



## **Iraq's Real 'Civil War': Sunni Tribes Battle Al Qaeda Terrorists**

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Anbar Province, Iraq -- Last fall, President Bush, citing the violence in Baghdad, said that the U.S. strategy in Iraq was "slowly failing." At that time, though, more Americans were dying in Anbar Province, stronghold of the Sunni insurgency. About the size of Utah, Anbar has the savagery, lawlessness and violence of America's Wild West in the 1870s. The two most lethal cities in Iraq are Fallujah and Ramadi, and the 25-mile swath of farmlands between them is Indian Country.

Imagine the surprise of the veteran Iraqi battalion last November when a young sheik, leader of a local tribe outside Ramadi, offered to point out the insurgents hiding in his hometown. "We have decided that by helping you," he said, "we are helping God."

For years, the tribes had supported the insurgents who claimed to be waging jihad. Now, citing the same religion, a tribe wanted to switch sides. Col. Mohammed, the battalion commander, accepted the offer. "The irhabi (terrorists) call themselves martyrs. They are liars," he said. "I lost a soldier and when I pulled off his armor, there was the blood of a martyr."

With Iraqi soldiers and Marines providing protection, the sheik and his tribesmen rolled through town, pointing at various men. The sweep netted 30 insurgents, including "Abu Muslim," who was wanted for the murder of a jundi (Iraqi soldier). "He was just standing there waving at us with all the others," one jundi said during the minor celebration at the detention facility.

Six months ago, American intelligence reports about Anbar were dire. Although the Marines won the firefights, insurgents controlled the population--the classic guerrilla pattern. Among the groups, the extremists called al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had achieved dominance. In 2004, AQI briefly held Fallujah, where they whipped teenagers who talked back, bludgeoned women who wore lipstick and beheaded "collaborators"--hapless passersby and truckers. AQI preached a persuasive message: Our way or the grave.

In Anbar, AQI became the occupier, shaking down truck drivers and extorting shop owners. In the young sheik's zone, AQI controlled the fuel market. Each month, 10 trucks with 80,000 gallons of heavily subsidized gasoline and five trucks with kerosene were due to arrive. Instead, AQI diverted most shipments to Jordan or Syria where prices were higher, netting \$10,000 per shipment and antagonizing 30,000 shivering townspeople. No local cop dared to make an arrest. The tribal power structure, built over centuries, was shoved aside. Sheiks who objected were shot or blown up, while others fled.

In late 2005, acceptably-trained Iraqi battalions began to join the persistent Americans in Anbar. AQI resorted to suicide attacks and roadside bombs, and avoided direct fights. Sub-tribes began to kill AQI members in retaliation for individual crimes, and discovered that AQI was ruthless, but not tough. Near the Syrian border, an entire tribe joined forces with the Marines and drove AQI from the city of al Qaim.

By the fall of 2006 AQI had become the oppressor, careless in its destructive swath, while the American and Iraqi forces persisted with their mix of force of arms and civil engagement. When an AQI suicide car bomb attacked an Anbar market in November, killing a Marine and nine civilians, the Marine battalion commander and his Iraqi counterpart offered medical care at the local clinic for the entire town, including the first gynecological examinations many local women had seen. This was not an isolated event, and the people noticed.

With a war-weary population buoying them, 25 of the 31 Anbar sub-tribes have pledged to fight the insurgents over the past five months, sending thousands of tribesmen into the police and army. Led by Sheik Abu Sittar, who has called this an "awakening," the tribes believed they were joining the winners.

Politics in Baghdad have swirled around reinstating former Baathists to their prior jobs, thereby supposedly diminishing the insurgency. The central government, though, has given Anbar such paltry funds that jobs are scant, Baathist or not. In Anbar, reconciliation theories count far less than that eternal adage: Show me the money.

When the sheiks delivered thousands of police recruits, they consolidated their patrimonial power by providing jobs, plus pocketing a fee rumored at \$400 paid by each recruit. The tribal police then provided security that permitted American civic action projects profitable to contractors connected, of course, to the sheiks. Our Congress has just appropriated an emergency supplemental for our troops that included millions to grow spinach and store peanuts; in Anbar, the sheiks are filling potholes that can conceal IEDs.

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There remain problems that require military solutions, however. Neither the coalition nor the Iraqi government is prepared to imprison the sharp increase in killers like Abu Muslim who are being netted in the surge in Baghdad and the tribal awakening in Anbar. No one wants to take the heat from the mainstream press that would accompany the construction of prisons and the indefinite incarceration of several tens of thousands of insurgents.

In response to the 2003 abuses at Abu Ghraib, the U.S. military and the Iraqi government instituted a catch-and-release system that Sweden would find too liberal. Unlike uniformed prisoners who in past wars were held until the war was over, in Iraq most detainees are released within a few months. To some, this represents a scrupulous adherence to the rule of law, with every insurgent provided the right of habeas corpus.

To the sheiks, it is both naïve and deadly. The Iraqi judicial system in Anbar is nonexistent. Locals are quick to relate stories of killers who returned to murder those who snitched. So it's no surprise that while most insurgents are arrested, some simply disappear. The American command in Anbar has issued a clear order barring support to any unauthorized militia. But guidance from the Iraqi ministries has been vague. If the insurgents have a complaint, they can take it up with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

In recent weeks, al Qaeda has struck back with suicide bombers, blowing up a Sunni mosque in the young sheik's area, killing 40 worshipers, and then detonating a series of chlorine truck bombs in residential neighborhoods outside Fallujah. They hope that if they murder random groups of women and children, the tribes will fall back in line. These tactics have locked AQI in a fight to the death against the tribal leaders. It reflects an enemy who has lost popular support for his jihad, clinging to fear alone. Had any American analyst predicted AQI would attack local Sunnis with weaponized chemicals nine months ago, he would have been laughed at.

In itself, the tribal shift is significant but not decisive. The intensity of tribal loyalty varies across the province and is weakest in the cities. While perhaps only a quarter of the males in Anbar heed the orders of the sheiks, their cohesion gives them larger sway. Others will follow their lead, provide tips or stay out of their way. Numerical estimates aren't possible because there has been no systematic effort to identify via biometrics the military-age males in the Sunni Triangle, a gross military error in combating an insurgency. The tribes aren't trained fighters. They occasionally engage AQI in a melee, but they need American or Iraqi soldiers to destroy insurgent bands, especially when holed up in houses that serve as concrete pillboxes.

The real value of the tribes lies in providing specific information and recruits for the police and army. The tribes openly acknowledge that it has been the personal behavior, strength of arms and persistence of the American forces that convinced them to join the fight. "The American coalition is the only thing," Sheik Abureeshah of Ramadi said, "that makes the Iraqi government give anything to Anbar."

The tribes want their share of oil revenues, more power and a cut of the American contracts. With American combat forces likely to leave within a year or two, it is the Iraqi Government that must determine the modesty of the demands. But to put the state of the province in perspective, six months ago the head of Central Command, Gen. John Abizaid, told the Congress that "Anbar was not under control." Last week the U.S. commander in Anbar, Maj. Gen. Walt Gaskin, said he was "very, very optimistic."

Gen. David Petraeus, the top general in Iraq, recently persuaded Mr. Maliki to visit Ramadi and meet with the tribes. That was the start of the bargaining. The Iraqi government faces a classic risk-versus-reward calculation. The reward is that the tribes will provide the information, recruits and local policing that shrinks the area where AQI operates. With less area to search, the Iraqi Army can concentrate wherever al Qaeda tries to rest or regroup, eventually drying up the swamp. The risk is that, if the Shiite-dominated government refuses reasonable terms, the tribes use their military muscle to reach a truce with AQI and the province reverts.

Baghdad is the critical battleground. But it is only in Anbar that the Congress agrees with the president that U.S. forces must combat the AQI terrorists. The tribes will learn to play that card to keep pressure on the central government not to neglect them.

Civil war between the Sunni tribes and the extremists has broken out in Anbar Province, the stronghold of the insurgency, and the U.S. and Iraqi government should support it. Anbar is like the American West in the 1870s. Security will come to towns in Anbar as it came to Tombstone--by the emergence of tough, local sheriffs with guns, local power and local laws.

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