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# How al Qaeda lost Iraq

ANDREW PHILLIPS*

*Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has suffered a grave setback in the context of its ongoing campaign there. Since late 2006 Sunni tribal militias working in conjunction with Coalition forces have decimated AQI's ranks, and the organisation has been largely expelled from its former sanctuaries in western Iraq. This article seeks to explain the causes of al Qaeda's defeat with a view towards drawing out their broader implications for the ongoing struggle against jihadist terrorism. I argue that AQI's defeat can be ascribed to its ideological inflexibility, its penchant for indiscriminate violence, and its absolute unwillingness to accommodate the sensitivities and political interests of its host communities. Furthermore, I argue that, far from being exceptional, al Qaeda's mishandling of its local allies in Iraq represents merely the latest instance of a tendency to alienate host communities that has long been evident in its involvement in conflicts in the Islamic world. My analysis confirms that al Qaeda's ideological extremism constitutes a vital point of vulnerability, and that it remains possible to pry global jihadists away from their host communities even in the context of ongoing high-intensity conflicts.*



## Introduction

> Al Qaeda in Iraq has become a hand that destroys the Sunnis. Many Sunnis have been killed by them. Al Qaeda in Iraq is a source of corruption ... they always direct their weapons at innocent civilians.[1]

> We helped them to unite against us ... The Americans and the apostates launched their campaigns against us and we found ourselves in a circle not being able to move, organise, or conduct our operations.[2]

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In February 2008 the US military released extracts from two intercepted letters purportedly written by al Qaeda field commanders operating respectively in Balad, north of Baghdad, and Anbar province in western Iraq. Bemoaning the recent split between al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its erstwhile Sunni hosts, the first document recounts how emir Abu-Tariq's force of 600 operating in Balad was reduced to fewer than 20 in the face of a combined onslaught by Coalition troops and the tribal militias of the newly formed Awakening movement (Fletcher 2008). The second document echoes similarly bleak sentiments, with an unnamed al Qaeda emir describing the organisation as being in a state of 'extraordinary crisis' following the anti-al Qaeda uprising of tribal militias in Anbar (Fletcher 2008). The timing of the documents' release was undoubtedly fortuitous for an administration seeking to bolster the American public's flagging enthusiasm for the Iraq war. Nevertheless, the 'extraordinary crisis' within al Qaeda that the documents describe has been emphatically borne out in the organisation's declining fortunes in Iraq since late 2006. Following its attempt to declare an Islamic State of Iraq in October of that year, AQI suffered the widespread defection of its local allies, as tribal leaders entered a tactical alliance with Coalition forces to expel AQI from its former stronghold in Anbar province. So successful was the resulting marriage of Coalition firepower with local muscle that the 'Anbar model' was subsequently exported to other parts of the country, including the provinces of Diyala, Salah ad-Din, Babil and Baghdad (Kilcullen 2007). By early 2008 over 90 000 predominantly Sunni militiamen had been organised into 'Sons of Iraq' groups tasked with the responsibility of fighting AQI, leaving the latter both outgunned and ever more estranged from the local population (Simon 2008: 64). Expelled from its former sanctuaries, weakened by a declining inflow of foreign fighters to replenish its dwindling ranks, and beset by a combination of internal fragmentation and unrelenting external assaults, AQI found itself weaker in 2008 than at any other time over the course of the Iraqi jihad.

In the following pages I will advance an explanation for al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq, before drawing out the theoretical implications and policy lessons that this defeat presents for the conduct of the continuing struggle against jihadist terrorism. My purposes in undertaking this inquiry are twofold. First, I seek to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the best means of managing the jihadist terrorist threat to world order. More specifically, I aim to validate and build upon the insights of those who have argued that the goal of driving a wedge between jihadist terrorists and host communities in conflict-torn Muslim-majority societies should comprise a primary component of Western counter-terrorism strategies (Cronin 2006: 42; Kilcullen 2005). Al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq remains inexplicable without reference to the profound dissonance in values and political objectives that separated it from its tribal hosts in Anbar province. The Coalition's eventual success in leveraging off these differences revealed the underlying frailty of the initial alliance struck between AQI and local Sunni militants. More importantly the Iraqi case suggests a key

point of vulnerability in the jihadist movement that could potentially be exploited in other theatres where transnational jihadists have opportunistically sought to hijack local conflicts for the purposes of advancing their global Islamist agenda.

My second and subsidiary purpose in this paper is to briefly canvass the pitfalls as well as the promises associated with cultivating indigenous irregulars as a means of advancing Western security objectives. Following the endorsement of an 'indirect approach' to the Long War in the most recent Quadrennial Defense Review (Quadrennial Defense Review 2006: 11), considerable attention has been paid to the potential value of harnessing indigenous irregulars as a resource for furthering Western counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency goals (Arnold 2008; Cassidy 2006; Williams 2007a). My analysis of recent events in Iraq confirms the critically important role that local allies can play in eliminating terrorist sanctuaries and thus weakening the global jihadist movement. Nevertheless, while dividing jihadists from host communities and building alliances with the latter is vital if jihadist terrorism is to be contained, recourse to such expedients also carries the risk of empowering local warlords and thus jeopardising state-building projects in the longer term. For this reason attempts to replicate the 'Anbar model' in other theatres must proceed with an awareness of both the necessity and the difficulty of effectively binding local allies to central governments through targeted material and political inducements once the terrorist threat has been subdued. With respect to Iraq my analysis therefore counsels against premature triumphalism. While AQI may have been defeated, the challenge of effecting an enduring reconciliation between Iraq's feuding factions — and thus establishing a durable political foundation for the development of a strong, stable and inclusive Iraqi state — remains formidable.

The ensuing discussion proceeds in three sections. The first is dedicated to an analysis of the origins of AQI, the ideological imperatives that sustain it, and the nature of its strategic objectives. The second section surveys the history of AQI's activities in Anbar province, detailing their initially positive reception by local Sunnis, the progressive deterioration of AQI's relationship with its hosts, and the violent split between the two that culminated in AQI's expulsion from the province. In the third section I attempt to account for the causes of AQI's defeat in Anbar. I argue that the proximate causes for this defeat lay in the overly ambitious nature of AQI's strategic objectives, the inadequacy of the means through which it sought to advance these objectives, and the inappropriateness of the ways in which it attempted to harness local support for the advancement of its goals. Underlying this mismatch between ends, ways and means, however, was a much more profound contradiction between the revolutionary and global nature of al Qaeda's ambitions and the restorationist and essentially local aspirations of its Sunni tribal hosts. This contradiction in ambitions and world-views provided a potent source of friction between the tribal leadership and the jihadists, which Coalition forces were eventually able to exploit once AQI attempted to impose its authority over its host communities. Critically, in this

section of the discussion, I will demonstrate that AQI's alienation of its local benefactors in Iraq was far from a *sui generis* phenomenon. On the contrary, it replicated a pattern of estrangement and hostility that has long characterised al Qaeda's relations with host communities in different zones of conflict ranging from Bosnia to Afghanistan. This persistent tendency for global jihadists to alienate host communities carries important implications for counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations that extend well beyond the Iraq theatre, and that are reviewed in the concluding section of the discussion.

## Who are AQI and what are their objectives?

### *Ideological complexion*



In order to understand the nature of AQI as an adversary, it is first necessary to sketch the key tenets of the Salafi–jihadist ideology to which it subscribes. Salafi–jihadism constitutes a contingent synthesis of two ideological trends that have ripened in the Islamic world in the postcolonial period. The first of these, Salafism, refers to a movement that calls for the moral regeneration of Muslim societies through a return to the pure form of Islam that was supposedly practised by the first companions (*salaf*) of the Prophet (International Crisis Group 2004: 2). While the majority of Salafis are non-violent, their commitment to propagating an unadulterated form of Islam places them in an antagonistic relationship both to the West (as the supposed avatar of a corrupt and immoral modernity) and also to the majority of the world's Muslims. With respect to the former, Salafis regard Western societies as being vitally implicated in the Muslim world's political and moral decline since the 17th century (Yates 2007: 132–3). Specifically Salafis rail against the importation of Western concepts of secularism and nationalism into Muslim societies, regarding the first as licensing an estrangement of humanity from God, and the second as divisively privileging parochial forms of collective identity over the universal community of the faithful (the *ummah*) (Gerges 2005: 4–5; Mendelsohn 2005: 62–4). In addition to decrying these modern deviations, however, Salafis also condemn as un-Islamic local variations in religious practice, ranging from the worship of local saints through to Sufi meditative rituals, that are also held to exemplify Muslims' moral decline (International Crisis Group 2004: 2–3). At its heart Salafism thus enjoins a comprehensive project of moral and spiritual purification, entailing both the renunciation of Western cultural 'pollutants', as well as the purging of innovations in religious practice in Islamic societies that have accumulated in the centuries following the time of the Prophet.

The observation that contemporary Muslims are trapped in a condition of *jahiliyya*, referring to the time of ignorance and depravity that preceded the coming of Islam, is a central tenet of Salafism (Yates 2007: 132). This claim is nevertheless far from exclusive to Salafism, but can be found also in the writings of Islamist luminaries such as Mawlana Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, who have

also inspired the global jihadist movement (Wiktorowicz 2005: 78–9). Critically, whereas many Salafis have adopted a posture of political quiescence in the face of a morally bankrupt modernity, Qutb and his successors identified the waging of violent jihad against Islam's earthly enemies as every true Muslim's highest religious duty. For jihadists the obligation to wage war against God's enemies is incumbent upon all believers, and constitutes the most vital and authentic expression of religious devotion (Wiktorowicz 2005: 80). Additionally the waging of jihad is seen as being absolutely necessary if Muslims are to be liberated from an infidel-dominated world order (Yates 2007: 136). In jihadist lights the cosmic struggle against unbelief and the temporal struggle against Western encroachment on Muslim territory are completely conjoined, providing jihadists with a licence to wage unrestricted warfare against both the West and the local 'apostate' regimes in the Muslim world that form part of its apparatus of domination.

Salafi–jihadism, of which al Qaeda forms the most notorious expression, combines the puritanical moralism of Salafism with the violent activism and existential bellicosity of jihadism. In the instance of al Qaeda these ideological commitments are wedded to a very specific grand strategy, which envisages as its end goal the overthrow of apostate regimes throughout the Muslim world, the destruction of the existing international order of sovereign states and the unification of the *ummah* under a restored Caliphate (Mendelsohn 2005). It was in order to advance this objective that al Qaeda shifted its attention in the 1990s from the 'near enemy' of local apostate regimes in the Greater Middle East towards a focus on the 'far enemy', in the form of the United States and its allies (Gerges 2005: 1).[3] The attacks that culminated in 9/11 were intended to draw the West into an unwinnable military confrontation with the Islamic world, which would begin with their defeat in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and end with their military and diplomatic disengagement from the Middle East (Doran 2002: 23). Emboldened by their victory over the infidels and secure in their sanctuary in Afghanistan, the jihadists would then be in a strong position to overthrow weakened autocracies throughout the Muslim world (Doran 2002: 23). This would in turn pave the way for the Caliphate's establishment and Muslims' restoration to their rightful place of global pre-eminence. These expectations were initially confounded with the Taliban's rapid overthrow in late 2001. However, the Bush administration's subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 revived jihadists' fortunes, simultaneously opening up a new 'field of jihad', while also catalysing the emergence of an indigenous Salafi–jihadist presence in the heart of the Islamic world.

### *AQI – social composition and strategic outlook*

With the exception of the Kurdistan-based Ansar al-Islam, no significant Salafi–jihadist presence existed in Iraq before the Coalition invasion in 2003.

This observation aside, the slow atrophy of the Iraqi state from 1991 onwards had witnessed a dramatic growth in clandestine religious activity throughout the country, which extended to the development of an indigenous Salafist movement (Hashim 2006: 148). Following the collapse of Saddam's regime, Iraqi Salafists began to mobilise more openly, with some participating in the insurgency from its earliest stages. This process of indigenous Salafi mobilisation occurred in tandem with a rapid inflow of foreign jihadists over Iraq's poorly guarded borders in the chaotic months following the fall of Baghdad (Deneslow 2008: 19). These foreign fighters included a substantial number of jihadists affiliated with al Qaeda, and foreign fighters would come to play a key role in the insurgency, introducing tactical innovations such as suicide bombing and public beheadings, while also accelerating Iraqi jihadists' ideological radicalisation (Hashim 2004). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that AQI constitutes a foreign entity in the country. On the contrary, while foreigners such as the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi played a vital catalytic role in establishing AQI, and continue to occupy key leadership positions within the organisation, informed estimates suggest that Iraqis constitute over 90 percent of AQI's membership (Hoffman 2007: 326). AQI should thus be regarded as a hybrid political entity incorporating both foreign and local elements, and one that furthermore constitutes merely one part of a broad and fractious insurgency. AQI's hybrid origins can be discerned also in its strategic outlook, which reflects both the local sectarian anxieties of Iraq's Sunni minority as well as al Qaeda's universalist aspirations to establish a transnational Caliphate.

AQI's origins lie with the establishment of the jihadist group *Tawhid wal Jihad* (Unity and Holy War) by the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. A seasoned jihadist who had previously associated with Ansar al-Islam following his retreat from Afghanistan in late 2001 (Hashim 2006: 143), Zarqawi immediately recognised the opportunities for jihad presented by the Coalition's invasion of Iraq, and quickly became notorious for his penchant for extreme blood-letting, including his alleged personal involvement in the public beheading of Western hostages (Byman and Pollack 2008: 60). In 2004 Zarqawi renamed his organisation al Qaeda in Mesopotamia and formally pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden. For Zarqawi identification with the al Qaeda 'brand' carried with it both the promise of increased notoriety as well as increased access to external sponsorship (Fishman 2006: 21). Equally, for the senior al Qaeda leadership in hiding along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, affiliation with Zarqawi ensured a visible al Qaeda presence in the world's most prominent jihadist battlefield (Fishman 2006: 21). The alliance between al Qaeda and Zarqawi was plagued by disagreements over strategy and tactics, with the former presciently decrying Zarqawi for alienating Muslim public opinion through his routine resort to the indiscriminate killing of Iraqi civilians (Wright 2005). Nevertheless, the alliance was too valuable to both parties for either of them to consider abandoning it, and it has endured without serious challenge in the period following Zarqawi's death.

AQI's strategic objectives reflect both the murderous sectarian bigotries of its founder as well as the global preoccupations of its nominal patrons. For both Zarqawi and the senior al Qaeda leadership, Iraq's importance lay in its role as a beachhead for the global jihadists located in the heart of the Islamic world. Having long been preoccupied with the goal of obtaining a secure territorial base for the jihad, Ayman al-Zawahiri envisaged a staged struggle that would begin with expulsion of the 'Crusaders' from Iraq and entail the subsequent establishment of a Caliphate stem-land in western Iraq. This liberated territory would then serve as a launch-pad from which to strike out at and eventually overthrow neighbouring apostate regimes, thereby facilitating the growth of the Caliphate and the political unification of an ever larger proportion of the *ummah*. With the Caliphate established, the conditions would then be ripe for a final armed confrontation with Israel and its infidel patrons (al-Zawahiri 2005). While Zarqawi subscribed to some aspects of al Qaeda's broader strategic vision, his fear and loathing of Iraq's Shi'ite majority led him to conclude that the Coalition's expulsion could best be expedited by goading Iraq's Shi'ite militias into a sectarian civil war (Michael 2007: 346). For Zarqawi a sectarian civil war that would eventually engulf the entire Middle East constituted an essential circuit breaker that would weaken incumbent regimes, terminate the Shi'ite ascendancy, drive the Coalition from the region, and thus create the conditions necessary for the rise of the Caliphate.

Their differences aside, what united al Qaeda's senior leadership with Zarqawi was their common reading of the Iraqi insurgency through the lens of their pan-Islamic goals. In the chaotic aftermath of Saddam's fall Iraq became an ideal venue for deterritorialised nomadic jihadists to prosecute their dream of unifying the *ummah* under the banner of a universal Caliphate. The jihadists' opportunistic insertion into the Iraq conflict was made possible by the prior existence of a clandestine Salafist presence in Iraq (Hashim 2006: 113), combined with the fears of a recently disenfranchised Sunni minority in the face of Shi'ite political ascendancy. Critically, however, this transient convergence of interests between AQI and elements of the Sunni community masked a far more profound divergence in ambitions and outlooks, which the ensuing six years of conflict have progressively exposed. It is to a more sustained examination of the successive alignment and estrangement between AQI and its Sunni hosts that I now turn.

## The rise and fall of al Qaeda in Anbar

### *Reception and alignment, 2003–04*

Encompassing roughly a third of Iraq's territory but accounting for only 1.3 million of its 28 million inhabitants, the sparsely populated province of Anbar served as a hotbed of rebellion from the earliest days of the anti-Coalition insurgency. In contrast to more urbanised provinces, tribal loyalties have

remained paramount in Anbar, with the province's fiercely independent sheikhs violently resisting the encroachments of successive central governments from the establishment of the British Mandate onwards (Vinogradov 1972). Even under the Ba'ath party's draconian rule tribal resistance to Baghdad was never completely eradicated and, with the weakening of the Iraqi state under international sanctions during the 1990s, the centrifugal tendencies of Iraqi tribalism were again brought to the fore. From 1991 onwards sheikhs from Anbar's dominant Dulaimi tribe grew rich off their involvement in smuggling oil and other commodities across the border into Syria (Long 2008: 75; Kilcullen 2007). Confronted by restricted oil revenues and a faltering central state apparatus, Saddam made a virtue of necessity during the 1990s, endorsing a strategy of 'auxiliary tribalism' (Long 2008: 75) that charged Anbar's sheikhs with responsibility for enforcing order throughout the province. In exchange the sheikhs enjoyed extensive financial patronage and were even permitted to maintain their own private armies (Long 2008: 75). Such inducements failed to completely eliminate the threat of tribal rebellion, but they did nevertheless ensconce Anbar's tribes in a position of privilege that was gravely jeopardised with the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in 2003.

Given its religiously conservative character and its history of hostility to central rule, Anbar was always likely to emerge as a cradle for the anti-Coalition insurgency and, with the Coalition's attempt to impose democracy on Iraq, this possibility was soon realised. With the fall of Saddam the generous patronage arrangements that had formerly tied the tribes to Baghdad were abruptly terminated, while the prospect of universal suffrage threatened to marginalise Anbar's Sunni elite in a Shi'ite-dominated democracy (Hashim 2006: 105–6). The prospect of disenfranchisement was particularly galling to Iraq's Sunnis given their historic dominance of the country from the time of the Ottoman Empire onwards, while the relative dearth of proven oil reserves in the Sunni triangle promised to add material deprivation to political disempowerment as the Sunnis' likely future.[4] In light of these considerations the initially warm reception the Sunni resistance accorded to foreign jihadists is unsurprising.

The initial alliance between Anbar's rebels and foreign jihadists stemmed from their common interest in expelling the Coalition from Iraq and arresting the Shi'ites' political ascendancy. To the protean constellation of ex-Ba'athists, nationalists and tribal rebels that formed the backbone of the insurgency, foreign jihadists provided a useful source of volunteers, whose military inexperience was partially offset by their fanaticism and willingness to undertake 'martyrdom' operations against the Coalition and its local allies (F. Kagan 2007: 6). Additionally, foreign jihadists provided local insurgents with valuable connections to sources of financial support throughout the Muslim world, thereby enhancing the insurgents' resilience in the face of Coalition attempts to dismantle their local infrastructure. Equally, for the foreign jihadists, Anbar served as a crucial portal through which to infiltrate Iraq from either Syria or Jordan, with a network of sympathetic mosques and safe-houses along the

Euphrates river valley forming a conduit through which jihadists could be funnelled to Baghdad via Ramadi (K. Kagan 2007: 3–5). Later Anbar would also serve as a staging area from which Zarqawi would direct AQI's bombing of American-owned hotels in Amman, Jordan in November 2005. To the Sunni insurgency foreign jihadists represented a useful tactical asset, while, for the foreign jihadists, Anbar served a threefold role as a portal to the Iraqi jihad, a territorial beachhead on which to build the Caliphate, and a launch-pad from which to strike out at neighbouring apostate regimes. Underlying the alliance between the Sunnis and the foreign jihadists was an extremely fragile and contingent convergence of interests, which splintered as AQI progressively sought to insinuate itself deeper into the fabric of Iraqi society.



### *The emerging split within the insurgency, 2005*

Over the course of 2005 a split emerged within the insurgency between Anbar's tribal leadership and AQI. When this split culminated in violence, AQI were initially victorious in coercing their local hosts back into conformity with AQI's demands (Long 2008: 78). Nevertheless, this confrontation was driven by deeper dynamics that would soon blossom into the more enduring schism that developed within the insurgency from 2006 onwards. A consideration of the causes driving local disenchantment with AQI from 2005 is therefore essential in understanding the context for Al Qaeda's subsequent expulsion from Anbar.

Despite their common interests in expelling Coalition forces from Iraq and restoring Sunnis to a position of supremacy within the country, relations between Anbar's tribal leaders and AQI steadily soured as the latter sought to entrench itself more deeply in Anbar. Three factors in particular contributed to Anbaris' increasing hostility towards AQI. The first of these was AQI's attempt to embed itself into local society by marrying its members into prominent tribal families. While attempts to engineer and exploit local kinship ties have long been a standard technique of roaming jihadists seeking to tether themselves to host societies (Kilcullen 2007), the attempt in the Anbar case proved highly counter-productive. Specifically this strategy ran counter to long-established customs that forbade marrying off the tribes' women to anyone from outside the larger tribal confederation (Kilcullen 2007). Al Qaeda's attempted violation of this cultural taboo was staunchly resisted by the locals, while the jihadists' attempts to overcome this resistance through violence and intimidation created a revenge obligation that in turn catalysed a series of armed confrontations between AQI and its tribal hosts (F. Kagan 2007: 28).

In addition to coercively trying to marry in to the local tribal communities, AQI also tried to muscle in on the tribes' lucrative involvement in black market activities, creating a powerful material incentive for the tribes to turn against it. Tribal leaders in the dominant Dulaimi confederation had long enriched themselves through their involvement in banditry and smuggling along the

under-policed Amman–Baghdad highway, and AQI's attempt to usurp their position aroused their abiding hostility (Long 2008: 75). While AQI's effort to tap into Anbar's lucrative illicit economy represented an expedient means of financing their activities, its strategic effect was to alienate the group's local protectors and patrons and thus further cultivate the conditions for an eventual split within the insurgency. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that one of the Awakening movement's key leaders, the late Sattar Abu Risha, was a notorious highwayman in addition to being a tribal potentate, whose eventual turn against AQI was driven as much by economic self-interest as it was by moral and ideological convictions (International Crisis Group 2008: 12).

Finally, AQI's high-handed attempt to impose its own social and political agenda on the people of Anbar fostered further tensions within the insurgency. This tendency manifested itself first in AQI's violent attempt to impress Salafism's rigidly puritanical moral and religious code onto the local populace. Actions such as breaking the fingers of cigarette smokers and murdering women who refused to wear the *niqab* naturally alienated locals (International Crisis Group 2008: 13–14; Paley 2008), as did AQI's attempt to stamp out local religious practices (e.g. the veneration of ancestors' tombs), which the group decried as un-Islamic (Williams 2007b: 63). Even more significant than these infractions, however, was AQI's attempt to bully the tribal leadership into conformity with the jihadists' political vision. Whereas the Sunnis had boycotted the January 2005 elections of their own volition, by year's end a rough consensus had coalesced around a dual strategy entailing armed confrontation with the Shi'ite-dominated government in conjunction with formal participation in the political process (Knickmeyer and Finer 2005; Williams 2007b: 63). Such a strategy made sense to elements of the Sunni leadership anxious to avoid permanent political marginalisation. Equally, however, participation in Iraq's fledgling democracy was anathema to al Qaeda, which regarded any form of man-made law as an act of hubris, democracy itself being regarded as an intolerable affront to the majesty of divine law as revealed in the Koran (Michael 2007: 346). AQI's inflexible hostility towards democracy, together with its continuing attempts to compel local conformity with its dictates, seeded the ensuing rebellion that led to AQI's eviction from Anbar.

### *Rejection and rebellion — the Anbar awakening and al Qaeda's defeat, 2006–present*

By the beginning of 2006 local opinion in Anbar was turning decisively against AQI. Three factors on top of those already considered provided the catalyst for the shift from simmering resentment to open rebellion. The first of these was the shift in Sunni perceptions of the sectarian balance of power in Iraq following AQI's bombing of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra in February 2006. The

desecration of the al-Askari mosque was a calculated act of provocation by al Qaeda that succeeded in propelling Iraq towards a sectarian civil war. The ensuing wave of sectarian cleansing that swept through Iraq succeeded in further polarising the Sunni and Shi'ite communities, nominally advancing AQI's goal of derailing the Coalition's attempts to consolidate a functioning democratic state in the country. At the same time, however, the ensuing sectarian clashes compelled Sunnis to revise their expectations that they would emerge as the victors from an Iraqi civil war. While the Shi'ites' numerical superiority was never in question, Iraq's Sunnis had hitherto believed that victory would be assured (Biddle 2008: 6), given the military advantages they possessed by dint of their prior dominance of the Iraqi army officer corps (Hashim 2006: 67), and given also the support from foreign co-religionists that they may also have anticipated in the event of war. The course of the conflict in 2006 forced Sunnis to significantly revise this assessment (Biddle 2008: 6). More importantly for this inquiry, the flare-up in sectarian civil violence demonstrated that, while AQI could certainly provoke the Shi'ites into conflict, it could not effectively protect Sunnis from the retribution of Shi'ite death squads, either in Baghdad or elsewhere.

The perceived value of the Sunni alliance with al Qaeda consequently diminished as sectarian violence escalated, while AQI's continued high-handedness and conspicuous attempts to monopolise the insurgency further inflamed local hostility. Al Qaeda's announcement of the foundation of an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in Ramadi in October 2006, which attracted fierce criticism not only from AQI's indigenous jihadist rivals but also internationally from leading jihadist ideologues such as Hamid al Ali and Abu Basi al Tartusi, exemplified this tendency.[5] The attempted establishment of an ISI in 'liberated' Ramadi, Anbar's commercial centre and provincial capital, was consistent with AQI's grand strategy of carving out a Caliphate stem-land amid the wreckage of the Iraqi state. Additionally the ISI announcement may also have been motivated by a desire to deflect criticisms concerning the dominance of foreigners in AQI's leadership by providing a more Iraqi public face for the organisation (Fishman 2008: 49–50). If this was AQI's intention in establishing the ISI, however, it backfired disastrously. Recoiling at yet another perceived attempt by AQI to dictate the course of the insurgency, a coalition of Islamist insurgent groups established their own rival umbrella group (the Reformation and Jihad Front) in May 2007 (Kohlmann 2007 : 15). In the context of ongoing local resentment towards al Qaeda's bullying and penchant for indiscriminate violence, this acrimonious and highly public schism between AQI and other Sunni insurgents signalled a sharp rise in internecine insurgent violence from which al Qaeda would eventually emerge the loser.

It was within the context of shifting Sunni perceptions of the sectarian balance of power and a growing fragmentation of the Sunni insurgency that the United States officially modified its counter-insurgency strategy in February 2007 to take account of these new realities. Whereas the United States had

intermittently engaged with tribal leaders in Anbar from 2004 onwards in its efforts to stabilise the security situation, the possibility of forming a *de facto* alliance with the tribes emerged only once the Sunnis had themselves become disenchanted with AQI, and once the United States had also grown equally disillusioned with the prospects achieving of a 'top down' process of political reconciliation through the auspices of the al-Maliki government (Simon 2008: 60–1). While Anbar's rebels remained resolute in their commitment to ending the Coalition's occupation of their country, the fear of an Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite takeover, combined with exasperation at the intransigence and indiscriminate belligerence of al Qaeda, propelled them towards a tactical alliance with the United States. Backed by American firepower and buoyed by American patronage (the US budgeted $150 million to sponsor its tribal proxies in 2008), tribal Awakening groups rapidly overwhelmed al Qaeda insurgents in Anbar following Awakening's establishment in 2007.[6] The immediate consequence of this realignment was a surge in al Qaeda casualties and AQI's loss of its territorial base in Anbar. Subsequently, however, the 'Anbar model' has been successfully exported to other provinces, including Diyala, Salah ad-Din and Baghdad, leaving AQI without sanctuary and without friends throughout large swathes of Iraq (Kilcullen 2007). That al Qaeda remains active in Iraq and capable of inflicting horrendous atrocities on the local populace is beyond doubt. But, following the 'betrayal' of its former allies, al Qaeda's armed strength has been much reduced and its operational freedom dramatically curtailed. Now shorn of its base and encircled by enemies, al Qaeda's dreams of establishing the Caliphate on the grave of the Iraqi state today appear more remote than ever.



## How al Qaeda lost Iraq

At the most prosaic level a Qaeda's defeat in Iraq can be attributed to its adoption of a grossly flawed strategy. Conceptualised through the prism of a classic ends/means/ways trichotomy, al Qaeda pursued unrealistic ends through recourse to inappropriate ways and inadequate means. Beginning with an assessment of al Qaeda's strategic ends, the negative goal of humiliating the Coalition and energising the global jihad through involvement in the Iraqi insurgency was eminently achievable. Conversely, al Qaeda's positive goal of establishing an enduring stem-land for the Caliphate in western Iraq appears in retrospect to have been wildly optimistic. That jihadists from al-Zawahiri down believed this goal to have been achievable merely underscores the degree to which they exaggerated the popular appeal of the jihadist cause among the Iraqi people. Additionally al Qaeda's ambitions also betray a tendency to downplay the inherent difficulties involved in navigating an environment in which local concerns would inevitably predominate. Al Qaeda not only misperceived the degree of concordance between their political objectives and those of their

hosts, but they also ignored the formidable constraints imposed by having to negotiate local sensitivities and concerns in the furtherance of their goals. The belief that local insurgents would passively accept the subordination of their interests to the cause of global jihad was farcical, as was the supposition that Iraq was some sort of *tabula rasa* in which al Qaeda could carve out a micro-Caliphate without incurring the wrath of an insurgent movement that from its earliest stirrings remained dominated by Iraqi nationalists (Simon 2008: 62).

The weakness of al Qaeda's strategy is evident also in the inadequate means it had available to advance its goals. Over the course of the war in Iraq foreign fighters have never accounted for more than a fraction of the insurgency and, even following AQI's 'Iraqisation', AQI has always been outnumbered by nationalists, local Sunni jihadists and Shi'ite militiamen, not to mention Coalition forces and those of the fledgling Iraqi state (Hashim 2006: 139). Despite Sunnis' initial gratitude for the military assistance provided by al Qaeda, AQI's small size ensured that it could only ever realistically aspire to be a junior ally to its Sunni hosts. If al Qaeda was ever going to have achieved its goals, it would have needed to have augmented its own military capabilities by carefully cultivating local alliances and steadily persuading these allies of the merits of the jihadist cause. As it was, AQI lacked the patience, the tact and the diplomatic prowess necessary to engineer such an outcome. Instead, Al Qaeda consistently overrated its value as an alliance partner to the Sunni population, while simultaneously underestimating the degree of resentment it was generating through the many burdens it imposed on its hosts. Through its maladroit handling of local allies AQI not only forfeited the opportunity to develop the critical mass necessary to achieve its goals, but it also ensured its own isolation, creating the preconditions for its own destruction.

Compounding the problems flowing from its unrealistic objectives and its inadequate means, the methods al Qaeda employed both to embed itself in Anbar and to discipline wayward allies also contributed significantly to its defeat. In violating tribal taboos against exogamous marriage, encroaching on tribal leaders' economic interests, and ruthlessly imposing its own puritanical interpretation of Islam on the local population, AQI perversely cemented its status as a malignant foreign entity in Anbar, a perception that no amount of local recruitment could dispel. Similarly, al Qaeda's attempts to punish local allies and thus deter subsequent defections proved equally counter-productive. By itself the calculated use of atrocity is far from uncommon in unconventional conflicts, being frequently used both to assert control over local populations and also to shore up coalitions where sections of an insurgency might otherwise be tempted to defect to the government's side (Kalyvas 1999). Additionally al Qaeda's turn to coercion was also doubtless strongly motivated by the desire to pre-empt the possibility of its local allies abandoning it with the expected cessation of conflict after the anticipated withdrawal of Coalition forces. Al Qaeda's motives for attempting to intimidate local communities into compliance with the jihadists' vision for Iraq are strategically intelligible, given the

jihadists' enduring bitterness about their perceived 'betrayal' by local co-religionists at the end of previous conflicts such as the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina,[7] and given also its concerns to prevent the fruits of victory from again being squandered by the treachery of ungrateful allies.[8] In the context of Anbar, however, al Qaeda atrocities merely activated tribal revenge obligations, thereby fortifying rather than weakening the resolve of al Qaeda's enemies (Kilcullen 2007). Al Qaeda's exclusive privileging of religious solidarity over other forms of identity may also have led its leadership to exaggerate the search costs entailed in tribal elites finding alternative allies to al Qaeda. In overstating the holding power of religious loyalty and attempting to deny its Sunni allies an autonomous voice in determining the direction of the insurgency, AQI left its local partners with only exit remaining as a viable choice. The conflict's subsequent course shows that the Sunni tribes seized this option with alacrity once a shift in US strategy enabled them to align with Coalition forces against their common enemy.

Throughout the duration of its existence, al Qaeda has revealed itself to be an ingenious and adaptive adversary; thus it is reasonable to expect that it may yet learn from its mis-steps in Iraq. The fluid character of tribal loyalties, the continuing spectre of sectarian conflict, and the increased operational freedom that AQI would enjoy in the event of a precipitate allied withdrawal should also give pause to any who would assume that al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq is somehow irreversible (Byman and Pollack 2008: 62). These caveats aside, I nevertheless believe that al Qaeda's defeat is likely to prove enduring. Furthermore, I maintain that, when considered within the context of the broader history of the global jihadist movement, al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq appears far from exceptional. To the contrary, analogues to the Anbar experience can be found in nearly every conflict involving roaming jihadists since the original Afghan jihad in the 1980s. In successive conflicts ranging from Bosnia to Chechnya to Kashmir the jihad jet-set has rapidly worn out its welcome among local host populations as a result of its ideological inflexibility and high-handedness, as well as its readiness to resort to indiscriminate violence against locals at the first signs of challenge (Sageman 2004: 59–60; Williams 2007a; 2007b). Throughout its history, al Qaeda's operatives have consistently sought to graft the global jihadist agenda onto localised conflicts involving Muslims. However, with the notable exceptions of Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban and to a certain extent the lawless tribal belt straddling the contemporary Afghanistan–Pakistan border, they have been generally unsuccessful in converting locals to the jihadist cause, much less in securing a territorial base for the Caliphate. That this pattern has so frequently been repeated suggests that the underlying causes of al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq may transcend the specific circumstances of that conflict, being rather related to the very nature of global jihadism itself.

Considering the Anbar case once again, what is most striking about AQI's behaviour is its abject failure either to adapt itself to local circumstances or to rein in its operatives' excesses once their impact on al Qaeda's strategic position

in the province became clear. Rather than seeking to mollify local actors or accommodate their concerns, al Qaeda's leaders condemned any who disagreed with them as un-Islamic, pronouncing the judgement of excommunication (*takfir*) against dissenters at the slightest provocation (F. Kagan 2007: 26). Al Qaeda operatives also regularly meted out brutal punishments for seemingly trivial social transgressions such as smoking cigarettes or watching satellite television (International Crisis Group 2008: 13; Paley 2008). To outsiders, the negative strategic repercussions of punishing such infractions of the Salafist code would seem easy to anticipate. That al Qaeda proved both so unwilling to adapt to local circumstances and so incapable of exercising self-restraint, despite the existence of obvious incentives to do so, demands explanation. While hubris and blood-lust commend themselves as immediate answers to this puzzle, I suggest that a more satisfactory explanation can be found through a more sustained exploration of al Qaeda's ideological essence.

Baldly stated, the causes of al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq can be located in its ideological DNA (Stephens 2008: 26). By this, I mean that jihadist conceptions of religion and the self are so configured as to compel a relentless and ultimately self-defeating assault on local cultures as an essential part of the jihadist religious experience. Far from being marginal to the jihadist project, the promotion of a decontextualised Islam stripped bare of local cultural accretions is in fact central to the Salafist vision in its present neo-fundamentalist form (Roy 2004: 244). Thus, for al Qaeda's roaming jihadists, the extirpation of local 'deviations' from Islam forms an inseparable part of a broader cosmic struggle against the condition of *jahiliyya*. This dimension of the cosmic struggle between faith and ignorance cannot be neglected, even when the surrounding social and political circumstances might otherwise recommend restraint as the preferred course of action. The culture of existential bellicosity that pervades the global jihadist movement provides a further reinforcement of this message. For the jihadists violence conducted in the name of Allah assumes a significance that transcends its instrumental value. The killing of God's enemies, be they infidels or nominal Muslims, thus serves as a purgative rite of violence in which spiritual 'pollutants' are cleansed from the *ummah*, and in which the individual believer's fidelity to God's word finds its highest affirmation.

A full examination of the sociological origins of jihadist ideology remains beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, Olivier Roy has advanced some highly suggestive comments concerning the popularity of a 'decontextualised' and deculturalised form of neo-fundamentalism among sections of the Muslim diaspora (Roy 2004: 263–5). Within the context of the Iraq war this observation may provide vital clues as to the exact nature of the cultural clash that underlay al Qaeda's disastrous confrontation with the Sunni tribes. Thus, for example, a consideration of AQI's leadership reveals the dominance of deracinated exiles drawn from throughout the Arab world, while its Iraqi foot soldiers included large numbers of urbanised young men who had been dislocated from their original locality and social context, and who presumably

found a surrogate form of community in al Qaeda (International Crisis Group 2008: 3). It is easy to imagine how such rootless men would have chosen to identify with a deterritorialised and abstract *ummah* over the more parochial solidarities of tribe and nation, just as it is easy to understand how they may have sought self-realisation in the project of violently transforming Anbar into the foundation of a revived Caliphate. Equally, however, it takes little effort to comprehend how threatening such a project must have seemed to Anbar's sheikhs, whose aspirations were restorationist rather than revolutionary, and who ultimately sought to preserve rather than overturn the province's social order and its accompanying tribal hierarchy. This antagonism could only have been sharpened in light of the jihadists' attempts to strip Islam of the very practices and rites that rendered it such a powerful source of identity and ontological security for Anbar's Muslims.



The foregoing speculations as to the ultimate causes of al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq are necessarily brief, and are intended to be suggestive rather than definitive. They are nevertheless completely consistent with the record of global jihadism's long history of repudiation and defeat in successive conflicts in the Muslim world over the past two decades. Throughout this period the jihadist *Internationale* has time and again committed the same types of mistake as those that contributed to its defeat in Iraq. In contrast to its reputation for tactical and operational innovation, jihadist strategy has remained remarkably maladaptive, with opportunistic forays into local conflicts rapidly segueing into fratricidal violence occasioned by al Qaeda's overweening intolerance and its ideological inflexibility. The deracinated and 'purified' form of radical Islam espoused by al Qaeda has undoubtedly amplified its appeal to a globally dispersed constituency, and has enabled it to reap a harvest of alienated young Muslims who are doubly estranged from disintegrating traditional social structures and an encroaching global market civilisation (Cronin 2002/03; Mousseau 2002/03). But I maintain that the strategic dividends of al Qaeda's global reach have arguably been more than offset by its serial failures to capitalise effectively on local grievances by striking deeper social roots into war-torn Muslim-majority communities.[9] Al Qaeda's murderous iconoclasm has favoured geographical breadth over social depth, repeatedly thwarting the jihadists' declared goal of carving out a secure territorial base for a renewed Caliphate. Seen through the context of this longer history of failure, al Qaeda's most recent defeat in Iraq potentially carries important lessons for the conduct of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations that extend well beyond the present conflict.

With regard to the conduct of the struggle against jihadist terrorism, al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq appears to reflect longstanding incapacities for moderation that will continue to inhibit its ability to forge enduring relationships with local allies in other theatres. The experience of Anbar province in particular seems to validate the notion that jihadist ideology constitutes al Qaeda's strategic centre of gravity (Fishman 2008), and that attempts to pry local allies from al Qaeda's grasp can benefit from a more sustained focus on

exacerbating the ideological differences between global jihadists and local actors. Non-Muslims lack the religious and cultural authority necessary to directly influence the contours of the ideological debate. Nevertheless, they can do much to create the enabling conditions in which ideological disagreements may more easily mature. Specifically I suggest that an integrated strategy of choking, wedging, building and binding, inductively derived from the Anbar case, provides the best means of fostering dissent between al Qaeda and its host communities.[10]

By choking, I refer to operations that are designed to starve jihadist operatives of access to sources of money, *materiel* and personnel that are external to host communities. The primary purpose of such operations would be to diminish al Qaeda's value as an ally and a source of patronage to its hosts. It must be acknowledged that the success of choking operations would also probably prompt al Qaeda to increase its exactions on the local populace, at least in the short term. This development would doubtless produce unfortunate humanitarian consequences, given al Qaeda's penchant for violence and intimidation, but it would nevertheless work to further alienate the jihadists from indigenous sources of support, thereby paving the way for the jihadists' eventual eradication from host communities. Wedging refers to initiatives that are explicitly designed to further aggravate divisions between al Qaeda and host communities by leveraging off existing differences of interest between them. In Anbar, for example, the opening up of opportunities for Sunnis to directly participate in elections played a crucial role in driving a wedge between the tribal leadership and al Qaeda, giving the former a non-violent channel through which to advance their sectarian and tribal interests, while condemning the latter to adopt a position of ever more violent and intransigent opposition to the democratic process. Building, which works best when preceded by a successful attempt at wedging, refers to the cultivation of tactical alliances between counter-insurgents and indigenous proxies along the lines of the Anbar model, with a view towards employing these proxies to eradicate the jihadist presence within their communities. Finally, binding entails the sustained use of patronage and opportunities for political participation to tie proxies ever more closely to the central government, and is intended to assist the long-term consolidation of state power, and with it the elimination of the conditions of internal instability within which jihadist terrorism thrives.

The chief lessons of al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq are that global jihadists can be pried loose from their local hosts even in the context of an ongoing high-intensity conflict, and that al Qaeda's ideological inflexibility constitutes a key point of vulnerability that should be explicitly targeted by its adversaries whenever local conditions allow. The Anbar experience also illustrates that indigenous irregulars can play a critical role in eradicating jihadist terrorists, appearing to vindicate the 'indirect approach' to counter-terrorism that was advocated in the most recent Quadrennial Defense Review (Quadrennial Defense Review 2006: 11). Nevertheless, continuing developments in Iraq

illuminate the perils as well as the promise of relying on local irregulars to fight jihadist terrorism. For, while the empowerment of local auxiliaries provides a powerful means of countering groups such as Al Qaeda in Iraq, such initiatives carry with them the risk of strengthening local warlords at the expense of the very states they were intended to preserve. This danger is especially pronounced in circumstances of the kind now present in Iraq, where sectarian antagonisms have inhibited the consolidation of a central government enjoying broad-based cross-communal support, and where the rearmament of the Sunni militias heralds the risk of renewed communal violence in the event of an eventual American withdrawal.

For the foregoing reasons, any optimism concerning the success of the American 'surge' in Iraq must be tempered by an acknowledgement of the Faustian nature of the bargain between Coalition forces and Sunni irregulars that has underwritten AQI's defeat. From a counter-terrorism perspective the Coalition's exploitation of the schism between AQI and its Sunni hosts was strategically vital in ensuring the former's suppression, and American sponsorship of indigenous irregulars to spearhead the assault on al Qaeda was potentially unavoidable. Nevertheless, from a counter-insurgency and state-building perspective, this expedient has run the risk of further entangling the Coalition in Iraq's sectarian antagonisms, while also weakening Baghdad's faltering attempts to secure a monopoly over organised violence within the country. The facility with which elements of the Sunni leadership have leveraged off Coalition counter-terrorism concerns, both to destroy their immediate adversaries (AQI) while also renewing their military capacity to credibly threaten renewed hostilities against al-Maliki's Shi'ite-dominated government, also testifies to the independence and political sophistication of so-called local 'proxies', further cautioning against premature triumphalism in the wake of the 'surge'.

Al Qaeda's defeat in Iraq demonstrates that predatory roaming jihadists are eminently beatable, and that tactical alliances between international forces and indigenous irregulars provide a useful means of advancing Western counter-terrorism objectives in the context of ongoing high-intensity conflicts. The gulf in values separating Salafi–jihadists from tribal communities also suggests the potential for exporting the 'Anbar model' to other conflicts in which jihadists have sought to impose their agenda on local populations through their characteristic blend of propaganda, patronage and terror. Nevertheless, the precarious and partial nature of the order that has been established in Iraq also demonstrates the inherent risks associated with such a strategy. Attempts to export the 'Anbar model' to other theatres, such as Afghanistan, must proceed with an awareness that indigenous irregulars invariably enter into alliances with international forces to advance their own political agendas, and that these agendas frequently contradict Western aspirations to build centralised Weberian states established on broadly liberal-democratic principles. While the ideological intransigence of jihadist terrorists thus leaves them susceptible to

isolation and excision from local communities, the existence of a parallel values gap between Western counter-insurgents and host communities also complicates efforts to harness local proxies to the task of creating strong, inclusive and democratically accountable sovereign states once the common threat posed by jihadist terrorism has been subdued. Binding proxies to the central government once jihadist terrorists have been defeated therefore remains as essential to achieve in theory as it is difficult to accomplish in practice, particularly in contexts where the internal security dilemma between a polity's constituent communities remains intense. In the case of Iraq the ongoing restiveness of the tribes, the slow pace at which Sunni militiamen are being formally integrated into the state's security establishment, and the omnipresent threat of revived sectarian bloodletting all caution against an overly optimistic assessment of the country's prospects. Al Qaeda may have lost Iraq, but this in no way implies that the US and its allies have won.



## Notes

1. Abd al-Rahman al Qaysi, spokesman of the Mujahedin Army in Iraq, an indigenous force opposed to al Qaeda in Iraq, cited in Ridolfo (2008).
2. Unnamed emir of al Qaeda in Iraq, cited in Fletcher (2008).
3. It is necessary to qualify my portrayal of the shift from the 'near enemy' to the 'far enemy' by noting that this shift in focus was conditioned by circumstantial factors (specifically the jihadists' experience of the constraints and opportunities of exile in the 1990s) as well as by the ideological imperatives of Salafi–jihadism. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.
4. It is nevertheless worth noting that the Iraqi government has subsequently substantially revised upwards its estimates of existing oil and natural gas deposits on Sunni territory. Given the preliminary nature of these findings and the many years it will take to effectively extract these resources, however, Sunni fears of economic marginalisation will continue to be a salient factor governing their relations with Baghdad for the foreseeable future. See Glanz (2007).
5. My thanks to Barak Mendelsohn for drawing my attention to the negative international reaction that AQI elicited with its declaration of an Islamic State of Iraq.
6. Figures on the United States' financial support for the Sunni tribal groups are taken from Simon (2008: 65).
7. While Bosnians had accepted the military support of foreign jihadists during the course of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, relations between the Bosnians and the foreign jihadists were marked by persistent friction. Consequently, the government of President Izetbegovitch proved only too happy to implement the provisions of the Dayton Peace Accords mandating the expulsion of foreign jihadists from Bosnia-Herzegovina, incurring the jihadists' enduring enmity. See Williams (2007b: 55).
8. My thanks to Barak Mendelsohn for drawing my attention to this point.
9. My thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to clarify my thoughts on the strategic consequences of the trade-off between al Qaeda's geographically broad appeal and its limited capacity to strike up enduring alliances with local communities.
10. This approach is inspired by David Kilcullen's advocacy of 'disaggregation' as a preferred strategy for combating the global insurgent threat posed by al Qaeda and its affiliates. See generally Kilcullen (2005).

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