

SPEAKING FREELY

Baghdad plays familiar al-Qaeda card

By Nicola Nasser

International, regional and internal players vying for wealth, power and influence in the world are all beneficiaries of the "al-Qaeda threat" in Iraq. In spite of the deadly competition among these players, they all support the presence of the US-installed sectarian government in Baghdad - and its sectarian al-Qaeda antithesis - because this justifies proxy wars in the country.

The Iraqi people are a passive player in all this, paying in blood for Machiavellian, dirty politics. The war which the US unleashed by its invasion of Iraq in 2003 continues, as does the bleeding of the population.

According to the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq, 34,452 Iraqis have been killed since 2008 and more than 10,000 were killed in.

2013. Last year, suicide bombings more than tripled, according to the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk's recent testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Agence France-Presse reported on Monday that more than 1,000 Iraqis were killed in January. The UN refugee agency UNHCR, citing Iraqi government figures, says that more than 140,000 Iraqis have already been displaced in the western province of Anbar by fighting there.

Both the United States and Russia have signed multi-billion dollar arms sales that purportedly aim to empower the sectarian government in Baghdad to defeat the sectarian "al-Qaeda threat". Their aim is to rebuild Iraq's influence against Iran, which is particularly for the US given its losses in blood and treasure since the invasion.

However, by pouring billions of petrodollars into the region as part of their anti-Iran agenda, Turkey and Gulf Cooperation Council countries led by Qatar and Saudi Arabia are empowering al-Qaeda and its allies.

This effort to contain Iran's expanding regional sphere of influence only ends up fueling the sectarian strife in Iraq. Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization while the Gulf Cooperation Council nations are Arab non-member "partners" of the organization, yet both seem to stand on the opposite side of their strategic ally in the current Iraqi conflict.

The three major partners in Iraq's domestic "political process" are no less Machiavellian in their exploiting of the al-Qaeda card. The self-autonomous northern Iraqi Kurdistan region, waiting for the

right time to launch a secession, could not be happier with the central government's preoccupation with the "al-Qaeda threat".

Pro-Iran Shi'ite parties and militias use the threat to strengthen their sectarian bonds and to justify their loyalty to Iran. Their Sunni sectarian rivals are using the threat to promote themselves as an "alternative" to al-Qaeda in representing the Sunnis, and to justify financial, political and paramilitary support from the US, the GCC and Turkey.

Exploiting his partners' infighting, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has outmaneuvered the constitution to launch a bid for a third term. To reinforce his one-man show of governance, he was in Washington last November and then in Tehran the next month seeking military "help" against the "al-Qaeda threat" - he got it.

US war by proxy

US Secretary of State John Kerry has pledged to support Maliki's military offensive against al-Qaeda and its offshoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The US has agreed to supply Baghdad with 24 Apache helicopters, 175 Hellfire air-to-ground missiles and reconnaissance drones as part of US\$4.7 billion military deal which also includes another 18 F-16 fighters.

James Jeffrey reported in Foreign Policy last Monday that President Barack Obama's administration is "increasing intelligence and operational cooperation with the Iraqi government". Meanwhile, Le Figaro reported earlier this week that "hundreds" of US security personnel will return to Iraq to train the army to use these weapons." Kerry has ruled out sending placing "American boots" on the Iraqi ground, but obviously he meant "Pentagon boots", not Pentagon-contracted forces.

The Wall Street Journal online on February 3 reported that the "US military support there [in Iraq] relies increasingly on the presence of contractors". It described this strategy as "the strategic deployment of defense contractors".

Citing State Department and Pentagon figures, the Wall St Journal reported, "As of January 2013, the US had more than 12,500 contractors in Iraq", including some 5,000 contractors supporting the American diplomatic mission in Iraq, the largest such contingent in the world.

It is obvious that the US administration is continuing its war on Iraq through the ruling proxies it left behind when the American combat mission ended in December 2011.

Support for Maliki from Iran, Syria and Russia might suggest that his government is anti-American, but this cannot mask the fact that the administration was essentially installed by the US foreign military invasion and is still bound by a "strategic agreement" with the US.

Broken political system

Despite its size, the new US surge in "operational cooperation with the Iraqi government" will likely not

succeed in fixing Iraq's shattered political system, Christopher A Preble wrote in an article published by the Cato Institute on January 23.

A plea to send retired US general David Petraeus and former Iraq ambassador Ryan Crocker back to Iraq made by US Senator John McCain on CNN's *State of the Union* on January 12 seems desperate, wishful thinking.

Iraq's political woes are the product of a US-engineered democratic transition that relied on a sectarian and ethnic fragmentation of the country. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Jeffrey said that the "United States tried to transform Iraq into a model Western-style democracy," but "the US experience in the Middle East came to resemble its long war in Vietnam".

The US proxy government in Baghdad, which has developed into an authoritarian regime, remains the main source of the US's strategic failure there.

Iraq is now "on the edge of the abyss", director of Middle East Studies at the Royal United Services Institute professor Gareth Stansfield wrote on February 3. This situation is "being laid at the door of Prime Minister Nuri Maliki", he adds.

In the Center for Strategic and International Studies report "Iraq in Crisis", published on January 24, Anthony H Cordesman and Sam Khazai wrote that the cause of Iraq's current violence is its failed politics and system of governance. The authors add that the Iraqi "election in 2010 divided the nation rather than create any form of stable democracy".

Given the current status quo, Iraq's next round of elections, scheduled for next April 30, aren't expected to achieve much more. Writing in *Al-Ahram Weekly* last August 14, Salah Nasrawi said that more than 10 years after the US invasion, "the much-trumpeted Iraqi democracy is a mirage".

He was vindicated by none other than the speaker of the Iraqi parliament, Osama Al Nujaifi, who was quoted by the Gulf News as saying last January 25 during a visit to US: "What we have now is a facade of a democracy - superficial - on the inside it is total chaos."

A popular uprising, not an al-Qaeda takeover

Anbar Governor Ahmed al-Dulaimi on February 8 issued a one-week ultimatum to the "criminals" who "had kidnapped Fallujah" for more than a month, saying they must leave the city.

Not all Americans believe the US media reports claiming that al-Qaeda is solely behind recent fighting. Ross Caputi, a veteran US Marine who participated in the second US siege of Fallujah in 2004, wrote in an open letter to US

Secretary Kerry last Monday that "the current violence in Fallujah has been misrepresented in the media".

"The Iraqi government has not been attacking al-Qaeda in Fallujah," he said, adding that Maliki's government "is not a regime the US should be sending weapons to." Caputi attached a petition with 11,610 signatures and described what was happening in the western Iraqi city as a "popular uprising".

It seems Iran and US Iraqi proxies have now joined forces against this "popular uprising". Deceptively pronouncing al-Qaeda as their target, pro-Iran sectarian forces and the pro-US "Awakening" tribal militias have revived a 2007 alliance forged by the US.

The Washington Post on February 9 reported that "Shi'ite militias" have begun "to remobilize", including the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah and the Mahdi Army. The newspaper quoted a commander of one such militia, namely Asaib Ahl al-Haq, as admitting to "targeted" extrajudicial "killings".

This unholy alliance is the ideal recipe for fueling religious divides and inviting a sectarian retaliation in the name of fighting al-Qaeda. The potential for violence vindicates Cordesman's and Khazai's conclusion that Iraq is now "a nation in crisis bordering on civil war".

Al-Qaeda is a real terrorist threat, but like the US-installed government in Baghdad, it was a newcomer brought into Iraq because of the invasion. Most likely it will last as long as its sectarian antithesis lives on in Baghdad.

"Maliki has more than once termed various fights and stand-offs as a fight against 'al-Qaeda', but it's not that simple," Michael Holmes wrote in CNN on last January 15. The "Sunni sense of being under the heel of a sectarian government ... has nothing to do with al-Qaeda and won't evaporate once" it is forced out of Iraq, Holmes concluded.

A week earlier, analyst Charles Lister, writing in CNN, concluded that "al-Qaeda" was being used as a political tool" by Maliki. "[The prime minister] has adopted sharply sectarian rhetoric when referring to Sunni elements ... as inherently connected to al-Qaeda, with no substantive evidence to back these claims."

Al-Qaeda 'not the only force'

Al-Qaeda is "not the only force on the ground in Fallujah", where "defected local police personnel and armed tribesmen opposed to the federal government ... represent the superior force," Lister adds.

The Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has reported that the "Iraqi insurgency" is composed of at least 12 major organizations and perhaps as many as 40 distinct groups with an estimated less than 10% non-Iraqi foreign insurgents. It is noteworthy that all those who are playing the "al-Qaeda threat" card are in consensus on blacking out the role of these movements.

Prominent among them is the Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (JRTN) movement, which announced its establishment after Saddam Hussein's execution on December 30, 2006. It is the backbone of the

Higher Command for Jihad and Liberation (HCJL), which was formed in October the following year as a coalition of more than 30 national "resistance" movements. The National, Pan-Arab and Islamic front (NAIF) is the Higher Command's political wing. Saddam's former deputy, Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, is the leader of JRTN, HCJL and NAIF as well as the banned Ba'ath Party.

"Since 2009, the movement has gained significant strength" because of its "commitment to restrict attacks to "the unbeliever-occupier," according to Michael Knights, writing for the Combating Terrorism Center on July 1, 2011.

"We absolutely forbid killing or fighting any Iraqi in all the agent state apparatus of the army, the police, the awakening, and the administration, except in self-defense situations, and if some agents and spies in these apparatus tried to confront the resistance," Duri stated in 2009.

The majority of these organizations and groups are indigenous national anti-US resistance movements. Even the ISIL, which broke out recently with al-Qaeda, is led and manned mostly by Iraqis. Playing the al-Qaeda card is a smokescreen to downplay their role as the backbone of the national opposition to the US-installed sectarian proxy government. Their Islamic rhetoric is a common language they share with the Iraqi people.

At the end of the US combat mission in Iraq in December 2011, the organizations resorted to popular peaceful protests across Iraq. However, last December Maliki dismantled by force their major camp of protests near Ramadi, the capital of the western province of Anbar. Armed men immediately took over Fallujah and Ramadi.

Since then, more than 45 tribal "military councils" were announced in all the governorates of Iraq. They held a national conference in January, which elected the "General Political Council of the Guerrillas of Iraq". Coverage of the news and "guerrilla" activities of these councils by Duri's media outlets is enough indication of the linkage between them and his organizational structure.

There is no doubt a revolution is brewing, but Sunni discontent with Baghdad - not al-Qaeda - is likely its main driving force.

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