The Rise and Fall of the Iraqi Sunni Awakening Movement

Ramiz Sevdimaliyev

Baku State University (Azerbaijan)

Abstract: The article studies the rise of the Sunni Awakening (or *Sahwa*) movement as an example of how different groups can be mobilized for collective action and disintegrated by internal and external factors. It also examines the motives of the Sunni tribal leaders to oppose the AQI and the factors that had a decisive influence on the disintegration of the Awakening movement. The emergence of the Iraqi Sunni Awakening was associated not so much with a sense of ideological, patriotic, or religious obligation but with the loss of economic power of the tribal leaders who decided to mobilize against the AQI.

Since 2006, the Sunni Awakening has been a key component of the US strategy to combat jihadi groups. The growth of the movement's activity led to a weakening of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and a significant decrease in the intensity of interfaith conflict in the country. After the official transfer of control of the Awakening to the Iraqi government, the relationship of the Sunni tribes with official Baghdad deteriorated, as Prime Minister Al-Maliki pursued a systematic policy of marginalizing and eliminating the Awakening. The disintegration of the Awakening was strongly influenced by two US decisions that were of strategic importance to Iraq: (a) support for al-Maliki following his defeat in the 2010 parliamentary elections, won by the secular Sunni-Shiite coalition; (b) poor timing of the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, as by the end of 2011, the Iraqi security forces were still not ready to ensure the country's security. As a result, in 2012, numerous supporters of the *Sahwa* began to participate in anti-government revolts, and thousands of fighters from the movement joined ISIL.

Keywords: Iraq, Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Sunni tribes, Awakening (*Sahwa*), ISIS

T he result of the March 21, 2003, invasion by the US troops and the member states of the anti-Iraq coalition in Iraq was the destruction of all state infrastructure and security agencies. Thousands of Sunni military and civil servants, who had a privileged position under the Hussein regime compared to the Shiite

majority, were dismissed from their posts. The created power vacuum led to chaos and violence in which various extremist groups, including those acting under the guise of Islam, felt at ease.

One of the most influential forces opposing the jihadist group "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI) between 2006 and 2010 was the Sunni Awakening (or "*Sahwa*" in Arabic) movement. During this period, the Awakening movement was a key component of the US strategy in the fight against terrorist groups in Iraq (Hamourtziadou 2020). However, after 2010, numerous Sunni rebels left the *Sahwa* movement and joined the ranks of terrorist groups, especially AQI.*

The rise of the Sunni Awakening movement in recent Iraqi history was instrumental in mobilizing different groups for collective action. The Awakening example also provides an opportunity to understand better what prompted the leaders of the Sunni tribes, first in the al-Anbar, and then other provinces in Iraq, to oppose the AQI, with whom they previously worked. It is equally important to understand what factors had a decisive influence on the collapse of the Awakening movement.

The article analyzes the reasons and ways of mobilizing Sunni tribes against AQI, the Awakening's successes, and the movement's specifics. It also examines the political decisions of both the Iraqi government and the US administration that led to the collapse of this movement.

The author used unclassified, open-source materials to study the issues. The findings can serve as the basis for analyzing the causes of the emergence and collapse of similar organizations in the Middle East. However, the results cannot be directly applied to similar cases at this stage. Historical analysis of the *Sahwa* movement points to the fact that, in this particular case, external forces played an important role. Any analysis focused on similar cases must consider this variable's impact.

De-Ba'athification of Iraqi Society

The intervention of the coalition forces led to the fall of Saddam's regime and created a fertile ground for the escalation of violence across the country. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), created as Iraq's transitional government and led by Paul Bremer, made two critical decisions that led to increased violence in Iraq. The first order was issued to de-ba'athification of Iraqi society – removing all public sector workers from offices associated with the Baath Party and prohibiting them from working in the public sector in the future[1]. According to this order, all senior party members would be prohibited from government service. The top three levels of officials from

---

[1] Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). 2003a. Order Number 1. De-Ba'athification of Iraqi Society (May 16). URL: https:// govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/regulations/20030516_CPAORD_1_De-Ba_athification_of_Iraqi_Society_.pdf (accessed 21.02.2023).

all government ministries would be dismissed, even if they were not members of the Baath Party. Contrary to the assertion of the head of the CPA, Paul Bremer noted that the de-Baathification would affect only about 20,000 people (Bremer, McConnel 2007: 40), the total number ranged from 85,000 to 100,000 (Ricks 2006: 40, 160; Pfiffner 2010: 78; Sanchez, Phillips 2008: 184). In particular, following this order, "forty thousand schoolteachers who joined the Baath Party simply to keep their jobs" were fired (Tenet, Harlow 2007: 427).

The second destructive order issued by the CPA, which led to an escalation of violence in Iraq, was the disbandment of all Iraqi security forces and their replacement with newly created security forces[2]. The security forces included 385,000 in the military, 285,000 in the Ministry of the Interior Affairs (police), and 50,000 in the presidential security forces (Ricks 2006: 162, 192).

As a result of these decisions, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis lost their jobs. Immediately a large pool of unemployed and armed people feeling humiliated and hostile towards the American occupiers emerged. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who could not support themselves or their families were alienated; the standard infrastructure needed for social and economic activities was undermined. These CPA decisions created a security vacuum in Iraq, which exacerbated and fueled sectarian divisions in Iraqi society, primarily between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. Along with violence between these sects, insurgent attacks on the coalition and Iraqi security forces have increased.

A complicated internal political, economic, and social situation led to chaos in Iraq. The country was filled with various armed groups and militias, which the Iraqis joined per their religious beliefs to ensure their survival. There were essentially several insurgency wars in the country, leading to multi-level conflict (Arnold 2008: 25). Simultaneously, the nature of the insurgency varied from one region of Iraq to another. In particular, in the Sunni-majority areas (SMAs), the insurgency groups fought against US forces and the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government. In Baghdad, the clashes were most likely of a sectarian nature. For example, Sunni groups have resisted and attacked Shiite militias or Shia-dominated police for their sectarian purges. The conflict also involved groups consisting of former military personnel of the Iraqi Saddam army. These groups were motivated by several goals: a) to end the US forces' presence in the country; b) to return the state power "captured" by the Shiites; c) to avenge the violence against the Sunnis by the Shiite militias.

One of the active participants in the Iraqi conflict was the AQI, a group consisting of a significant number of foreigners. On the one hand, this group shared the goals of other Sunni rebel groups and had broader goals associated with global jihad. Vari-

---

[2] Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). 2003b. Order Number 2. Dissolution of Entities (May 23). URL: https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/regulations/20030823_CPAORD_2_Dissolution_of_Entities_with_ Annex_A.pdf   (accessed 21.02.2023).

ous Shiite militias, mainly operating in Baghdad, and Iraqi police forces controlled by them, sought to expel the Sunnis from the city and maintain Shia dominance in the state and avenge the Sunni insurgents for violent acts against Shiites.[3]

The spread of sectarian violence in Iraq has provided a unique opportunity for various radical and jihadi Sunni groups to wage guerrilla warfare against Shiite militias, coalition forces, and the Iraqi government. From 2004 to mid-2007, the situation in Iraq was indeed extremely terrifying. By August 2006, Iraq averaged more than 1,500 civilian deaths per month, and by the 2006 fall US military was suffering a monthly toll of almost 100 dead and 700 wounded. (Biddle, Friedman, Shapiro 2012: 7).

By 2006 sectarian violence had become rampant in the country. During this period, experts[4] characterized Iraq as a state suffering from a civil war. Radical Sunni factions such as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Islamic Army, Hamas Iraq, and the 1920s Revolution Brigade were in open conflict with Shiite militias such as the Badr Brigades, Hezbollah Iraq, and the Mahdi Army. These groups simultaneously threatened the coalition forces and the nascent Iraqi government (Maye 2016: 133).

The birth of the Awakening councils

Shortly after the start of the anti-terrorist war in Afghanistan, many al-Qaeda fighters and jihadists fled the country, mainly to Pakistan, Iran, and Iraqi Kurdistan. In December 2001, Abu Musab Zarqawi and his followers left Afghanistan to take refuge in Iran. Sometime later, with the help of the Kurdish jihadist group Ansar al-Islam, he moved to northern Iraq (Napoleoni 2005: 104-105; Schanzer 2005: 136). Zarqawi arrived in Iraq when the United States stepped up its rhetoric and prepared to invade Iraq and established a jihadist group in Biyar, Sulaymaniyah province. Like the one he created in 1999 in Herat (Afghanistan), this group was named *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (JTWJ).[5]**

Zarqawi led JTWJ group and significantly increased the scope and the number of terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings during 2004-2006. The group became more involved in the kidnappings and beheadings of foreign nationals. JTWJ became widely known in a short period due to the audacity and brutality of its attacks.

---

[3] Shapland G. 2018. Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency (2003–2013) Case Study. Stabilisation Unit, UK (February), p. 6-7. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/ uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766033/Iraq_case_study.pdf (accessed 21.02.2023).

[4] See: Beehner L. 2006. The Implications of "Civil War" in Iraq. *Council on Foreign Relations*. URL: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/implications-civil-war-iraq (accessed 21.02.2023).

[5] Brisard J.-Ch., Martinez D. 2014. Islamic State: The economy-based terrorist funding. *Thomson Reuters* (October). URL: http://cat-int.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/White-Paper-IS-Funding_Final.pdf (accessed 21.02.2023);
Raphaeli N. 2005. *The Sheikh of the Slaughterers: Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qaeda Connection.* The Middle East Media Research Institute. Inquiry & Analysis Series Report no. 231, July 1. URL: https://www.memri.org/reports/%E2%80%98-sheikh-slaughterers%E2%80%99-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-and-al-qaeda-connection (accessed 21.02.2023).

It quickly established extensive international recruitment networks for foreign fighters and became a growing center for jihadist terrorists. In the wake of the aggravation of the struggle with the Americans and the new Shia-dominated Iraqi government, Zarqawi began negotiations with Osama bin Laden to merge with Al-Qaeda. After eight months-long negotiations, he pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and stated his loyalty to him and Al-Qaeda. From then on, the group was announced as an official extension of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. It was renamed Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (*Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*). However, this group became known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)[6].

By early 2004, the JTWJ, the predecessor of AQI, and other terrorist groups operating under the guise of Islam had occupied relatively strong positions in the country's Sunni provinces, especially in Anbar province. Anbar's Sunni tribal leaders, because of the invasion of the coalition forces, faced the prospect of losing the lucrative patronage agreements appointed by Saddam Hussein after the 1991 Gulf War to maintain order in the province. To diminish the opportunities to achieve a stable income and to reject the Shiite government's political rule, which equaled to the political dominance of the Shiite majority, Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar quickly instigated an armed uprising to expel Coalition forces from Iraq. They began to accept help from jihadist groups such as AQI to achieve their goal. Consequently, from the early days of the invasion of Iraqi coalition forces and the fall of the Baathist regime, Anbar became the cradle of anti-coalition rebels and a central place where dissenting former Baathists and other elements mobilized and fought against the Coalition forces. However, the local Sunni insurgency was dominated by nationalists. From the outset, AQI sought to provoke a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites to create a foothold for what they saw as the re-establishment "caliphate" (Michael 2007: 346). Thus, the relationship between Iraqi Sunni and the AQI was based not on shared ideological visions or political doctrines on the country's future but on a short-term convergence of interests to expel Coalition forces from Iraq.

Soon, the AQI unilaterally began to impose the ideology of global jihad on the Sunni tribes, which required the mandatory re-fashioning of social and religious norms and customs following the principles of Salafi jihadism. They demanded that the elders introduce a ban on playing musical instruments, abandon celebrations, and order women to wear hijabs. Also, AQI deprived local tribes of the income they received for escorting goods to neighboring Syria. It is important to emphasize that from 1991 to 2003, tribal leaders provided transport corridors and protection to smugglers, thereby obtaining a steady income. Having settled in the provinces, the AQI militants began charging a fee to businesspeople and kidnapping them for ransom. There have

---

6 Muir J. 2017. 'Islamic State': Raqqa's loss seals rapid rise and fall. *BBC News.* October 17. URL: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648 (accessed 21.02.2023).

been frequent killings of people working in public institutions. A large number of AQI militants prevented the leaders of local tribes from earning income from contracts and other business projects offered by coalition forces[7].

The forced imposition of its ideology and the deprivation of local tribes of opportunities to receive traditional income by AQI since 2004 only temporarily strengthened its position in the Sunni provinces of the country, mainly the Anbar province. Residents opposed the enforced medieval laws, for instance, against the right of the discretionary rape of Iraqi women appropriated by the AQI militants (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 94). AQI leaders and operatives were dismissive of local customs and attempted to marry women from prominent tribal families. They strove to create contact with society through family ties and eventually become part of the "social landscape." These attempts contradicted local regulations prohibiting exogamous marriage and generated considerable hostility among the population[8]. AQI consistently preferred to use assassination tactics to achieve local obedience. Tribal elders also resented abductions and murders. Two sheiks from the tribes of Abu Aeta and Albu Diyab were killed, and all others were constantly at gunpoint as competitors of the prosperous military economy of AQI (Benraad 2011).

The systematic and gross violation of local customs, the manifestation of a rude and aggressive ideology to monopolize not only political and economic power but also the entire way of life of the local Sunni population, as well as an attempt to dictate the direction of the rebel movement against the coalition forces, ultimately led to alienation, deterioration, and the enmity between the Sunni tribes and AQI. After some time, local tribal leaders, in response to violent acts and deprivation of their traditional sources incomes, called young people to go to the police service and refused to cooperate with AQI. This factor intensified attacks by AQI militants against those who collaborated with the coalition forces and the government of Iraq. As a result, AQI militants killed a prominent sheikh from the al-Dulaymi tribe Bazia al-Rishawi and his youngest son Muhammad, while other sons Abdullah and Ali were abducted[9]. It led to the mobilization of various Sunni tribes against AQI at the end of 2005. Finally, the 35-year-old Sheikh Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi (known as Abu Risha), one of the sons of the murdered Sheikh Bazia al-Rishawi, announced the creation of the "al-Anbar Salvation Council" (*Majlis inqadh al-Anbar*) on September 26, 2006, in Ramadi and himself became the head of this Council (Benraad 2011). Initially, out of twenty-five tribes in Ramadi that al-Rishawi approached, only three supported him. However, that number soon rose as more tribal leaders saw the Council as an escape from the violence and

---

[7] Nechitailo D.A. 2008. 'Awakening Councils' in Iraq. *Middle East Institute*. Moscow. September 29. URL: http://www.iimes. ru/?p=7560 (дата обращения 21.02.2023). (In Russ.).

[8] Kilcullen D. 2007. Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt. *Small Wars Journal*. August 29. URL: http://smallwarsjournal.com/ blog/2007/08/ (accessed 21.02.2023).

[9] Nechitailo D.A. 2008. 'Awakening Councils' in Iraq. *Middle East Institute*. Moscow. September 29. URL: http://www.iimes. ru/?p=7560 (дата обращения 21.02.2023). (In Russ.).

brutality of AQI. In a short time, the number of activists of the Council increased to 100, whose task was to detect and eliminate the AQI members. This development signaled the beginning of the active phase of the confrontation between local tribes and AQI. Soon, members of the Council, Sheikh Hikmat Mumtaz Al-Bazi, head of the Samarra tribal council, and Sheikh Kamal an-Nazzal, head of the Fallujah tribal council, were killed by militants of AQI[10].

Abu Risha was not the first chieftain of the tribe to rebel against the AQI's authority in al-Anbar. Since 2003, several Sunni tribes in Iraq have also been in a latent conflict with the AQI group due to its ruthless methods and punitive campaign, leading to hundreds of their leaders' deaths. These tribes opposed the desire of the group to establish an "Islamic Emirate" on their territories. However, the contact of these tribes with the coalition forces has been fragile for a long time. In early 2005, several sheiks of the Albu Mahal tribe around the Iraqi city of Qaim, bordering Syria, began cooperating with US troops to expel the AQI militants from their territories[11]. Soon, the sheiks of these and other Sunni tribes realized that working with US troops, in the long run, could give them an advantage in taking part in the country's political life.

On the other hand, before 2006, the US strategy in Iraq was based on an enemy-centric approach to counterinsurgency, essentially a war of attrition, in which American forces attempted to kill or capture as many insurgents as possible. By 2006, this strategy had failed: the situation in Iraq remained complicated, and the violence in the country got out of control; attacks by Sunni insurgents caused widespread repression of the Shiites and vice versa. Breaking this cycle required a new military strategy to ensure the population's safety and reconcile Sunnis and Shiites. The new strategy was based on the classic population-centric counterinsurgency approach, which emphasized the protection of the population to break the cycle of violence. The new strategy envisaged an increase of some 30,000 in the number of US troops deployed in the Sunni-majority areas, the redeployment of troops from large bases, and deployment in small groups directly in cities and villages. Besides, commanders were encouraged to promote contacts and cooperation with local communities. This direct association was intended to help the US forces better protect the local community, secure their support, and gain more information about the insurgent groups. The US needed to promote reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites and persuade Sunnis to take responsibility for their security[12].

[10] Ibid.

[11] Nickmeyer E., Finer J. 2005. Insurgents Assert Control over Town near Syrian Border. *The Washington Post.* September 6. URL: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/05/AR2005090500313.html (accessed 21.02.2023).

[12] Mannina R. N. 2018. How the 2011 US Troop Withdrawal from Iraq Led to the Rise of ISIS. *Small Wars Journal.* December 23. URL: https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-2011-us-troop-withdrawal-iraq-led-rise-isis (accessed 21.02.2023).

Of course, for his part, the leader of the Al-Anbar Salvation Council, Abu Risha, also sought American support for the Awakening movement early in its formation. He asked for support from the U.S. Marine forces commander in Anbar province, Lieutenant Colonel Sean MacFarland, who then faced the rapidly deteriorating security challenges in the region. Clearly, the benefits of working with Sunni tribes were in the United States' interests, and Lt. Col. McFarland was soon given the mandate to support the Sunni movement (Maye 2016: 142). Finally, the US government realized that cooperation with the Sunni tribes to establish control over the situation was crucial. They began to negotiate with the leaders of the Sunni tribes in the western province of Anbar. Representatives of the US administration urged the leaders of the Sunni tribes to stop supporting the militants and called them to join the campaign of the coalition forces and the Iraqi government against the militants[13]. US support for the Sunni tribes included military training, protection, advice, and money. The money came from both payments to the families of dead policemen and the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP). This money allowed the tribal leaders to regain authority in their tribes and gain economic power within the province. Therefore, they wanted to support the Awakening's mobilization efforts and join more tribes[14]. Many Sunnis believed the promises that they would have positions in the state apparatus and control over their security and finance.

Abu Risha was the first tribal chief to urge his followers to join the local police in Anbar province to fight against AQI. Other tribal leaders followed suit. The collaboration pattern "quickly spread throughout the province" and thousands of young Sunnis joined the local police force (Maye 2016: 142).

In October 2006, Sunni tribes in the western Anbar province began an uprising against the AQI. Inspired by the successes, the leaders of the Sunni tribes supported the Anbar Salvation Council and continued to join the uprising against the AQI. As Abu Risha's revolt grew, renaming the "Anbar Salvation Council" (*Majlis inqadh al-Anbar*) to "Anbar Awakening Council" (*Majlis al-Sahwa al-Anbar*) and founded the "Council of Awakening." The Council included the leaders of a dozen Sunni tribes.[15] Soon the uprising that began in Anbar "affected about 40% of the country" and "spread to Ninewa, Diyala, Babil, Salah ad-Din, Baghdad and – intriguingly – is filtering into Shi'a communities in the South"[16].

[13] Muir J. 2017. 'Islamic State': Raqqa's loss seals rapid rise and fall. *BBC News*. October 17. URL: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648 (accessed 21.02.2023).
[14] Shapland G. 2018. Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency (2003-2013) Case Study. *Stabilisation Unit*. UK (February). URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/ uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766033/Iraq_case_study.pdf (accessed 21.02.2023).
[15] Dagher S. 2007. Sunni Muslim Sheikhs Join US in Fighting Al-Qaeda. *Christian Science Monitor* (May 3). URL: http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0503/p01s04-wome.html (accessed 21.02.2023).
[16] Kilcullen D. 2007. Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt. *Small Wars Journal* (August 29). URL: http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/ (accessed 21.02.2023).

The United States began arming and funding a militia of Sunni tribespeople, incorporating them into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as an auxiliary police force called the Sons of Iraq. As a result, on the one hand, the AQI lost support among the Sunni population of Iraq and lost its principal recruiting source. On the other hand, the Sons of Iraq could deter the Iraqi government from abusing Sunni communities and thereby help break the violence cycle (Kilcullen 2016: 46).

Mainly Sons of Iraq consisted of mobilized Sunni Arab fighters outside Al-Anbar and across the country who had previously opposed the coalition forces (Benraad 2011: 122). Many Sons of Iraq leaders were former insurgents themselves and had a military background, including former officers and soldiers of Saddam Hussein's army (Maye 2016: 144). Soon the Awakening movement gained prominence in Baghdad, and Sunni politicians also began to support it. It became clear that the Awakening involved representatives of different levels of the Sunni society in Iraq: politicians, tribal leaders, former Baath supporters, and youth tribal representatives. At the elite level, Sunni politicians supported the creation of Sunni police forces and local groups to undertake counterterrorism activities. At the tribal level, leaders joined the movement and served as an example for others. Tribal leaders also encouraged young people to join the Awakening. Finally, at the local level, former officers and followers of the Baath Party were involved in the fight (Maye 2016: 141, 145).

The shared desire of the Coalition Forces and the Sunni tribal leaders for cooperation resulted from specific circumstances that led to an accidental overlap of their interests. Cooperation between Coalition forces and the Sunni tribal leaders effectively eliminated one of the main factors in the Iraqi conflict escalation. Thanks to this cooperation, the Sunni tribes, on the one hand, together with the United States, participated in the destruction of the AQI jihadists and, on the other hand, promoted a program of inter-communal reconciliation and prevented the threat of the Iraqi conflict sprouting into a regional Sunni-Shiite war. The establishment of successful cooperation between the coalition and the Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province was a significant development that had yielded promising outcomes in Ramadi from mid-2006. This cooperation included extensive financial support for Sunni militias, joint operations using local intelligence by Sunni tribes, combined with US firepower backed by air support. Despite the Shia-dominated al-Maliki government's deep fears, a tactical alliance between US forces and Sunni militias soon bore fruit, and AQI members initiated rapid withdrawal from Anbar. Thus, the alliance with the Sunni tribes gave the United States the capacity to obtain reliable local intelligence, which led to the ability to distinguish jihadists from the rest of the local population effectively and led to the identification, isolation, and elimination of AQI members in Anbar province (Michael 2007: 346). On the other hand, the emergence of the US alliance with the leaders of the Sunni tribes and the change in the US position on security issues encouraged the local population to fight decisively against the AQI. The Anbar's experience would soon be repeated in the neighboring provinces (Phillips 2009: 29).

Thus, the Sunni Awakening in Anbar appeared from the emergence of convergent interests between Sunni tribal leaders and the United States, amid growing animosity between local insurgents and AQI militants and the escalation of sectarian violence in 2006. Subsequently, the use of Sunni tribes became one of the main elements of the American administration's strategy in the fight against terrorist groups. The Sunni Awakening (*Sahwa*) movement's collaboration with US forces began in mid-2007 under the leadership of General David Petraeus.

Successes of the *Sahwa* movement

Across the country, thousands of Sunni militants continued to join the ranks of the *Sahwa*. The movement has gained popularity and support in Salah al-Din's province, where support for Saddam Hussein has always been strong. Tribal sheiks in Tikrit also expressed support for *Sahwa*. Similar actions were carried out in other parts of the country. The movement became a serious political force in less than a year, and its paramilitary groups turned into leading armed groups against the ISI. By December 2007, the US military worked with over 60,000 armed Sunnis to provide security on the ground[17]. In the first quarter of 2008, more than 80,000 armed fighters were in the *Sahwa* movement ranks[18], 82% of whom, according to the US military, were Sunni[19].

The *Sahwa* movement has received technical and financial assistance from the coalition forces' command to confront the ISI. To deprive terrorists of the support of broad sections of the population, the American command began to introduce the practice of bribing Sunni tribes, which had previously opposed the foreign presence, in many parts of the country. The actions of the *Sahwa* fighters, supported by the American and local security forces, combined with their extensive knowledge of the terrain, proved very useful in fighting the ISI. They led to a change in the status quo.

Initially American military controlled the *Sahwa*. By mid-2008, the number of *Sahwa* fighters peaked at 100,000 people, and they received a monthly salary not exceeding 300 US dollars[20] According to the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA), the US spent no less than 15 million US dollars per month for this purpose[21].

[17] Shapland G. 2018. Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency (2003-2013) Case Study. *Stabilisation Unit.* UK (February). p.12. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/ uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766033/Iraq_case_study.pdf (accessed 21.02.2023).

[18] O'Kane M., Black I. 2008. Sunni Militia Strike Could Derail US Strategy against al-Qaida. *The Guardian.* March 21. URL: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/21/iraq.alqaida (accessed 21.02.2023).

[19] Ali A., Jamail D. 2008. Tensions Rise Between 'Awakening' and Iraqi Govt Forces. *Inter Press Service.* February 29. URL: https://www.enewspf.com/latest-news/tensions-rise-between-Sahwa-and-govt-forces/#.X1Aqu8gzblU (accessed 21.02.2023).

[20] Abbas M. 2013. Iraq to Reinstate Sahwa Forces. *Al-Monitor.* August 27. URL: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/iraq-revive-Sahwa-qaeda-sunni-protesters.html (accessed 21.02.2023).

[21] Kino N. 2014. Former Iraq Awakening Members Joining ISIS. *Assyrian International News Agency.* June 15. URL: http://aina.org/news/20140615144922.htm (accessed 21.02.2023).

By January 2009, the US government had spent over $ 400 million on salaries for the Awakening members. According to General Petraeus, who testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2008, it was a worthwhile investment because it allowed for saving lives and army vehicles. Consequently, the level of violence in Iraq has decreased considerably. The number of attacks against US troops in Anbar decreased substantially from 1,350 in October 2006 to just over 200 in August 2007. Besides, in October 2006, there were almost 3,100 violent deaths in Iraq; by October 2007, their total number was less than 600[22].

Between October 2006 and August 2008, the number of terrorist attacks, including those that implemented vehicles filled with explosives, also reduced significantly. Consequently, the situation improved; terrorists have been forced out of most regions and physically eliminated. By mid-2007, Ramadi and Fallujah were almost entirely free from ISI (Benraad 2011).

The successes achieved in the fight against the ISI instilled confidence in the leaders of local tribes, and Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi, inspired by his successes, began to exaggerate his role in achieving it (Gordon, Trainor 2013: 253). In his interview with the New York Times, he stated the following: "By God, if we had good weapons, good vehicles, and reliable support, I could drive Al Qaeda back to Afghanistan." New York Times reporter Edward Wong writes that Abu Risha allegedly said the same thing to President Bush during a meeting with him during the latter's visit to Baghdad in 2007[23].

However, according to the Chief of Police of Anbar Tareq Youssef, Abu Risha was killed in Ramadi a few days after meeting with the President after the bomb planted by ISI fighters exploded near his home. His two bodyguards also died during the attack[24]. After Sattar ar-Rishavi was assassinated, his brother Akhmed Abu Risha succeeded him[25].

The increased efficiency of *Sahwa*'s activities has caused many foreign ISI fighters to leave Iraq, and the intensity of interfaith conflict in the country has decreased significantly.[26] In general terms, 34 out of 42 top-ranking ISI leaders have been murdered or captured, owing to the joint efforts of *Sahwa*, Iraq security forces, and US forces. The commander of the US military contingent in Iraq, General R. Odierno, said at the beginning of June 2010 that the ISI had been completely beheaded, 80% of the or-

---

[22] Shapland G. 2018. Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency (2003-2013) Case Study. *Stabilisation Unit*. UK (February). p.11, p. 15. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/ government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766033/Iraq_case_study.pdf (accessed 21.02.2023).

[23] Wong E. 2007. An Iraqi Tribal Chief Opposes the Jihadists and Prays. *New York Times*. March 3. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/03/world/middleeast/03sheik.html (accessed 21.02.2023).

[24] Roggio B. 2007. Sheikh Sattar, leader of the Anbar Awakening, was killed in a bombing. *The Long War Journal*. September 13. URL: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/09/sheikh_sattar_leader.php (accessed 21.02.2023).

[25] Abbas M. 2013. Iraq to Reinstate Sahwa Forces. *Al-Monitor*. August 27. URL: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/iraq-revive-Sahwa-qaeda-sunni-protesters.html (accessed 21.02.2023).

[26] Kahl C. 2010. Breaking Dawn: Building a Long-term Strategic Partnership with Iraq. *Foreign Policy*. August 31. URL: https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/09/01/breaking-dawn-building-a-long-term-strategic-partnership-with-iraq/ (accessed 21.02.2023).

ganization's combat strength had been eliminated, and all funding channels and connections to Al Qaeda's central leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan had been lost[27]. The threat of ISI diminished to a smaller degree and, consequently, the US decided to decrease the rewards for any information that would have led to the death or capture of Hamza al-Muhadjir, known as Abu Ayub al-Masri. In 2007 the amount to be paid for this information changed from 5 mln. US dollars to 1 mln. US dollars and, later, in 2008, decreased again to 100,000 US dollars[28].

The disintegration of the *Sahwa* movement

In 2009 the US transferred control over *Sahwa* to the Iraqi government (Benraad 2011: 123). To maintain security in the Sunni provinces, the latter agreed to employ at least 20% of the *Sahwa* fighters in the police and government offices, providing them with salaries. In the first half of 2010, the Iraqi government claimed that it was paying a salary to 650,000 police and military, including 20,000 of the *Sahwa* fighters involved in the country's security forces[29].

We should note that the political result of *Sahwa*'s efforts was expected to include the representatives of Sunni tribes in the central government and participate in the activities of government agencies. This policy was pursued in the country, but it lasted only until the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, and after a while, the picture changed dramatically.

After the Americans officially transferred control over the *Sahwa* movement to the Iraqi government, relations between Sunni tribes and official Baghdad continued deteriorating. The Nuri al-Maliki government's reluctance to integrate the movement into state institutions resulted. Instead, Baghdad pursued a systematic policy of marginalization and liquidation of *Sahwa*. The fact that the *Sahwa* movement leaders, in turn, criticized Nuri al-Maliki for failing to restore security and implement a national consensus policy aggravated the situation.

Nuri al-Maliki's government created parallel tribal structures and attracted *Sahwa* leaders[30]. In 2008, the Tribal Support Council split the local movement and transferred it under Baghdad's patronage. Grassroots leaders and *Sahwa* fighters joined this Council (Benraad 2011: 125).

---

[27] Shanker T. 2010. Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Neutralized, US Says. *The New York Times*. June 4. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/05/world/middleeast/05military.html (accessed 21.02.2023);

Lister C. 2014. *Profiling the Islamic State*. Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper. Number 13, November. P.10. URL: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/en_web_lister.pdf (accessed 21.02.2023);

[28] Mount M. 2008. Reward for Wanted Terrorist Drops. *CNN*. May 13. URL: http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/05/13/pentagon.masri.value/ (accessed 21.02.2023).

[29] Hendawi H. 2010. Al-Qaida in Iraq Offers Cash to Lure Former Allies. *Associated Press Writer*. August 6. URL: http://archive.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2010/08/06/al_qaida_in_iraq_offers_cash_to_lure_former_allies/ (accessed 21.02.2023).

[30] Rubin A. J. 2008. Clash over Tribal Councils Intensifies in Iraq. *The New York Times*. November 4. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/world/africa/04iht-baghdad.1.18394779.html (accessed 21.02.2023).

According to some experts (see: Benraad 2011), to weaken the *Sahwa* movement, the government attempted to deprive it of material and financial resources. For example, some soldiers have been provided with permanent and long-term work in government institutions; generally, the salaries promised to *Sahwa* fighters were low and irregular. Moreover, the government decided to impose restrictions on the carrying and possessing of weapons in the provinces where the *Sahwa* movement fought. In particular, to disarm and finally abolish the movement in the province of Diyala, where the confrontation with the ISI was more violent, thousands of permits for carrying and storing weapons have been suspended (Benraad 2011). By mid-2010, the ISI leadership eagerly recruited *Sahwa* militiamen and offered them more wages than the Iraqi government[31].

The government generally sought to suppress the *Sahwa* movement and disband tribal councils. Since 2008, there has been a real hunt for the *Sahwa* fighters in the province of Diyala; they were accused of terrorism and illegal possession of weapons and were arrested[32]. Government reprisals provoked fury and a feeling of deep humiliation among the movement leaders, who repeatedly threatened to stop cooperating with the government. However, Nuri al-Maliki justified these repressions by citing the infiltration of ISI militants and Baathists into the ranks of *Sahwa*. This argument in al-Maliki's rhetoric became a tool for discrediting *Sahwa* in the eyes of the public.

The growing political and economic claims of the *Sahwa* movement illustrate the reason for the disappointment of Sunni tribes' fighters and the diminishing government assistance. It is explained by the fact that the tribal movement initially emerged in 2005, not because of patriotism but as a profoundly self-serving phenomenon due to the loss of control over the critical resources of the Al-Anbar tribes, including income derived from smuggling, robbery, and oil sales[33]. In search of quick and effective ways to expel the ISI from their territories and regain control over their traditional illegal business and income, these tribes viewed US troops as a source of strength and alternative funding. However, the economic motives for the emergence of *Sahwa* suggested that when the alliance with the American administration ceased to bring sufficient dividends, this movement would collapse, and the tribes would return to their previous activities, including promoting violence.

Another critical factor in the recession of Sahwa was the Iraqi government's hostile attitude to the movement. Baghdad, from the very beginning, opposed the Sahwa movement. Nuri al-Maliki's government reacted with suspicion and indignation to

---

[31] Williams T., Adnan D. 2010. Sunnis in Iraq Allied with US Rejoin Rebels. *The New York Times.* October 16. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/world/middleeast/17awakening.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 21.02.2023).

[32] Ali A., Jamail D. 2008. Tensions Rise Between 'Awakening' and Iraqi Govt Forces. *Inter Press Service.* February 29. URL: https://www.enewspf.com/latest-news/tensions-rise-between-Sahwa-and-govt-forces/#.X1Aqu8gzbIU (accessed 21.02.2023).

[33] Rubin A. J., Cave D. 2007. In a Force for Iraqi Calm, Seeds of Conflict. *The New York Times.* December 23. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/23/world/middleeast/23awakening.html (accessed 21.02.2023).

the US administration's alliance with *Sahwa* and feared that the success of this local movement could turn into real legitimate political power. Shiites and Kurdish political forces were also concerned about the *Sahwa* movement (Benraad 2011).

On the other hand, on August 31, 2010, the US administration officially announced the end of the combat mission in Iraq. It began to withdraw the American army's main contingent from the country. About 50,000 American soldiers, who were supposed to prepare the Iraqi army and security forces, protect American facilities, etc., remained in Iraq. The official termination of US military operations in Iraq occurred during severe political and institutional uncertainty in the country, which arose after the parliamentary elections on March 7, 2010 (Sevdimaliyev 2011: 294-296).

Before the parliamentary elections, al-Maliki opponents formed the nationalist, non-religious coalition *al-Iraqiyya*, a secular Sunni-Shiite alliance. The moderate Iraqi Shiite Ayad Allawi led the *al-Iraqiyya* coalition. Many leaders of the Sunni tribes, who in 2005 boycotted the election, also declared their support for him (Sky 2015: 313).

The inclusion of Sunnis in the election process in 2010, which was tumbled down by the country's key political event, was crucial to ensure the government's legitimacy and prevent further sectarian conflicts. Sunni turnout in the March elections was more substantial than expected. The media noted that Sunni Muslims, a minority that succeeded under Saddam Hussein, "aggressively pursued a get-out-the-vote campaign in hopes of gaining a larger voice in the government led by the Shiite majority"[34].

Maliki's State of Law coalition was defeated in the election. The *al-Iraqiyya* coalition won and got a slight majority of seats in parliament. The victory of *al-Iraqiyya* enabled the coalition to replace Maliki since, per the Constitution of Iraq, the bloc with the most significant number of seats in parliament received the right to form a government and appoint a prime minister. However, Maliki used a series of politically dubious maneuvers designed to delay, undermine, and challenge the election results. He accused opponents of rigging the elections, demanded a recount under the guise of de-Ba'athification, and sought to remove opponents from the *al-Iraqiyya* coalition. Ultimately, Maliki received the right to form a government because of these and other maneuvers[35].

Despite legally and politically questionable methods of contesting the election results, the Obama administration supported Maliki. This decision by the US administration undermined the democratic process in Iraq. The vast majority of Iraqis were opposed to Maliki forming a government and becoming the prime minister again. They believed that according to the election results, *al-Iraqiyya* should have this right and that the leader of the *al-Iraqiyya* coalition, Allawi, should become the prime min-

---

[34] UPI World News. 2010. Iraqi election turnout was 62 percent. March 9. URL: https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2010/03/09/Iraqi-election-turnout-62-percent/98731268143318/ (accessed 21.02.2023).

[35] Mannina R. N. 2018. How the 2011 US Troop Withdrawal from Iraq Led to the Rise of ISIS. *Small Wars Journal*. December 23. URL: https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-2011-us-troop-withdrawal-iraq-led-rise-isis (accessed 21.02.2023).

ister. However, the Obama administration, fixated on the US withdrawal from Iraq as soon as possible, supported Maliki and pressured Allawi to refuse to form a government and accept Maliki as the prime minister (Sky 2015: 334, 336).

The Obama administration needed an active Iraqi government to facilitate the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq in 2011. In the interests of political expediency, President Obama's administration persuaded Iraq to accept an agreement on the division of power, which did not reflect the Iraqi electorate's will. Thus, despite the Maliki bloc losing the election, it became more powerful than ever, thanks to the United States tacit support. US support for Nouri al-Maliki has stripped the Sunni minority of Iraq of civil rights and, ultimately, forced them to resume cooperation with the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

After the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, agreements on the involvement of members of the Sunni tribes to rule the country have been violated. Sunni leaders blamed the country's pro-Shiite leadership for this. The *Sahwa* militia became increasingly disillusioned with the pro-Shiite central government of Nuri al-Maliki because of his lack of support and non-payment of wages.

The withdrawal of the 45,000 remaining US troops from Iraq by the end of 2011 led to a deterioration in the security situation in Iraq, as the Iraqi military forces were not ready to take responsibility for the country's safety. It has led to a security vacuum in parts of the country (Gordon, Trainor 2013: 670). Moreover, the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq almost coincided with the outbreak of civil war in Syria. The remnants of ISI, under the new brand of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), used the conflict in Syria to renew their jihad and restore their former military power.

After the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, Maliki rigidly consolidated power and oppressed the Sunni tribes. A week after the last American troops withdrew from Iraq, he forced his Sunni deputy into exile. Then he was accused of absentia and convicted of supporting terrorism. Under the pretext of combating terrorism and de-Ba'athification, the Maliki government arrested the Sunni elite, many of whom were subsequently tortured and killed. In December 2012, Iraqi security forces raided the Iraqi Finance Minister's home, a popular Sunni politician and member of the al-Iraqiyya coalition. Sunni protests broke out in Fallujah and spread throughout the country, lasting more than a year. In response to protests in *Hawija*, Iraqi security forces killed 23 to 44 civilians, some of whom were shot execution-style with their hands behind their backs. The systematic persecution of the Sunnis by the Maliki government after the US withdrawal caused a wave of indignation and discontent, which was characteristic of the Sunni riots in 2005–2006[36].

---

[36] Mannina R. N. 2018. How the 2011 US Troop Withdrawal from Iraq Led to the Rise of ISIS. *Small Wars Journal*. December 23. URL: https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-2011-us-troop-withdrawal-iraq-led-rise-isis (accessed 21.02.2023).

Ultimately, Nuri al-Maliki's government dissolved the *Sahwa* movement. One hundred thousand Iraqi men who fought against the ISI were disarmed and left without a salary. Many of them were killed, others imprisoned, and a significant number managed to escape (Kino 2014). The resulting conflict led to the fact that in 2012, numerous supporters of the *Sahwa* movement took part in anti-government demonstrations in the province of Anbar. According to some data, thousands of *Sahwa* fighters faced threats of jihadists joining the ISI[37].

The alliance between the Sunnis and ISIS began in Ramadi in December 2013. Maliki sent Iraqi security forces to Ramadi to disperse the demonstrations, resulting in violent protest clashes. The clashes spilled into neighboring Fallujah. A few days later, ISIS fighters entered Fallujah and teamed up with Sunni tribal leaders and former Baathists. Iraqi security forces and government agencies were forced to leave the city. ISIS leaders used the Iraqi interfaith conflict to gain a foothold in Anbar. In turn, the leaders of the tribes saw ISIS as an ally in their tribal revolution. An influential Sunni sheikh called ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the defender of 15 million Iraqi Sunnis (Warrick 2015: 299). Thus, due to popular Sunni support, ISIS captured Fallujah, parts of Ramadi, and Mosul by June 2014. It became clear that the Iraqi Sunnis joining the jihadists played an essential role in the rapid territorial conquests of ISIS and became one of the critical factors in its successes.

One of the *Sahwa* leaders, who moved to Europe a couple of days after ISIL fighters captured Mosul, in an interview with AINA – Assyrian International News Agency – stated:

> It is as if we never existed. But the truth is that, in Mosul, *Sahwa* members who had been set free from prison by ISIS have joined ISIS. We hated extremism and fundamentalism, but now we see ISIS, an evolution of our enemy, Al-Qaeda, as the only possibility to stop the oppression and persecution of the Sunnis in Iraq. The enemy of my enemy has become my friend[38].

In general, the US presidential administration's two strategic decisions completely changed Iraq's progress, forcing Iraq to return to the path of interfaith violence. First, although the secular Sunni-Shiite political coalition won by a slight margin in the 2010 parliamentary elections in Iraq, the Obama administration decided to support Nouri al-Maliki after his defeat and effectively reinstated him as prime minister. It under-

---

[37] Hendawi H. 2010. Al-Qaida in Iraq Offers Cash to Lure Former Allies. *Associated Press Writer.* August 6. URL: http://archive.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2010/08/06/al_qaida_in_iraq_offers_cash_to_lure_former_allies/ (accessed 21.02.2023).
[38] Kino N. 2014. Former Iraq Awakening Members Joining ISIS. *Assyrian International News Agency.* June 15. URL: http://aina.org/news/20140615144922.htm (accessed 21.02.2023).

mined the fragile foundation of Iraqi democracy and deprived the civilian rights of the Sunni minority, whose cooperation during the Sunni Awakening was crucial for ending the violence in Iraq. Second, the time to withdraw US troops from Iraq was chosen poorly. By the end of 2011, the Iraqi security forces were still unprepared to ensure the state's security, and the Sunnis were vulnerable. Almost simultaneously, a civil war broke out in Syria, and the leaders of the radical groups used the conflict in Syria to resume jihad. Iraq's Sunni minority – alienated and abandoned – began fighting back against the Maliki government's oppression. The leaders of the Sunni tribes in this struggle saw ISIS as an ally and, by 2014, helped them capture almost a third of the territory of Iraq, creating a physical "caliphate."

Understanding grievances and motivation of the movement

When we analyze the history of the *Sahwa* movement, it is crucial to understand the perceptions of people who have laid its foundation and the people who joined the ranks of the movement.

From a theoretical perspective, it may seem that the intra-group religious ideology was the element that brought people under the umbrella of various groups operating in the country. Indeed, the members of Sunni groups had one feature in common – following Sunni Islam. However, it is impossible to identify religious belonging as a causal mechanism and attribute the start of the resistance movement to it. The trigger mechanism for the *Sahwa* movement's start was the volume and severity of atrocities committed by AQI and degenerating living standards due to AQI's presence. As the AQI gained momentum in Iraq, their actions provoked grievances among the Sunni population. Based on the analysis, we can argue that relative deprivation, both on an individual and group level, played a big part in forming grievances. Relative deprivation is when an individual compares their current situation to accepted norms and standards, such as equity, justice, or past experiences (Folger 1986). According to several authors (van Zomeren, Postmes, Spears 2008; Klandermans, van Stekelenburg 2013), the affective component of relative deprivation (feelings of dissatisfaction and discontent about outcomes) have a more significant effect on participation compared to the cognitive component (an observation that an individual or a group receives less than a promised standard). In this case, the less-than-favorable outcome for Sunni tribes meant they were better at staging an armed resistance than freeriding. Should they have chosen to comply with AQI's restrictions, the survival and long-term stability of Sunni tribes would have been threatened. Also, freeriding could have been a costly approach to the AQI threats because the tribes would have relinquished their interests and lost their identity.

In a way, it is possible to argue that the choices made by Sunni tribal leaders were rational and were made to maximize their chances for survival and economic prosperity. Success in fighting against the AQI meant that the movement could achieve its initial goal. This enabled the movement to look for other targets to accomplish. The

American troops' presence and their support made the tribes led by Sunni sheikhs reconsider their long-term future. The perceived belief in the benefits of aligning with American forces in Iraq made Sunni tribe leaders realize that they could claim a stake in the country's future governance.

For the Sunni tribes, the restrictions imposed by the US were tolerable because these restrictions only limited their level of control over the financial instruments of those tribes. On the other hand, AQI's restrictions radically transformed their lifestyle and left Sunnis without traditional income sources. The sudden radical transformation of established habits amplified the matter and added an extra layer of dissatisfaction for the local population.

Another element that must be considered when analyzing the issue is the Sunnis' lack of political trust in the Iraqi government. Because local Sunnis had little trust in the central authority and held their respective tribal leaders in higher esteem, the call to arms issued by the leaders became a sufficient factor for Sunnis to initiate the fighting against AQI. For many years Iraq faced significant problems regarding the rule of law and equality of all groups living in the country. Saddam Hussein's rule serves as an excellent example of this. During a specific period, the opportunities presented to Sunnis were more generous than to Shiites. After the fall of Hussein's regime and the events discussed in this work, it became evident that the power dynamic in the country was shifting. Bearing this in mind, the blow dealt to the Sunni tribes of Iraq by AQI and the presence of American forces in Iraq gave a higher degree of perceived authority to tribal leaders from their followers' perspective. The Sunni population believed that only the tribal leaders had the interests of their communities at heart.

According to Klandermans and van Stekelenburg (Klandermans, van Stekelenburg 2013), the above elements powerfully motivate grievances that affect group mobilization. When Sunni tribes of Iraq were restricted from obtaining income, it led to anger, an antecedent and a motivator of protest participation (van Zomeren, et. al., 2004). As we have seen from the analysis, restricting the availability of income was the primary trigger mechanism for the emotional response, which led to violent resistance.

The generating of grievances was possible due to the combination of factors: severity of intolerable acts, drastic change in the living standard, lack of trust in the political establishment, the growing influence of tribal leaders, and the amplifying feeling of anger. This combination made the mobilization of Sunni fighters possible, thus paving the way for the creation of *Sahwa*.

The response of the Iraqi government: an approach based on fear or rationalistic view?

The reasons for the disbandment of *Sahwa* are political and should be sought within Iraq's political establishment. From Baghdad's perspective, creating the conditions for the movement's disintegration was the logical step for containing the growing Sunni influence in the country. The Iraqi government's key priority was establishing

firm control over the country by maintaining the monopoly over the control of armed forces. After the US troops' withdrawal, the presence of a Sunni-centric *Sahwa* movement threatened the al-Maliki regime's stability. As the analysis of the events pointed out, Nouri al-Maliki carried out a policy aimed at limiting the power of the Sunni population. One causal mechanism possible to attribute to the intra-state power dynamic shift is fear and perceived threat.

The Iraqi government's goal to dissolve *Sahwa* is understandable in this context. Several factors explain this policy approach. From a theoretical perspective, both sides operated under the conditions of incomplete information. Existing information regarding the objectives of *Sahwa* made the Iraqi political establishment careful and raised a "status dilemma."A status dilemma is when the sides cannot interpret the status claims sent by each party. When the sides do not possess such crucial information, leaders feel the incentive to make the necessary steps to reassert their dominance.

Given that the Nouri al-Maliki cabinet found itself in a politically contentious and challenging situation, it looked at *Sahwa* from the prism of an interfaith threat to the regime's stability and the country. From a theoretical perspective, the steps taken by the government can be explained by the desire to simplify a very complex real-world phenomenon. However, stripping the issue's subtleties and nuance can lead to oversimplified judgments (Stein 2013: 371). The desire to simplify the level of existing threat led to a difficult decision that left one hundred thousand Iraqi fighters who actively resisted the threat of ISIS.

The impact of *Sahwa* on security in Iraq and the Middle East

The Middle East has long been one of the turbulent and explosive regions of the world, bound by armed conflicts, religious extremism, and terrorism. The US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 further exacerbated the potential for conflict in the region. One of the tragic consequences of the invasion of the coalition forces in Iraq was the rapid growth in the activity and influence of radical groups under the guise of global jihadism. Among these, AQI posed the most significant threat to international security. Another challenge in front of Iraq was the further aggravation of the religious and political confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites. In this context, the rise of the Sunni *Sahwa* movement has paved the way for some transformation in regional security in the Middle East and reducing the threat posed by AQI to international security. First, the increased role of the *Sahwa* movement in the fight against AQI and ensuring security in the country could improve mutual understanding between Sunnis and Shiites. Second, the movement's emergence introduced an additional variable into the equation, as the AQI faced a new threat. From the perspective of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the *Sahwa* movement posed a threat to the AQI, which increased its dominance over time. With the *Sahwa* movement's rise to prominence, the position of AQI in the Sunni populated areas started to become more precarious because the movement was able to garner significant support against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The radical group

relied on the strategy of terror, which led to resentment exhibited by the local population. As parts of the Sunni population started to lose their preferential positions in the military and law enforcement agencies, there was no shortage of skillful and trained military personnel. These people could have been mobilized quickly if their interests were guaranteed.

The USA utilized the Sunnis' grievances against the local branch of Al-Qaeda, and consequently, the American government used its resources to challenge the AQI without compromising its personnel. From the perspective of the United States, this was a low-risk, high-reward approach. In many ways, initiating regular combat against a decentralized group such as AQI is akin to asymmetric warfare. Mounting combat losses of American military personnel may have led to an increasing number of protests operations in the Middle East, which means that the decision-makers in the government would have had a difficult decision to make. The presence of Sunni tribes and their willingness to fight to improve their damaged social and economic position allowed the United States to achieve two key objectives: a) use proxy groups to extend their influence in the region; b) diminish the power of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The paradox is that this was a very positive approach from the perspective of peacebuilding in Iraq. The dawn and the subsequent rise of the *Sahwa* movement became the force that paved the way to establish a significant level of resistance to the terrorist groups operating under the guise of Islam. Consequently, this element enabled Iraq to create some resemblance of security and hold elections. Therefore, *Sahwa* became an essential element in the strategy of security building in Iraq, although this was not the movement's primary objective.

The movement's disintegration came down to two factors: the return of the American military home and the political approach of Nuri al-Maliki. Both from a theoretical and practical perspective, it was a matter of time before the population of the United States would start actively objecting to the presence of American forces in Iraq because, from the perspective of US citizens, the losses incurred by following this policy outweigh its potential benefits. From the perspective of American policymakers, it was a logical step to foster the conditions necessary for the local government to operate. It was the only safe way for Americans to leave the country; otherwise, the power vacuum would have harmed its security. Consequently, the elections took place in 2006 and 2010. Both times Nouri al-Maliki emerged as the Prime Minister.

As a result of Nouri al-Maliki's policies, especially after the withdrawal of US troops, Sunni tribes have been placed in a disadvantageous position. Their political prestige has been systematically limited, including banning 499 Sunni politicians from exercising their right to be elected in the 2010 elections due to their alleged ties to the Baath party[39]. The Head of the Government of Iraq systematically utilized every tool

---

[39] Chulov M. 2010. Sunni candidates ban threatens Iraq election. *Guardian*. January 15. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/15/sunni-candidate-ban-iraq-election (accessed 21.02.2023).

to clear potential rivals' political landscape. The persecution and repression against members of the *Sahwa* movement organized by the Baghdad government have led many Sunni tribes to support ISIS. Despite this, the Sunni tribes, in general, were not imbued with radical Islamist ideology, and their alliance with ISIS was situational.

The political crisis that arose in 2014 due to the lightning-fast spread of ISIS led to the resignation of Nuri al-Maliki. Consequently, Haidar al-Abadi, the most compromising candidate not perceived negatively by a significant part of the Sunni tribes, became the new prime minister. However, the Sunni tribes, despite the improvement in the religious and political situation in the country, were not fully involved in the political process and today do not have a common leader or political party that enjoys the support of the majority of the Sunnis, as they continue to be divided. In this case, the split often takes place within the same tribe. Consequently, today the Sunni tribes do not operate as a single entity and do not have common political or economic interests.

Conclusion

The emergence of the Sunni *Sahwa* movement was initially not due to patriotism but because of the "self-serving" phenomenon, which stemmed from the loss of control over the critical resources of the Al-Anbar tribes, including income derived from smuggling, robberies, and oil sales. In this context, Sunni tribes viewed the US troops as a source of strength and alternative funding to expel the ISI from their territories and regain control over their traditional illegal business and revenues.

On the other hand, using Sunni tribes in the fight against terrorist groups was one of the main elements of the American administration strategy. The coalition forces commander provided technical and financial assistance to the *Sahwa* fighters to oppose the ISI. According to the American administration's promises, the political outcome of the efforts of Sahwa was to include representatives of the Sunni tribes in the central government of Iraq and their participation in the activities of the country's governmental bodies.

However, after the transfer of control of the *Sahwa* movement to the Iraqi government by the US administration in 2009, relations between Sunni tribes and Baghdad continued to deteriorate, as the government of Nuri al-Maliki opposed the *Sahwa* from the very beginning.

After the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, agreements on the involvement of members of the Sunni tribes to rule the country were broken, and the *Sahwa* movement was disbanded. Consequently, the movement was disarmed, and many soldiers were imprisoned.

In response to the Al-Maliki government's actions, numerous *Sahwa* movement supporters took part in anti-government revolts in Anbar province, and thousands of *Sahwa* fighters joined the ISI.

Notes

* – The group, first created as the "Organization for Monotheism and Jihad" ((*Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad — JTWJ*), changed its name several times as its ambitions grew. In 2004 it was renamed "Al-Qaeda of Mesopotamia". It became known as "Al-Qaeda of Iraq" (*AQI*), which in early 2006, in alliance with other terrorist groups, created the Mujahideen Shura Council (*MSM*). The MSM, in turn, in alliance with several other groups and leaders of Sunni tribes in October 2006, announced the establishment of the so-called "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) in eight Sunni provinces. ISI, as it expanded to Syria in 2013, added the concept of "and the Sham" or "and the Levant" to its name and began to be called the "Islamic State of Iraq and Sham" (*ISIS*) or "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (*ISIL*). In 2014, the so-called "Islamic State" was announced.

** – Zarqawi set up a training camp in 1999 near Herat in western Afghanistan, away from the al-Qaeda base. He used the camp to train fighters for the "Levant Army" (*Jund al-Sham*), the jihadist group he created. Within a month, the group has renamed the "Organization for Monotheism and Jihad" (*Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad*).

About the author:

Ramiz M. Sevdimaliyev – Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor at the Department of International Relations, Baku State University, Azerbaijan, AZ1148, Baku, Acad. Zahid Khalilov str., 23.
E-mail: sevdimaliyev@yahoo.com

Conflict of interest:
The author declares the absence of conflict of interests.

Анализ взлета и падения движения иракских суннитов «Пробуждение»

Рамиз Мамедали оглу Севдималиев

Бакинский государственный университет (Азербайджан)

В статье изучается становление суннитского движения "Пробуждение" (или "*Сахва*") в качестве примера того, как различные группы могут мобилизоваться для коллективных действий и распадаться под воздействием внутренних и внешних факторов. Также

изучаются мотивы вождей суннитских племён выступить против «Аль-Каиды» в Ираке (АКИ) и факторы, оказавшие решающее влияние на распад движения «Пробуждение». Пример «*Сахва*» также позволяет лучше понять, что побудило вождей суннитских племён сначала провинции аль-Анбар, а затем других провинций Ирака выступить против АКИ. Утверждается, что возникновение иракского суннитского «Пробуждения» было связано не столько с чувством идеологического, патриотического или религиозного долга, сколько с потерей экономической власти вождей племён, которые решили мобилизоваться против АКИ. После 2006 г. суннитское движение «*Сахва*» являлось ключевым компонентом стратегии США в борьбе с джихадистскими группами. Рост деятельности «*Сахва*» привёл к тому, что многие иностранные боевики Исламского государства Ирак (ИГИ) покинули Ирак, и накал межконфессионального конфликта в стране существенно снизился. После официальной передачи контроля над «*Сахва*» иракскому правительству отношение суннитских племён с официальным Багдадом ухудшалось, так как премьер-министр Аль-Малики проводил систематическую политику маргинализации и ликвидации «*Сахва*». На распад «*Сахва*» сильное воздействие оказали два решения США, которые имели стратегическое значение для Ирака: (а) поддержка Нури аль-Малики после его поражения на парламентских выборах 2010 года, на которых победу одержала светская суннитско-шиитская коалиция; (б) неудачный выбор времени вывода американских войск из Ирака, так как к концу 2011 г. иракские силы безопасности все ещё не были готовы обеспечить безопасность страны. В результате в 2012 г. многочисленные сторонники движения «*Сахва*» принимали участие в антиправительственных выступлениях в провинции Анбар и тысячи бойцов движения присоединились к ИГИЛ.

Об авторе:

Рамиз Мамедали оглу Севдималиев – доктор политических наук, профессор кафедры международных отношений, Бакинский государственный университет, Азербайджан, AZ1148, Баку, ул. Акад.Захида Халилова, 23.
E-mail: sevdimaliyev@yahoo.com

References:

Arnold M. B. 2008. The US 'Surge' as a Collaborative Corrective for Iraq. *The RUSI Journal*. 153(2). P. 24-29. DOI: 10.1080/03071840802103199.

Biddle S., Friedman J. A., Shapiro J. N. 2012. Testing the Surge: Why did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007? *International Security*. 37(1). P. 7-40. DOI: 10.1162/ISEC_a_00087

Benraad M. 2011. Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall. *Middle East Policy*. 18(1). P. 121-131. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00477.x

Bremer L.P., McConnell M. 2007. *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Folger R. 1986. Rethinkinng equity theory: A referent cognition model. H.W. Bierhoff, R.L. Cohen, & J. Greenberg (Eds.). *Justice in social relations*. P. 145-162. New York: Plenum.

Gordon M.R., Trainor B.E. 2013. *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama*. New York: Vintage Books. A Division of Random House Inc.

Hamourtziadou L. 2020. *Body Count. The War on Terror and Civilian Deaths in Iraq.* Bristol University Press. 216 p.

Kilcullen David. 2016. *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Klandermans B., van Stekelenburg J. 2013. Social Movements and the Dynamic of the Collective Action. In: L. Huddy, D.O. Sears, & J.S. Levy (Eds.). *The Oxford handbook of political psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press. P. 774-811.

Maye D. L. 2016. Understanding the Sunni Realignment in Iraq with Complexity Theory. *Digest of Middle East Studies.* 25(1). P. 132-154. DOİ: 10.1111/dome.12077.

Michael G. 2007. The Legend and Legacy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. *Defence Studies.* 7(3). P. 338-357. DOI: 10.1080/14702430701559248.

Napoleoni L. 2005. *Insurgent Iraq: Al-Zarqawi and the New Generation.* New York: Seven Stories Press.

Pfiffner J. P. 2010. US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army. *Intelligence and National Security.* 25(1). P. 76-85. DOI: 10.1080/02684521003588120.

Phillips A. 2009. The Anbar Awakening: Can It Be Exported to Afghanistan? *Security Challenges.* 5(3). P. 27-46.

Ricks T. 2006. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003 to 2005.* New York: Penguin Press.

Sanchez R.S., Phillips D.T. 2008. *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier's Story.* New York: Harper.

Schanzer J. 2005. *Al-Qaeda's Armies. Middle East Affiliate Groups & the Next Generation of Terror.* Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Sevdimaliyev R. 2011. *International Terrorism and Political-Legal Problems of Combating It.* Baku: İNDİGO. (In Russian).

Sky E. 2015. *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq.* New York: Public Affairs.

Stein J. 2013. Threat Perception in international relations. L. Huddy, D.O. Sears, & J.S. Levy (Eds.). *The Oxford handbook of political psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press. P. 364-394.

Tenet G., Harlow B. 2007. *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA.* New York: HarperCollins.

Van Zomeren M., Postmes T., Spears R. 2008. Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action: A Quantitative Research Synthesis of Three Socio-Psychological Perspectives. *Psychological Bulletin.* 134(4). P. 504-535. DOI: 10.1037/0033-2909.134.4.504

Van Zomeren M., Spears R., Fischer A. H., Leach C.W. 2004. Put Your Money Where Your Mouth is! Explaining collective action tendencies through group-based anger and group efficacy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* 87(5). P. 649-664. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.87.5.649.

Warrick J. 2015. *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS.* New York: Doubleday.

Weiss M., Hassan H. 2015. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror.* New York: Regan Arts.