

## *Middle East Dialogue 2015...Glorious Past, Uncertain Future*

### **UNDERSTANDING THE SUNNI REALIGNMENT IN IRAQ USING COMPLEXITY THEORY**

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In March 2003, after Hussein's Ba'athist regime fell so did all semblance of public order in Iraq. Initially, coalition forces were not ordered to contain the violence, which proved to be a critical error in decision-making. The impact of the looting and lawlessness compounded the already dilapidated state of Iraq's infrastructure, making it far more difficult to provide basic services. The looting made it difficult for the coalition to operate under the plans they had devised for the post-war occupation and recovery. The subsequent de-Ba'athification of the internal security police and military forces only exacerbated the problem, which resulted in widespread lawlessness and an inability to control the people.

Concurrent to the surge of U.S. forces in the region in 2006 – 2007, Sunni tribesmen in the U.S. Marine-controlled western Anbar province of Iraq experienced an “awakening” movement, which led them to side with U.S. and coalition forces. These “Sons of Iraq” were paid by the U.S. forces and organized to fight the other insurgent groups. The combination of the surge in forces, doctrinal changes and the Sunni Awakening led to a decrease in violence and a strategic pause which enabled the U.S. forces to negotiate (albeit not actually agree to) a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Iraqis and develop a plan to withdraw from the region.

The Awakening movement also spread to Iraq's other Sunni-dominated governorates. By 2008, the SOI had grown to a force of over 100,000. Many of the SOI members were former Iraqi officers and soldiers under Saddam Hussein, and they were familiar with formal military doctrine as well as nonconventional tactics. The SOI were paid approximately \$300 per month for providing security services, and many were integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Iraqi Police Forces (IP). Their knowledge of the local population, insurgent strongholds, and access to reliable intelligence, facilitated the efficiency and success of the movement.

The Sunni realignment demonstrates that the impetus to “change sides” often happens on a personal level before it grows into an ideological movement. Some have argued that the realignment of the Sunni factions in Iraq was the catalyst that gave the

U.S. “surge” its momentum. This finding is difficult to measure mainly due to the fact the reason political factions choose to realign during military intervention and civil wars is an understudied concept. Both the Sunni Awakening in Anbar province and in Baghdad demonstrate that some individuals realign because of betrayal and opportunities for advancement. They also show that individual motives can have macro-level social consequences.

From the standpoint of the occupation power, only so many variables can be controlled. Obviously, each military intervention and occupation has quite different socio-political factors and historical frames of reference. This paper seeks to explain alliance formation at the *sub-state level* in Iraq, notably, why the Sunnis realigned. It is important to note that each political faction, as well as the occupying power, made decisions based on a different set of calculations and consequences. Much of the literature thus far on the Iraq war only takes into account the American and coalition strategies and tactics. Meanwhile, the various factions within Iraq had their own set of strategic calculations as well as short and long-term goals. This paper addresses why certain groups, below the state level of analysis, chose to align in the way that they did.

Complexity theory suggests that political factions will realign based on individual considerations that then develop into macro-level movements. Complexity theory combines both agency (in terms of micro-behaviors) and structure (in terms of initial conditions). An important concept within the complexity literature is the idea of “critical mass.” Theories of self-organization suggest that individual considerations aggregate to a point of critical mass in order to become macro-level movements. In the case of Iraq, you had individuals who decided *as individuals* to align with the Americans, but the macro-level Awakening movement did not gain momentum until enough individuals had joined the Sons of Iraq. This paper will use process tracing to show how the point of critical mass is achieved in realignment.