

The Status and Future of the Awakening Movements

Jun 15, 2009



Articles & Testimony

Although Iraq is a far more stable and secure place than it was in 2007 or 2008, violence has slowly increased in 2009. According to the security company Olive Group, there were 1,242 reported security incidents in Iraq in April 2009, compared with 1,168 in March and 1,103 in February. The gradual increase in security incidents in provinces such as Baghdad, Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Salah al-Din has spurred questions about the prospects for ethnic-sectarian reconciliation in the months leading up to vital parliamentary elections in early 2010.

Parliamentary elections scheduled for January 2010 could see a substantial shakeup of the political landscape established under Coalition occupation since 2003. Iraq could vote for the same ethnic and sectarian blocs that have dominated since Saddam's fall, or empower a new cross-sectarian political center rooted in Arab nationalism. Sensing what role will be played by the Sunni Arab community and particularly the Sahwa or Awakening movements is a vital factor in understanding current security problems and future political coalition-building.

Before examining the future prospects of the Sahwa, it is worth looking closely at what exactly they are. U.S. forces began engaging successfully with Sunni tribes in Anbar province in late 2005, when U.S. Marines worked with local tribal leaders to expel al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from the governorate. In September 2006, the process was expanded and formalized when Sheikh Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi (known as Sattar Abu Risha,) convened the first Sahwa meeting, drawing together 45 tribal leaders from around Ramadi to successfully convince 4,500 Sunni Arabs, including many former insurgents, to join the Anbar police.

Under the U.S.-led surge from 2007 onwards, Sahwa councils spread throughout Sunni Arab communities as a forum where U.S. military and tribal leaders could talk and coordinate security actions. Sahwa councils also participated in U.S.-brokered reconciliation talks between Sunni and Shia community leaders. Sahwa councils increasingly became a place where local reconstruction needs were discussed, drawing in Iraqi local municipal and military officials. In essence, the Sahwa operated in parallel to official provincial, district and subdistrict councils where they were did not include local Sunni Arab leaders. In contrast to the 2006 Sahwa movements (whose members directly joined the government security forces), the Sahwa movements established during the surge took the unprecedented step of creating temporary paid security forces called the "Sons of Iraq" that were not officially part of the government security forces.

The Sahwa movements thus began as a U.S. initiative but the last twelve months have witnessed the Awakening movements being absorbed into a range of official political and security institutions of the Iraqi state. Sahwa leaders have been incorporated into a strengthening web of local government institutions such as District Development Forums and Neighborhood Advisory Councils. Many Sahwa leaders participated in provincial elections in January 2009; the most successful Sahwa candidates were in Anbar, where Sheikh Abd al-Jabbar al-Rishawi (known as Jabbar Abu Risha) led the Iraq Awakening Council to a leading position on the provincial council. Elsewhere in Iraq, well-known Sahwa leaders tended to succeed best when they allied themselves with political parties such as Saleh Mutlaq's Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, the Mosul-based al-Hadba party and even the Iraqi Islamic Party in places such as Diyala province. Instead of being engaged directly as tribal groups by the U.S. military or the central

government, the Sahwa leaders are normalizing their relations with the Iraqi state within the framework of local governance and elections.

The same goes for the security role of the Sahwa. The Sons of Iraq are being slowly but steadily absorbed into alternative forms of employment; all 90,000 have now been registered and their age, skills, aims, and educational level categorized. Approximately 20,000 have either already joined the police service or are in the process of applying for jobs in the federal security forces. The 47,000 Sons of Iraq in Baghdad are being used as a trial run for the demobilization system that will see most fighters absorbed into construction or industrial work based at vocational technical centers. The Iraqi government has committed to pay the salaries of Sons of Iraq fighters until they receive new jobs, and the U.S. military keeps a close eye on the issue, which it regards as essential to improving the security situation.

So what is next for the Sahwa, the Sons of Iraq and ethno-sectarian reconciliation in Iraq? In political terms, the Sunni Arab community is wide awake. But the provincial elections underlined the need for Sunni Arab politicians, and particularly tribal leaders, to combine their efforts and form more cohesive political blocs to contest the national elections. At present, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is considering drawing a range of Sunni Arab allies into a new coalition, including Mutlaq's National Dialogue, al-Hadba, and the Iraq Awakening Council. The national elections could have mixed effects on reconciliation in Iraq, with reduced inter-Arab sectarian tension but widening Arab-Kurdish ethnic divisions. Anti-Kurdish rhetoric was key to al-Hadba's strong victory in the Nineveh provincial elections and this theme may emerge again in the national elections.

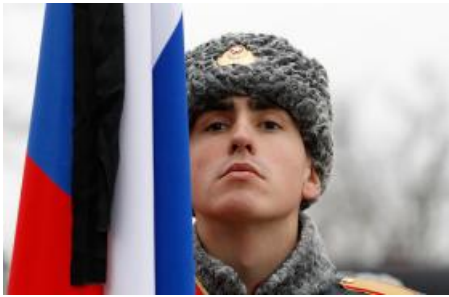
On the security front, the Sons of Iraq remain a stabilizing force. Though some Sons of Iraq are dissatisfied with slow payment and job creation, or are concerned that the government is arresting too many Sons of Iraq leaders, the vast majority of the leadership and foot soldiers continue to work towards stability in their neighborhoods. There is little solidarity between Sons of Iraq leaders and little prospect that scattered arrests will drive them to a collective abandonment of cooperation with the government. The minor security downturn in Iraq should be kept in proportion -- the 1,242 incidents in April 2009 are less than half the 2,799 incidents reported in April 2008. There are many causes of the recent rise in incidents and the release of tens of thousands of militant detainees from U.S. detention facilities is likely a more significant driver than a broad failure of reconciliation. Iraq continues to slowly edge towards stability and the leaders that made up the Sahwa are mostly working within new institutions and political processes to support the country's recovery at the same time as representing their local constituencies.

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Note: This text is © 2009 the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and was published in the [Arab Reform Bulletin \(http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=23190\)](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=23190), vol 7, issue 5 (June 2009). ❖

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