

Resurgence of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Fuelled by Saudi Arabia

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Iraq, more than two years after the U.S. withdrawal, and nearly a decade after the U.S. forces ousted Al Qaeda in Iraq AQI from Falluja, is still grappling with not merely an escalating sectarian crisis between the Shia-led government and an increasingly disaffected Sunni minority, but, even more menacingly, AQI's- relabelled itself as the Islamic state in Iraq and Levant ISIS - takeover of parts of Ramadi and Falluja in the notoriously rebellious Suni-dominated Anbar province. And while the Iraqi army managed to regain parts of - the provincial capital - Ramadi, it has so far spectacularly failed to make any headway in Falluja.

Although, the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki, has repeatedly warned that the army was on the verge of storming Falluja, nonetheless he has so far refrained, fearing that civilian casualties would trigger a fierce backlash by tribal leaders backing the army. Maliki, on Feb. 5, asserted that the only way to avoid a full-scale assault, was accepting an amnesty declared on Feb. 9, by Anbar's Governor, Ahmed Al Dulaimi- which offered militants one week to lay down their weapons. But despite the end of the deadline, military action has not yet materialised. It is doubtless that 2013 witnessed a dramatic surge in deadly violence, yet, it is no where near the 2006-2007 levels.

That is largely due to the fact that despite a relentless campaign - which has overwhelmingly targeted the Shia majority - aimed at provoking a tit for tat retaliatory attacks by the Shia militias, it has, at least for now, spectacularly failed. In retaliation to the killing of dozens of soldiers on Dec. 21, and in preparation for the looming general elections in Apr. 2014, the army bombed AQI camps, arrested Ahmed Al-Alwani, a sunni MP - who was wanted for terrorism charges - and then on Dec. 30, dismantled the protest camp in Ramadi.

While AIQ and Sunni tribal leaders opened fire on the Army, the speaker of the parliament Osama Al-Nujaifi, and his Sunni bloc Mutahidoon - part of the Sunni-dominated Iraqiya bloc - explicitly demanded the immediate withdrawal of the army from Falluja and Ramadi. But, as Maliki withdrew the army, AQI scrambled to seize the two cities. Without doubt, Maliki's decision was - militarily speaking - a grave mistake, however it has manifested that: First, AIQ had not only a highly significant presence in the protest camp, but even more alarmingly, it was heavily armed. Second, the local police in Anbar were at best utterly incompetent, but at worst colluding with AQI. Additionally, Maliki's decision has also led to: First, it has driven a majorwedge between Sunni tribal leaders. While, Ahmed Abu Reasha, has emphatically backed the army, Ali HatemSuliaman, has formed the Falluja Military Council to fight the Iraqi Army. Second, the sight of AIQ sweeping into Falluja and Ramadi,

both the scene of America's fiercest battles, has undeniably jolted the Obama administration to sharply expedite shipments of desperately needed weapons.

Ever since the overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003, the Saudi regime has been emphatically hostile towards Iraq. This has been largely due to its deeply entrenched fear that the success of democracy in Iraq would undoubtedly inspire its own people. Another reason is the deeply rooted hatred – by Saudi Arabia's extremist Wahhabi Salafi religious establishment – towards the Shia. The Saudi regime also accuses Maliki, of giving Iran a freehand to dramatically intensify its influence in Iraq. The Saudi regime has made no secret that its overriding priority is to severely undermine what it perceives as highly perilous and yet growing Iranian influence.

Even though the Saudi regime vehemently opposed U.S. pull out from Iraq, nevertheless in Dec. 2011, Syria rather than Iraq became Saudi Arabia's principal target for regime change. The Saudi regime has consistently considered the Syrian regime of Bashar Al Assad, an irreplaceable strategic ally to its primary foe Iran. The Saudis moved swiftly to shore up the armed insurgents by deploying its intelligence services, whose instrumental role in establishing Jabhat Al Nusra JN was highlighted in an intelligence review released in Paris in January 2013. The Saudi regime also used its huge influence and leverage on not only Sunni tribal leaders in western Iraq, but also on Saudi members of AQI, convincing it that its principal battlefield must be Syria and that its ultimate goal should be deposing Bashar Al Assad's Alawite regime, since its overthrow would break the back-bone of the Iraqi Shia-led government and inevitably loosen Iran's grip on Iraq.

The New York Times reported on October 14, 2012, that most of the weapons shipped by Saudi Arabia and Qatar were going to hard-line jihadists in Syria, thereby explaining how JN swiftly rose to prominence in Syria. *The New York Times* also reported on Sept. 12, 2013 that the Saudi regime dramatically stepped up its arming to the rebels, hoping to enable them to capitalise on a much-anticipated U.S. military strikes in retaliation to a chemical attack on a Damascus suburb. However, the Saudi regime was deeply rattled by Obama's stunning change of heart: Not only pulling back from launching military strikes against Syria, but, far more devastating, actively pursuing diplomacy to resolve Iran's highly contentious nuclear programme. In response, On Oct. 23, 2013, Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi intelligence chief reportedly told E.U. diplomats that Saudi Arabia is hell bent on scaling back its co-operation with the U.S. on the all-important issue of arming Syrian rebels.

Among the primary reasons for the strikingly extraordinary resurgence of AIQ are the following:

First, the torrent of funding, arming, logistical support and salaries provided by Saudi Arabia to extremist groups in Syria have not only turned JN – which according to Abu Baker Al Baghdadi's head of AQI, declaration in Apr. 2013: Is merely an extension of AQI, and Al Julani head of JN, is one of AQI's foot-soldiers. Adding, that all the resources were shared between AQI and JN – Salafi Wahhabi group into the most potent killing machine in Syria, but also dramatically reviving, if not, vaulting AQI's power and influence to levels that surmounts its peak strength in 2006-07.

Second, the appointment of Bandar bin Sultan, as the new intelligence chief in Jul. 2012, was primarily designed to ratchet up Saudi Arabia's faltering efforts in Syria. In Bandar's eyes overthrowing the Syrian regime was highly unachievable without initially destabilising Iraq and Lebanon. Thus, AIQ was given the green light to restart its intense campaign in

Iraq, aimed at ensuring that Iraq is far too busy to prop up the Syrian regime.

Third, the protests, which erupted in Anbar in Dec. 2012, were swiftly hijacked by a number of the Iraqiya bloc leaders and hard-line Sunni clerics. They, not only defiantly refused to negotiate directly or indirectly with the central government, but sought to escalate the protests, which were spurred on by AQI and Saudi Arabia. For AQI, the ongoing protests were a golden opportunity for more radicalisation, recruitment and ultimately reactivating the safe havens that originally existed in those areas. Saudi Arabia in turn, enthusiastically trumpeted these protests as incontrovertible evidence from the horse's mouth that Iraq is adopting discriminatory policies. And exploited the protests to intensify its blatant meddling under the perfect pretext of responding to appeals made by Sunni leaders. The Saudi Foreign minister in Jan. 2013, chillingly warned that Iraq will not stabilise unless it ceases embracing sectarian extremism.

Four, as part of the Saudi regime's strenuous attempts to stave off an internal uprising, especially after its patently deceitful myth of being the guardian of Sunni Islam has unravelled - largely due to the Saudi regime's full-blown support to the tyrannical regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen against the Sunnis in these countries. It has been working tirelessly to ratchet up sectarian strife in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Therefore, paving the way for AQI to ignite a regional sectarian war, enabling it to demonstrate to its increasingly disenfranchised people that it is heavily engaged in combating an existential threat from the Shia, namely Iran. Five, of course, the spiralling conflict in Syria has dramatically emboldened the Sunni minority in Iraq. All of these factors underscore the inescapable reality that Saudi Arabia's virulently sectarian geo-policies are behind the resurgence of AQI.

According to Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham narrative: Maliki's policy of discriminating against the Sunni minority revived AQI. This narrative holds no water for deliberately ignoring the following facts:

First, AQI was also heavily active in the same Sunni safeheavens, during the premiership of both Ayad Allawi - a secular Shia - and then Ibrahim Al Jaffari.

Second, the Sunni minority has persistently been in power since 1920, but it was during the Baathist era, and specifically under Saddam's rule, almost exclusively calling the shots in Iraq. No wonder, the Sunnis regard the prominent positions - Vice President, Deputy Prime Minister, Finance Minister and seven more ministries - as woefully inadequate.

Third, Sunni leaders have adamantly refused to accept the unavoidable reality that the Shia are the indisputable majority in Iraq - Nujaifi has even claimed, on Al Jazeera TV in Qatar, that the Sunnis are the majority. Four, despite Sunni claims that Article 4 of the terrorism law has unfairly been targeting them, it was, however, the Shia cities of Basra, Amarah, and Sadr city which, experienced in 2008, the strictest implementation of anti-terror laws.

This narrative sends out the highly perilous message to all ethnic and religious minorities: It is perfectly justifiable for marginalised minorities to join terrorist groups like AQI and turn their areas into a safeheaven and a launch-pad for suicide bombers to indiscriminately slaughter thousands of innocent civilians - for belonging to the majority - to bring the government to its knees. That was indeed Al Qaida's narrative for bombing New York, London, Madrid and now Baghdad.

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