

Iraqi government turns on Sunni “Awakening” militias

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Amid the ongoing claims of victory in Iraq, American forces and the pro-US government have come into open conflict with predominantly Sunni Arab militias that were bribed into ending their resistance to the occupation during the “surge” in 2007.

On Saturday, a battle broke out in the Baghdad suburb of Fadhil when American and government troops entered the area to arrest the local leader of an “Awakening Council”, Adil al-Mashadani, on charges of previous involvement in the insurgency and using his position to extort \$170,000 a month in protection money from Fadhil businesses and residents. During exchanges of gunfire, at least three men were killed and 15 wounded. Awakening fighters took five Iraqi soldiers hostage and demanded the freeing of Mashadani in exchange for their release.

The Awakening Councils (Sahwa in Arabic) were created in regions of the country and Sunni suburbs of Baghdad that had been epicentres of armed resistance to the occupation. They were formed under conditions of intense US military operations against the insurgency, and pogroms against Sunni communities by elements of the Iraqi security forces and death squads loyal to the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the government.

Thousands of Sunnis were killed and tens of thousands fled Baghdad to escape the massacres. Facing not only defeat but potential annihilation, up to 60,000 Sunni men in Baghdad, and 40,000 in provinces such as Anbar, Ninevah, Diyala and Salah ah Din, ultimately agreed to join US-paid militias and cease attacks on American forces. The US paid the militiamen between \$150 and \$300 a month. With mass unemployment gripping the country, this money has supported many Sunni families.

As part of the arrangement, the Awakening Councils assisted the occupation forces to hunt down intransigent elements of the insurgency that would not submit. In exchange, American troops prevented government forces and Shiite militias from entering Sunni districts. In Baghdad, this involved sealing them off from Shiite areas with 12-foot high concrete blast walls, transforming the city into a network of ghetto-like enclaves.

This political settlement, which has been the main factor in the ebb in violence over the past 18 months, is now breaking down. As of April 1, the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, rather than the US military, will be responsible for paying the Awakening groups. Maliki views the Sunni militias as a threat and wants them disarmed and disbanded. To bring about this outcome, he guaranteed that 20 percent of the Awakening fighters would be given employment in either the police or the armed forces, and that the rest would be offered public sector jobs.

Maliki's promises, however, have not been met. The New York Times reported on March 24 that just 5,000 Awakening fighters have been given jobs in the Iraqi security forces. Few others will be. The government has been forced to slash its 2009 budget due to declining oil revenues and has announced a freeze on all hiring by the police. Other government departments are refusing to take on more staff.

Six Awakening groups in Baghdad and Diyala province contacted by the New York Times stated that they had not been paid for two months. Awakening militia leaders also complained that some of their men had been arrested despite being given an amnesty for their previous involvement in the insurgency. Saturday's attack on the Fadhil Awakening will only heighten recriminations over Maliki's broken promises.

A militia commander in the Baghdad suburb of Abu Safain told the Times on Saturday: "Members of the Iraqi Army are trying to pick a fight between them and the Awakening. Do they want the sectarianism to come back, like in 2006?" Another Awakening leader in the Sunni district of Adhamiya said: "All of our guys are asking, 'What about us? Are they going to arrest us next?'"

Facing persecution from the government and with no financial incentive to collaborate, many of the fighters may again take up arms against the occupation.

If they do, they could be joined by thousands of men who have recently been released from US military prisons. In the course of the illegal US occupation, tens of thousands of Iraqis were rounded up and thrown into prisons on nothing more than the suspicion of involvement in the insurgency. Since 2003, at least 100,000 Iraqis have been detained without any charges—some for years.

At the highpoint of the "surge" in 2007, the US was holding more than 26,000 people in prisons such as Camp Bucca. Throughout 2008 and the first months of 2009, that number has been systematically reduced to less than 9,000.

Brigadier General David Quantock, the commander of US detention operations, told Reuters, "there are 6,000 to 7,000 who we consider dangerous detainees". They will be handed over to Iraqi government, dragged before the courts, summarily convicted and imprisoned or sentenced to death for resisting the US invasion. At least 109 insurgents have been given death sentences already.

The bulk of the detainees, however, have been able to return to their homes and families. In most cases, they confront unemployment and devastated communities, as well as the repressive conduct of the Iraqi military and police.

According to a March 23 report in the Washington Post, the police fear that many of those released are joining or forming resistance groups.

The article drew attention to the sentiment among Shiite ex-prisoners, most of whom were detained during crackdowns on the Mahdi Army militia loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. After initially denouncing the US invasion, Sadr made his peace with the occupation and the pro-US government. Large numbers of working class Shiites who once followed him have not. Over the past six years, they have suffered constant persecution and continue to endure terrible deprivation.

The Washington Post commented: "In the hardscrabble Shiite neighbourhoods of Baghdad,

some former inmates of Bucca speak of revenge.” Resistance groups they formed would be able to recruit numerous new fighters from among the hundreds of thousands of unemployed and destitute Shiite youth in suburbs such as Sadr City in Baghdad’s east.

In Sunni areas, an Iraqi intelligence officer estimated that 60 percent of the ex-prisoners who had returned to Baghdad had already rejoined the insurgency. The police chief in the Baghdad suburb of Garma, who also heads the district’s 3,000-strong Awakening militia, estimated the rate was 90 percent in his area. He told the Post he had arrested 70 former prisoners, including some who had been appealing to his militiamen to resume armed resistance.

The Iraqi government, echoing its overlords in Washington, demonises all insurgent activity against the US occupation as “terrorism”. In fact, the majority of the fighters had no links with international or local Islamic extremism and fought to evict the foreign occupation forces and for the right of Iraqis to determine their own future. With no employment prospects, it is inevitable that some will decide to resume fighting Iraq’s US domination.

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