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## **The Battle for Anbar, the War for Iraq**

**Erez Striem and Yoel Guzansky**

2013 was the most violent year in Iraq since 2008, a reminder that the war for Iraq is far from over. The latest outbreak of violence in Anbar Province follows the dismantling of a Sunni protest tent and the arrest of a Sunni member of parliament, in the course of which the MP's brothers and five bodyguards were killed. Forty Sunni MPs resigned in protest over the violent arrest, and armed clashes have broken out throughout the province. In addition, the organization known as "the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIS) and armed Sunni tribes have taken control of large portions of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, and the city of Fallujah. They have seized military posts and police stations and released prisoners, while security forces have responded with aerial bombardments.

The recent outbreak of violence in Anbar Province is not only serious in and of itself, but is also a symptom of several illnesses of the Iraqi state. The Sunni protest against al-Maliki's government began as a sporadic wave of non-violent protests and civil disobedience, and deteriorated into a violent rebellion that is threatening to bring the country once again to the verge of civil war. The Sunnis accuse al-Maliki of using false arrests and brutal suppression of protests, along with systematic discrimination against them in all areas of life. They claim that he is working to concentrate more and more government powers in his hands, to bring the security apparatuses under his control, and to exclude Sunnis from the political system in Iraq.

The Islamist organizations, which consider the battle for Syria and Iraq to be one and the same, have been adept at taking advantage of this frustration. ISIS is working on both sides of the border and seeks to establish a Islamic emirate in the territories under its control. Many weapons from the Syrian army have fallen into opposition hands. Such developments, along with generous donations mainly from private sources and "charitable" organizations in the Gulf states have helped revive these al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations in Iraq after the blow they suffered a few years back.

During the US army surge in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, US forces, in cooperation with the Iraqi government, began to harness the Sunni tribes in Anbar Province to the struggle against al-Qaeda, using these tribes' opposition to the al-Qaeda presence and its violent

ways. Cooperation with the Awakening movement (Sahwah), a militia composed of Sunni tribal elements that received support from US forces in financing for weapons, was a decisive factor in Iraq's success in reducing the number of casualties in terrorist attacks and armed clashes. However, since then the government has in many ways abandoned Sahwah. After the departure of US forces, Baghdad refused to pay all the salaries and even arrested many members, fearing the movement itself would become a threat to the government.

Al-Maliki met recently with tribal leaders in the province in an attempt to reorganize the Awakening movement, and the government even announced it was promoting a number of projects, including the establishment of an industrial city, a new airport, and an oil refining facility, in order to prove its attentiveness to the protesting population. In addition, following the recent incidents, the government succeeded in reaching a temporary agreement with a number of armed tribes in the province on cooperation against the Islamists. Many of the tribes in the province are repulsed by the radical organizations, but at the same time, they do not trust the Iraqi government and security forces, which are largely Shiite. The fact that the ISIS is able to pay salaries – even if minimal – to local residents leads many to join its ranks. Furthermore, the strategic depth of the organization, which has extended its control to broad swaths of Syria that are outside the reach of Iraqi security forces or Assad's forces, provides it with a significant advantage.

The more the violence increases, the more the legitimacy of al-Maliki and his government is eroded, including in the eyes of the country's Shiite population, which, together with the security forces is the main target for terrorist operations by the radical Sunni organizations. However, the greater the force used by the government to suppress the protests, the more likely it is to lose the trust of the Sunnis, which see the dynamic as an attack by a Shiite army on a Sunni population.

The instability has arisen amidst fears over the territorial integrity of the state. A number of provinces have already declared their desire for autonomy, a right granted to them by the Iraqi constitution. Even today, the government in Baghdad is confronting the growing independence of the Kurdish autonomous province, which enjoys an economic and security situation that is better than that of many other regions of the country. While the Kurds are establishing their independence in the north of the country, the south remains an area under Iranian influence. Iran sees Iraq, with its mostly Shiite population, as a natural area for influence and an important link between the Islamic Republic and its allies in the Levant, the Assad regime and Hizbollah.

The United States is disturbed by the policy of the Iraqi government, which is assisting Iran to promote its influence in the region, inter alia, by allowing it to transfer equipment from Iran to the fighters in Syria. In addition, the US frowns on al-Maliki's attempts to

concentrate additional governmental powers in his own hands, keep the Sunnis out of the political process in Iraq, and deprive them of some of the funds to which they are entitled. Although the United States and Iraq (and Iran) have a common interest in stopping the Sunni Islamist organizations, the US administration has thus far responded with hesitation to requests by the Iraqi government to raise the quantity and quality of the arms exported it receives. Al-Maliki might exploit his fight with the Islamists to receive political and military aid that would be used to help him consolidate his power.

The United States is expected to wait before making further overtures toward Iraq to see whether al-Maliki will succeed in taking advantage of the current crisis to promote reconciliation between the government and the Sunni population. The administration, which has stressed that this is an internal Iraqi battle, is now seeking to supply the Iraqi army with weapons (Hellfire missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and if Congress lifts its objection, Apache helicopters as well) in order to aid it in its campaign against the Islamists. This weapons shipment will be a test of the extent of American influence on the Iraqi government, and it could enable the US government to exert pressure for change in al-Maliki's policy toward the Sunni population and a reduction in the aid he provides to Iran and Syria.

Military aid, even if indirect, could help the US government prove that it has not completely abandoned Iraq, although it is not prepared to intervene directly. As to other actors, the Iranians are standing with al-Maliki, and have already offered their assistance in suppressing the rebellion. The Saudis, who in the past were accused by al-Maliki of aiding radical Sunni groups in Iraq in order to undermine the stability of his government, are standing aside. While there is no real evidence that the Saudis are directly supporting these groups, the Sunnis in general are looking in the direction of Riyadh and hoping for assistance.

In spite of the lack of trust between the Sunni tribes and the government, the attempt by ISIS to take over major cities and the desire to impose a strict version of Islamic law in the areas under its control could lead some tribal leaders to cooperate with the government, and might even accelerate the efforts at dialogue. Much of the population, working through local militias, are themselves fighting the Islamists because they are revolted by their ideology and the fact that many of them are an alien presence ("volunteers" from outside of Iraq).

Anbar Province covers almost one-third of the territory of Iraq. The tension there is primarily connected to Sunni anger at their ejection from the centers of power and deprivation of funds. It is also related to the spillover of the Syrian civil war to Syria's neighbors and local anger at the aid provided by Baghdad to the Assad regime, which plays into the hands of the Islamists. Al-Maliki's ability to bring about calm and thus to increase his chances to win a third term in the upcoming elections is thus less dependent

on the military campaign he is waging against the Islamists and more on his ability to heal the deep ethnic rifts in the country.

