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Iraqi Islamic Party, Kurds and the Tribal Awakening

By William S. McCallister

“... I say at once there are fewer difficulties in holding hereditary states, and those long accustomed to the family of their prince, than new ones; it is sufficient only not to transgress the customs of his ancestors...”.

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The recent agreement between the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and the Kurdish parties in Iraq appears at first glance a much desired step toward reconciling the nation's diverse ethnic interests and a good faith effort at improving relations with the Kurdish neighbor to the north.¹ Strategic considerations make strange bedfellows and this apparent good will gesture could therefore also be interpreted ominously as an attempt by Tariq al-Hashimi, current Vice President of Iraq and Secretary General of the IIP to strengthen his party's position against the Maliki government in Baghdad and to seize the mantle of Sunni Arab leadership for himself. Salih al-Motlaq, leader of the Sunni Iraqi Front for National Dialogue and alliance partner to the IIP described the agreement as attempted blackmail of the Maliki government. In strategic terms this move would be described as seizing the initiative.

Why now? In any non-equilibrium system change is the only constant. Variation, adaptation, competition and cooperation are the driving forces that keep the system churning. An attempt at establishing stability or equilibrium in a non-equilibrium system such as Iraq is a frustrating endeavor and even more so when trying to deal rationally with traditional ways of thinking. The very important fact that current U.S. policy objectives are largely driven by the impending U.S. national elections makes no difference to Iraqi political strategists as they seek greater positional advantage vis-à-vis their rivals. On the contrary, it may even prove an advantage as U.S. policy makers are more inclined to make concessions so as to appear to be making progress.

What has changed in the Iraqi sociopolitical environment to facilitate this grand gesture of conciliation between the IIP and the Kurds? To single out the dissatisfaction with the Maliki government of the IIP, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as the primary motivating factor only scratches the surface. There are important strategic gambits in play that are primarily aimed on the one hand at

¹ BBC Monitoring Weekly Roundup of Iraqi Press 2-8 Jan 08. Iraqi papers focused on the new coalition announced by the main Kurdish Party and the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party.
http://www.industrywatch.com/pages/iw2/Story.nsp?story_id=113447122&ID=iw&scategory=Government%3APolitical+Reviews&P=&F=&R=&VNC=hnall

curtailing the rising tide of the tribal awakening and on the other to exploit this fear and attain tangible benefits in the process.

The factor most likely to have influenced the decision to bring these sides together was the emergence of the tribal awakening in Anbar known as Sahawa al Anbar (SAA) (Figure 1). The awakening meme infected the tribes and has continued to spread from Anbar province into the neighboring Ninewa, Salah ad Din, north Babel and Diyala provinces as well as to Shia Arab tribes in the south of Iraq (Figure 2).

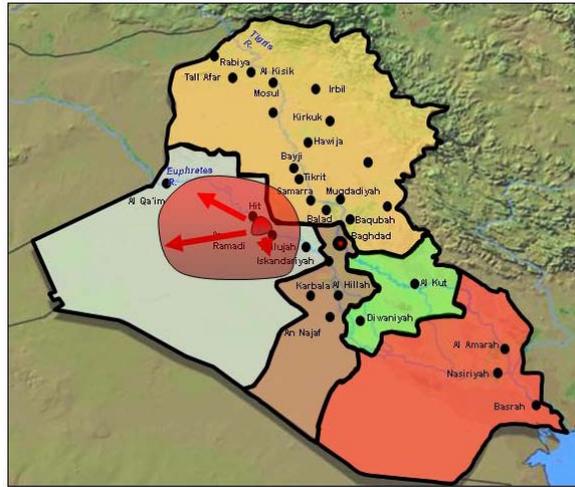


Figure 1

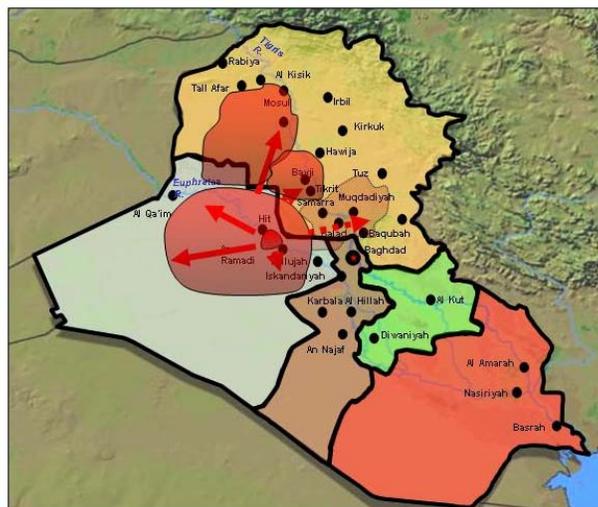


Figure 2

The tribal awakening began as a means to gather tribal fighters to oppose AQI. As the movement gained momentum in Anbar province it morphed into a mixture of traditional tribal governance and political party. As more tribes allied themselves with the Albu Risha tribe that formed the core of the movement in its early stages around which the other tribes would later rally, it assumed its present name of Sahawa al Iraq (SAI).

After reestablishing security in Anbar province the SAI set its sights on directly challenging the IIP's hold on political power in the province. The rise of the SAI as a potential challenger not only to the IIP but also the Maliki government initiated a number of counter initiatives by both the Maliki government and the IIP to curtail the SAI's growing popularity and to limit its expansion. The Maliki government continues to fear a potentially greater Sunni Arab awakening and the strategic threat it represents to Shia governance while the IIP fears losing its influence in the predominantly Sunni areas.

By extension, the Shia Sadrists and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) are alarmed that the awakening may also infect the southern Arab tribes. The southern Arab tribes constitute the popular base from which they draw their support. The last thing they desire is for this relationship to change and for the tribes to speak from a position of strength.

The Kurds are concerned that a Sunni Arab awakening will empower Arabs in the ongoing negotiations over the status of Kirkuk and jeopardize its territorial gains beyond the Green Line in east-central and northern Iraq. All parties; the Maliki government, IIP, Sadrists, ISCI and the Kurds are united in their concern for the growing power of the tribal awakening.

Each party now seeks to challenge the tribal awakening. The Maliki government continues to send conflicting messages to the SAI and negotiates with one or the other tribe within the greater SAI shura in an attempt to keep the movement divided. His administration has gone as far as to insinuate that the SAI is an illegal militia and has hinted at outlawing the organization outright. The Maliki government has also publicly stated that efforts by the SAI leadership to expand outside Anbar province proper are prohibited and would not be tolerated by the sitting government.²

Vice President Hashimi has publicly stated that he fears the awakening and its popularity and "is scared for the future". Well aware of SAI's prospects for national political influence the IIP has also begun to sponsor its own "awakening" councils in Anbar province to check its political rival. All the while, Anbar tribal leaders affiliated with the IIP express their concern for the growing power of the SAI and maneuver diplomatically within the Dulaymi Confederation for positional advantage.³

² Dr. Bassima al-Jaydri, Secretary General of the Implementation and Follow-up Committee (IFCNR) likely speaks for the Prime Minister when she draws no distinction between SAI security and political functions and publicly threatens to close all SAI offices outside Anbar province.

³ Discussions concerning SAI with IIP affiliated tribal leaders in Anbar reveal the traditional in-direct approach. Tribes depend on their connections. In such a system, a tribe whose power is waning is one few will want to associate themselves. The opponent is never attacked directly but is made to look weak and on the decline. In the case of SAI, tribal leaders affiliated with the IIP seek to persuade Coalition Forces that

The Kurds see an opportunity to exploit the fact that Tariq al-Hashimi and the IIP seek to check the rising influence of the tribal awakening while consolidating its own influence in the Sunni areas. To garner Arab Sunni support, Tariq al-Hashimi must appear able to deliver resources and access to influence so as to entice uncommitted groups to align themselves with the IIP. It appears Hashimi's strategy to accomplish the latter is to enter into a relationship with the Kurds against the Shia dominated government. This short-term alliance with the Kurds provides the IIP one substantial benefit, namely, increasing its bargaining power among the various political and sectarian parties vying for a greater role in the central government. Increased bargaining power translates into more lucrative ministerial positions and access to levers of patronage with which to entice uncommitted groups to join the IIP coalition. All the while, the IIP continues to chip away at the growing influence of the SAI and the awakening movement in general in order to either co-opt its individual members or in case this fails to disrupt and check its growing influence.

The Kurds recognize the short-term benefits of entering into an agreement with the IIP. First, the Kurds can only benefit from the IIP's attempts to check the growing influence of the tribal awakening. Dividing the movement into its component parts presents the Kurds with an opportunity to mass its diplomatic, economic and martial resources against individual groups vice engaging a united front. Individual voices of discontent are more easily dealt with than the many speaking as one. Second, the Kurds understand that the IIP will not succeed in the long run but their effort buys time for the Kurds in the near term to consolidate territorial gains beyond the Green Line in east-central and northern Iraq and to strengthen their bargaining position in the on-going negotiations over the status of Kirkuk.

The Kurds are also postured to take advantage of the inroads the tribal awakening is making in southern Iraq. Many Arabs currently residing in Kurdish areas of influence are Shia having been moved north by the former regime to manipulate the ethnic balance of the region. Since the removal of the Saddam regime, both the ISCI and the Sadrists have deployed fighters into the area, under the auspices of protecting their co-religionists to consolidate control over their respective territories.

The rising popularity of the tribal awakening in the south threatens the influence Shia political and sectarian parties exert over the popular tribal base from which they draw their support. Reports of SAI negotiating directly with the Governor of Wasit province to formally establish the movement in the Shia dominated province only reinforces this concern. While supporting the IIP's efforts to weaken the tribal awakening movement in the north, the Kurds may also be seeking to indirectly benefit from its manifestation in the south. The threat of a tribal awakening in southern Iraq may force the various Shia parties to focus greater attention on their home turf. It may even motivate the Shia parties to renegotiate existing agreements in the four-party alliance more favorably disposed to support Kurdish strategic designs. An even greater tactical benefit to the Kurds would be

the SAI is not to be trusted so as to indirectly attack the relationship the SAI enjoys with Coalition Forces. A direct attack against the SAI will be launched at a later time once it is has been sufficiently isolated.

if the tribal awakening in the south caused these same groups to withdraw fighters from the northern territories and redeploy them to the south to reinforce their presence in tribal territories.

The IIP – Kurdish alliance sends different signals to different people. It sends a signal to the Maliki government that Arab and Kurdish Sunnis can work together and if united represent nearly 45% of the Iraqi population. It sends an implied signal to the tribal awakening that the Kurds are ready to defend their territorial gains as proven in their willingness to align themselves with a party openly committed to disrupting and dividing the movement. A number of tribes are already calculating the benefits of aligning themselves with the awakening or the IIP. Finally, it sends the signal that the various Shia parties should focus on getting their houses in order before challenging the Kurds directly and that compromise on certain key issues is in everyone's best interest.

The fear that the IIP-Kurdish alliance represents a potentially severe threat to Iraqi security and stability may be misplaced. If the intent of the alliance is to divide and disrupt so as to mass diplomatic, economic and martial resources at decisive points, then we might also assume that the threat of large scale violence is diminished. Although the threat of violence in a culture where fighting is a form of negotiation is never totally eliminated, smaller groups unable to garner enough strength to challenge the more powerful are more easily isolated and dispatched than those that are able to do otherwise. All the players engaged in this game understand, accept and abide by this simple rule.

The IIP-Kurdish alliance is just one of many moving parts in a complex, non-equilibrium system in which all sides are adapting to the unknown. All parties in Iraq adhere to accepted, traditional rules of conduct. All diplomatic, economic and martial actions are continuously shaped by these rules. The political dynamics, as revealed in Iraq's political variations, adaptations, competition and cooperation is shaped by the decentralized nature of political authority and as counterintuitive as it may seem, may actually improve the chances for order and stability in the long run.

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