

## Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

*Arab Reform Bulletin*

September 2007, Volume 5, Issue 7

Michele Dunne, Editor

Salma Waheedi, Assistant Editor

### **Iraq: The Politics of Sunni Armed Groups**

*Muhammad Abu Rumman*

Although there have been ideological and political struggles among armed Sunni factions in Iraq since the beginning of the occupation, they were kept quiet until recently. In early 2007, differences exploded into the open in the form of warring public statements between the “Islamic State of Iraq” (a coalition including al-Qaeda) and the “Islamic Army in Iraq,” exposing previously unacknowledged struggles.

As the two groups went at each other in the media, other Sunni groups began a complicated process of splintering and reformation. The 1920 Revolution Brigades split into two military factions, Fatah and Jihad, with Fatah later reclaiming the “1920 Revolution Brigades” name. Hamas-Iraq, which emerged as the first armed movement to build political and media institutions parallel to its military activities, joined forces with the Iraqi Resistance Islamic Front. In early May 2007, the Jihad and Reform Front formed, incorporating the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Mujahideen Army, and the Shari’a Committee of Ansar al-Sunna (which split from its mother organization, Ansar al-Sunna), with the Fatiheen Army joining later. Then in early September seven factions, including the 1920 Revolution Brigades and al-Rashideen Army, joined forces to establish the Jihad and Change Front.

This period of upheaval has left four main blocs in the Iraqi Sunni resistance:

- Jihadist Salafism, which is an extension of al-Qaeda. This bloc consists primarily of the Islamic State of Iraq and is close to Ansar al-Sunna as well.
- Nationalist Salafism, which observers believe toes the Saudi Salafi line and receives material and moral support from abroad. The groups in the Jihad and Reform Front belong to this bloc.
- The Islamic Brotherhood trend, mainly Hamas-Iraq and the Resistance Islamic Front. Observers believe it is associated with the Islamic Party, which participates in politics within the Iraqi Accord parliamentary bloc.

- The nationalist Islamist trend, including the Jihad and Change Front groups (such as the 1920 Revolution Brigades and al-Rashideen Army). This bloc is ideologically close to the Brotherhood trend and is considered an extension of the Association of Muslim Scholars, the leading group of Iraqi Sunni clerics.

While keeping the players straight is admittedly difficult, it is important to understand why Sunni groups are experiencing such turmoil. Two factors—U.S. discussion of withdrawal from Iraq and genuine ideological and political differences among Sunnis—can explain why this is happening now.

First, signs of U.S. military failure and the rising chorus of voices in Washington calling for withdrawal have changed the focus of Sunni insurgents. As militants sense that a U.S. withdrawal is approaching, defeating the occupation has lost primacy as a goal in favor of maneuvering to fill the power vacuum in the post-occupation stage. In this context, several factors have fueled tensions among resistance factions. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq (al-Qaeda and its allies) has not only tried to spread its influence among the other factions but has also demanded that many faction members pledge allegiance to its emir, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. At the same time, Arab countries (particularly Jordan and Saudi Arabia) have begun to worry about who will fill the power vacuum after the U.S. withdraws. Such countries are concerned about preventing the dual threat of increasing Iranian influence and the rising power of al-Qaeda in western Iraq, the latter of which constitutes a clear and direct threat to their security.

Second, there are genuine ideological and political disagreements—mostly centering on questions of nationalism and religious ideology—among armed factions. The Islamic State of Iraq employs a universalist rhetoric, and is more concerned about defeating the U.S. occupation and waging a war of attrition than agreeing on the nature of a new Iraqi political system. These groups' close ties with al-Qaeda's central command give them a broad agenda, whereas the goal of other Sunni factions is essentially confined to a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

On political-religious ideology, the Islamic State of Iraq also adopts a more uncompromising rhetoric than the other factions on key questions such as attitudes towards the Shi'a. The Jihad and Reform Front also takes a hard-line position on the Shi'a, though less so than groups affiliated with al-Qaeda. The Jihad and Change Front groups, meanwhile, see their priority as defeating the U.S. occupation, although they do not conceal their concern about Iranian ambitions in Iraq. Regarding what should come after the U.S. withdrawal, the Jihad and Reform Front seeks to establish rule by *Shari'a* (Islamic law). For their part, the Jihad and Change Front groups say they would allow a popular consensus to determine democratically what type of political regime would prevail.

Political and military struggles among armed Sunni factions are likely to persist for some time. The outcome depends on many variables, but especially the relationship between al-Qaeda and other factions in the Sunni fold, as well as the relative military strength of various groups.

*Muhammad Abu Rumman is a Jordanian scholar and writer. Paul Wulfsberg translated this article from Arabic.*