A Government for the People by the People: Defeating ISIL with an Inclusive Central Iraqi Government

By James Kaelin

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has leaped to the forefront of American foreign policy concerns with the beheading of two Americans and one British citizen, but it did not spring up overnight. One of George W. Bush's most toxic legacies is the introduction of al Qaeda into Iraq.[1] The U.S. led invasion and subsequent occupation not only provided the raison d'être for the formation of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), it fueled the influx of foreign fighters and enabled a lawless environment for profitable criminal activities.[2] AQI, was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004, and was rebranded the Islamic State of Iraq by Abu Ayyub al-Masri following Zarqawi's death. In 2013, the current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the group was operating in Syria and rebranded the organization, ISIL. ISIL, as we know it, emerged out

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of the crucible of the Syrian civil war and the discontent in Iraq's Sunni region.[3]

While fighting in Syria, ISIL has learned sophisticated urban combat tactics, which it has displayed against Iraqi security forces.[4] In addition, ISIL has acquired sophisticated weaponry. Western officials insist that most of the weapons fell into rebel hands when Iraqi Security Forces unexpectedly panicked and fled their positions in Mosul and other areas, which ISIL forces then overran. While this official explanation may address how ISIL obtained such sophisticated weaponry, it does not explain the origins of ISIL's newfound arsenal. For this we must turn back to the U.S. and its allies. In an attempt to aid Syrian rebels the U.S. delivered small arms and non-lethal aid, which included vehicles, sophisticated communications equipment, and advanced combat medical kits.[5] While these were intended to help moderate rebels some of the aid inevitably fell into the hands of ISIL. The rise of ISIL and the unintended use of U.S. provided aid and weaponry demonstrates how such support can be misplaced and may lead to a boomerang effect against Western interests and goals.[6] As ISIL has become an imminent threat to stability in the Middle East and the West President Obama has vowed that our objective is clear, "We will degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy." This begs the question: what is the best strategy to degrade and destroy ISIL?

The answer to this question is to stop ISIL where it began, in Iraq. The U.S. and its allies must apply a similar counterinsurgency to the one that helped bring security to Al-Anbar in 2007. The first step to degrading counterinsurgency is a comprehensive civilian and military effort designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and addresses its roots causes.[7] In Iraq the root causes of the insurgency comes from a disenfranchisement of Sunnis by the Iraqi government. In the absence of freedom, Iraqis lacked legitimate outlets to express their political grievances, making them more likely to resort to political violence and terrorism.[8] Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, political grievance has been the main justification for violence in Iraq. The current increase in violence is no exception. In order for a

democratic solution to take place Iraq needs to truly have a government by the people and for the people.

By understanding the drivers of violence in Iraq we can chart a way forward in the fight to degrade and destroy ISIL. While military support can be used to supplement the fight against ISIL, it will not win the war. In fact, the war against ISIL in Iraq cannot be won with military action. It can only be won through political strength and courage. The Sahwa movement, more commonly known as the Sunni Awakening, in 2007 has shown us that Iraq's Sunni population is not driven by sectarian concerns, but nationalistic goals. In order to address the ISIL threat we must look to disenfranchised Sunnis who have entered into a marriage of convenience with ISIL. Following the U.S. invasion, uncertainty reigned in Iraq. The security institutions fell and the looting of government property immediately ensued. As crime rose, so did uncertainty about where to turn for security. Al Qaeda and militant jihadist groups were among the few organizations on the ground that offered protection and guidance to Sunni communities.[9] Fearing political irrelevance, Sunnis formed an alliance with AQI. From 2003 through 2007, the group galvanized the Iraqi insurgency until its high profile, divisively brutal tactics and its failure to deliver meaningful gains to its nominal constituents led to a reversal in AQI's popularity.[10] Upon realizing that AQI posed a much larger threat to their political future than originally anticipated Sunni tribal leaders formed the Sahwa. When U.S. commanders observed what was transpiring, they sought to encourage the Sahwa forces. This led to a combined effort to diminish the threat of AQI. By joining efforts, the Sahwa and the U.S. military successfully brought stability to Anbar. If Iraq's government is to have success against ISIL they must address Sunni concerns of disenfranchisement, thus reaffirming a unified Iraqi government is the best way to ensure continued Sunni political actualization.

To fully understand how political grievances and the perceptions of disenfranchisement have affected violence in Iraq we need to look at the changing levels of violence in Iraq. The first peak of violence in Iraq took place began in 2005 and started to subside in 2007. Sunnis in Iraq began to feel relegated to political obscurity as the process of

de-Ba'athification was implemented by the U.S. led Coalition Provisional Authority. Sunni Arabs, a minority that had long dominated the Iraqi state to the exclusion of Shia and Kurds until the American invasion in 2003, were at the risk of being relegated to the status of the traditional minority, one without political power and adequate representation in the post-occupation state. [11] De-Ba'athification, combined with the outcome of the 2005 National elections, led many Sunnis to believe the greatest threat to continued political relevance were the U.S. Military and the Shia led government in Baghdad. The death toll in Iraq continued to rise until 2006 when the perception of who proposed the biggest threat to Sunni political power began to change.

While the surge in U.S. troops received most of the headlines regarding the decrease of violence in Iraq during 2007, the Sunni Awakening or Sahwa had a more profound impact. The Awakening, which began to take root in 2006, resulted from a growing distrust of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and their tactics. As AQI's religious based ideology conflicted with local Sunni Iraqi's nationalistic ideals, many. Many tribal leaders began to conclude that the political process might hold more benefit than continued fighting. [12] Sunni tribal leaders deemed AQI's influence as more of a threat to their continued rule, while U.S. forces were considered less of a determining factor in the region, because of AQI's over reach. [13] As a result tribal leaders shifted their attitudes about who posed the biggest threat to their political future, leading to a drop of violence in Iraq. There was a growing awareness of the benefits of what rapprochement could mean for them in the longer term, especially in terms of political participation and power. [14] Tribal leaders began to feel that the path to political actualization was through working with U.S. forces and participating in the constitutional political process. With the help of U.S. forces, the Sahwa were able to turn the tide of violence. By the late spring and early summer parts of Anbar that had previously been horrifically violent were relatively peaceful and insurgent hotbeds, such as Ramadi and Fallujah, had been cleansed and relatively pacified. [15] Levels of violence would continue to decline until the Iraqi government once again became the biggest threat to Sunnis' political actualization.

The progress made in the fight against AQI began to turn in 2010. From the start, Baghdad opposed the Sahwa, looking at its alliance with the United States with suspicion and resentment. Baghdad was concerned that Sahwa's success on the ground might translate into actual legitimacy and political power.[16] This fear materialized in April 2010 when Iraq held its second Parliamentary election. The election resulted in the secular Al-Iraqiya party, led by Ayad Allawi, winning a plurality of seats. Allawi, a secular Shiite, drew his support from millions of Sunni Arabs, who cast ballots on March 7 hoping for an end to their marginalization by the Shiite-led government.[17] Despite losing to Al-Iraqiya, Maliki, backed by Iran, managed to form a staunchly Shiite coalition that helped retain his role as Prime Minister. With his post as Prime Minister securely in hand, Maliki began the process of marginalizing Sunnis once again. Perhaps the most significant overreach of power initiated by Maliki came in December 2011. A day after the United States withdrew its last combat troops, the Shiite-dominated government ordered the arrest of the Sunni vice president, accusing him of running a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials.[18] As a result, Sunni politicians denounced Maliki as a dictator, accusing him of deliberate sectarian provocations that would usher in a return of sectarian conflict to Iraq. The beginning of 2013 saw rising Sunni discontent at political marginalization and political targeting, which resulted in protests. The dramatic escalation began on April 23 when the protest turned violent and the Iraqi Security Forces attacked protesters, killing 49 of them. Due to the ensuing Sunni retaliation the number of civilian deaths tripled in the next 6 months.[19] As sectarian tensions and violence in Iraq increased, tribal leaders once again turned to the Sunni militants. The marginalization of the Sunnis has given AQI the opportunity to work with local Sunni militias and to cause havoc in Iraq under the new moniker ISIL. Once again the Sunnis are doing whatever it takes to secure their own political interests. In essence, things have come full circle and ISIL is the new al Qaeda—the vanguard.[20]

The first step toward meeting the nationalistic goals of Sunnis is to form a new inclusive Iraqi government. Iraq began to move in the right direction when Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stepped down as

Prime Minister. Iraq's parliament responded by approving a new government headed by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi with the support of the country's marginalized Sunni population. Abadi is the most pivotal figure in the fight against ISIL as he can show the Sunni population they will no longer be marginalized. A leading Sunni lawmaker Dhafer Al Ani stated, "We feel and we hope that there will be a more positive atmosphere that will lead us out of the former era that was filled with problems and turn over a new page with Abadi that is based on respect for partners and for citizens." He continued, "We have great hope that many circumstances will be corrected. At least we feel Abadi is positive in a way that can change the circumstances for our people."[21] Although the government is moving in the right direction this will not be an easy process as Sunnis have had their trust in the political process broken once before.

The second step is to reinstitute the policies that helped to make the Sahwa a success. The new government must look to the tribal leaders to provide security in Anbar. This tactic is nothing new in Iraq. The British used it in the 1920s; later Hussein became a master of using tribes to ensure the continuity of his rule.[22] Accordingly, the new government in Baghdad must once again look to this time tested method of providing security in Anbar. The tribal leaders have no alliance with ISIL. What's going on is the Sunni leaders are lying in wait, waiting for the right moment to spring their trap on ISIL, just like they did with AQI during the US occupation.[23] To do this, the new government must fulfill the promises made to the Sahwa in 2007 by incorporating tribal fighters into the greater Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). For those individuals who cannot be incorporated into ISF, they can be given jobs rebuilding Anbar, thus showing a promise to address Sunni concerns. If Iraq's government can address the issues of marginalization, which have plagued the Sunni-Shia relationship since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the tide of war against ISIL will subside as quickly as it broke. If Sunni marginalization is never properly dealt with, then we will all need to settle in for a long, deadly, and destabilizing affair.

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