

# ISLAMIC AFFAIRS

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# ANALYST

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## Anbar's Sunni militias: fighting by proxy

### KEY POINTS

- Al-Qaeda's retreat in the province of Al-Anbar has less to do with the US military surge than it has to do with a US willingness to reach out to Sunnis.
- As the US arms and facilitates the emergence of anti-Al-Qaeda Sunni groups in Iraq, the danger is that such temporary alliances will be untenable.
- Recent history from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia show that warfare through proxies is inherently an unruly process, but there are obvious lessons from these conflicts that the US could do well to note as it considers its options in Iraq.

**O**n his trip to Al-Asad Air Base in Iraq's Anbar province in early September, President George W Bush touted the progress in this region as an indicator that the recent surge in US troops is succeeding. But General David Petraeus' 10 September testimony before the US Congress and the recent National Intelligence Estimate suggest the "normalisation" of Anbar came about for other reasons. In Petraeus' words, the "normalisation" was due to a "political shift where the population led by the sheiks of major tribes decided to reject Al-Qaeda and its Taliban-like ideology, and extremist behaviour".

US troops in Iraq have recently gained the support of Anbar province's Sunni militias in their battle against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. *Brian Glyn Williams* examines the pros and cons of the Anbar model and the precedents behind the use of proxy forces by an occupying army.

The unexpected decline in attacks on US troops in Anbar would seem to have more to do with people like Lieutenant Colonel Mark Odom and his recently acquired tribal allies. Over the course of the last year, Odom's small team was able to cultivate relations with former insurgents such as Sheik Ali Majid al Dulaimi whose father was killed by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Recently Odom assisted Ali and his tribal followers as they fought against the terrorists who sought to transform Anbar province into the centre of their AQI-dominated 'Islamic State in Iraq'.

It had become increasingly obvious to Odom that the xenophobic Sunni chief-

tains of Anbar, who once shared a common cause with AQI, had come to see their erstwhile allies as a greater threat than the US. One Sunni sheik named Younis Hamid Abid who personified this trend recently told his followers the foreign-led AQI, "represent Satan, and God orders us to kill them because they killed our sons, burned our houses and destroyed our orchards and fields."

Sheikh Osama al-Jadaan, another Anbar leader who is head of the influential Karabila tribe, was similarly representative of this trend. After his people were terrorised by the foreign-led AQI, he said: "We realised that these foreign terrorists



were hiding behind the veil of the noble Iraqi resistance. They claim to be striking at the US occupation, but the reality is they are killing innocent Iraqis in the markets, in mosques, in churches and in our schools.”

Such previously unspeakable sentiments about Iraq’s most relentless terrorist organisation have increasingly been translated into action by what the US military calls emergency response units or more commonly, concerned local citizens (CLC) militias.

No CLC militia have had as much success as in Anbar, where dozens of sheiks whose people have suffered from AQI’s actions, rallied under the leadership of Sheikh Abdul Sattar al Rishawi to form the Anbar Salvation Council (ASC). The ASC then drove AQI out of Ramadi – the capital of Anbar province – in October 2006. It was this ‘Sunni Awakening’ in Iraq’s largest province that made it less dangerous for coalition troops.

In light of such unexpected success in Ramadi, the Anbar model has been tried in Baghdad’s Amiriya and south Ghazalia districts where ex-Baathists belonging to the Amiriya Knights and Ghazalia Defence Militias fought off AQI with US assistance.

Sheikh Rishawi, whose father and brothers were killed for opposing AQI’s cult of violence, expressed a desire to chase AQI even further afield saying: “I swear to God, if we have good weapons, if we have good vehicles, if we have good support, I can fight Al-Qaeda all the way to Afghanistan.”

The ASC, which includes 25 of Anbar’s 31 major tribes, seems to have the means to make good on its threat. It has over 6,000 fighters, has captured dozens of AQI fighters, and is reported to have killed more high-level AQI insurgents in Ramadi than the US.

While the battle has not been one-sided (AQI killed Sheikh Abid, the leader who called their organisation ‘Satan’, as well as several other ASC sheiks), the tide has

steadily turned against AQI in the western corner of the Sunni Triangle and in Baghdad’s southern suburbs. This may have a domino effect in provinces such as Salah-din and Nineveh where similar militias are being created.

Forced to flee from Anbar, AQI established its capital in Diyala province, north-east of Baghdad where it ran into a different set of problems. The problems started when AQI started killing members of such Sunni/Salafist insurgents groups as the 1920s Revolutionary Brigades, the Islamic Army in Iraq, and Ansar al Sunnah. For the most part, they were killed for not recognising the authority of AQI’s Amir ul Muimen (the self-proclaimed ‘Commander of the Faithful’). In response, one 1920s Revolutionary Brigades fighter claimed: “Al-Qaeda is an abomination of Islam... cutting off heads, stealing people’s money, kidnapping... every type of torture they have done.”

As these local insurgent groups responded to such provocations, the US military began reporting red on red (enemy on enemy) violence. On several occasions, members of the 1920s Revolutionary Brigade even asked for US support in their skirmishes with AQI in Baquba, the capital of Diyala province and AQI’s new capital for the ‘Islamic State in Iraq’.

As the heat is turned up on Iraq’s most extreme insurgent group, there is talk of supporting more Sunni militias as a means of empowering other (comparatively) moderate Sunni groups. But the talk of supporting Sunni militias such as the ASC or Amiriya Knights, both of which contain ex-Sunni insurgents, is not making everyone in Iraq happy.

Many in the Shia-dominated Nouri al-Maliki government fear that this ad hoc response to AQI may be empowering Sunni opponents who will one day use their weapons against Shia in a possible civil war following US withdrawal.

In light of the potentially dangerous ramifications of the Anbar model, it is useful to see how this sort of proxy policy has

played out in three similar occupations of Muslim territory where foreign extremists have operated namely: Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, Serb-occupied Bosnia, and Russian-occupied Chechnya. An analysis of these precedents may help point out some of the benefits and pitfalls of co-operating with local militias in fighting extremist militias with foreign links.

### **Soviet-Occupied Afghanistan**

While many in the West saw the Soviets’ war in Afghanistan as a black and white battle between ‘bad’ Communists and ‘good’ mujahideen (freedom fighters), there were far more complex undercurrents to this war. Just as the Shia and Kurdish resentment of the dominant Sunnis complicates the war against AQI in Iraq, the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Shia-Hazaras’ resentment of Afghanistan’s dominant ethnic group, the Pashtuns, complicated the Soviets’ struggle against the mujahideen.

But, as with the pro-US Kurds in Iraq, it was these ethno-sectarian divisions that gave the Soviets an opening to use local moderate ethnic fighters against their more extreme opponents. When the powerful Pashtun-dominated mujahideen parties in Pakistan refused to arm or even recognise an Uzbek mujahideen party, for example, the Soviets offered the Uzbeks the weapons and respect they craved. The Soviets played on the Uzbeks’ moderate form of Sufi Islam and historical animosity towards Pashtuns to create ‘revolutionary defence groups’ which guarded installations in the north against the extremist Pashtun mujahideen.

Under their able commander, Abdul Rashid ‘Dostum’ (My Friend), the pro-Communist government Uzbek militias pacified the north of Afghanistan much as the ASC has rid that province of AQI. Dostum’s forces eventually served elsewhere as rapid reaction shock troops against the Pashtun mujahideen as a part of the Soviets’ Afghanistan policy.

While he was certainly an ethnic opportunist, on some levels Dostum’s reasons

for fighting paralleled those of the moderates in Anbar Province who turned on AQI. In a 2003 interview Dostum claimed: "We fought against the mujahideen to protect ourselves and our traditions from the Pashtun and Arab extremists. We did not want to submit to their fundamentalism. We hated the outsiders who came with their strict ways and burnt schools, attacked women for not wearing the veil, and proclaimed their right to control everything because of the jihad."

As in Anbar, where the foreign Wahhabi-Salafist extremists have antagonised moderate local Muslims by implementing strict sharia (Islamic law), many moderate Sufi Uzbeks resented the Wahhabi-Salafites from the Arabian Peninsula and their local Pashtun allies. Even Ahmad Shah Massoud, the head of the Tajik component of the mujahideen resistance, fought against Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Saudi-funded Pashtun mujahideen. He later fought to have the foreign Wahhabi volunteers expelled when the Soviets departed. The parallel today is the increasing red on red conflict between AQI and other groups like the 1920s Revolutionary Brigades operating in Iraq.

But it was the Uzbek gilamjan (carpet thief) militias that proved most devoted to fighting the local and foreign extremists. In light of the bad blood between the Uzbeks and the Pashtun fundamentalists (especially Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction), it is not surprising Dostum's Uzbeks later propped up the post-Soviet Communist regime of President Najibullah. Like the pro-government Hazara fighters of Sayed Naderi, Dostum turned on the Communist government in 1992 only after it ran out of money and began to reach out to Pashtun mujahideen parties.

Fearing that the Pashtun-dominated Communist government was playing the ethnicity card, Dostum joined the Tajik mujahideen forces of Massoud and brought down Najibullah's government. But Dostum continued to serve the Russians by creating a secular bulwark or

'shield' in the north of Afghanistan based on his secular mini-state around Mazar i Sharif. When the Taliban then threatened the Commonwealth of Independent States in Central Asia, he fought them off until 1998 when he was finally defeated.

Therefore, the Russians' proxy forces fought on behalf of their interests for almost a decade after they departed the country in 1989. Ironically, when Dostum's enclave fell in 1998, the Russians began funding their former nemesis, Massoud, to fight against the Taliban and foreign Al-Qaeda extremists (the so-called Al-Qaeda 055 International Brigade).

But it was Dostum who would ultimately destroy the Taliban. The US later used Dostum's fierce horsemen in their own war against the Pashtun Islamist extremists and their Arab allies during Operation Enduring Freedom. Ironically, the Soviets' Uzbek proxy allies in the war against the CIA-funded mujahideen became the US' greatest on the ground asset in the war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

But it should also be noted that Dostum's Uzbeks (who were armed by the departing Soviets with everything from Scud missiles to squadrons of MiG and Sukhoi fighter bombers) played a key role in the eventual destruction of Kabul during the 1992-96 Afghan civil war. The T-62 tanks, Uragan multiple rocket systems and small-arms the Soviets had given their proxy allies were used to empower the Uzbeks in their struggle against their Tajik and Pashtun rivals. In the process the Afghan capital was blasted to rubble and thousands of people were killed.

The long-term warning here for Iraq is obvious. The Afghan precedent would suggest that proxy forces like the ASC will likely defend their own ethnic-regional-religious interests in any post-US vacuum. The risk that these militias will use their weapons against the US-backed Shia government in a battle for spoils similar to the Afghan civil war remains high. If the Iraqi government does not pursue sectarian policies in favour of the Shia, the Sunni

militias may, however, prop up the central government and keep their area free of AQI extremists as Dostum's forces did.

### Serbian-occupied Bosnia

When the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska Serbian forces began to fight with the nationalist Muslim government of Alija Izetbegovic in 1992, not all Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians) were committed to the struggle. Tens of thousands of self-proclaimed 'moderate pragmatist' Bosniaks living in the isolated Bosnian enclave of Velika Kladusa opted not to fight.

Accusing the Izetbegovic's Bosnian government of being fundamentalist, they rallied under their leader Fikret Abdic 'Babo' (Father) and created 'citizens defence militias' to defend their neutrality. One of Babo's followers claimed at the time: "We are not fanatics and criminals like those from the (Bosnian army's) Fifth Corps. We all bow, go to mosque, and respect the Quran. But we do not need an Islamic state of Alija Izetbegovic. Whether my sister will wear a veil, is up to her to decide and not up to some stupid effendi (Muslim scholar)."

While the Bosnian government was not overtly fundamentalist, it allied itself with foreign fundamentalist fighters who formed the dreaded Kateebat ul Mujahideen Brigade. The foreign Salafist-Wahhabis soon outlawed drinking, smoking and dancing and began to enforce veils and sharia in areas where they fought. Such un-Bosnian activities infuriated many of moderate ex-Yugoslav Sufi Muslims and strengthened Babo's hand.

When the Bosnian government decided to use the Bosnian Fifth Corps and allied foreign mujahideen fighters to destroy Babo's 'Western Bosnian Autonomous Region', his followers fought back. Babo's militias soon began to fight alongside the Serbs against the Bosnian Muslim government. With funding and weapons supplied by their Serbian allies, they pinned down the Bosnian Fifth Corps in the Bihac enclave from 1993-95



and allowed the Serbs to fight elsewhere. This Muslim on Muslim violence proved to be some of the most vicious of the war and portended a reckoning should Babo's autonomous region fall.

Fikret Abdic Babo's forces were finally overrun during a joint Croatian-Bosnian offensive backed by the US, known as Operation Storm (1995). As many as 30,000 of Abdic's followers who were labeled murtadis (apostates) by the Bosnian government fled for their lives when their enclave fell. Many of them were killed and the welfare they had sought to protect by co-operating with the powerful Serbs. Like the pro-US Montagnards in Vietnam or the Christian militias used by the Israelis in south Lebanon, they paid a heavy price for their 'betrayal'.

The lesson here would be that the proxy militias the US is allying itself to in Iraq today could face the threat of reprisals for their actions from the AQI fighter-terrorists or from Shia should their US protectors withdraw. If they are to continue the fight against the extremists, Sunni groups such as the ASC may require long-term financial or even military assistance to prop them up or save them from retribution.

### Russian-occupied Chechnya

In 1996, the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria achieved independence from the Russian Federation after a bloody two year war. While most ex-Soviet Chechens dreamed of a stable secular homeland, many foreign vakhibity (a catch-all term for all Wahhabi-Salafist jihadists) from abroad began to settle in their homeland in the following years. While these foreign fighters had been useful during the war with the Russians, most average Chechens detested the jihadists' uncompromising fundamentalism.

Khasan Baiev, a Chechen doctor who wrote a book detailing the arrival of the foreign fighters in his homeland entitled *The Oath*, claimed: "These so-called Wahhabis were beginning to cause problems in Chechnya. They claimed our traditions

contradicted the Quran... we did not like it when they told us our Islam was not true Islam."

To make matters worse, the foreign extremists began to raid neighbouring Russian territories in an effort to expel the Russian 'infidel' from the Caucasus. At this time, the foreign mujahideen banned smoking, drinking, zikirs (Sufi dances and singing) and tried to force Chechnya's traditionally free women into the veil. Many Chechen moderates began to fight back during the inter-war period from 1996-1999. The moderates did not want their lands turned into an Imamate or Caliphate any more than the Afghans or Bosniaks had before them.

When the Russian Federation re-invaded in 1999, the moderate Chechen mufti (chief Islamic official), Ahmed Kadyrov, chose to ally with the Russians. His men and those of several other secular warlords (such as the Yamadiyev brothers) fought alongside the Russians against the foreign Vakhibity and their Chechen extremist allies. These pro-Russian proxy fighters proved useful in hunting down Vakhbity amirs (commanders) as they knew the lay of the land and clan-traditions. As Russian losses mounted they increasingly turned to the so-called Kadyrovsky Militias to fight in Chechnya's mountainous terrain.

By 2004 this 'Chechenisation' policy had proven successful and the Russia gradually regained control of Chechnya's capital and much of the countryside. But with the death of Ahmed Kadyrov in a bombing (May 2004), his son Ramzan Kadyrov turned the pro-Russian militia into a personal army. This brutal proxy army is now an increasingly independent force that terrorises many innocent Chechens and settles clan scores. In essence, the Russians have ceded control of Chechnya to their often unreliable proxy forces. For the Russians this is a victory of sorts, even though their proxies accrue regular condemnation from international human rights groups.

The lesson here would seem that the US should encourage the moderate Sunni sheiks of Iraq to defend their Sufi traditions against those Salafist-Wahhabis who threaten them. By presenting themselves as the defenders of Iraq's traditional moderate version of Islam, the US-backed militias can win the support of wide portions of the Iraqi population.

But safe-guards should be put in place at an early stage to make sure groups such as the ASC do not go rogue as the Kadyrovsky Militias have. If not, US-sponsored militias may quickly devolve into death squads that are more focused on settling scores with competing tribes or Shia than fighting against AQI.

### Lessons of history

As even the Hamid Karzai administration in Afghanistan has begun to arm tribal militias from among the Pashtuns of the southeast, (including the Mangal tribe of the Gardez area and militias in the Kandahar region), many questions remain about the long-term implications of arming or collaborating with proxy forces in the war on Al-Qaeda.

However, history would seem to indicate that in the zones covered here, indigenous proxy forces have proven to be very effective in fighting extremists that threaten their local customs. But in all these cases, the proxy forces have been drawn into retributive violence and settling of scores that had nothing to do with their sponsor's original objectives.

The fact that one of Anbar's Sunni militias has already named itself the Anbar Revenge Brigades is perhaps indicative of things to come should the US draw down its presence in this combustible region. ■

### Further Analysis

■ **On the offensive - Taking on Al-Qaeda in Iraq**

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