Security, Religion and Gender in Al-Anbar Province, Iraq: A focus group-based conflict analysis

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Almost eleven years have passed since the US toppled Saddam Hussain's regime, and Iraq still continues to struggle. In December 2013, Iraq national security forces stormed the private residence of the Iraqi Finance Minister, arresting several of his staff for supporting terrorism. This incident served as a trigger for sectarian violence throughout the Sunni triangle in southern Iraq – Al-Anbar Province. It was one of the areas that led peaceful demonstrations on February 2011, but subsequently witnessed the highest amount of sectarian violence, including government security force attacks on civilians.

The recent advancement of Islamic State of in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or *Daesh*) forces in Mosul and other areas in Iraq has caused great concern about the prospects of peace. Policymakers are scrambling to figure out an appropriate strategy to limit further advancement and prevent further security breakdown. Amidst this uncertainty, one thing is clear: preventing the further breakdown of the Iraqi state and the growth of violent extremism is a goal of international and regional actors, as well as Iraqi authorities. But ISIS' advancement in Mosul is not a new phenomenon. ISIS has managed to gain strength in other areas within Syria and Iraq before. Studying patterns in these areas may help in identifying strategies on how to move forward to build a lasting peace in Iraq and in the region.

The following is a summary of a study of the conflict in Al-Anbar province[1]. The findings may provide insight into the recent developments in Iraq, including explanations for the advancement of ISIS. Several key issues contributing to and sustaining conflict were identified through this research, as were points of entry for peacebuilding which can be capitalized on to reduce tensions. Key themes are outline below.

Political and sectarian tensions: Identity is the main driving factor for individuals and groups in shaping attitudes and behaviors in conflict, strongly influencing conflict[2], including individual's willingness to die under the name of their group - ethnicity, religion, clan, or nation. This research concluded that political and sectarian considerations play a large role in exacerbating conflict where residents tend to possess a strong political-sectarian orientation and religious doctrine - Arab Sunni, in the case of Anbar.

The politicization of religious identities and institutions is a cause of tension among religious leaders and sects[3]. Some research interviewees count religious leaders and clerics as a moderate group supportive of peace process and capable of mending broken community relations. However, research confirms that most below to another group –clerics who are fueling conflict by affiliating with terrorists, and provoking youth and men toward violent actions, justified through Islamic and anti-Shi'a Wahhabi principles. Sunni religious group follow clerics blindly in many Sunni regions.[4] For example, Harith AlThari, a prominent Sunni Arab cleric from Anbar and chairman of the Association of Muslim Scholar, issues extreme messages encouraging Sunnis to fight against American intervention and the National Army.

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[1] I conducted a total of 18 interviews and 8 focus group sessions (10-13 people in each). Due to ongoing security concerns in Anbar, participants' identities are confidential. I employed a combination of data collection methods, including focus groups, individual interviews, secondary research, and a validation session; and engaged with different stakeholders, including government, civil society, international community, armed groups, religious leaders, women, and youth. Although the focus was mostly on those in Al Anbar, I also incorporated opinions from outside actors, from citizens of Baghdad to international political analysis (UN-Iraq, NGOs).
[2] Demmers, Jole. *Theories of Violent Conflict*. Routledge, 2012.
[3] Several interviews referred to Saddam's rule when there was a potential for sectarian conflict between Sunna and Shia which was prevented through the creation of sectarian militias, as the Baghdad government doing now.
[4] Interview with an activist.

> **About Al-Anbar Province, Iraq**
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> **Geography:** Western province one third the size of Iraq.
> **Economy:** Agriculture, construction, manufacturing; 12.5% under the poverty line (2011) - higher than the national average.
> **Population:** 1.5 million; majority Arab Sunna; minority Christian.
> **Politics:** "The political crises in Anbar are due to a conflict of interests and needs between the biggest Sunni political groups in Anbar (Almutahidun) and Shiaa Blocs (Maliki Government)" (per an interview with an independent political analyst). Sunni accuse Maliki of following an Iranian government agenda and, conversely, Maliki and his followers accuse the Sunni Blocs of following a Saudi Arabian and Qatari agenda. Religion, ethnicity, nationalism, and tribalism are each used as a political tools favoring or mobilizing one group over another. Primary political parties are the Iraqi Islamic political party, Al-Sahwa, and The National Reform and Development Movement (*Al-Hal*). Until now, the Ba'ath Party has enjoyed wide public support in Anbar in addition to regional support from Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and from the Kurdistan Region, but the party is illegal and unregistered.
> **Security:** The security situation continues to worsen. Protests demanding an end to Sunni marginalization maintained a low profile until December, 2013 when sectarian violence began in Ramadi and Faluja. Anbar's location is a transit point for Al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is strategic to both Al-Qaeda and Sunni groups, as it is the birthplace of both Abu Bakr Albaghdadi and influential Sunna clerics. Sunni families have moved to Anbar due to sectarian violence, and about 51,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are from Anbar, Faluja and Ramadi provinces.

It is crucial to highlight the critical role of Ba'ath Party and their alliances inside and outside the province. Many Anbar residents view the role of Ba'ath party positively - in Anbar specifically and in Sunni areas – due in part to the shared Sunni heritage and the Ba'ath party's previous constructive policies. Says one resident, "I personally can understand [Ba'ath Party members' and supporters'] perspective, even though I'm a Kurdish women from a nation that has long suffered from Ba'ath policies, [and] although their experience seems to be totally different than my own or that of the Kurds".

Sense of citizenship: It is crucial that those in situations of armed conflict seek security by identifying a sense of belonging which they have control over. [5] In Anbar, rather than national citizenship, there is a sense of local citizenship as a Sunni province and, in general, as the Sunni triangle of Iraq. This tendency contributed to the breakdown of centralized authority and in the long-term will contribute to increased distrust, fear, and a lack of patriotism, leading to lack of trust between citizens and government officials. The Shia Government of Baghdad is not welcomed by Arab Sunni of Anbar because of sectarian discrimination. Prime Minister Malaki's bias against Sunnis fuels sectarian tensions. [6]

Furthermore, Anbar community perspectives toward the National Army differ. Some consider the National Army as belonging to Iran and serving Shia interests under the lead of the Maliki Government. Others, mainly women, support the existence of the National Army as they are the only means to protect the civilian population from clan militias and terrorists. On the other hand, the Maliki Government accuses some in Anbar of hosting terrorists and providing logistical support to Daesh.

Culture of dialogue: The lack of any culture of dialogue among different ethnic and religious groups – the results of decades of dictatorships - in Iraq is a big issue, and not only in Anbar. One focus group participant suggested, "If we call for building peace, we have to rebuild relations with the active involvement of youth and women – especially women – as they are currently more active in creating

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[5] Ledreach, John Paul. *Building Peace: Sustainabile Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. US Institute of Peace, 1998. Page 13.
[6] According to Al-Qaim focus group sessions.

opportunities for peace"[7]. A focus on local participation in the peace process ensures a feeling of ownership in the process - a crucial condition for Anbar society. According to participants in one focus group sessions, youth have to actively participate in the process jointly with the moderate community leaders, intellectuals, writers, and local NGOs, in addition to a limited number of trusted politicians."

> "There is no sense of patriotism among the security force[s]… weakness of national moral, and lack of experience… because it is the only easy available source of income."
> - University professor, PhD School of Law

Local civil society organizations: Civil society organizations are not that active, but they have significant peace initiatives, including a statement on human rights violations in Anbar in March 2011. However, activists are not sufficiently protected; NGOs strongly denounced the assassination of a few activists in April 2013. [8]

Local NGOs also mediated between demonstrators and the Baghdad Government after visiting sit-ins in Ramadi and Faluja (Feb 2013). NGOs wrote a solidarity letter addressed to Baghdad outlining the legitimate and reasonable demands of the protesters. As a result, a delegation from the Political Department of the United Nations Assistant Mission of Iraq (UNAMI) visited the sit-ins, met with clerics and tribal leaders, and declared that the demonstrations are peaceful[9]. But the local NGOs in Anbar were not invited by the UNAMI delegation to join them and there was no coordination or consultation[10].

International community: Neighboring countries have a role in driving conflict by providing financial and logistical support to armed groups, including Al-Qaeda and Daesh. "Interventions of third parties… in Anbar province fuel the conflict and fabricate crises." [11] According to focus groups in Anbar, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are the two most influential Sunni forces and Iran is the biggest supporter and influencer on the Baghdad government. Sentiments from several focus groups and interviews suggest that Maliki is not Iraqi, but actually a representative of Iranian government.

UNAMI interventions were limited to humanitarian and material aids. At the same time, UNAMI has no long term plan for assistance to Anbar, and insists that that demands for technical support in Anbar have to be put for by the Baghdad government. Through their official press releases and publications, UNAMI has pushed Sunni leaders to start peace talks with the Baghdad Government, but their strategy has yet to be realized. [12]. According to several interviews with the UN Political Mission representative to Anbar, the UN did respond positively to the government's decision to close sit-ins because the threat to national security was justified, despite the peaceful nature of the demonstrations.

> The term of *others* has almost no place within the Iraqi dictionary. "We don't believe in the *others*, everyone wants to be a leader, even if they only lead themselves."
> - School of Law teacher

Rule of law & structural violence: Structural violence includes lack of services and infrastructure; lack of proper education, especially in rural areas where education is almost nonexistent; unemployment of youth and women; poverty due to corruption and unjust wealth distribution; discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities; random detention; and limited freedom of expression. Citizens perceive that the government uses these tactics, making decisions in favor of alliances with certain tribal leaders.

According to many research participants, rule of law can be promoted by strengthening executive power. However, they disagreed on whether rule of law was a tool to solve conflict, as the only way to solve problems in a tribal society is through negotiations between tribal elders; application of law and force is a last resort. Many concerns were raised about Iraq's laws, specifically the anti-terrorism law

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[7] Al- Qaim focus groups session.
[8] "اغتيال احد نشطاء التظاهرات في الفلوجة" April 4, 2014. Available at www.sunnti.com/vb/showthread.php?t=3590.
[9] Civil initiative meeting minutes (internally circulated among initiative members).
[10] Letter from Peaceful Initiative for NGOs in Sit-ins Sites to Iraqi Al-Amal Association
[11] Interview in Al-Qaim.
[12] Interview with activists from international NGOs.

(2005), as well as the government's biased use of the law against Sunni groups -for example, arresting protesters on charges of terrorism, despite UNAMI's confirmation that demonstrations were peaceful.

Armed groups: There are divergent views towards Al-Qaeda and Daesh, with no clear rejection or acceptance of Al-Qaeda. According to one activist, 10-15% of Anbar society supports Al-Qaeda, who changed their hostile policies to gain public support but still lacks women's trust due to a fear of strict interpretations of Sharia law. There are also diverging views toward armed militias, some[13] saying that they defend civilians against Shi'a violations, including the National Army. On the other hand, some - especially academics and women - accuse the tribal militias of being terrorists who never consider community interests and risk the possibility of an Iraqi civil war. However, the majority in Anbar mistrusts the national army and sees it as closely aligned with the interests of Shia populations and Iran, as opposed to the national interests and specifically interests of Sunni populations. Numerous participants felt that the national army was the main cause of the conflict.

Youth: Lost opportunities for education and work and after eleven years of insecurity has created a lost a generation. Youth of Anbar have limited interest in politics, as "only 10-20% of youth are actively involved. [Instead, they] care more to improve [their] daily lives and career opportunities."[14] However, the University of Anbar encouraged political awareness and open expression among its students who organized the sit-ins[15] which served as cultural centers and forums for peaceful expression. Women and girls were not allowed to participate but were active in local campaigns promoting human rights.

Gender & Rights: Women have been always among the first to feel the impact of conflict. A high percentage of widows and forced/early marriage are some of the biggest problems, in addition to divorce, unequal job opportunities, and limited involvement in politics. Armed groups limit freedoms in women's daily lives, restricting dress, education and employment. For example, wearing of the hijab only started after Al-Qaeda extended operations in Anbar in 2005-6[16]. Thus, women typically prefer the protection of the national army instead of armed groups, whereas men argue that it is religious groups that limit women's freedoms. However, one activist pointed out that it is in fact the militia groups that limit women's access to public space rather than religious groups: "There are no statements by Sunni religious leaders or... clerics intent on provoking honor killings... until now we had not received any cases of honor killing in Anbar under religious justification, even though it is a Muslim community."[17]

Women's movements are weak, unorganized and not united in Anbar due norms and culture – unrelated to religious doctrine – that restrict freedom of movement for women. Women, other than a limited number belonging to sectarian groups, rarely participate in international or national events. According to one activist, these women also avoid interacting with Shia women's groups. Women are not active in the provincial council, and are not even permitted in public demonstrations. Another critical issue is forced or coerced marriage to Al-Qaeda members, which cannot be legally registered in the courts since the men are considered terrorists. As a consequence, both women and children are deprived of their rights, leading children without other options to be recruited by terrorists.

The sense of dignity among men is a more public issue that involves the entire community; for women, dignity is linked to personal freedom. Research also showed that women are more focused on peace and freedom, whereas men have difficulty seeing beyond sectarian divisions. Such deeply entrenched sentiments greatly impact the way they engage in peace processes and in many cases, men in Anbar suffer indignity due to discriminatory policies. "We don't want Shiaa security men protecting our Sunni society. It is preferable for us that Al-Qaida does it because they are Sunna and we don't feel offended."[18] These words reinforce the idea that manhood and masculinity is linked to security.

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[13] Focus group sessions of men, tribal and religious groups.
[14] Interview with a youth from Anbar.
[15] Interview with a university student and a professor from Anbar University.
[16] Interview with a female University faculty member.
[17] Interview with Hanaa Edwa, Iraqi woman activist.
[18] Interview with male activist and male student from Anbar University.

Recommendations

To the government of Iraq:
- Develop the legal framework to protect human rights and minority rights, including a mechanism to fight corruption and discrimination.
- Develop a clear vision for an end to the conflict, including involvement of extremist tribe leaders and clerics and Ba'ath party members, in coordination with local NGOs and UNAMI.
- Implement economic development programs in cooperation with the private sector, specifically to create opportunities for youth and women.
- Increase border and internal security; include Anbar and Sunni youth in national security forces.
- Implement rehabilitation programs for victims of the violence, particularly women and children.
- Initiate partnerships with local NGOs and community leaders to build trust
- Provide security for peace activists, particular women's rights and human right's defenders.
- Seek the technical expertise and capacity building support of UNAMI, particularly in regards to dialogue, peace education, crisis management and conflict transformation.
- End de-Ba'athification, which damages national cohesion.
- Dissolve all militias; maintain a national army that includes all categories of society.

To Iraqi NGOs & civil society:
- Conduct research on conflict analysis/prevention to promote a national peacebuilding strategy.
- Support the Iraqi government to start the transitional justice process.
- Strengthen relationships with tribal leaders and clerics; engage them with peace building programs.
- Provide opportunities for women and youth to participate in and lead peace building activities.

To the international community:
- Work with the government and civil society to ensure effective rule of law, including reporting and accountability mechanisms.
- Engage all groups in peace dialogues, including extreme clerics and Ba'ath party members.
- Commit ongoing support to monitoring and reporting crimes against civilians in Anbar.

To the Anbar local authorities:
- Build capacity of local officials to engage in conflict management and conflict transformation.
- Establish secure means for women to travel and participate in public spaces, including politics. .
- Raise awareness of peace processes amongst activists, tribal leaders, clerics, schools and media.
- Act independently to serve community interests and needs with no discrimination.

To Anbar community leaders:
- Promote individual responsibility, active citizenship, and patriotism.
- Urge all the armed groups, political parties and the national army to refrain from attacking schools, infrastructure, healthcare centers and households.
- Call on a dialogue between extremists and use act as moderates between actors.
- Cooperate with the national government to dissolve all militias.