-Jaysh al-Islami communiqué released on the internet, 5 April 2007.

³⁶ Al Jazeera, 17 April 2007.

³⁷ On 13 May 2007, four little-known groups established the “Iraq Jihad and Liberation Brigades.” Two days later, eight groups formed the “Iraq Front for Resistance and Liberation”. Previously, nine small groups had announced the “Coordination Office for Iraq’s National and Islamic Resistance” and fourteen groups had set up the “Popular Front for Iraqi Resistance”. There are myriad other examples of mergers, splits and reshuffles, which all challenged – implicitly or explicitly – al-Qaeda’s attempt to unify the insurgency under its command. Communiqués obtained by Crisis Group. An observer described the relationship between the Jihad and Reform Front on the one hand and al-Qaeda on the other: “There have been many attempts to promote cooperation, alliances and even unification. What is most interesting is that the Front clearly condemns violence against civilians and calls for greater tolerance. Basically, this amounts to a condemnation of al-Qaeda. And this condemnation was made public in a statement that was printed and widely distributed”, Crisis Group interview, former officer with close ties to insurgent groups, Falluja, May 2007.

³⁸ Recorded message excerpted in *al-Hayat*, 6 May 2007.

³⁹ On 6 June 2007, the Islamic Army and al-Qaeda signed an agreement designed to “protect the jihadi project, prevent any split within the resistance, preserve Muslim blood, fulfil the fight against the enemy and block those who want to take advantage of the occupation”. The agreement called for an immediate and reciprocal ceasefire, an end to kidnappings of

militants belonging to either group, de-escalation in the war of words and establishment of a committee to settle all outstanding issues. Agreement obtained by Crisis Group. The covenant rapidly collapsed.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Murabitin Army spokesman, May 2007. He made this statement at the time when creation of the “Iraq Front for Resistance and Liberation” – a coalition of eight groups, including the Murabitin Army and the Jihad and Liberation Brigades – was still under discussion.

⁴¹ “Tensions between al-Qaeda and the tribes have always existed, although some tribes cooperated with the movement. But from the onset, Zarqawi declared that he was embarking on *harb al-rida* [war on apostasy], a Koranic reference. When the Prophet died, some tribes announced that they no longer were Muslims. Emir Abu Bakr subsequently fought them into submission. Zarqawi compared tribes that did not embrace his vision to tribes that had challenged the Prophet’s legacy. In other words, he accused them of apostasy”, Crisis Group interview, insurgent not aligned with any particular group, Mosul, May 2007.

by al-Qaeda in Iraq nor the ensuing retaliatory cycles were uncommon.⁴²

Alienating large and important segments of the Sunni population cost al-Qaeda in Iraq dearly. By undercutting its support among its natural social and political constituency, the movement became increasingly vulnerable. In many parts of the country, Iraqis did more than simply stop protecting the jihadi movement; they denounced and informed on it. Angry citizens, armed groups and tribes tipped off far less knowledgeable U.S. forces on al-Qaeda locations and hideouts.

This combination of U.S. firepower and local intelligence proved overwhelmingly effective in clearing large swaths of territory. After four years of an inadequate military doctrine the U.S. military also began implementing the kind of counter-insurgency tactics required to actually hold conquered ground: making safety of the local population rather than force protection a priority; setting up advanced, small bases within local communities; relying on proxies recruited in the neighbourhood; adopting a pragmatic approach to former combatants, even those with American blood on their hands; and helping provide services and encouraging basic economic revival in zones under U.S. control. According to U.S. commanders interviewed by Crisis Group, this would have been impossible without the additional troops provided by the surge. As one put it:

I think improvement in security happened because increased forces allowed our division to focus on smaller areas so we could come in and stay. The first thing we did after we took control was to build the patrol base. We came, we secured the area and we stayed, thus projecting a sense of security. Now if something happens in town, my soldiers have probably seen it or heard it – we live with the population. We had a very

⁴² A notable example is the October 2005 assassination of Hikmat Mumtaz, sheikh of the Albu Baz, a prominent tribe in Samarra' and Dhulu'iyah, north of Baghdad. "There is no protection from al-Qaeda. The sheikh of the Albu Baz began to collaborate with the government by contracting some of his tribesmen to guard infrastructure in and around Samarra'. As the relationship developed, the government hired other tribesmen to manage various installations. Al-Qaeda began to kill them; in response, the sheikh argued he had to do this to lessen the pressure and hardships imposed on the city. He, too, was threatened, and his house blown up. Finally, he was assassinated. No other tribe stood by him, either because none had shared in the benefits or simply out of fear. U.S. and Iraqi forces did nothing to protect him either. A feud ensued, and it went on for a while. Ultimately, al-Qaeda came out the victor", Crisis Group interview, former brigadier general in the Iraqi army from Samarra', Amman, February 2007.

hard fight in September as we arrived. Al-Qaeda launched several vicious counteroffensives, but these attacks proved unsuccessful. We'd still be around, shops would reopen the next day, and the city would continue to thrive.⁴³

Al-Qaeda in Iraq's access to critical local expertise and resources simultaneously waned, seriously undermining its capacity to fight back. A well-informed observer commented that, by mid-2007, the tables basically had turned:

Is al-Qaeda still indispensable to the other armed groups? I don't think so. In fact, I believe the opposite is true. Nationalists, Baathists and local Islamists have superior local knowledge. They enjoy superior military know-how, intelligence and so forth. Of course, they need volunteers, funds and even some of the weapons that al-Qaeda can provide. But I believe al-Qaeda depends on other fighters more than they depend on it.⁴⁴

When Syria began tightening its borders and restricting militant crossing into Iraq in late 2006 and early 2007, Iraq's tribal and insurgent figures did not complain. Instead, by and large they welcomed the move, insisting

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, U.S. military commander, Hawr Rajab, March 2008. Another typical example is the semi-rural neighbourhood of 'Arab Jbur, which lies in shooting distance from the Green Zone and had witnessed no sustained U.S. presence before the surge. "My unit got here in June 2007 as part of the Baghdad defensive belt. At the time there was no Iraqi police, no Iraqi Army, just a lot of al-Qaeda. Before the surge, we only had enough troops to focus on big population centres. 'Arab Jbur had always been an insurgent stronghold, but al-Qaeda came in and drove out the Islamic Army, as well as many civilians. Throughout 2006 al-Qaeda was manufacturing VBIEDs [cars rigged to explode] there and sending them into Baghdad. We had a very tough fight working our way into the town. The local population worried we would be like other coalition troops – stay a couple of weeks and leave. Still a local sheikh produced three of his guys to help coalition forces find al-Qaeda fighters. They would also walk in the streets in front of the soldiers and point out IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. They explained this was out of rejection of al-Qaeda's random and deliberate extreme violence. Al-Qaeda had controlled resources such as food and water, which led to passive support by the remaining population. When people understood we were here to stay, intelligence improved. The surge gave us the number of troops we needed to start living here", Crisis Group interview, U.S. military commander, 'Arab Jbur, March 2008.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, former officer with close ties to insurgent groups, Falluja, May 2007.

that al-Qaeda in Iraq was the principal beneficiary of this cross-border traffic.⁴⁵

This is not to say that Iraqi society has irrevocably rejected al-Qaeda in Iraq as an alien, extraneous body. The movement never was centred in a determined geographical location; rather, it has always been more akin to a loosely organised and disparate network.⁴⁶ It brings together a powerful ideology, vast financial resources provided by Muslim sympathisers throughout the world, fighters with experience from several battle fronts as well as an almost limitless reservoir of volunteers – potential martyrs, computer experts and religious figures. Even some of its staunchest Iraqi critics doubt it can be eradicated any time soon:

Al-Qaeda will not disappear for a number of reasons. First, it is not an organisation but an ideology and an appealing one at that. It thrives on the struggle against the U.S. occupation and hegemonic regional policies. Secondly, it has colossal financial capacities, the importance of which is magnified in a country with such ample needs. Thirdly, al-Qaeda's sectarian outlook is not a disadvantage only, in that many people embrace it. Fourthly, a political vacuum remains, in the sense that the alternative to al-Qaeda's nihilistic program is not yet convincing to many. Fifthly, it is very much a generational phenomenon, strongly appealing to the young.⁴⁷

To date, the absence of significant progress toward national reconciliation, lack of tangible reconstruction and failure by U.S. and Iraq forces to fully extend their control over zones harbouring al-Qaeda in Iraq militants have left the movement sufficient room to survive. Faced with increasing military challenges, it has sought

to flee U.S. troops and redeploy in less dangerous locations.⁴⁸ In Anbar, al-Qaeda in Iraq militants are said to have moved north to Mosul and its surroundings or simply to be lying low.⁴⁹ Similar reports can be heard in Ba'quba, where the movement's leadership has redeployed, while its rank and file has simply faded away or merged with local militias collaborating with U.S. forces, known in the U.S. as the "Sons of Iraq".⁵⁰ Other al-Qaeda strongholds such as 'Arab Jbur or Hawr Rajab on the outskirts of Baghdad, or the large city of Samarra', also have been cleared, with life returning to normal.

For now, in other words, the jihadi movement appears to be concentrating in the north, in the mixed-population areas bordering the Kurdistan region. There, the environment remains favourable for a combination of reasons: the surge did not reach these areas; the Kurdish parties oppose the emergence of Sunni militias, fearing they ultimately could become a more potent threat than the existing insurgency; ethnic tensions and Arab resentment of what they see as a Kurdish expansionist agenda mean that al-Qaeda retains its appeal; and the terrain (a mix of hills, remote villages and the large urban centres of Mosul and Kirkuk) provides adequate shelter in the absence of any significant U.S. or Iraqi military presence.

The U.S. and Iraqi governments reportedly are planning a major offensive to eradicate al-Qaeda in Iraq from its northern refuge, leading some – such as General Keane (ret.), an architect of the surge – to surmise that

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, insurgent representatives and tribal figures, September 2007.

⁴⁶ "Over the past years, al-Qaeda never has been rooted and entrenched in a specific zone. It moves and shifts according to the laws of guerrilla warfare", Crisis Group interview, former officer in the Iraqi military with close ties to the insurgency, Falluja, May 2007.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, insurgent leader, November 2007. On al-Qaeda's appeal to young people, see eg, Peter Harling, "Iraq's Lost Generation", op. cit. "Al-Qaeda has always been most accessible to our youth. Unlike other armed groups, al-Qaeda simply demands that prospective members appear religious and provide token evidence of their commitment – such as laying a mine or shooting an RPG at a convoy. At that point, payment of salaries is forthcoming. From what I hear, salaries range from \$200 for a driver involved in an operation, \$600 for men who use their weapons and up to \$1,000 for the cameraman who films the action for internet display", Crisis Group email communication, Iraqi journalist with access to insurgents in Anbar, January 2007.

⁴⁸ This strategy was adopted after the 2004 Falluja showdown; Crisis Group previously described it as "recoil, redeploy and spoil", Crisis Group Report, *In Their Own Words*, op. cit., p. 25.

⁴⁹ "We can say al-Qaeda has been weakened and has lost perhaps 50 per cent of its capacities, but it remains, be it in the form of active groups or sleeping cells. They are still up and about in the west of the country, in Salaheddin and elsewhere, and are waiting for a signal that the fight is resuming", Crisis Group interview, prominent tribal leader from Falluja, March 2008. This notion of "sleeping cells" is a recurrent one. "In reality, the Americans achieved considerable success against al-Qaeda in Anbar, Baghdad, Salaheddin and Diyala. But even Anbar will witness its violent return after its sleeping cells have completed preparations for its revival", Crisis Group interview, Iraqi analyst with ties to the insurgency, March 2008.

⁵⁰ "Most of al-Qaeda's leading figures, both foreigners and Iraqis, first left the city for the suburbs and later Kirkuk and northern Iraq, where the mountains serve as a sanctuary. Those who supported them or even worked for them as foot soldiers were left behind, disappeared in the countryside or switched sides. These for the most part are people desperate for employment and who will side with whomever provides it", Crisis Group telephone interview, Ba'quba police officer, December 2007.

the jihadi movement would be eradicated before the end of 2008.⁵¹ However, a senior U.S. military commander was more nuanced:

We must continue to press our efforts on al-Qaeda. Mosul is a last urban stronghold, but we also need to do more work up the Tigris river valley, in the Zab triangle [the Little Zab and Great Zab are two effluents of the Tigris, coming down from Kurdistan and joining with the Tigris south of Mosul]. It is a small but significant area. I do believe al-Qaeda's threat to Iraq has been significantly reduced, but it can regenerate – nothing here is irreversible.⁵²

That al-Qaeda in Iraq has been considerably weakened and suffered significant setbacks is beyond doubt. The movement turned out to be its own worst enemy, overreaching, alienating its constituency and creating an extremely hostile environment for itself even prior to the surge. The U.S. shift to more classical and effective counter-insurgency tactics along with its deployment of additional troops – chiefly in Anbar and Baghdad – and its more nuanced understanding of the range of insurgent groups helped it capitalise on this opportunity.

Ultimately, what the U.S. had been unable to achieve in the past – reach deals with insurgent groups and secure tribal backing in its fight against al-Qaeda⁵³ – it finally could do, largely as a result of the jihadi group's own missteps. Although deep divisions had long existed, al-Qaeda in Iraq had preserved minimal tactical unity with major insurgent groups through intimidation and funding, but also by buttressing its religious credentials, openly debating and building a consensus over strategy, denying responsibility for its most controversial forms of violence and proving its utility to the more nationalistic strands of the resistance.⁵⁴ The evolution described above, however,

led it to focus on bullying and corruption, rendering it far more vulnerable to U.S. divide-and-conquer tactics.

Whether the movement can reform and revamp itself while also shoring up its local base remains an open question. Its 14 April 2008 statement suggests that, at a minimum, it is aware of the damage it has done and the need for compromise.⁵⁵ Moreover, in official statements, groups such as the Islamic Army leave the door open for possible future reconciliation.⁵⁶ This suggests that if the current deals between the U.S., the tribes and the insurgency were to unravel – a possibility discussed below – the jihadi movement conceivably could have a second life in Iraq.

The bottom line is this: there is neither a definitive military nor political – in the sense of negotiations leading to a compromise – solution to al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its self-regenerating capacity will come to an end only when a cohesive national security apparatus extends its reach over the country's entire territory and when fully legitimate and functional state institutions can provide Iraq's disenfranchised population with a future in which it believes.

Nor can the issue of al-Qaeda specifically or that of jihadi Salafism in Iraq more generally be addressed without closely scrutinising the question of their origins and sources of support. While the U.S. repeatedly criticises Damascus for its lax border controls, it has remained largely mute on the fact that most of the volunteers and funds transiting through Syria originate in the Gulf. There are good reasons for Washington to preserve its strong strategic alliance with the peninsula's oil-rich states. But this need not entail turning a blind eye to the role they play as incubators of a jihadi threat which these states have been able to contain on their own territory but which remains remarkably and curiously free to spread wherever security vacuums emerge throughout the wider region.

⁵¹ Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 9 April 2008.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. military commander, Baghdad, March 2008.

⁵³ In late 2005, early 2006, U.S. marines operating in Anbar governorate noted a series of clashes that did not involve any of their units, in which victims were foreign jihadis and during which tribes appeared to be reasserting control over their territory. U.S. forces gradually became convinced that this was evidence of a growing rift with al-Qaeda that they could usefully exploit. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. military and civilian officials, February 2006. However, it took until 2007 for this to happen in a sustained way. See *Los Angeles Times*, 5 October 2006; *The Times*, 23 November 2006. For an informed analysis of U.S. policies toward the tribes, see Michael Eisenstadt, "Tribal Engagement Lessons Learned," *Military Review*, September-October 2007, pp. 16-31.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group Report, *In Their Own Words*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ In this statement, Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi calls upon Sunni Arabs to abandon all collaboration with the U.S. and offers to pardon those who do.

⁵⁶ See the interview of the Islamic Army's Emir in *al-Hayat*, 22 February 2008.

III. THE TRIBES' RETURN TO PROMINENCE

A. FROM SADDAM TO THE OCCUPATION

During the initial years of Saddam Hussein's rule, tribes paid the price for the regime's state-centric, modernising agenda and, most of all, quasi-totalitarian social control. Over time, their role would change; in the 1980s, some largely were co-opted into the expanding security apparatus, and the regime armed a number of southern tribes during the Iran-Iraq war. In the following decade, it would make the most of tribalism, prominently displaying its cultural symbols in the local media. Saddam would regularly meet sheikhs, rewarding their loyalty with perks and privileges and handing over assets and prerogatives – including the right to police their territory and enact their own forms of justice – formerly within the central authority's exclusive purview.

None of this amounted to genuine, autonomous power. Tribal authority remained wholly derivative, dependent on the regime's goodwill and largesse. Any hint of serious rebelliousness was severely repressed. Absolute allegiance to the tyrant was expected; weapons were provided only when absolutely necessary; smuggling and other petty crimes were ignored only to the extent they did not affect regime interests; and tribal leaders with a modicum of personal standing were regularly replaced with cronies. The regime expected tribes to turn over anyone it deemed a threat, in direct contravention of their most sacred and time-honoured traditions of solidarity and asylum. Whatever power sheikhs were able to build, in sum, was bestowed by the regime rather than wrested by the tribe. In this manner, tribal chiefs played their part in the regime's all-embracing system of oppression. This deeply damaged their reputation among clansmen, prompting monikers such as *shuyukh al-tis'inat* ("chieftains of the 90s", meaning artificial and regime-manufactured) or "chieftains made in Taiwan" (ie, of lesser quality than the original).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ On the pre-2003 period, see eg, Amatzia Baram, "Neo-tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's tribal policies, 1991-1996", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (February 1997), pp. 1-31; David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre. L'Irak en transition* (Paris, 2004); Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod, *Tribes and Power. Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*. (London, 2003); and Judith Yaphe, "Tribalism in Iraq, the old and the new", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 7, no. 3 (June 2000), pp. 51-58. "Once upon a time the tribes enjoyed huge importance. But they faded, particularly as a result of the societal and political ideas that came with the end of the monarchy in

Immediately after the Baathist regime's collapse, tribes became as invisible as they had been pervasive prior to 2003. In Ramadi, which had been home to several powerful tribes under Saddam, walls rapidly were scrawled with graffiti insulting chieftains who, only days earlier, inspired fear and awe. *Shuyukh al-'asha'ir 'umala'* ("the tribal sheikhs are collaborators") was one such writing, conveying the sense that tribal leaders were turncoats willing to sell themselves to the highest bidder – Saddam one day, the occupiers the next.⁵⁸ This phenomenon was not limited to Sunni tribes. The invasion clearly empowered Shiites, yet heads of vast southern tribes found themselves sitting in empty reception halls (*mudhayif*), both dismayed and disorientated.⁵⁹

Seeking to reassert their relevance, tribal leaders formed numerous associations, federations, fronts and unions, each claiming hundreds of thousands (in some cases even millions) of members. But these leaders typically lacked legitimacy and were challenged by their own kin, while inflated membership numbers were virtually meaningless.⁶⁰ In reality, tribes were being left out of the nascent political process in Baghdad, a few token exceptions aside.⁶¹ On the ground, they quickly were outpaced and outmanoeuvred by the insurgency and growing Shiite militias, facing a choice between subordination to these emerging forces and political

1958. There came a time under Saddam when the mere fact of using your tribal name was forbidden by the bureaucracy. The party and regime would countenance no competition. Even when Saddam once again played up the tribes, he created an extensive database [*maratib*] to centralise information on them and optimise control. What was left of the tribes' power was gobbled up by the central power", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad University professor, Amman, December 2006.

⁵⁸ Observations by Crisis Group analyst visiting Iraq in a different capacity, Ramadi, May 2003.

⁵⁹ Observations by Crisis Group analyst visiting Iraq in a different capacity, Sadr City and Basra, May 2003. One tribal leader, whose ancestors had worked with British colonial forces in the early twentieth century, expressed surprise that their successors were now trying to link up with him – as if, a century later, a tribal leader still exerted significant control over his clansmen. Interview by a Crisis Group analyst visiting Iraq in a different capacity, Basra, May 2003.

⁶⁰ Observations by a Crisis Group analyst visiting Iraq in a different capacity, Baghdad, May 2003.

⁶¹ Iraq's first president after Saddam's fall was Ghazi al-Yawir, an engineer and nephew to the sheikh of the Shammar Jarba tribe. He had just returned from exile in Saudi Arabia. Adnan al-Janabi, an economist and sheikh of the Janabiyyin tribe, was nominated minister of state without portfolio in the first post-2003 government. Neither bore any significant power at the time nor has fared well in politics since.

irrelevance.⁶² Far from being autonomous, cohesive units responding to the needs and requirements of their own constituencies, tribes once again fed into the clientelist strategies of others. Devoid of any traditional sources of power, having built their authority on the basis of the former regime's patronage, their sheikhs' fate remained utterly dependent on the emergence of a new benefactor.

B. THE TRIBAL AWAKENINGS (SAHWAT)

Tribal authority and relevance re-emerged seriously only once the U.S. altered its tactics and nurtured a new generation of leaders, quickly dubbed *shuyukh al-alfinat* ("chieftains of the 2000s") by Iraqis. In late 2006 and early 2007, as tensions grew between al-Qaeda in Iraq and some Anbar governorate tribes (for reasons discussed below), U.S. forces stationed in the area saw an opportunity to bolster the latter. Such outside sponsorship proved decisive, enabling tribal leaders to shore up local support, providing them with the means to persuade their constituencies that they once more had developed ties to a powerful patron. In turn, this ensured tribal allegiance to the U.S. The newfound alliance helped tilt the balance. An Anbar sheikh said, "until that time, al-Qaeda was better armed and entrenched than the tribes. But the U.S. decision to help us by throwing its weight behind the tribes rather than fight on its own turned the tables".⁶³

Sheikh 'Abdul Sattar Bazi'a Fatikhan al-Rishawi of the Albu Risha tribe – more widely known as Sattar Abu Risha – was the first sheikh to openly collaborate with U.S. forces. In January 2007, he rallied several other chieftains to his view.⁶⁴ Other groupings subsequently joined (and as their numbers grew, so did rivalries among them).⁶⁵ Al-Qaeda in Iraq fought back, bombing Ramadi, offering large rewards for killing tribal figures and assassinating some of their leaders, including Sattar Abu Risha.⁶⁶

From the outset, the tribes' so-called "awakening" (*sahwa* in Arabic, plural *sahwat*) generated considerable unease, even within the ranks of al-Qaeda in Iraq's

most bitter enemies. Shiite actors in Maliki's governing coalition feared they would serve as a refuge for unreformed insurgents or that they eventually would challenge the dominant parties' hold on power.⁶⁷ In Anbar, tensions grew between the *sahwat* and the Islamic Party, a Sunni organisation with little grassroots support that nevertheless dominates governorate institutions since the 2005 elections; rivalry has centred on control over resources, notably reconstruction contracts.⁶⁸ Various insurgent groups have been equally vocal in their denunciations, depicting the *sahwat* as U.S. stooges. The spokesman of one such group called the *sahwat* "a U.S. construct tying together a series of local, tactical and superficial victories. In essence, the U.S. has purchased a clientele, buying off the loyalty of tribal chieftains".⁶⁹

The insurgency – whether nationalist or Islamist – undoubtedly has been severely weakened by the tribes' return to prominence. Thanks to the tribes' extensive knowledge of the local population and environment, they can exercise far more control than could the U.S. military on its own; in turn, their alliance with the U.S. makes it difficult for them to countenance any form of resistance. A former general who joined the insurgency asserted:

Occupation forces have used what people call the *sahwa* [awakening] but I call them the *ghafwa* [to take a nap or doze off] because they are manipulated and don't want to see that they are serving the American cause. They weakened the brave resistance in Falluja. Because of them, our heroic fighters must lie low and stay at home, waiting for the storm to blow over. We will fight until the invader is expelled. Weapons and

⁶² On tribes in the southern city of Basra, see eg, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°67, *Where Is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, 25 June 2007.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Falluja tribal leader, Amman, December 2007.

⁶⁴ See eg, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 2007.

⁶⁵ For an example of mutual accusations between Anbar sheikhs, see Inter Press Service, 15 June 2007.

⁶⁶ See *The New York Times*, 29 April 2007; *The Christian Science Monitor*, 26 June 2007; and Associated Press, 13 September 2007.

⁶⁷ In the words of a U.S. analyst, "the *sahwa* is scaring the Shiite warlords for the first time and allowing the U.S. to exert real pressure on the government. It is providing a useful counterbalance to Shiite militias. This could be good or bad: bad, if it worsens sectarian conflict; good, if the U.S. uses it to broker accommodation", Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, November 2007.

⁶⁸ Jawdat Kadhim, "Al-Anbar tribes reiterate threat to expel Islamic Party with force", *al-Hayat*, 10 March 2008.

⁶⁹ He continued, "the objectives are to contain and pressure the government; restore some balance between Sunnis and Shiites; ensure a period of calm and apparent progress during the U.S. presidential campaign; and reduce the exorbitant costs on the U.S. military by delegating tasks to far less onerous tribes", Crisis Group interview, insurgent group spokesman, March 2008. A 4 June 2007 petition provided to Crisis Group and signed by tribal leaders, imams as well as notables from Anbar, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, Diyala and Ninawa, condemned Sattar Abu Risha as a traitor and warned against any copycat attempts.

volunteers are plentiful, but what is most important is our freedom of movement. Here the *sahwa* did what the U.S. could not. We cannot move anymore in Falluja. Only in the periphery, around Garma or Saglawiya, is it still possible to operate.⁷⁰

Early on, the *sahwat* conveyed the impression they would focus exclusively on circumscribed areas, without interfering in (non al-Qaeda) insurgency battlegrounds.⁷¹ Yet as the *sahwat* expanded, the insurgents inevitably were squeezed. A former fighter explained:

I'm stuck; there is nothing I can do. The *sahwa* walks hand in hand with the Americans and that's extremely bad for us. There is no doubt we have been weakened. It's become extremely difficult to move in Falluja and throughout the region. Some have left for Ba'quba and Mosul, where room for manoeuvre is greater, but here we are in an open prison. The surge was never the problem. The Americans are not that dangerous. They have the technology, but they don't know the topography. We know the terrain, we're on our land. More U.S. troops alone simply could have meant more and perhaps easier targets. But we've been betrayed by our own brethren. They use the pretext of fighting al-Qaeda to crack down on anyone who does not comply with their rule. If they find a weapon, they say it's al-Qaeda.⁷²

C. UNDERSTANDING THE SAHWAT PHENOMENON

Critics assert the *sahwat* are motivated less by principle or politics than by more prosaic concerns. They point to Sattar Abu Risha's involvement in thievery along the Baghdad-Amman highway,⁷³ an endeavour that directly competed with al-Qaeda's Islamic state ambitions. According to an insurgent group spokesman:

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Falluja, December 2007.

⁷¹ "I know Sattar Abu Risha well, and his objective is to expel the Americans from Ramadi – the best way to do that being to restore peace and security. Whoever wants to fight the U.S. is most welcome to do so outside the city", Crisis Group interview, Sattar Abu Risha supporter, Ramadi, May 2007.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, currently inactive insurgent figure, Falluja, December 2007.

⁷³ Under Saddam, the Abu Risha tribe was known for ransoming in what is commonly referred to as kilometre 160, purportedly the most dangerous stretch of the Baghdad/Amman highway.

As of 2007, the U.S. military effort had completely failed; they had lost Anbar governorate. Things started to change for reasons that had nothing to do with them. The conflict between al-Qaeda and several sheikhs, foremost among them Sattar Abu Risha, was prompted by competition for control of spoils deriving from traffic on the Baghdad-Amman highway. The Islamic state considered this a tax to which it was entitled. When it killed some of its competitors, it crossed a red line and triggered a cycle of revenge. At first, the U.S. looked on passively. Subsequently, they saw an opportunity to further deepen the rift by backing the tribes. Based on our estimates, Sattar Abu Risha received tens of millions of dollars from the Americans to fight al-Qaeda.⁷⁴

For tribal leaders who had been forced into exile due to confrontation with al-Qaeda in Iraq or the insurgency, this presented a unique chance for a comeback.⁷⁵ It also offered them the opportunity to reap substantial financial rewards, whether by diverting funds the U.S. channelled through them (principally salaries for their armed volunteers)⁷⁶ or by ensuring they benefited from reconstruction projects.⁷⁷

Al-Qaeda in Iraq's presence had been bad for business. The group fostered chaos and instability and sought to impose monopoly control – all of which made it difficult for others to prosper. As a result, ridding Anbar of the group was, in and of itself, a revenue-generating proposition for the tribes. Moreover, the *sahwat* phenomenon was appealing to younger, less prominent sheikhs who could bypass rigid tribal hierarchies and more quickly assert their power.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, insurgent front spokesman, March 2008.

⁷⁵ A former Salafi insurgent fighter said, "the *sahwat* phenomenon is based on greed. Its leaders, those who currently collaborate with the U.S., didn't dare walk in the streets of Falluja or Ramadi a year ago. They returned on the back of their alliance with the U.S. and are now seeking their revenge. They pursue only selfish interests", Crisis Group interview, Falluja, December 2007.

⁷⁶ According to a U.S. analyst, "the United States has budgeted \$150 million to pay Sunni tribal groups this year, and the sheikhs take as much as 20 per cent of every payment to a former insurgent – which means that commanding 200 fighters can be worth well over \$100,000 a year for a tribal chief", Steven Simon, "The Price of the Surge. How U.S. Strategy is Hastening Iraq's Demise", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3, (May-June 2008), p. 65.

⁷⁷ Shaykh Sattar Abu Risha hosted the first Ramadi reconstruction fair.

⁷⁸ David Kilcullen, a counterinsurgency adviser to the U.S.-led coalition, explained: "Internal tribal dynamics also play a

Critics also express concern that the *sahwat* essentially are a sectarian actor. They argue that the tribes sided with the U.S. to counter Shiites, Iran and the Maliki government, the three of which they barely distinguished. There is some truth to the charge. Many *sahwat* leaders interviewed by Crisis Group appeared driven essentially by fear of Iran's agenda and influence in Iraq.⁷⁹ Some suggested they planned to reestablish Sunni political dominance.⁸⁰

However, the phenomenon is more nuanced. There are confessional motivations, to be sure, but sectarianism often is rejected by tribal figures whose own rather liberal conception of Islam is more consistent with a national, secular agenda than with a narrow, fundamentalist one. They tend to condemn what they see as a sectarian, Iranian-backed government rather than Shiites per se. A *sahwa* leader said:

Al-Qaeda has only itself to blame if we now allow the Americans to walk freely in the streets of Ramadi, Baghdad and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda messed everything up, killed and expelled innocent people. They planted the seeds of sectarianism and sedition. Before, Sunnis and Shiites were brothers. They used to

part. Many older leaders, who consider themselves the true heads of clans or tribes, fled Iraq in 2003 because they were implicated in dealings with Saddam and are now in exile in Syria or Jordan. The on-the-ground leaders are a younger generation, concerned to cement their positions vis-à-vis the old men in Damascus, who may one day want to return. By joining forces with the government, these leaders have acquired a source of patronage which they can re-direct to their people, cementing themselves in power and bolstering their personal positions", Small Wars Journal blog, posted 29 August 2007, at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/authors/dave-kilcullen/>.

⁷⁹ "Our country hardly belongs to us anymore. Our capital is Tehran. The Persians are killing our children and elderly. We don't even control our oil anymore. We are under attack from the east, and our government is not going to do anything about it", Crisis Group interview, *sahwa* leaders in Habbaniya, Halabsa, December 2007. "Our people made mistakes, but this is an opportunity we can't waste. We don't want to let al-Qaeda back into the area, and at the same time we want to fight the Shiite militias because they're appointed by Iran. There won't be any stability in Iraq unless we get rid of Iranian influence", Crisis Group interview, *sahwat* leader, Taji, March 2008.

⁸⁰ A sheikh from Salah al-Din said, "we need U.S. support to tilt the balance of power in the disputed governorate of Diyala. From there, we can extend our reach into Wasit, which has always been a quiet governorate – a Shiite soft belly in the south. We then will be in a strong position to squeeze the middle Euphrates strongholds such as Karbala and Najaf. In so doing, we could cut Baghdad off from its Shiite hinterland", Crisis Group interview, tribal leader from Salah al-Din, July 2007.

live together, from north to south, with Christians and other religions. I don't even like to call them that, but that's the way things have become. Sunni, Shiite, "triangle of death" and the like: none of this vocabulary was in use prior to the occupation. It came from outside and intoxicated deranged souls who started to rampage and kill their own nation.⁸¹

Likewise, although partly driven by a quest for power and wealth, the roots of the *sahwat* phenomenon run deeper. Al-Qaeda in Iraq's expansion in Anbar triggered a profound social upheaval, challenging well-established customs and threatening important social elites. In the words of a local observer:

Relations between al-Qaeda and the local tribes evolved from relative hospitality to outright hostility, interspersed with periods of defiance and tension. Initially, hospitality was based on the traditional tribal value systems as well as their respect for people – some of whom came from afar – willing to fight the invaders. But their value system could not countenance a guest seeking to dispossess his host of all authority, even if it is in the name of combating the enemy. Tribal leaders couldn't accept to see their moral and social standing further undermined.⁸²

The jihadi movement was seen as alien because of the presence not only of foreign fighters but also of Iraqi nationals who, instead of paying tribute and showing deference to sheikhs, espoused an especially intransigent vision of Islam as a means of intimidating and bullying them. Young men, unskilled workers or simple peasants upturned a social order traditionally dominated by land-owning tribal leaders and modern urban elites, and they did so by killing the privileged and imposing their own set of allegedly Sharia-inspired mores. A *sahwa* leader explained:

We have nothing against mujahidin fighting in the name of God. But these people tarnished the notion of jihad. They targeted educated people and tribal leaders, they blurred lines and interfered in everything. They banned cigarettes and even ruled that tomatoes and cucumbers couldn't be mixed together. They blew up mobile phone relays. Islam never taught us decapitation. Those committing these crimes often were foreign to Falluja – not necessarily

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, *sahwa* leaders in Falluja, Amman, December 2007.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, former officer with ties to local armed groups, Falluja, May 2007.

foreigners, but ignorant peasants who killed people as if slaughtering mere animals.⁸³

Particularly upsetting, according to some, was al-Qaeda in Iraq's attempts to consolidate control by marrying local women.⁸⁴

All in all, al-Qaeda in Iraq disrupted more than the tribal elite. It dislocated an entire social order, triggering self-preserving, conservative reactions among sheikhs. As one commented, "we are against the occupation, but al-Qaeda went too far. They killed not only our leaders but also our educated people. They undermined society as a whole, assassinating local policemen because they represent the law. But law and police are the basis for stability. And ultimately, we want stability".⁸⁵ According to a *sahwat* figure, this inherent incompatibility between al-Qaeda in Iraq's vision and tribal interests was critical in persuading the U.S. that its alliance with the tribes would be sustainable rather than short-lived.⁸⁶

The combination of deep-seated tensions, more mundane motivations and sectarian sentiment explains why, despite al-Qaeda in Iraq's vigorous and often vicious resistance, the Anbar *sahwat* made steady progress throughout the governorate. As they reaped the benefits of cooperation with the U.S., they encouraged other tribes to follow suit, generating a wider and more powerful dynamic. The Anbar model was replicated in al-Qaeda strongholds south of Baghdad⁸⁷ as well as in Tikrit,⁸⁸ Diyala⁸⁹ and elsewhere. Shiite tribes in the mid-Euphrates region did

likewise.⁹⁰ In the far north (around Mosul in particular) and far south, on the other hand, the tribal revival for now has been effectively resisted by, respectively, Kurds and Sadrists.⁹¹

Within approximately a year, over 91,000 Iraqis had volunteered to cooperate with American forces – a figure that includes *sahwat* members and former insurgents, collectively referred to in the U.S. as "Sons of Iraq".⁹² Additional U.S. troops and shift in tactics facilitated this remarkably rapid transition. One of the architects of the surge offered a highly optimistic reading:

Fundamental to that success was the use of proven counter-insurgency practices, to protect the people, with sufficient amounts of Iraq and U.S. troops. This was a catalyst for the widespread Sunni awakening movement What really happened is the Sheikhs and tribal leaders decided they could not achieve their political goals with the AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq], in fighting the U.S. and the GOI [government of Iraq]. As such the overwhelming majority of Sunni leaders made four strategic decisions to 1) stop the violence; 2) leverage the U.S. leaders to influence the GOI; 3) reconcile with the GOI; and 4) provide their "sons" to work with us and the Iraqis to help defeat the AQI and protect their own people....Clearly the Sunnis are politically reconciling with the GOI, and the GOI is assisting.⁹³

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, *sahwa* leaders, Falluja, December 2007.

⁸⁴ "One person told me that AQI's pitch to the tribes was 'we are Sunni, you are Sunni. The Americans and Iranians are helping the Shi'a – let's fight them together'. But this alliance of convenience and mutual exploitation broke down when AQI began to apply the standard AQ method of cementing alliances through marriage", David Kilcullen post on the Small Wars Journal blog, op. cit.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, *sahwa* leaders from Falluja, Amman, December 2007.

⁸⁶ "There is a relatively clear division between the tribes and al-Qaeda. This helped generate trust with the Americans and, as a result, made it easier for them to give us weapons", Crisis Group interview, tribal leader from Falluja, Amman, December 2007.

⁸⁷ Nancy A. Youssef, "U.S. finds a way to pacify Iraqi town — by using cash", *McClatchy Newspapers*, 12 November 2007.

⁸⁸ Alexandra Zavis, "U.S. courts sheiks in Hussein terrain. Hoping to replicate gains in Anbar, American officials have signed \$5.2 million in deals with Salahuddin tribesmen", *Los Angeles Times*, 14 November 2007.

⁸⁹ "Tribal alliance in Diyala to cleanse it of al-Qaeda", *al-Hayat*, 10 May 2007.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Civil War*, op. cit.. "Many tribal sheikhs in the south are trying to get closer to the Americans in order to strengthen their power and get involved in rebuilding the country. They have their interests and the Americans are a winning card they can use to achieve their goals", Crisis Group interview, senior Shiite politician, Baghdad, September 2007.

⁹¹ "In Nasiriya tribal chiefs have founded their *sahwat*. Recently, they even took part in the confrontation with the Mahdawiya sect [a small movement that believes in spreading chaos as a way of hastening the Imam al-Mahdi's return], in coordination with the police and army. They also tried to reach out to Mahdi Army fighters and co-opt them on condition that they pledge allegiance to the *sahwat* and Iraqi security forces. But they largely failed and cannot stand up to the Mahdi Army", Crisis Group interview, local businessman and Sistani follower, Nasiriya, January 2008.

⁹² The "Sons of Iraq", an expression coined by U.S. officials to describe tribesmen and former insurgents now working with the coalition, number roughly 72,000 Sunnis (out of a total of over 91 000, 19 per cent of whom are Shiites). General Petraeus testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 8 April 2008.

⁹³ General Keane (ret.) testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 9 April 2008.

Still, and at this stage, it remains unclear how successful the *sahwat* experiment ultimately will be. The Iraqi government, Shiite parties and many observers suggest they pose a threat to the ruling order, if only because reinvigorated tribes ultimately may resist state authority. Indeed, tribes may prove highly reluctant to relinquish any newfound prerogatives to central authorities, further contributing to Iraq's dangerous fragmentation.⁹⁴ The problem will be all the more acute if the government continues to fail to integrate them into mainstream security forces.⁹⁵

While to a large extent accurate, this assessment should be nuanced. Funds provided by the U.S. are, in the main, used for salaries or diverted for personal benefit. The tribes have been given few weapons and certainly no heavy ones; the *sahwat*'s basic mission is policing, the U.S. taking the lead whenever serious fighting occurs. And, to the extent *sahwat* members are familiar with basic combat techniques, they hardly owe this to recent developments; rather, they acquired them as a result of pre-2003 military service, the many wars Iraq has waged and, in the case of many, five-year involvement in the insurgency.

In other words, the *sahwat* phenomenon has not in and of itself transformed the tribes into a serious threat; they are not on their way to becoming a self-sufficient, autonomous force. Instead they remain thoroughly dependent on an outside sponsor, in this instance the U.S., which, by providing protection and succour, enabled them to reestablish some cohesion. Were the U.S. abruptly to end its support, it follows, the situation essentially would revert to the status quo ante: sheikhs would either be targeted in Iraq by vengeful insurgents or return to (more comfortable) exile abroad; their militias would either evaporate or blend in with the insurgency. Without US backing, the *sahwat* would fade away or offer themselves up to the next highest bidder.

One possible scenario in that situation would be for the Iraqi government – with huge unspent resources – to place the highest bid. However, alarmed at the possible

emergence of a more organised and legitimate Sunni actor which would have to be accommodated into the political system, it appears reluctant to do so. As a result, the more potent danger is that the tribes would turn to neighbouring states for help, thus becoming a vehicle for the conflict's further regionalisation. Arab states, seeking to promote their influence, counter Iran's or pursue a sectarian, Sunni agenda might pick up where the U.S. let off.⁹⁶ In short, the surge has added a new player and new layer in an already multidimensional conflict.

In other ways, too, the *sahwat* phenomenon has generated new fault lines and potential sources of violence. First, the U.S. has of necessity been more generous with some tribes than with others. The resulting redistribution of power almost certainly will engender rivalry, which in turn could give rise to intense feuds⁹⁷ – an outcome on which some insurgent groups admit they are banking.⁹⁸

Secondly, the sheikhs' empowerment is viewed warily by significant local constituents. Though al-Qaeda in Iraq's assault on tribal customs was widely rejected by the population at large, this never translated into wholesale support for tribal authority. As sheikhs seek to impose and extend their rule, yet another social upheaval could be in the making. Self-defined patriots who to this day reject the occupation and home-grown Islamists willing to fight it on religious grounds deeply resent the tribes' crackdown on all forms of resistance. Should they overreach, the tribes could lose popular support. Moreover, some members of Falluja's old urban elite feel threatened by what they perceive as a backward and opportunistic set of tribal chiefs who control the city through militias recruited in the rural hinterland.⁹⁹ In the neighbourhood of Jolan, once an al-Qaeda stronghold, residents who consider themselves

⁹⁴ Steven Simon powerfully makes this argument in "The Cost of the Surge", op. cit. An insurgent sympathiser observed: "As a rule, tribes tend to defend their constituents and territory. Sociologically, tribalism doesn't sit well with a modern state. The Iraqi state's collapse awakened new instincts among the tribes, which the U.S. and the government are manipulating. If they fight against the resistance, they are rewarded with greater autonomy, privileges and cash. I don't see how this can be reconciled with the reconstruction of a functional state", Crisis Group interview, former officer with ties to local armed groups, Falluja, May 2007.

⁹⁵ See Toby Dodge, "Iraq after the surge", paper for the Institute of Diplomatic Studies, Riyadh (February 2008).

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Saudi analyst, Riyadh, April 2008.

⁹⁷ For example, see *Los Angeles Times*, 21, 22 January 2008. "In Samarra', improved security is largely due to the role of the Albu Baz tribe, which has imposed itself through the local *sahwa* council. But they are active mainly within the tribe's traditional stronghold areas and face resentment from other parts of Samarra' and from other, rival tribes", Crisis Group telephone interview, businessman from Samarra', March 2008.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, insurgent front spokesman, March 2008.

⁹⁹ "The Americans have found zealous allies in these tribes that attack not only al-Qaeda but any former officer who doesn't collaborate with them and the occupiers. I belong to that category of patriots, and now I am dispossessed and idle, because of these Arabs [in this context, a derogative term designating rural dwellers] from the Albu 'Alwan, Halabsa and so on. These opportunists don't even belong to Falluja, and now they rule our lives here". Crisis Group interview, former general with ties to the insurgency, Falluja, December 2007.

the city's true offspring and legitimate owners tend to reject the tribal militias as alien transplants.¹⁰⁰

The U.S depiction of the *sahwat* as "concerned local citizens" standing up for their neighbourhoods is accurate in some places but not in others. For instance, Ba'quba residents expressed distrust of the many unknown faces among those patrolling their streets.¹⁰¹ Mosul, where the *sahwat* as such do not exist but where the security apparatus recruited massively among tribes within the city's surroundings, is witnessing similar tensions.¹⁰² As reconstruction funds, positions in the local security apparatus and employment in civilian institutions flow to a new tribal elite – a fraction of the wider Sunni population – accusations of corruption and self-serving collaboration with the occupier quickly will spread.

The *sahwat* emerged and gained legitimacy primarily as a reaction to al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, as the intensity of the threat posed by the jihadi movement recedes, the tribes are being forced to alter their role. With time, they must find a suitable place in a delicate network of power relations that feels threatened by their growing aspirations. They also need to establish more sustainable sources of legitimacy. This will require addressing their constituents' longstanding demands – including basic services, economic development, good governance and political representation. None of this is within their present or foreseeable capacity. In short, the *sahwat* provide a temporary fix which does not begin to resolve – and may perhaps even further exacerbate – the deeper, more fundamental problem of rebuilding a legitimate and functional state.

¹⁰⁰ "Jolan remains on the fence. Much of the neighbourhood was destroyed in the 2004 confrontations, and little has been done since. Criticism of the tribes is on the rise. People say: 'these Arabs don't even hail from Falluja and are only driven by their personal interests. They make big money but look at our streets. Garbage is piling up, and we have no work, no electricity'. A class conflict of sorts is brewing, and the rift between the *sahwat* and local inhabitants is growing. Anyone in Falluja can tell that the fight is only temporarily suspended", Crisis Group email communication, journalist from Falluja, February 2008.

¹⁰¹ "These young men who are maintaining security have no discipline and no command hierarchy or structure. They may turn to kidnapping if they need cash or for any other reason. Our problem with them is that we really do not know them or where they are from. Many came from villages around the city and the tribes. But nobody knows who their leadership is and what their organisational structure is. The Americans run patrols and checkpoints at the major city entrances but leave the side roads and neighbourhoods to these volunteers who were not necessarily recruited locally", Crisis Group telephone interview, official from Diyala University, November 2007.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, local inhabitants, Mosul, January-February 2008.

IV. THE STATE OF THE SUNNI INSURGENCY

A. A REVERSAL OF FORTUNES

The armed insurgency – which in 2006 appeared supremely confident, largely united, dominated by a handful of major groups and increasingly sophisticated – has been profoundly destabilised by recent events.¹⁰³ What had held the insurgency together was both the clarity of shared objectives (resisting the occupation as well as, more and more, fighting Shiite militias) and the prospect that they would be fulfilled. Yet, personal rivalries along with religious and ideological divisions (including Islamist versus Baathist and Salafi versus Sufi)¹⁰⁴ resurfaced, resulting in intensified internal discord. The rift between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the bulk of the Sunni insurgency broke the taboo against internal strife and had significant ripple effects. Aside from weakening the jihadi movement, the split dealt a severe blow to the overarching tactical unity that prevailed until 2007, exacerbating tensions that had been papered over.

At its origins, the falling out with al-Qaeda in Iraq was principally due neither to al-Qaeda's supposed foreign composition nor to its Salafist outlook. Rather, what set the jihadi movement apart had to do with its very different conception of the Iraqi battlefield. An insurgent figure explained:

The critical divider within the resistance is neither religion nor nationality. Al-Qaeda is very much Iraqi now, and the bigger groups tend to espouse much of its Salafist worldview. The problem is that al-Qaeda sees Iraq as a battleground, whereas others are attached to its unity and fate. The conflict is about global Islamism [*islamiya 'alimiya aw 'awlamiya*] versus national Islamism [*islamiya wataniya*]. Our mantra is "at the end of the rifle comes the pen" [*nihayat al-bundaqiya al-qalam*] – meaning resistance ultimately has to give way to politics -- whereas al-Qaeda's mantra is "at the end of the rifle comes the canon" [*nihayat*

¹⁰³ For an analysis of the insurgency during that earlier phase, see Crisis Group Report, *In Their Own Words*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ "The popular Sufi tradition in Islam has given priority to the spiritual aspect of the faith and the (often mystical, gnostic) quest for individual knowledge of God over the worldly concern with mores and law", Crisis Group Middle East Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, p. 2. In contrast, Salafism is a revivalist and fundamentalist current which, by preaching a strict moral order, seeks to strengthen the community of believers' cohesion.

al-bundaqiya al-madfa'], meaning the fight against the unbelievers and apostates can only go crescendo.¹⁰⁵

The divergence of views had practical consequences. Al-Qaeda in Iraq's methods were excessively brutal, its goal being to fuel ever-intensifying sectarian strife, fear and instability. It systematically targeted Shiite civilians, killed police officers and other civil servants and even coerced Sunni civilians to the point where most were forced to flee. In no sense could this lead to victory as the more nationalist groups defined it; instead, it was a recipe for never-ending chaos and bloodshed. More importantly perhaps, al-Qaeda in Iraq's attempt to monopolise the insurgency generated a backlash from groups either squeezed out of former strongholds or facing more intense competition, including assassination of their militants. While some observers attribute the turn against al-Qaeda to other factors – notably the movement's inability to stop the Shiite militias' spectacular expansion during the 2006 and early 2007 battle for Baghdad –¹⁰⁶ insurgents challenge this interpretation.

Some believe or claim that al-Qaeda's failure to prevent the Shiite militias from taking over the capital persuaded the resistance that it served no purpose. This is untrue. We lost many mixed neighborhoods, to be sure, but the Sunni strongholds remained impregnable. At the height of the battle for Baghdad, the neighbourhoods of Dura, 'Amiriya and Ghazaliya were no-go zones for the U.S., for militia-infiltrated security forces or for the Mahdi Army itself. And this was essentially due to al-Qaeda's steadfastness. Ironically, al-Qaeda's strength in Baghdad led to the rift. By imposing its domination on areas previously controlled by other insurgent groups, it drove the latter to side with the U.S. Rivalry in 'Amiriya is the true origin of the clash between the Islamic Army and the Islamic state.¹⁰⁷

Tensions and disagreements revived (or were wrapped in) more theoretical debates over the hierarchy of foes.¹⁰⁸

Justifying their controversial decision to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq and, by extension, side with the U.S., some insurgent groups argued that, for the sake of Iraq's political future, the priority was to defeat the most immediate and pressing threat, Iran. That Iran was a dangerous enemy always had been a matter of consensus; but it now served to explain a tactical rapprochement with the U.S. which, of course, was anathema to al-Qaeda. As an Iraqi analyst with close ties to the insurgency put it, "the national Islamist resistance is concerned with Iraq's unity and Arab character, whereas al-Qaeda in Iraq believes in an existential fight with so-called Western crusaders".¹⁰⁹ Explaining the shift, some insurgents went so far as to equate the Iranian and al-Qaeda perils. An insurgent sympathiser claimed:

The surge is not what turned things around. A few more U.S. soldiers in Anbar could not weaken the resistance. The surge's so-called success is due to shifts among Sunnis. We decided we'd better counter Iran's plans for Iraq. But our cooperation with the U.S. is only temporary and cannot be called collaboration. We remain opposed to the occupation; we don't forget the ultimate objective, which is to chase out the occupying forces. But right now they play a somewhat positive role. Resisting the occupation doesn't translate exclusively into armed resistance. At times one must put weapons aside and opt for a longer-term strategy. Some of us oppose this, but I believe it was high time to realise we have a more dangerous enemy than the US.

Evidence abounds as to Iran's hegemonic goals, including the behaviour of its allies within the political system and its provision of weapons and funding to armed groups. We believe Iran was funding terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. Why at a certain stage did we choose to side with the Americans rather than Iraqis belonging to al-Qaeda or acting in its name? Because we understood that the murder of our religious leaders, our fighters and our people could only

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, spokesman for the Jihad and Reform Front, April 2007.

¹⁰⁶ This view is developed in particular by Steven Biddle, *op. cit.* On the battle of Baghdad, see Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Civil War*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, April 2008. In 2007 U.S. forces were involved in fierce fighting in all of these neighbourhoods, meaning they were not "no-go zones" per se, although the U.S. proved unable to defeat the resistance there until the locals joined their efforts.

¹⁰⁸ "There undoubtedly exists a division within the resistance on the issue of what is the priority target: Iran or the U.S. The

U.S. succeeded in convincing many of us that the answer is Iran. If this division were to be overcome, the U.S. could soon be defeated", Crisis Group interview, spokesman for the Jihad and National Salvation Front, March 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Iraqi analyst with close ties to the insurgency, March 2008. A Baath party official echoed this view: "Al-Qaeda looks at Iraq as the battleground for its existential fight with the U.S. And this is precisely Bush's vision, too, who wants to fight terror in Iraq rather than on American soil", Crisis Group interview, senior Baath Party official (Izzat al-Duri branch), July 2007.

serve foreign agendas. We realised that we couldn't do with al-Qaeda, and the Americans realised they couldn't do without us.¹¹⁰

Growing cooperation between some insurgent groups and the U.S. lifted the pre-existing taboo against negotiations with the occupier. It also encouraged greater focus on the struggle's political as opposed to military aspects. In May 2007, an Iraqi observer said:

Al-Qaeda's methods served the occupation by dividing the resistance, pitting insurgent groups against one another and weakening them all. Increased frustration with its bullying tactics and hegemonic ambitions led the resistance to accept the principle of negotiations with the U.S. The past few months have witnessed many interactions – direct or indirect – between faction leaders and occupying forces under the pretext of fighting the Persian threat. Most factions aren't very serious about fighting the occupation anymore. They focus on political objectives and the formation of broad fronts.¹¹¹

Among members of the Islamic Army – one of the largest and most effective insurgent groups – many have opted for cooperation with the U.S., while its more militant elements have splintered and taken on new names in different locations (such al-Furqan in Mada'in and Fatah al-Mubin in Mosul).¹¹² Smaller groups adopted various paths; the 1920 Revolution Brigades and Jami' struck deals with the U.S., whereas Asa'ib al-Iraq al-Jihadiya and Jaysh al-Fatihin reportedly have not, denouncing all forms of collaboration.¹¹³ While there exists no reliable data, arguably as much as two thirds of the insurgency as it existed at its height is currently inactive.

As with the tribes, the U.S. displayed far greater subtlety and sophistication vis-à-vis the insurgency than at any

prior point during the five years of the war. The U.S. shifted its focus from fighting the enemy to protecting the civilian population; in particular, it halted blind sweeps that endangered civilians, antagonised the population and had at most a limited impact on the insurgency.¹¹⁴ Additional troops stationed in smaller bases enabled it to start paying attention to local dynamics and turn them to its advantage. Even still-active insurgent leaders concede the U.S. has made considerable progress, implicitly acknowledging they are facing their first serious challenge. One of them described the course of events in a Baghdad neighbourhood in 2007:

Al-'Amiriya was controlled by several armed groups, most prominently al-Qaeda and the Islamic Army. Until April, the U.S. barely could enter the neighbourhood and, if they did, they would be forced to leave quickly under heavy fire. But a conflict was simmering between al-Qaeda and the Islamic Army. The Americans noticed it, observed and then began backing one side against the other. They did so subtly, focusing their attacks on al-Qaeda so that the Islamic Army began to see the U.S. as its de facto ally. Now Abu al-'Abd, the Islamic Army's local commander, rules supreme.

No other group can continue the resistance. Why? First, all fighters know each other, so Abu al-'Abd can easily track down where the attacks are coming from and turn over troublemakers to the Americans. Secondly, they don't want more internal strife which would only further strengthen the occupier. Thirdly, Abu al-'Abd has incorporated many of the other groups' members. When he won the fight against al-Qaeda, he posed as a liberator, enjoyed wide popular support and called on volunteers to work with him. He needed a few hundred. Thousands showed up, many from rival groups. The U.S. learned from this and has tried to replicate the model elsewhere.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, tribal figure with close ties to the 1920 Revolution, Falluja, December 2007. Saudi officials and analysts also claim that Iran is helping al-Qaeda, Crisis Group interviews, Riyadh, April 2008.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Iraqi observer with close ties to the insurgency, March 2008.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, well-connected figure within the insurgency, April 2008.

¹¹³ Ibid. Another well-informed observer noted that "there remain factions, notably Salafi ones, that stick to their principle of jihad against the U.S. with no negotiations before its defeat. These include Ansar al-Sunna, 'Asa'ib al-Iraq al-Jihadiya, Jaysh al-Mujahidin and obviously the parties behind the Islamic State, ie, al-Qaeda in Iraq, Jaysh al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura and the like", Crisis Group interview, Iraqi observer with close ties to the insurgency, March 2008.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group advocated such a shift in late 2004 and again in late 2006. Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°34, *What Can the U.S. Do in Iraq?*, 22 December 2004; and N°60, *After Baker-Hamilton: What to Do in Iraq*, 18 December 2006.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior figure within the insurgency, November 2007. "To take another example, in the al-Jihad neighbourhood, the Islamic Army requested the U.S. to build a wall to both protect civilians from Shiite militias operating out of neighbouring Baya' and encourage the return of displaced persons and refugees. By the same token, the Islamic Army also facilitated the return of Shiite families, thereby

The accumulation of such local deals made a remarkable contribution to the decrease in violence. As in the case of the *sahwat*, there is much in it for U.S. forces, which gain access to former insurgents' in-depth knowledge of the local topography and human environment. For their part, groups collaborating with the U.S. typically end up exercising greater control over the areas in question,¹¹⁶ often by resorting to violent, arbitrary means going far beyond targeted operations against al-Qaeda in Iraq.¹¹⁷ Resistance by other insurgent groups inevitably would lead to a bloody fratricidal confrontation, an unappealing prospect that has led movements wishing to pursue the fight to lie low.

The critical challenge for the U.S. is not only to incorporate former insurgents turned Sons of Iraq into the security apparatus or provide them with alternative jobs. It also is the fact that the insurgency is yet to be defeated and that the problem it presents has no military solution.

highlighting its national, non-sectarian credentials. This is their political calculation", *ibid.* A U.S. journalist offered a more nuanced view: "I've covered Abu Abed since early May 2007 when he produced roughly 40 men to work with the Americans and am not sure he has expanded that into the thousands. There actually appears to be considerable infighting among the Sons of Iraq in 'Amariya. I'm not sure the U.S. has tried to replicate this model elsewhere as they consider 'Amariya unique, even though it was influenced by the Anbar *Sahwat*", Crisis Group email communication, April 2008.

¹¹⁶ "I fled after the Islamic Party, which rules some of our localities, formed a local police force in cooperation with elements from Hamas Iraq, Jami' and others. At first they went after al-Qaeda fighters and their informants, but after al-Qaeda was defeated they turned against our combatants and led the Americans to our weapons caches. These 'police forces' used to fight with us against the occupation, so they know us individually, and they know who cooperates and supports us and they provide the Americans with all this information. This forced us to leave our homes and abandon jihad. We do not have the strength to confront them because they are backed by the Americans but also because they are our cousins and we don't want more blood between us. We hope that they will return to the right path, which is the path of resistance against the occupier until he is forced out", Crisis Group interview, Jihadi Clans of Iraq ('asa'ib al-'iraq al-jihadiya) member, July 2007. The monthly number of weapon caches found by coalition or Iraqi forces rose from an average of 50 in early 2007 to more than 150 in February 2008. MNF-I SIGACTS III Database (Coalition Reports only) as of 23 February 2008.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group gathered abundant testimony from residents of localities suspected of being al-Qaeda strongholds who claim that children, women and elders were killed by U.S.-sponsored forces. In contrast, young jihadi militants reportedly were able to flee and redeploy in other areas. Crisis Group interviews, al-Faris, al-'Irsan and al-Khalis residents, June-August 2007.

B. INSURGENCY DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Increasingly divided and with several important groups co-opted by the U.S., the insurgency is a weakened yet still potent force. According to U.S. statistics, and as late as mid-March 2008, insurgents attempted or executed a weekly average of 500 attacks, or approximately 2,000 monthly, against coalition forces or Iraqi infrastructure – roughly the same figures as in mid-2005, though but a third of what occurred during the worst periods in 2007.¹¹⁸ Other figures provide a clearer picture. Between 13 February and 4 May 2007, the U.S. estimates the insurgency carried out a daily average of 32 attacks (approximately 960 monthly), all targets included, in Anbar and Salaheddin – two governorates where there is neither sectarian violence nor Shiite militia activity. From 1 December 2007 to 22 February 2008, the average had declined to 11 daily, or roughly 330 per month.¹¹⁹ Insurgent communiqués suggest a drop of similar proportions in attacks for which they claim responsibility.¹²⁰

Meanwhile, violence in Ninawa has remained steady over time with a daily average of 15, or 450 monthly.¹²¹ Although the number of Iraqi (civilian and military) and U.S. casualties (at least until the late March 2007 flare-up in the south and Sadr City) has decreased markedly, ongoing violence at a time when al-Qaeda in Iraq's capacity has been substantially eroded suggests the insurgency is not over.

The conflict appears to have reached a new stalemate. On one side, insurgents face huge, quasi-insurmountable obstacles in areas where U.S. forces have successfully deployed their counter-insurgency tactics; their only hope for a resurgence will come if and when U.S. achievements – in particular, the Sons of Iraq phenomenon – are undone. Their fate, in other words, is intricately tied to U.S. actions – its ability to strike and sustain local deals and achieve meaningful political progress as well as the pace and scope of any withdrawal.

On the other side, the surge appears to have reached its limits. It has had little to no impact in Ninawa or in parts

¹¹⁸ General David Petraeus testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 8 April 2008. These figures include attacks perpetrated throughout the country.

¹¹⁹ SIGACTS III Database (Coalition Reports only) as of 23 February 2008. Data reflects executed enemy attacks targeted against coalition, ISF, civilians, Iraqi infrastructure and government organisations. It does not include improved explosive devices or mines that were found and cleared.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Western analyst monitoring all communiqués released by the Iraqi insurgency, April 2008.

¹²¹ SIGACTS III Database (Coalition Reports only) as of 23 February 2008.

of Salaheddin and Kirkuk (although the establishment of the Huwayja *sahwa* was one of the surge's important indirect outcomes). Lacking sufficient troops, the counter-insurgency tactics applied in some areas are hard to replicate elsewhere; moving U.S. forces to new locations and leaving behind Iraqi security forces would be risky, for they remain weak and unreliable. Paradoxically, in most areas the surge highlighted the inability of Iraqi forces, working on their own, to protect the local population and gain its confidence. Moreover, as the surge phases out, the fragility of local deals with the U.S. risks becoming more apparent, adding to the difficulty of convincing tribes and insurgent groups in the northern governorates to emulate their counterparts further south.

In sum, although the insurgency has been cut down to a more manageable size, what remains is an enduring source of violence and instability. It also likely could rapidly revive should there be lack of political progress, disappointment with existing deals or other setbacks, be it at a local or national level.

Much of this uncertainty relates to the existence of a decentralised, cottage industry-style insurgency whose importance has swelled with the fragmentation and defection of more organised and potent armed groups. This includes fighters who do not belong to any of the major groups, neither document, publicise nor film their deeds and prefer anonymity to visibility. During fieldwork in Mosul, Ramadi and Falluja throughout 2007, Crisis Group came across a significant number. They have no grand vision for Iraq's future or even their own;¹²² instead of counting on outside resources, they tend to rely on local volunteers, weapons seized from the former regime's stockpiles and their own fluent knowledge of the local terrain.¹²³ For the most part, their activities consist of relatively modest operations such as nightly mortar attacks and laying occasional mines. Although limited in scope, such operations likely form a non-negligible portion of anti-US violence.

While these attacks are an irritant more than a strategic threat, fighters – some of whom are former military or intelligence professionals – offer or sell their services

and expertise to more structured groups,¹²⁴ thereby giving them an important, indirect role in the insurgency's overall performance.¹²⁵ They could well serve as a catalyst for revival of resistance against the U.S.

Some insurgents go further, presenting an upbeat image of continued resistance and objection to any form of collaboration with the U.S. There is, undoubtedly, significant self-serving propaganda; in fact, they may be doing little more than seeking to improve their leverage in anticipation of sought-after talks with the U.S. Yet, their arguments as to why the *sahwa* and Sons of Iraq are but a fleeting phase in a lasting war are worth considering.

First, they claim that former insurgent leaders who work with the U.S. have not brought all their fighters with them. Rather than enlist with the so-called Sons of Iraq, many allegedly melted away, joining the aforementioned unaffiliated fighters, waiting for better times¹²⁶ or

¹²⁴ A former security officer under Saddam said, "although I always remained independent, I provided information to various resistance factions, given my expertise in this field. I served them well, and they were Islamists. But I couldn't join them because they saw me as a Baathist and a security officer and accused me of fighting Salafism in the past. I also was suspicious of them, sensing that there were foreign parties behind some of the people with whom I interacted", Crisis Group interview, former security officer, July 2007.

¹²⁵ A Salafist leader remarked that many former military commanders did not have the necessary qualities to assume key positions within the insurgency's leadership yet were indispensable due to their experience: "Former military commanders lack a political vision. Their experience under Saddam was one of blind obedience and absolute loyalty. They have immense military know-how and courage, but they are no revolutionaries", Crisis Group interview, armed group spokesman, April 2007.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, members of the insurgency, Ramadi and Falluja, December 2007. Insurgent groups for now seem to have ruled out the option of all-out retaliation against those who have struck deals with the U.S. They tend to break down the Sons of Iraq phenomenon into various categories, stressing that although some of their members are genuine collaborators with the U.S., others are driven by legitimate anger at al-Qaeda's deeds or mere poverty. That, they argue, is why they are reluctant to target them. Other considerations also are at play, including the Sons of Iraq's deep knowledge of the local terrain, the powerful support they enjoy from the U.S. and concern at the inevitable costs of an intra-Sunni civil war, Crisis Group email communication, senior official from the Muslim Scholars Association, a religious and political organisation with ties to the insurgency, March 2008; Crisis Group interview, spokesman for the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance (an umbrella organisation regrouping the Islamic Army, the Mujahidin Army, Ansar al-Sunna, Jami' and Hamas Iraq, segments of which now collaborate with the U.S.), March 2008.

¹²² "What is the resistance's future? Honestly, we don't have a clue. It's quite complex. Anyhow, many of us who fight have no particular vision other than for the very short term. There's a time for everything. If the Americans flee, no doubt the current government would follow. Sunni zones would remain in the hands of the resistance, but for the rest of Iraq, it's unclear. It's too early to think this over. The dynamics shift by the day", Crisis Group interview, fighter unaffiliated with any particular group, Mosul, May 2007.

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews, fighters unaffiliated with any particular group, Mosul, Ramadi and Falluja, May-December 2007.

redeploying to areas where it is still possible to fight.¹²⁷ They remain, under this account, profoundly hostile to the occupation.¹²⁸ An Iraqi analyst with close ties to the insurgency asserted:

The reality is that within groups whose leadership is now tied to or even aligned with the U.S., many combatants chose the quiet and stability of their homes. The expectation is that they may return to their original factions if these groups change course, which is somewhat doubtful; or that they will rise up against them, which is a possibility; or that they progressively will organise themselves into new resistance groups, which is the most likely. They are, in a sense, sleeper cells.¹²⁹

Secondly, they point out that among co-opted former insurgents, discontent is or inevitably will be rising. Insurgents concede that economic and security progress has occurred in some areas, where life resumed after al-Qaeda in Iraq's defeat. But they describe it as broadly insufficient or wholly lacking, as well as highly vulnerable in regions such as Baghdad's 'Arab Jbur, and utterly dependent on U.S. military presence, political leverage and material support.¹³⁰ Improvements that have occurred, they argue, are destined to evaporate, a victim of Iraqi mismanagement, corruption and sectarianism. An insurgent leader described a fragile situation:

¹²⁷ An official from the Muslim Scholars Association said, "the occupying forces used various means to shut down opportunities for the resistance in specific parts of the country. But they were surprised to see opportunities emerge elsewhere. Most recently, when the resistance calmed down in Anbar, it intensified Diyala, and when Diyala was put out, it reignited in Mosul and Samarra", and so on in a series of shifting locations to which I see no end", Crisis Group email communication, March 2008.

¹²⁸ A former general said, "what matters is to chase the American occupier. Some former generals like me have been approached and offered jobs in the army or the police. In fact, they tried to lure me with an important position. I thought it over and refused. I decided I would never accept as long as we are under occupation. My negotiating terms are simple: You leave and then we professionals install security. We are absolutely qualified and ready", Crisis Group interview, Falluja, December 2007.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Iraqi analyst with close ties to the insurgency, March 2008.

¹³⁰ In the words of a U.S. military commander, "today business is growing and children are back in school. Until recently there had been little to no services. There was no electricity when we came in, and now it is up to twenty hours a day. We did it by going to district council and asking them to come over. We just kept working them and working them until they repaired the electrical infrastructure and refurbished the health clinic", Crisis Group interview, Hawr Rajab, March 2008.

Anbar has become the safest governorate for the Americans in all of Iraq, with the exception of the Kurdish zones. Practically every town and village can be considered a U.S.-controlled camp, fenced off with berms and barbed wire and accessible only through closely watched checkpoints. Towns are divided in quarters by blast walls. Security has been established, but there is no freedom. The people's basic needs have yet to be genuinely addressed. Until recently, people saw al-Qaeda as the cause of all their problems. But now al-Qaeda is gone, and their expectations have turned to the U.S. Many people were co-opted by the Americans but not out of love for them. They did so out of practical considerations. The U.S. will have to deliver quickly and on a wide scale. But there is no trust between the U.S., the Iraqi government and local players. That is why the current situation is only temporary.¹³¹

Some U.S. military commanders echoed this assessment. Speaking of 'Arab Jbur, one said:

The big problem is that there is no government participation in our efforts. The government doesn't want to come down and help, therefore nothing really works down here. The risk in the next six to twelve months is not to see al-Qaeda's re-emergence but the emergence of another Sunni insurgent group based on frustration due to lack of government support. The government doesn't care about 'Arab Jbur because that was where some of Saddam's people came from.¹³²

Other sceptics point to irregular salary payments and lack of vital infrastructure such as hospitals as reasons why U.S. efforts will fail.¹³³ This is doubtful in the short term, as more likely is needed to persuade a large number of former insurgents to switch back. Having thrown in their lot with the U.S., and given al-Qaeda's possible return, the Sons of Iraq will think twice before turning against their new patron. Even if some of their members quit, their leadership is

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, senior figure within the insurgency, November 2007.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, U.S. military commander, 'Arab Jbur, March 2008.

¹³³ "People now can go about their own business. But there is an atmosphere of fear as people are not fully satisfied with the current situation, seen as unsustainable. Basic services are very poor and have become the main focus of complaints targeting the government. Hospitals and health services are very limited, far worse than what they were under Saddam and the sanctions", Crisis Group telephone interview, Ba'quba businessman, December 2007.

probably too tainted and compromised in the insurgency's eyes to be redeemed. Nor is there much appeal in the prospect of resuming anti-U.S. activity, which has shown its limitations. The Sons of Iraq have crossed a threshold, in other words, and it probably will take more than this kind of frustration for them to cross back.

Instead, the real danger lies in their appearing to be mere U.S. proxies, thereby losing legitimacy in their constituents' eyes. Already, their unease at such an outcome is perceptible. A Sons of Iraq leader said:

We are awaiting a major political change. We are trying to send a very informed message to the people ... to convince them to put down their arms ... One group was left out of the political equation. Now let's acknowledge there was a mistake – that the electoral process in 2005 was controlled by Shiites and that security agencies have been taken over by Shiite parties and militias. There is more than one way to change this reality. As a consequence, we have formed a political structure to represent us, and we hope that there will be real cooperation from the American side. Threats of al-Qaeda, Shiite militias and Iran still exist. Our message is that we need to start a new era. Our volunteers are asking what is the reward for our cooperation – is it just a few dollars handed out? That can't be the reward. Soon we will face al-Qaeda sleeper cells if we lose hope.¹³⁴

Indeed, many who joined the Sons of Iraq did so based on the straightforward if simplistic assumption that their alliance with the U.S. would check Iranian influence and Shiite power – ironically linking the U.S. with some of the more sectarian, anti-Shiite Sunni elements.¹³⁵ Their inflated expectations not being met, some insurgents argue, the Sons of Iraq gradually will come to terms with Washington's lack of desire or capacity to achieve this goal. Insurgent representatives repeatedly evoke their hope that their former allies will wake up to America's "betrayal and manipulation" and turn away from a "disappointing and bitter experience";¹³⁶ they

build on recent history to buttress their case, namely the U.S. forces' perceived passivity throughout the civil war that engulfed Baghdad and elsewhere, when Shiite death squads operated with impunity.¹³⁷

All this, they say, reinforces their conviction that striking deals with the U.S. ultimately is fruitless since Washington has done virtually nothing to rid the country of Iran's influence; instead, it has merely used its new Sunni allies to defeat the resistance and entrench its occupation.¹³⁸ An insurgent commented: "Iran is not our priority. Iranian influence only increased under cover of the U.S. occupation; the U.S. fostered it by establishing and supporting this sectarian government. So our priority will always remain the U.S. occupation".¹³⁹ The Iraqi government's reluctance to incorporate meaningful numbers of Sons of Iraq into its security apparatus is further evidence.¹⁴⁰ By April 2008, only 21,000 out of

prevailing sentiment if the Sons of Iraq were not incorporated into Iraqi security forces: "The Sons of Iraq really turned the tide last year. Now what they're saying is 'we did this for you – we did it for ourselves too – and what do we get for it?'. The answer is nothing", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, March 2008.

¹³⁷ Iraqis relate countless stories of anti-Sunni violence by security forces despite a nearby U.S. presence; in some cases, they claim the U.S. was "softening up" Sunni neighbourhoods resisting such forces, Crisis Group interviews, Sunni refugees from Baghdad, Damascus, 2007-2008.

¹³⁸ "Contrary to the Americans' promise, they are not focusing on al-Qaeda and Iranian-backed militias. They are targeting all resistance factions. In fact, their efforts against those militias pale in comparison to those against the resistance", Crisis Group interview, spokesman for the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance (elements of which cooperate with the U.S.), March 2008.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, member of insurgency, March 2008. A spokesman for the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance echoed this view: "The Council clearly looks at the American occupier as the number one priority. The occupation is the principal reason for the presence of Iranian proxies, and if the occupier is expelled, they will be expelled too", Crisis Group interview, March 2008. Similar views were expressed to Crisis Group by several other insurgent leaders, interviews, March 2008.

¹⁴⁰ A member of the insurgency commented: "To this day we believe the U.S. is working to foster chaos. How else can one explain its incapacity to build neutral, patriotic security services? When the current government refuses to merge the *sahwat* ["Sons of Iraq" is above all an American expression, while Iraqis sometimes use *sahwat* – a term initially restricted to the tribal awakenings – to designate all volunteers working with the U.S.] into the security forces, why does the U.S. go along? This is beyond our understanding and convinces us that the Americans are not serious about confronting the [Shiite] militias", Crisis Group interview, March 2008.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sons of Iraq leader, Ghazaliya, March 2008.

¹³⁵ The 1920 Revolution Brigades, for instance, has been accused of sectarian cleaning in Diyala, alongside al-Qaeda (albeit not in coordination with it). In explaining its decision to side with the U.S. in its traditional stronghold of Abu Ghayb, west of Baghdad, the group highlighted the need to resist alleged Shiite "colonisation", Crisis Group interviews, insurgents from Diyala and Abu Ghayb, August 2007.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, insurgent representatives, March 2008. A U.S. military adviser described what likely would be the

more than 91,000 had been incorporated into the army and police or provided with menial jobs.¹⁴¹

In the end, many still-active insurgents contend, the Sons of Iraq will come under growing pressure to rethink their newly minted alliances with the U.S.¹⁴² and the resolve of those who remained with the insurgency will strengthen.¹⁴³

Insurgents put forth a third plausible reason for questioning whether the current policy can lead to lasting quiet which relates to increased Sunni fragmentation. Dividing the insurgency and pitting some against others has become a pillar of U.S. policy and is at least in part a key to its recent successes. As an Arab analyst put it, “the immediate goal for the U.S. is to encourage splits

¹⁴¹ General Petraeus testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 8 April 2008. A U.S. military commander in the mixed Rashid neighbourhood of Baghdad described the obstacles he faced as a combination of lagging capacity and the government’s sectarian bias: “The government isn’t doing enough. They may have the best intentions in the world, but they don’t have enough capacity to do it and then they’re afraid of losing control – that the whole process will spiral out of control. Also, I don’t see Sunni Sons of Iraq getting in the security apparatus as fast as their Shiite counterparts. I’m still seeing a heavy approval rating [for incorporation into the security forces] for Shiites on the west side of Rashid, while there is little more than token action for Sunnis in the east. How does one fight against that?” Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, March 2008.

¹⁴² “The alliance of some factions with the occupying forces occurred at a time when the occupiers adopted a new face; they were helped in that by various Sunni politicians who took part in the political process. During the Mahdi Army’s and Badr Corps’ sectarian offensive [in the aftermath of the February 2006 Samarra’ mosque bombing and throughout the first half of 2007] – a dirty game in which Iran’s role became evident – people’s anger rose. The occupiers tried to turn this to their advantage, persuading these factions to stop killing Americans and focus on those – Iran and its allies – who are more dangerous and will remain after the occupiers leave. We believe these factions have made a deadly mistake. On the one hand, they jeopardised their popular support. On the other, they have been manipulated like the *sahwat*, used for short-term goals by the occupiers and likely to be abandoned at the first opportunity. They risk being isolated and exposed to widespread criticism”, Crisis Group email communication, senior official from the Muslim Scholars Association, March 2008.

¹⁴³ “Whoever believes the resistance can be lured by promises of political representation, the return of the displaced or the improvement of services is mistaken. Those factions that gave in to such illusions have been frustrated by the occupier and discovered that Americans were deceitful. The rest, and in particular the most important and active groups, will not be satisfied by anything short of a full U.S. withdrawal. Their convictions are only stronger as a result of this bitter experience”, Crisis Group email communication, Muslim Scholars Association, March 2008.

among Sunnis and Shiites; the more fragmented they are, the more they seek outside assistance against rival groups, the less united they will be in confronting the coalition”.¹⁴⁴ But short-term expediency could come at the expense of longer-term exigencies, and greater fragmentation could render the goal of sustainable stability even more elusive. An insurgent group spokesman elaborated on this point:

The Shiites are divided into different parties, themselves divided into rival branches. In this way, the Americans believe they can control them. In like manner, the U.S. is trying to control the Sunnis through divide-and-rule tactics. But all these petty deals with tribes and armed groups do not amount to progress – let alone genuine agreement – on core issues. They represent a series of temporary, tactical victories which will give way to more violence as tensions deepen between all these elements supported by the U.S. The upcoming elections, for example, might bring them to a head, when all will fight over the new balance of power. We expect the security situation to take another plunge, enabling the resistance to resume.¹⁴⁵

All in all, transforming the Sons of Iraq experiment into a sustainable achievement raises deeper challenges than incorporating some of them into the security apparatus and providing others with jobs – a task that, for political and economic reasons, is difficult in and of itself. What the U.S. still lacks is a strategy aimed at engaging the wider Sunni Arab population and in particular what remains of the insurgency, which could still offer a credible alternative to cooperation with the U.S., if such cooperation were to yield disappointing results.

C. CAN THE U.S. AND INSURGENT GROUPS NEGOTIATE?

The above arguments reflect a self-serving, best-case scenario from the insurgents’ perspective. In particular, they disregard the possibility that the U.S. might consolidate its tactical gains through job creation, reconstruction, integration of significant numbers of former insurgents into the security forces and Iraqi government steps toward political reconciliation.

Still, it would be foolhardy for the U.S. to replace the insurgents’ wishful thinking with its own – namely, belief that effective armed opposition will fade away

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Arab analyst, Paris, October 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, insurgent front spokesman, March 2008.

once salaries are paid on time, political benchmarks are met and conclusive military campaigns are waged in remaining insurgent strongholds. The dynamics to which the insurgents point – continued resentment among Sunnis, the fact that many groups are merely hunkering down, the prospect of disillusionment among Sons of Iraq, alienated by U.S. failure to confront Iran and its presumed allies and by Iraqi failure to integrate them – all could spell longer-term trouble.

Aside from the steps mentioned above, minimising this risk would entail serious U.S. engagement with groups that remain active. Some contacts have been initiated. A British general has been put in charge of reaching out to elements within the insurgency;¹⁴⁶ overtures, such as releasing prisoners in the context of local deal making, also have been made.¹⁴⁷ Yet, although insurgents acknowledge that lines of communication with the U.S. have been extant for some time,¹⁴⁸ they insist that talks have fallen short of genuine negotiations. Instead, they suspect they are more akin to an intelligence-gathering exercise or another iteration of divide-and-rule tactics, the goal being to co-opt the groups rather than achieve a real compromise. A respected figure within the insurgency claimed:

There has been no genuine negotiation between major players within the resistance and the U.S. and Iraqi governments – only the opening of lines of communication. The idea of negotiating with the occupier gained traction among most groups. But the U.S. either wants capitulation on its own terms or engages with us to gather information and foment division.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, UK official, London, June 2007.

¹⁴⁷ “To bring the insurgents on board, the U.S. decided to selectively release detainees based on the assessment whether they were ‘reconcilables’ or ‘irreconcilables’”, presentation by a senior adviser to the U.S. military leadership attended by Crisis Group, Washington DC, February 2008.

¹⁴⁸ As early as April 2007, an armed group spokesman said, “discussions have occurred, and there have been Turkish, Saudi and Jordanian efforts to deepen them. But we have yet to see where this may lead”, Crisis Group interview, April 2007. An Iraqi journalist with ties to the insurgency added: “Talabani announced during the November 2005 Arab League-hosted conference that talks were being held with elements of the resistance. A few months later, the Americans stated for the first time that lines of communication had been opened and that they would soon be strengthened. At that time the resistance wanted to take the Americans’ pulse through third parties such as businessmen and politicians”, Crisis Group interview, July 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior figure within the insurgency, July 2007. The U.S. has been willing and trying to talk to insurgents for some time, but discussions appear to have

There is little doubt that most insurgent groups are eager for negotiations. Their representatives claim they can pursue the fight indefinitely, rarely complain of a shortage of volunteers or weapons¹⁵⁰ and argue that the absence of a credible alternative to resistance will keep many fighters active for the foreseeable future. But signs of exhaustion and weariness abound. Seeking to put a positive face, an insurgent group spokesman said, “the resistance has reached a new stage, but it cannot be equated with capitulation. We would call it a pause. Our people have endured much hardship with great resolve: the Iran-Iraq war, the 1991 war, the embargo, the American invasion. From time to time we need a respite”.¹⁵¹

Insurgent groups suffer from war fatigue, know they have been weakened and are interested in securing some gains prior to a U.S. drawdown. They lament the lack of strategic depth required to defeat their enemy. With the split from al-Qaeda in Iraq, financial resources have decreased, and Arab states remain reluctant to fund the insurgency or even recognise its legitimacy.¹⁵² Insurgents sometimes fault Baathist leaders in exile – often accused by the U.S. and Iraqi governments of financing Iraqi militants – for not standing up to their responsibilities.¹⁵³

focused on issues considered marginal by the more determined insurgent groups who are interested in a fundamental overhaul of the political system. “We’re speaking to ex-Baathists inside and outside Iraq, and we’ve encouraged them to speak with the reconciliation committee. Initial talks are about amnesty, pensions, property [confiscated or appropriated by others]. Some of our exiled interlocutors want to negotiate the terms of their return, finding it difficult to remain in Jordan and other countries, either because of money problems or because of growing anti-Iraqi sentiment”, Crisis Group interview, official involved in reconciliation, Baghdad, March 2008. Leaders and representatives of what remains of the insurgency confirmed that no negotiations had taken place based on their basic demand for an ultimate U.S. withdrawal. Crisis Group interviews, March 2008.

¹⁵⁰ “The weapons already available are enough to keep us going for another twenty years, as the former army abandoned stockpiles of them”, Crisis Group interview, Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance spokesperson, March 2008.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, insurgent front spokesperson, March 2008.

¹⁵² A spokesman for the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance said, “we call upon Arab and Islamic states to support the resistance because it is the only legitimate representative of the Iraqi people”, Crisis Group interview, March 2008.

¹⁵³ “As Baathists we got in touch with our leaders in Syria and they promised us many things, gave us a monthly salary of \$300 and pledged operational help or funds to build up our capabilities. That was in late 2005. Things stayed as they were for six months, and the only thing we saw were our salaries.

Other factors make this a propitious time for talks. These include forthcoming provincial council elections, which several important insurgent groups have recognised as potentially valuable. One of their spokespeople said, “local elections are less tied to the central government than they are to local services. The resistance will let the elections proceed in accordance with the people’s desire, because one of our objectives is to serve the people and because provincial councils are not part of the political process”.¹⁵⁴ The prospect of elections could serve as the entry point for more wide-ranging U.S./insurgency discussions; by the same token, redressing political imbalances caused by the last provincial elections (which many groups boycotted) could be an important step toward demonstrating that the political system can be reformed, generate legitimate representation and offer peaceful solutions.¹⁵⁵

More generally, in talks with Crisis Group, insurgent leaders put forward a number of ideas, exhibiting a degree of pragmatism. For example, a senior figure within the insurgency said:

In practical terms, we have many ideas, such as reshaping the security forces based on years of enlistment to ensure that units are truly mixed, reintroducing obligatory military training as a way of fostering national unity and re-enrolling patriotic commanders, with whom Iraq is awash.¹⁵⁶

Another insurgent added:

We are not seeking an absolute victory over the U.S. but looking for a better balance that guarantees the country’s independence and protects our collective interests. If the U.S. wants to save face, it must take the initiative of building – or contributing to build – a national government reflecting a genuine and balanced representation composed of true patriots. This not only would

calm the situation on the ground but also allow for legitimate negotiations on all issues. I don’t see why this would be impossible.¹⁵⁷

Given deep-seated mistrust, negotiations could begin with a series of one-on-one meetings between a U.S. representative and representatives of still-active groups, with possible mediation from neighbouring states.¹⁵⁸ This could serve as a prelude for the broader gathering of Iraqi actors called for by Crisis Group in an earlier report.¹⁵⁹

That said, and although the mere onset of serious negotiations might help foster greater realism and understanding on all sides, significant obstacles remain:

- The insurgents insist on characterising the U.S. presence as an occupation as well as a source of instability and expect guarantees that it will end.¹⁶⁰ The absence of such guarantees along with the establishment of vast U.S. compounds in Iraq¹⁶¹ create precisely the opposite impression, leading many insurgents to question what U.S. officials take to be self-evident: that they intend and want to leave. This ambiguity has very real, practical consequences, helping to keep the insurgency’s nationalist cause alive.¹⁶²

Although insurgents insist that nothing short of full withdrawal will do,¹⁶³ they accept that this inevitably will be a protracted and complex

This is when I had to flee, having no means to defend myself from the occupier and Iran’s agents”, Crisis Group interview, former major general and Baath section member, August 2007. A senior Iraqi Baath party leader acknowledged: “The Baath suffers from its inability to convince anyone that it plays a role in the resistance. We want to form a Baathist resistance, even if it comes more than four years late”, Crisis Group interview, senior official from the Baath Party (Muhammad Yunis branch), June 2007.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance spokesman, March 2008.

¹⁵⁵ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°75, *Iraq after the Surge II: The Need for a New Political Strategy*, 30 April 2008.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior figure within the insurgency, July 2007.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, tribal leader and insurgent, March 2008.

¹⁵⁸ There is some evidence that the U.S. has been interested in such a format for some time.

¹⁵⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *After Baker-Hamilton*, op. cit.; see also *Iraq after the Surge II*, op. cit.

¹⁶⁰ An adviser to U.S. forces in Iraq listed the “drivers of instability in Iraq as sectarian violence, al-Qaeda in Iraq, Sunni insurgency, Shiite extremists, Kurdish expansionism, Shiite-on-Shiite violence, external subversion, criminality, weak state institutions”, leaving out the U.S. role, presentation attended by Crisis Group, Washington DC, February 2008.

¹⁶¹ The U.S. embassy in Baghdad is the largest diplomatic representation in the world. “Baghdad international airport” has become a de facto U.S. military airfield, through which U.S. citizens can enter Iraq with no visa.

¹⁶² “It is impossible to unite all factions in a single front because different groups pursue different agendas. But all agree on the need to expel the occupier, and there is coordination to that end”, Crisis Group interview, Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance official, March 2008.

¹⁶³ “I don’t think that the resistance will be satisfied with anything short of a full U.S. withdrawal, and to me this explains why it has never given up despite attempts to eliminate or appease it”, Crisis Group email communication, Muslim Scholars Association official, March 2008.

process whose details and modalities would have to be negotiated.¹⁶⁴ Finding ways to show the military presence is not open-ended without committing to a timetable – whether through statements or by beginning preliminary talks with insurgent groups – could help in that regard. A third-party role – perhaps in the form of a UN envoy – in any discussions may be necessary due to deep lack of trust.¹⁶⁵

- Armed groups also absolutely reject the current government and overall political system. They view any interaction with the government as unthinkable;¹⁶⁶ characterise Sunnis participating in the system as opportunistic and unrepresentative collaborators;¹⁶⁷ and consider the constitution so gravely flawed as to present a more serious challenge than the less deeply entrenched occupation.¹⁶⁸ Expressing a commonly held view among insurgent groups, a Muslim Scholars Association official asserted:

The political process has utterly failed; it is a sick body kept on life-support by the occupier, but life ultimately will leave it, and the wait shouldn't be too long. The problem starts with the bases upon which it was built, such as sectarian and ethnic apportionment. The occupation already erased an entire system once, when it got rid of the former regime and all its institutions. It shouldn't be difficult for it to do this again.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, insurgent representatives, September 2007 and March 2008.

¹⁶⁵ "We have no trust whatsoever in the Americans or in any negotiations with them unless under international supervision", Crisis Group interview, spokesman for the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance, March 2008.

¹⁶⁶ "No one sees any point in negotiating with the government, because it is a tool, not a decision-maker. We are not aware of any faction of any importance that has entered into negotiations with it", Crisis Group email communication, Muslim Scholars Association senior official, March 2008.

¹⁶⁷ "Sunni politicians have the most dismal record, given their abundance of promises and absence of any result. Their performance is abysmal. I doubt those who elected them consider them as their representatives", *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ "The problem is not so much the occupation. Foreign forces will be expelled one day or the other. But the constitution is here to stay", Crisis Group interview, insurgent front spokesman, March 2008.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group email communication, Muslim Scholars Association senior official, March 2008. A spokesman for the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance said, "we advise the Americans to control the death squads and redress the sectarian imbalance in government by setting up a professional

As a result, insurgent groups take the unrealistic position that the entire political process must begin from scratch, ignoring U.S. objections and inevitable resistance from those Iraqi forces that have benefited from the existing system and will not accept a comprehensive overhaul. In their rather simplistic view, Shiite militias should simply return to Iran; the opposition that lived abroad under Saddam ought to resume its life in exile; the former army and security apparatus need to be recalled, all as if nothing had happened since 2003.¹⁷⁰ Exaggerated expectations of what the U.S. can and will do take the insurgents even further:

If the US wants to protect its interests in Iraq and throughout the region, it is quite simple. It must restore Iraq's military might to Iran's level under the control of a non-sectarian government. Secondly, it must protect Iraq's unity as such as well as its membership in the Arab world. This is the only way to truly counter Iran's growing influence.¹⁷¹

Although there is no easy way to bridge this gap, both sides could moderate their views. On the one hand, the U.S. should stop acting as if the existing political process were fully legitimate and representative, needing only a few correctives (the fulfilment of a handful of benchmarks), and instead accept the need for more fundamental change of a system that is riddled with sectarianism and corruption, marked by large-scale militia rule and the plundering of national resources.¹⁷² On the other hand, the insurgency will have to understand that starting from scratch is not an option and instead think in terms of a more realistic, cogent political platform. Preliminary discussions, based on the credible prospect of ultimate U.S. withdrawal, could help both sides make these difficult yet necessary adjustments.

- A third problem is the insurgency's fragmentation, which raises important procedural and logistical challenges for any putative negotiation. In the words of an intellectual with ties to the insurgency:

[ie, technocratic] government to replace this one", Crisis Group interview, March 2008.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, insurgent representatives, September 2007 and March 2008.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, insurgent front official spokesman, March 2008.

¹⁷² See Crisis Group Report, *After Baker-Hamilton*. *op. cit.*, pp. 2-6.

The problem is that the resistance is not united. In these circumstances, who should the U.S. negotiate with? Some groups have entered into alliances, but even they can only speak for themselves. Arab states could mediate but they have their own agenda. We can't afford to see Iraq's interests get lost in all this.¹⁷³

The logical option would be for the U.S. to talk to some of the major groups in given localities, gradually bringing in more of them. Sunni Arab demands generally coalesce around similar themes, divisions notwithstanding: an end to the occupation; equal access to basic services and reconstruction; rejection of the current political system's alleged unjust and sectarian nature and their inclusion in state institutions and security apparatuses; preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity and Arab character. Seriously tackling these issues could potentially overcome the problem of the insurgency's lack of cohesion and appeal to its constituency. Armed groups would be left with the choice of either continuing to squabble over their own trivial rivalries – and thereby continue to lose popular support – or agreeing to engage in genuine negotiations and ensure their survival in a reformed political system.

V. CONCLUSION

Fragmentation of the Sunni community has had some important, beneficial effects. Most notably, it has diluted the monolithic sense of sectarian identity and, thereby, replaced the risk of a major civil war with the reality of several more manageable ones. It may be, in the words of an Arab analyst, “the first necessary step toward longer-term stability”.¹⁷⁴ But, as U.S. officials openly acknowledge, these changes could prove both fragile and fleeting. Tribal elements and former insurgents may become disillusioned with lack of political progress, inadequate steps toward economic and social inclusion and what they perceive as continued dominance by Iran and its Shiite proxies.

The problem also runs deeper. Since the war, a once deeply repressed society has witnessed the open assertion of a multitude of intense – and often intensely conflictual – worldviews and interests. These oppose religious, tribal and modernist outlooks; urban and rural backgrounds; different social classes; opposition to and acceptance of the U.S. presence; and ethnic and sectarian identities. In this setting, tribes, militias and other groups are often little more than vehicles for the predatory acquisition of goods. A chaotic and inherently violent competition for power, positions and resources is taking place, without accepted rules of the game or means to enforce them. In all likelihood, it will last long, with ebbs and flows in the level of strife as shifting balances of power temporarily emerge.

The U.S. is an integral and critical player in this ideological and material scramble. Its military presence galvanised resistance, bringing together groups that shared little else in common. Its early policies exacerbated and consolidated sectarian and ethnic divisions. Today, its divide-and-rule tactics are contributing to new fault lines and rivalries as some groups (a particular tribe, group or political party) benefit from U.S. largesse, while others do not. Undoubtedly, those that feel left out are and will be turning to alternative outside sponsors.

Ultimately, stability will require that such rivalries be mediated neither through violence nor buy-off, but by functional, legitimate state institutions. This will take time, but initial movement in that direction requires the U.S. and others to push for a genuinely inclusive political system rather than sustain a deeply sectarian and corrupt one. As further described in the companion report, this means finding ways – eg, new provincial

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, respected intellectual figure in the insurgency, July 2007. “There are a few major groups, but we now have a multitude of small ones, some of which are highly localised – with no presence in Baghdad for instance, and no concern for what is happening there”, Crisis Group interview, armed group spokesman, April 2007.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Arab analyst, Washington DC, March 2008.

and then national elections; more pressure on the Iraqi government; a broader domestic gathering (al-Qaeda in Iraq excluded) coupled with greater regional engagement to forge a new political consensus – to bring together the nation’s various elements. One immediate step would be for the U.S., perhaps through the UN, to negotiate with what remains of an insurgency that cannot be militarily defeated and that could revive if this opportunity – the most promising since 2003 – is wasted.

**Baghdad/Istanbul/Damascus/Brussels,
30 April 2008**

APPENDIX A

MAP OF IRAQ

