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Return of the Bedouin Days: Iraq Insurgency leading to Tribalism

Nidaa Abu-Ali

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Sectarian militancy has become the dominant element of violence in Iraq. This is drastically altering the map of Iraq, causing internal migration and creating internal barriers to travel, work and daily life.

THE CHAOTIC situation in Iraq continues to show that the insurgents can still create destruction, threatening those who oppose them with annihilation. This was illustrated on 13 September 2007, when Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu-Rishawi, the leader of the Anbar Awakening Council and the chief of the Al-Bo Risha tribe, was assassinated by the Islamic State of Iraq. Their justification for the assassination was his alleged collaboration with the Iraqi government and the United States military against al Qaeda in Iraq and other organizations. This assassination is a step backward in the Iraqi government's slow and tenuous path to progress. For if a prominent leader who enjoyed strong protection in Iraq could meet this fate, ordinary Iraqis would assume the worst if they collaborated with the current Iraqi government. Add to that the sectarian violence of 22 February 2006 when Shiite shrines in Samarra were bombed, creating an endless cycle of vengeful actions.

Iraqis have reverted to tribalism without referring to the government because of the government's failure to maintain law and order. Insurgents have the upper hand at present and the weaker tribes that are not participating in these insurgencies have to pay the price.

The Iraqi sectarian conflict and the actions of violent militias are not only formulating a violent civil war but are also causing a displacement of Iraqi tribes who flee their towns, escaping terror.

Back to the Bedouin Days?

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of Iraqis registered as internal refugees reached 480,000 in the beginning of 2007, totaling the number of internally-migrated Iraqis to more than 2.25 million. These families are forced to live traditional Bedouin lives disregarding the modernity and stability Iraqis used to enjoy; Iraqis are moving from one area to another searching for security, shelter, resources and food, just as their Bedouin ancestors did. The only difference between pre-modern times and today is that they are looking for electricity.

But the major concern of these tribes that migrate to other areas is primarily to find security. Sectarian militias are not only causing inter but intra-community terror. Both Sunni and Shiite militias practice extortion, kidnapping, and other crimes against their own brethren to generate funds. Militias even burn the homes of Iraqis to force them to flee out of their towns. Even if not directly attacked, tribes that feel threatened will flee for safer areas. They return once the security situation has improved, only

to find their homes occupied by other families.

The children pay the highest price, according to the United Nations' humanitarian news service IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks). Some 30% of Iraqi children are not registered in schools because of constant travelling from a region to another. The constant travelling will lead to a new generation of inadequately educated children, leaving them on a downward spiral of instability and frustration. This may provide the foot soldiers for future extremist groups, raising the spectre of generational instability, coupled with the migration of the educated out of Iraq who are escaping the situation faced in Iraq. This situation will severely alter the character of Iraq, which was once celebrated for having a highly educated population and were proud of the benefits derived from that.

The impact of this movement can be seen in the formerly mixed communities such as Baghdad. Residents of once mixed neighbors have fled to the homogenous areas. The tragic irony is that the enclaves do not offer security, only a highly concentrated sectarian target. Sunni militias such as al Qaeda in Iraq can annihilate Shiite targets with little probability of harming Sunni allies. The same is true for Shiite extremists such as Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mehdi Army, who can extract their revenge in Sunni communities with little fear of harming Shiite supporters.

The Use of Barriers Inside and Outside of Iraq

In April 2007, the US and Iraqi military attempted to address this situation. At least temporarily, by erecting barriers around Sunni districts that are surrounded by Shiite areas to divide the two groups as a transitional solution. Some might think this will decrease violent acts. However there is a possibility that this will only highlight the existence of sectarianism and will enable the insurgents to target their enemy even more easily and fuelling civil strife. The Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki expressed his opposition to the idea of building fences claiming that it will increase sectarian violence, yet he did not suggest any alternative plan. The internal borders will also prevent the different Iraqi families from migrating into other Iraqi cities creating semi states within the state that do not mingle because they are at war.

Barriers are also being implemented on the borders of Iraq by neighbouring countries that fear that violence and the sectarian militias will cross into their own countries. The use of barriers is a strategy Israel has used to prevent suicide bombers from the Palestinian territory to enter their own. While Kuwait first started the construction of a fence on the Iraqi border in 1991 after the Second Gulf War, the Kuwaitis started building a second fence along the existing border in January 2004 for security reasons at a cost of US\$ 28 billion. Saudi Arabia is also building a barrier along its border with Iraq that costs about US\$45 billion and will take 5 to 6 years to complete.

Era of Fenced Borders?

This region may be entering a new era of protecting borders by erecting physical barriers to treat a symptom of instability rather than resolving the actual conflicts. This could be an indicator that these conflicts will continue much longer than was expected, which in turn reflects the Middle East's expectations that the chaotic violence in Iraq will continue for years to come.

The fortified sectarian enclaves will de facto create a situation that most leaders have been trying to avoid -- a fragmented sectarian state which may not be able to sustain itself. This will only feed the sense of isolation in an Iraq with divided districts trapped in a walled off country. The displaced individuals will stop escaping from sectarian violence and will turn into frustrated radicals that will do anything vengeful to annihilate the opponent sector, thus creating total destruction within their own society.

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