Jihadi Insurgents Return to Iraq

The fall of Mosul, Kirkuk and Fallujah—three prominent Iraq cities—to the radical Sunni forces of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is a challenge to Iraq as a coherent unified country. It is also the resurgence of a pattern of radical Sunni anti-governmental activity that was a feature of the US military occupation of Iraq beginning in 2003. And it is partly a result of it.

Fallujah is an example of what happened then and what is happening now. The attempt by American forces to eradicate Fallujah of radical elements paradoxically hardened them, and spread its fighters throughout the country. The paradox is even more striking considering that the Sunni leaders of the region were not supporters of Saddam Hussein, and many were predisposed to welcome the US liberation of the country from his leadership.

“We hated Saddam,” a Sunni Muslim cleric told me, indicating that he and his colleagues in the Sunni triangle of an Anbar province had no use for the secular dictator. Nonetheless, he and his allies came to regard the American coalition authority that replaced Saddam’s government as an even worse choice. They saw the U.S. occupation as a repressive force, imposing a Western-style government into Muslim territory, much as America’s ally, Israel, also imposed itself on the Middle East. They identified with Hamas and the Muslim struggle in Palestine, and asserted that the Palestinian oppression was parallel to their own experience in Iraq.

For this reason, the Fallujah uprising against the US-sponsored Iraq government was stimulated by the actions of a different government in a different part of the world—in Israel. The Israeli attack in 2004 that killed the Palestinian Hamas leader, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, had repercussions in the al Anbar province of post-Saddam Iraq. At the time that Sheik Yassin was killed, Sunni activists in Iraq were beginning to formulate a position of protest against the U.S. occupation of their country that began with the American-led military coalition that toppled Saddam Hussein’s government in April 2003.

The killing of Sheik Yassin had an impact especially on the insurgency in Fallujah during the critical month of March 2004. The Iraqis in Fallujah had identified themselves with the Palestinians, and Sheik Yassin had been widely revered in Iraq’s Sunni stronghold. The televised scenes of the site of the crippled leader’s death outraged Muslims in Fallujah, who poured out into the streets in a spontaneous demonstration. The US military used a show of force to control the demonstration, but the American presence reinforced the idea that the US and Israel were essentially the same. It was a common Iraqi belief that the US supported what was regarded as Israel’s oppression of Palestinian freedom. Thus the anger against Israel’s control over Palestine become merged with the hatred of US occupation of Iraq. In the eyes of many in Fallujah the Palestinian and Iraqi cause was the same. One of the main streets of the city—the one that ended in a square metal bridge over the Euphrates River—was renamed in honor of the fallen Sheik Yassin.

For over a week tension mounted. On March 31, several American-made sports utility vehicles came hurtling through Fallujah on the street renamed in honor of Sheik Yassin. The passengers in the vehicles were security staff employed by a North Carolina firm, Blackwater Security Consulting, but from the Iraqi point of view these armed Americans were either soldiers or spies. The vehicles were ambushed. Soon the stalled vehicles burst into flames with the occupants caught inside.

Though gruesome, the scene of four men burned alive soon became even more horrific. A crowd of some forty to fifty men and boys gathered in an orgy of violence, dancing and shouting anti-American slogans. Videotapes of the scene show men beating the lifeless charred corpses with a metal pipe. A young boy stomped his heel onto a burned head and called to a reporter to tell President Bush to “come and look at this!” What remained of two of the burned bodies was dragged down Sheik Yassin Street to the bridge. “This is what these spies deserve,” said one 28-year old Iraqi who observed the incident.

According to some accounts, the car that dragged one of the bodies through the streets of Fallujah had a picture of Sheik Yassin in the window. The Associated Press reported that members of the crowd held pictures of the assassinated Sheik as the bodies were mutilated. Later a statement was issued from a previously unknown group, the Brigade of Martyr Ahmed Yassin. The statement claimed credit for the attack, and described it as “a gift from the people of Fallujah to the people of Palestine and the family of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin who was assassinated by the criminal Zionists.”

This was a critical moment in the increasing intensity of the insurgency and in the militance of the U.S. occupation authority’s response. Against the advice of the U.S. generals on the scene, orders came from the Pentagon to punish Fallujah and quell the insurgency. A major military assault ensued in the following month, and after a difficult ceasefire during the summer, the city was virtually emptied by a U.S. military campaign in November 2004 that was determined to rid the city of insurgents. The intensity of the American assault, however, served to harden the opposition and create a more dedicated resistance as a result.

The fall of Fallujah marked a turning point in the jihadi influence on the insurgency. Though the U.S. attack was meant to weaken the domestic insurgency—which it may indeed have done—at the same time it helped to strengthen the hand of the foreign jihadi activists operating in Iraq, some of whom were associated with the transnational al Qaeda movement. Prior to November 2004 the Islamic activists in Fallujah were largely under the influence of local clergy. The destruction of Fallujah’s social network by the American military attack weakened those ties, however, and scattered the insurgents. Increasingly they came under the influence of the more radical activists.

When I was in Baghdad in 2004, my interviews with clerics associated with the Sunni resistance convinced me that at that time they were concerned largely about the religious consequences of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and not about global jihad. One of them told me that he was certain that the purpose of the U.S. invasion and occupation of his country was to coopt an Islamic revolution against the secular government. In his mind, the U.S.-supported regime in Baghdad was simply a continuation of the anti-Islamic secular policies of Saddam Hussein. From the cleric’s point of view, the purpose of the insurgency was not only to end the American occupation of Iraq, but also to herald a new Islamic regime. In this sense the mission of the Iraq insurgency was very much like that of Hamas. The respect paid to Sheik Yassin was a symbol of a style of Islamic politics that focused on local control, in many cases a religious nationalism.

The jihadi elements that came into Iraq in the months following the U.S. military invasion were different from these local insurgents—they were more strident, more romantic in their vision of global religious struggle. They were transnationalists. The jihadi warriors from Jordan, Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East saw Iraq as a new battleground in the global confrontation between Islam and what they regarded as the anti-Islamic forces of the secular West. One of the leaders of these new jihadi soldiers who helped to transform the Iraqi resistance was Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Zarqawi came from the Jordanian city of Zarqa—hence his adopted name. His real name was most likely Ahmad Fadeel an-Nazal al-Khalayeh. According to Jordanian intelligence reports he was born in 1966, grew up as a teen-age thug, and was briefly jailed on charges of drug possession and sexual assault. Later in life he became a convert to militant jihad and traveled to Afghanistan in 1989 to join the last stages of the *mujahadin* struggle against the Soviet-supported government. Soon after he returned to Jordan and created a militant organization, al Tawhid, dedicated to a militant Islamic revolution in the country. In 1992 he was arrested and served five years in prison for conspiracy to overthrow the Jordanian government. As soon as he was released in 1999 he attempted to blow up the Radisson SAS hotel in Amman, Jordan’s capital; the hotel was frequented by Americans, Israelis, and other foreign guests. With the Jordanian government eager to place him back in prison, Zarqawi fled to Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was there that Zarqawi most likely met with Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Khalid Sheik Mohammad, and other expatriate jihadis who were forming a coalition of activism that would explode around the world. Though bin Laden is said to have been wary of the course and thuggish Zarqawi—and for his part Zarqawi was said to have resisted paying obeisance to bin Laden or anyone else, for that matter—bin Laden is said to have provided him several hundred thousand dollars to set up a jihadi training camp in Afghanistan.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led military invasion of Afghanistan, Zarqawi for a time supported the remants of the Taliban in their resistance struggle against the new government in Kabul. In 2002 he was in Iraq—according to some reports he was there for medical treatment of injuries sustained in the Afghan struggles. He settled in the north, in the Kurdish region that with American military support enjoyed semi-autonomous status. Zarqawi joined an Islamic guerrilla movement, Ansar al-Islam, that was aimed at resisting Kurdish nationalism. Hence at the time of the U.S.-led military coalition’s invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Zarqawi and his cadre were well poised to join the resistance movement and try to bend it in a transnational jihadi direction.

Zarqawi’s forces, organized under the banner of the Tawhid (“unity”) group, targeted a wide range of individuals and public institutions in order to destabilize and discredit the embryonic Iraqi government that was being established by the U.S.-led reconstruction efforts. One of the first acts was a well-orchestrated suicide truck-bombing that demolished the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad on August 19, 2003, killing twenty –two people including UN special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello. The group found that more attention was focused on their acts of violence if it were performed in a particularly gruesome manner—hence the rash of televised beheadings, beginning with a young unemployed American, Nicholas Berg, in May 2004; and including British hostage Ken Bigley, who was kidnapped in Baghdad’s upscale al-Mansour district and beheaded in September 2004.

Zarqawi’s lasting impact on Iraq’s civil strife was his effort to create religious conflict between Arab Sunnis and Shi’ites. In March 2004, his group launched an attack on Shi’a shrines in Karbala and Baghdad. In December 2004 the group aimed at the leading Shi’a shrine in Najaf as well as further bomb blasts at the Karbala mosque. Perhaps the most spectacular attack was the February 2006 bombing of the al Askari mosque in Samarra—one of the most holy sites in Shi’a Islam—destroying its striking golden dome and killing 165 people. Zarqawi had publicly proclaimed his intention to foment Sunni-Shi’a animosity and the destruction of the shrine was clearly meant to accomplish that goal.

Zarqawi’s goal of sectarian strife indeed came to fruition, and these hostilities outlived Zarqawi himself. On June 7, 2006, U.S. military intelligence received information regarding Zarqawi’s location near the city of Baquba, and attacked the location with a significant missile strike that killed him, along with one of his wives and one of his children. There was considerable speculation about who might have divulged Zarqawi’s whereabouts, and some thought that he might have been betrayed by disgruntled members within his own movement. He was succeeded by an Egyptian jihadi, Abu Ayyub al-Masri.

In the meantime, the momentum of sectarian strife had taken on a life of its own. Soon after the February 2006 bombing of the Samarra mosque, over a hundred Sunni mosques were attacked and ten Sunni imams were killed. Fifteen more were kidnapped. A tit-for-tat litany of reprisal killings between Shi’a and Sunni neighborhoods intensified in the following year.

Much of the fervor of Shi’a retaliation against Sunnis was urged on by the radical Shi’a cleric, Muqtada al Sadr. Though relatively young and undistinguished among Shi’a clergy in Iraq, Muqtada had imposing family ties. He was the son of one of Iraq’s most famous clerics, the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, and son-in-law of another distinguished cleric, the Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir as-Sadr. Perhaps more important, he had set up something of a theocratic rule in one of Baghdad’s most crowded regions, Sadr City, which consisted almost entirely of poor Shi’a immigrants. Moreover, Muqtada served as the commander of a large paramilitary force, the Mahdi Army, that received its strength from former units of the disbanded Iraqi army. It was also said to have received covert support from Iran.

Muqtada had no use for the American-led coalition government, which attempted to arrest him in 2004. At the same time he despised Zarqawi’s forces, whose terrorists attacks were aimed at Shi’a targets. After the destruction of the Samarra mosque, rogue elements related to the Muqtada camp were responsible for some of the most savage acts of terrorism. The Shi’a attacks were aimed at the Sunni population in retaliation against the car bomb assaults in Shi’a neighborhoods, many of them in Sadr City. The Shi’a reprisals were equally as brutal. Groups of ordinary Sunni citizens would be rounded up, tortured and murdered, their bodies mutilated by electric drills and dumped in fields outside of the city of Baghdad.

Though the sectarian violence in Iraq was often described as Sunni-Shi’a civil war, there was very little support for the violence from mainstream religious leaders on either side. On the Sunni side, the Sunni Association of Muslim Clerics resisted the attempts of the Tawhid jihadis to coopt it, and the association often played a positive role in helping to moderate the violence. I talked with one Sunni cleric who told me that he had played a mediating role between extreme insurgents and the Iraqi government. He said it did it for the sake of Iraqi unity. The jihadi extremists became increasingly annoyed with this attitude, however, and by what they regarded as compromises by the nationalistic-minded Sunni leaders.

Beginning in 2005 a new movement, the National Council for the Awakening of Iraq—or simply the Iraq Awakening movement—mobilized the Sunni leadership in al Anbar province against the jihadi extremists. The movement was supported by the US military under a brilliant strategy of General David Petraeus to pit the modern Sunnis against the radical ones. By 2007 the tensions between moderate Iraqi Sunni leaders and the jihadi outsiders had erupted into dissention and violence between their factions. On the Shi’a side, leading clerics such as Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Husaini al-Sistani also distanced themselves from such Shi’a extremists as Muqtada. Sistani supported the leading Shi’a political party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim.

For a time it appeared that the Shi’a and Sunni factions could live peaceably together in Iraq. I was assured that Iraqi Shi’ite and Sunni had an innate sense of hospitality toward one another by Nuri Kamal al Maliki, who later became Prime Minister of Iraq, but who at the time of my interview with him in 2004 was Deputy Director of the Shi’a Dawa Party.Al-Maliki told me that his own party was fifteen percent Sunni and that Shi’a-Sunni intermarriage was a common thing. He also told me that the threat of Muqtada al-Sadr—who was one of his primary supporters—was greatly exaggerated. Yet the threat of al-Sadr turned out in subsequent years to be quite real, though in 2007 al Maliki pledged to control the forces of Muqtada in order to support a troop surge strategy promoted by U.S. President George W. Bush. For a time Muqtada al-Sadr went into hiding and the violence temporarily subsided. Nonetheless rogue elements from the Shi’a side soon continued their acts of terror and reprisal, mimicking the acts of Sunni extremists.

Al Maliki’s openness to the Shi’a opposition also turned out to be a hollow gesture. Increasingly his government took a hard line against the Sunni leadership in al Anbar province, who felt betrayed by the US military who handed over control of their militia to al Maliki and then left the country entirely in 2011. Without the US military to support their interests they were totally dependent on the generosity of the Shi’a majority government led by al Maliki, who showed no interest in opening his government to their interests. Even worse, he regarded them as potential enemies, and tried to build his own leadership strength on the basis of his willingness to take a hard line against the Shi’a majority’s traditional rival, the Sunnis. The US administration under Barack Obama pleaded with al Maliki to be more conciliatory to the Sunnis, and even the most prominent Shi’a leader in Iraq, al Sistani, urged al Maliki to take a more democratic stance towards the Sunnis. The Iranian government also favored this approach, fearing a backlash from the Sunnis and political anarchy in the country. Al Maliki resisted, and the dark prophecy of anarchy begin to take over vast regions of the western part of the country. Under the ISIS leadership, whole cities fell to radical Sunni hands, though in this case the Sunni elders chose to support them rather than fight them, in part because they felt ostracized by the Baghdad regime led by al Maliki.

Thus the circle has turned again to radical Jihadi insurgency. Once again Fallujah is in the hands of the extremists, though this time there is no US military to rescue the Iraq government from the militants’ control, and no David Petraeus to moderate between warring factions to bring stability to the country. Iraq will have to mediate this crisis by itself, though a behind the scenes alliance between Iran and US military advisors may give material and tactical support. The insurgency in Iraq, it seems, is far from over.

*This analysis of the radical Sunni insurgents in Iraq is based on the Iraq section of my book,* Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, *updated to reflect the 2014 military conquests of the forces related to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*.