

CRACKING

Recent fighting for control of the Iraqi city of Fallujah is symptomatic of a much wider al-Qaeda threat that is slowly worsening right across the Levant and the Middle East. In addition, as a distraction from the wider Shia-Sunni conflict, militant Sunnis are now turning on each other. Western diplomats struggle to cope with fractured Middle Eastern politics as it is; now, from the Syrian city of Raqqa to the Iraqi city of Fallujah, Sunnis are setting about each other instead of their more traditional enemy – the Shia. Washington's foreign policy with Iraq effectively is in tatters, a Shia government sits in Baghdad and its ties with Tehran are getting ever closer.

The latest Sunni al-Qaeda affiliate – the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) – is a highly dangerous organisation that should not be underestimated. It has not been in existence for very long, and yet has made its presence felt in both Iraq and Syria. Despite al-Qaeda's setbacks over the years in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali to name but a few, ISIS shows the network's incredible resilience and ability to regroup and morph into yet another version of itself. Essentially ISIS is the latest incarnation of al-Qaeda in Iraq only with much grander ambitions. ISIS would like to see a Sunni caliphate covering the so-called 'Fertile Crescent' stretching from Beirut to Baghdad. Such a concept is very appealing to many disenchanting Sunni Lebanese, Syrians and Iraqis.

In Syria, ISIS sparked a war within a war by fighting other rebel groups for control of liberated territory in the north. The supposedly moderate Free Syrian Army has long been as been at loggerheads with Islamist militant factions such as Jabhat al-Nusra – in recent months the latter and other rebel factions have been in a state of open warfare with ISIS. Fighting has spread through the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo to the cities of Raqqa, an ISIS stronghold, and Aleppo. In neighbouring Lebanon, tit-for-tat attacks on Shia and Sunni targets have been escalating. At the same time, Lebanese Sunnis are divided in their support for Syria's President Assad.

Stories of ISIS atrocities were such that the Syrian Sunni Islamist brigades teamed up with the more secular groups. The friction with ISIS has resulted in the Sunni Islamist brigades forming a new alliance known as the Islamic Front. This does not greatly encourage Western confidence in the Syrian opposition, however, as Ahrar al-Sham and other Islamist Front members are vehemently anti-Western. Predictably, those areas that ISIS has been forced from have fallen under the control of the Islamic Front. The opposition groups hope that the defeat of ISIS will lead to a renewal of the revolution against President Assad, which has been greatly dissipated by all the in-fighting.

In Iraq there is a terrible sense of déjà vu. Once again

“Iraq is being destabilised not only by Sunni al-Qaeda affiliates but also by Iranian-backed Shia militant groups”

the “Sunni triangle” is proving a major security headache for the authorities in Baghdad. In particular, the Iraqi government finds itself involved in a third struggle for the control of the vital city of Fallujah.

The so-called Sunni triangle dominates the strategically important western Anbar province bordering Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. Sunni militant fighters flow freely in both directions across these borders. By mid-February 2014 fighting between the Iraqi security forces, backed by tanks, armoured personnel carriers and Sunni militants, had displaced 300,000 people, of whom around 60,000 have fled to neighbouring Iraqi provinces.

Iraq is blighted by the Shia-Sunni civil war in much the same way as Syria. Attempts to include Iraqi Sunnis in a federal government dominated by the Shia have dramatically come off the rails. Iraq's Sunni population is at violent loggerheads with the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. In late December 2013, the arrest of Sunni minister Ahmed al-Alwani led to an outbreak of communal violence in Fallujah. Likewise, the government's decision to break up a Sunni protest camp in Ramadi also caused trouble. The Sunni-backed ISIS moved to take over parts of both cities. In response, the Iraqi army unleashed its mechanised forces, including M1 Abrams tanks and M113 armoured personnel carriers, on the militants in Ramadi.

ISIS, which last year stepped up its attacks with 68 bombings a month, has now succeeded al-Qaeda in Iraq as the leading Sunni terror group in the country. Iraq is now being destabilised not only by Sunni al-Qaeda affiliates but also by Iranian-backed Shia militant groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah, as well as the Baathist Naqshabandi movement.

Following the US withdrawal in 2011, the country endured about 300 major security incidents a month, but in 2013, this spiralled to 1,200 a month. According to figures compiled by the UN, 7,818 civilians and 1,050 members of the security forces were killed during 2013. During January 2014, attacks against predominantly Shia and government targets claimed the lives of 1,000 people.

In the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, al-Qaeda-inspired Sunni militants sought to establish a

FALLUJAH



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mini state in Anbar anchored on the key cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. In 2004 the US marines conducted the unsuccessful Operation Vigilant Resolve, followed by the more successful Operation Phantom Fury. Al-Qaeda was only fully expelled from Anbar two years later, after the Sunni tribes sided with the Coalition. And even then the Coalition and Iraqi security forces had to stage another security operation in June 2007 to cement this success.

In early 2014, Anbar's governor, Ahmed al-Dulaimi gave the militants in Fallujah a week to surrender. The officer in charge of the Anbar Military Command, Lieutenant General Rasheed Fleih, told Iraqi state TV two or three days were needed to push the militants out of Fallujah and Ramadi. Although the latter was cleared, there was much hesitation over the handling of Fallujah. While Iraqi Special Forces were sent into the city to hunt down ISIS militants, the Iraqi government held back from an all-out assault.

It was reported that up to 500 fighters had moved into Fallujah in early January, seizing weapons from the local police and freeing more than 100 prisoners. Clearly such a number would not be able to hold a city the size of Fallujah against a concerted counterattack by the Iraqi security forces. Intriguingly, Sheikh Ali al-Hamadi claimed that the ISIS fighters had gone and that it was local Sunni militias who were now controlling the city. The local security forces and police were reported to have abandoned their positions rather than face the militants. Nonetheless some 30 soldiers and civilians were killed during the preliminary skirmishing for the city along with an unknown number of militants.

According to Major-General Fadhel al-Barwari, an Iraqi Special Forces commander, "We entered Fallujah with heavy clashes". Quite whom these clashes were against remains unclear. Iraqi security forces claimed they had regained the initiative with the aid of local Sunni tribal militias who are opposed to al-Qaeda. The reality is that the tribes don't want the Shia-dominated Iraqi security forces in the city any more than they want ISIS. Tanks were reported on the eastern outskirts of the city poised for further action.

Despite al-Dulaimi's bullish ultimatum, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was determined to avoid an all out assault on Fallujah; memories of the death and destruction wrought a decade ago are still fresh, and the last thing he wants to do is to make the city a martyr once again to Sunni militancy. The second battle of Fallujah left 200,000 people displaced, 6,000 dead and thousands of buildings destroyed, including 60 mosques.

In a conciliatory move, al-Maliki visited Anbar offering training for loyalist tribal militias and \$83m in reconstruction funding. Likewise to motivate the militias, Iraq's government offered a reward of \$17,200 for each ISIS fighter or foreign militant killed. The local tribes remained largely immune to Maliki's blandishments, however. "We refuse Maliki's appeal and we stay in Fallujah along with all the armed groups," said Sheikh Rafea Mishhen, head of the Jumaliat tribe, "We advise him not to push his army into the city because it will be defeated."

Former Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, currently in enforced exile in Turkey, claims that al-Maliki is trying



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to divert attention from his own failings by blaming the bloodshed in Anbar on ISIS. Hashemi was sentenced to death in absentia in 2013 for running death squads. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly some truth in what Hashemi says – Shia-Sunni tensions cover the whole of the country, not just Anbar.

Until the Sunni inhabitants of Anbar are convinced that Baghdad has their best interests at heart, it is hard to see how the sectarian violence can ever come to an end. Likewise those Sunnis living in Baghdad see the Iraqi security forces as little more than a Shia militia hell-bent on discriminating against them. What Iraq's Sunnis would like to see is the same level of autonomy as that granted to the Kurds in the north. This option, though, could fragment the Iraqi state even further. Such a move would only really benefit Shia Iran which is happy to have a weakened Iraq on its borders.

Iran has no desire to see Iraq's Sunni minority in the ascendant again, however. When they Sunnis ruled under Saddam Hussein it led to the decade-long Iran-Iraq War. Somewhat unusually, and much to the alarm of Washington, Tehran has offered Baghdad its help. The Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Army, General Mohammad Hejazi, has offered advisers and military equipment. In an effort to head off any Iranian leverage, Washington has supplied Iraq with 30 helicopters and 48 drones. On top of this, Washington pledged to speed up the delivery of Hellfire missiles to go with the helicopters. All this is little more than a band-aid that does nothing to alleviate the underlying causes of conflict blighting the "Sunni triangle", however. One can only hope with Fallujah it is a case of third time lucky. Inevitably the West's inability to get to grips with and take decisive action over what is happening in Iraq and Syria leaves a state of chaos in which al-Qaeda can readily flourish. Whatever setbacks ISIS may endure there is little doubt that it will bounce back in one guise or another.

Sunni rally: members of the minority group demonstrate against the Shia-led government

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