



Iraq's Muslim Extremists Lay Ground for Taliban-style Rule

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It was a scene that could have been taken from the annals of the Taliban's Afghanistan. On October 18 scores of al-Qa'ida-affiliated gunmen on October 18 staged a boisterous parade in the streets of Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's restless western Anbar province, to celebrate the declaration of an Islamic state that claims to govern Iraq's predominantly Sunni Arab areas in central and western Iraq, rather than serving as a single, all-encompassing political community and government for the citizens of Iraq. The black-clad gunmen also raised placards vowing to continue to fight the US occupiers and the current Iraqi government. Similar parades were also reported in some towns in the province of Diyala. The self-styled state is to be headed by Amir Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, a mysterious and hitherto unknown figure, and would include the provinces of Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, Ta'mim, Salah al-Din and Ninawah, as well as parts of the provinces of Babil and Wasit.

A day earlier, the Mujahidin Shura Council, an umbrella organization of a potpourri of salafist groups that include the al-Qa'ida Organization in Mesopotamia (Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Bilad al-Rafidayn), issued a statement that in effect supports the break-up of Iraq along ethnic and sectarian lines. The statement describes the move as being in response to the Iraqi parliament's enactment a week earlier of a federalism law allowing provinces to join together to form regions enjoying self-rule. In the words of the Council's statement, which uses the vituperative terminology characteristic of visceral sectarian polemics:

After the Kurds had secured a state in the north and the Rawafid [a derogatory term for the Shi'as] had gained approval of federalism in the south and centre with the support of the Jews in the north and the Safavids [a disparaging reference to the Iranians in the current atmosphere of mounting ethno-sectarian hatreds engulfing Iraq] in the south, protected by armed militias that have black hearts, ideology, and action -- militias that have been killing our Sunni people and subjecting them to the ugliest forms of killing, torture, and displacement. The condition of the Sunnis has become the same as the condition of the orphans on the dining table of wicked people. Therefore, it has become obligatory for the honourable and free Sunni mujahidin 'ulama, and notables to make something for their own brothers, sons and honour.

The size and nature of the Islamic state that the Mujahidin Shura Council intends to form are fraught with indications of future conflict. The self-styled state lays claim to Sunni Arab-dominated provinces which constitute the heartland of the Iraqi insurgency. But there are large pockets of non-Arab and/or non-Sunni populations in other parts, such as in the capital Baghdad, and in and around the cities of Kirkuk in Ta'mim, Tallafar and Mosul in Ninawah, Balad and Dujayl in Salah al-Din, and Khalis and Ba'aquba in Diyala. Moreover, the provinces of Babil and Wasit are predominantly Shi'a and the oil-rich region of Kirkuk is subject to competing claims, mainly by Kurds and Turkmen, and to a lesser extent by Arabs and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians.

The statement also claims that the fighters of the Mujahidin Shura Council have imposed their "control over many areas" where "the enemies have no control." It asserts that "the mujahidin have established the rule of the Shari'ah and religion in these areas at the demand and persistence of the Sunnis themselves." It goes on to "call on all of Iraq's mujahidin, 'ulama, chieftains and Sunnis to pledge allegiance to the Amir of the Faithful, the virtuous Shaykh Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi; to obey him in good and bad times and to work relentlessly to strengthen the foundations of this state and sacrifice ourselves and our precious possessions for its sake."

Very little is known about Baghdadi. It is not yet clear whether the name Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi is an alias for Abdallah Rashid Salih al-Baghdadi, the head of the Mujahidin Shura Council. Three possible traits of Abu 'Umar Baghdadi can be inferred from a recent 22-minute audio-taped statement issued by Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, alias Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the al-Qa'ida leader in Iraq: that he has attained some education in Islamic religious studies, that he has been an active member of the insurgency, and that he is of Hashemite descent. In the statement posted on the internet on November 10, al-Muhajir pledges allegiance to "the venerable shaykh, the brave hero, the Qurayshi Hashemite, who is of a Husayni origin, the Amir of the Faithful, Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi ... to hear and obey, by putting at your disposal and direct orders 12,000 fighters, who constitute the army of al-Qa'ida, who pledge to die for the sake of Allah."

By taking a unilateral initiative to declare an Islamic state without even consulting other insurgent groups, community dignitaries or tribal chieftains in the areas it lays claim to, the Mujahidin Shura Council has been true to its exclusivist salafist ideology. But, like most unilateral conduct, the move will inevitably heighten inter- and intra-communal tensions. Tensions between al-Qa'ida and other Sunni Arabs in central and western Iraq have on many occasions flared over who will control the Sunni Arab heartland.

These tensions stem partly from the fragmentation of the insurgency. Since its early days, the insurgency has been plagued by several internal divisions and problems. Foremost among these are the lack of a single leadership, the multiplicity of ideological visions and the presence of a plethora of competing, if not conflicting, interests. While the existence of myriad groups on the landscape of the insurgency has made it difficult for the US and Iraqi government, let alone outsiders, to understand and unravel the resistance, it has also made cooperation and coordination between insurgent groups more difficult. Most cooperation between these groups has been focused on the tactical and operational levels, rather than on the political or strategic levels.

Fragmentation has made the insurgents' attempts to present a united political face futile. For one thing, no Sunni political group working publicly in Iraq has been able to play such a role, despite the fact that a number of groups would certainly welcome the opportunity to be the public political arm of the shadowy insurgency. For another, the proliferation of salafist groups in the insurgency has destroyed the possibility of either inter-communal or intra-communal cooperation around a programme of resistance to the occupation. In fact, salafism, especially that of the takfiri type that predominates in Iraq, is by its very nature not capable of consensus-building and reconciliation within an atmosphere of diversity and variety of interpretations and viewpoints. As an exclusivist ideology, salafism gives prominence to cleavages, to that which divides and separates rather than that which unites and bonds together; and it shrinks the boundaries of the Muslim community to include only the likeminded. For instance, the prevalent salafist rhetoric in Iraq not only regards groups traditionally regarded by salafis as being outside the pale of Islam, such as the Shi'as and the Sufis, but also other Sunni groups who disagree with some salafist views and tactics, such as the Association of Muslim Scholars and the Iraqi Islamic Party, are referred to as "apostates." With such an attitude, the effort to set up a salafist-inspired polity in Iraq is an exercise in futility and internecine bloodshed. Potential members of such a polity who disagree with the tenets of salafism would have to first be either eliminated, intimidated or forced to convert into salafism.

Each of these choices involves the use of violence, and the modus operandi of Iraqi salafis has indeed demonstrated an affinity for atavistic violence against other Iraqis. Their use of mass-casualty car-bombs and suicide-bombers against civilians has been the main factor in the widening chasm between the Sunnis and the Shi'as in Iraq. Warped arguments, inspired by a crude form of consequentialist morality, have been offered by al-Qa'ida and other salafist groups in Iraq to justify their attacks against civilians and adversaries. In their view, the ultimate goodness of the consequences of their actions renders the nature of those actions irrelevant. One local anti-Qa'ida leader once accused Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi of "not giving a damn about Iraq; he is prepared to kill 10 Iraqis if in doing so he can kill one American" (the Daily Star, Lebanon, July 16, 2004). Little wonder that the air often hangs heavy with paranoia in salafist-dominated areas of western and central Iraq. Intimidation and unbridled violence have been used freely to enforce a salafist interpretation of the Shari'ah in Sunni Arab areas. For instance, many barbers have been killed or threatened for shaving the beards of male customers.

The use of excessively ruthless tactics to impose a salafist interpretation of the Shari'ah has led to widespread discontent among tribal leaders in Anbar, who have on numerous occasions mobilised their tribesmen to engage the salafis in armed confrontation. A recent meeting at the home of tribal chieftain Buzay Futaykhan Abu Rishah resulted in the formation of the Anbar Salvation Council (Majlis Inqadh al-Anbar) or ASC. The ASC, headed by Abd al-Sattar Buzay Abu Rishah, has pledged to chase foreign fighters out of Anbar province. It has announced that it carried out operations against foreign fighters in a number of areas in Anbar including Ramadi. It claims that its tribal forces control the areas from the city of Hit to the al-Bu 'Ubayd region.

Most of the tribal leaders' ire, as well as of other Ba'athist, nationalist and even Islamist elements of the Sunni Arab insurgency, has been directed at al-Qa'ida. The killing of fellow Sunni Arabs for not adhering to a strictly salafist line or for disagreeing with the salafists' political standpoint has often angered local insurgents and led to clashes with foreign fighters, who make up a large percentage of al-Qa'ida's membership.

These tensions highlight a growing rift between the local insurgents and the foreign Arab and Islamist volunteers. The Mujahidin Shura Council in Iraq itself came into existence as a result of an effort deal with this gaping chasm. The Council was announced on January 15, 2006, as an umbrella organization comprising the following six Salafist insurgent groups: al-Qa'ida, Jaysh al-Ta'ifah al-Mansourah (the Army of the Victorious Sect), Saraya Ansar al-Tawhid (Monotheism Supporters' Battalions), Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami (Islamic Jihad Battalions), Saraya al-Ghuraba' (Strangers' Battalions), and Kata'ib al-Ahwal (Horrors' Brigades). Two weeks later a seventh insurgent group, Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa-al-Jama'ah (the Army of the People of the Sunnah and Community), asked to join the coalition. The Council accepted the request, emphasising that "the door is open to anyone who wants to join." By bringing in local salafist groups, the Council was trying to dispel the growing distaste for al-Qa'ida's non-Iraqi elements and their vicious tactics among local insurgents.

Efforts aimed at the 'Iraqisation' of the salafist component of the insurgency continue unabated. The most recent move in this direction came is the formation of the Hilf al-Mutayyibin (the Alliance of the Perfumed Ones) just before the declaration of the Islamic Emirate in Iraq. "Al-Mutayyibin" refers to an alliance in support of Banu Hashim formed before Prophet Muhammad (saw) received revelation, which a number of tribes joined. The alliance was sealed during a ceremony in which supporters of Banu Hashim dipped their hands into a bowl of perfume. A statement posted on the internet on October 12 declared that "the Mujahidin Shura Council in Iraq, Jaysh al-Fatihin [the Army of the Conquerors], Jund al-Sahabah [the Soldiers of the [Prophet's] Companions], Saraya Ansar al-Tawhid wa-al-Sunnah [the Supporters

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of Monotheism and Sunnah Battalions], many of the faithful tribal shaykhs, and others who will announce themselves later, decided to form an alliance they named the Alliance of the Perfumed Ones."

Yet the increasing coalescence of the salafist groups does not really indicate that a fissures within the insurgency are being healed. On the contrary, there is evidence that it comes at a time when the insurgency is becoming increasingly polarized between its salafist and non-salafist components. After the declaration of the Islamic Emirate in Iraq, contacts between a number of non-salafist insurgent groups resulted in the formation of a 25-member political bureau for the Iraqi resistance, representing Ba'athists, the Iraqi National Alliance, the Armed Forces General Command, Patriotic Communists Against the Occupation, the Association of Muslim Scholars, Grand Ayatullah Ahmad al-Hassani al-Baghdadi, the Nationalist Nasserite Trend, the Islamic Army, al-Rashidin Army, and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. Members of the political bureau include Dr Qays Muhammad Nuri, Dr Khudayyir Wahid al-Murshidi, Awni Qalamji, Ahmad Karim, Yusuf Hamdan, Abd al-Razzaq al-Sa'adi, Abd al-Karim Hani, Arshad Zibari, Buthaynah al-Nassiri and Abd al-Jabbar al-Kubaysi.

The unilateral declaration of an Islamic Emirate does not necessarily mean that such a state exists in reality. In fact, the declaration can as easily be taken as another media stunt. The Islamic Emirate of Iraq so far exists only in the statements of the Mujahidin Shura Council and other likeminded salafist groups. This fact notwithstanding, it is still another mark of the deepening rift between the exclusivist salafist insurgent groups on the one hand, and the non-salafist Islamic as well as more secular nationalist groups on the other. The salafists' acts of extreme violence have sown the seeds of sectarian strife in Iraq. In the hardened political landscape of post-Saddam Iraq, where the raw passions and actions of extremists have been crowding out the historical traditions and possibilities of compromise and accommodation, their unilateral and maximalist approach to insurgent politics could well foreshadow a downward spiral into another chapter of violent strife.

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