

Can Sunni recruits help a new Iraqi national guard take on IS?

by [Scott Peterson](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Plans to create a locally recruited Iraqi national guard to fight the Islamic State are gaining traction among Iraqi Sunnis, who first welcomed the jihadists but are increasingly repulsed by the IS's sectarian brutality.

The Sunni honeymoon with IS, formerly known as ISIS, is already waning in Mosul, the northern Iraqi city that fell in June. Months of IS rule, including strict social rules and the destruction of centuries-old religious shrines, has led residents to form underground anti-IS groups—risking beheading or crucifixion for their defiance.

“The revolution has to come from inside,” said a Mosul resident who gave the name Ahmed Yunis, contacted by phone. “Most of the people used to support ISIS; now they feel regret and shame.”

Four IS jihadists were killed recently by men with silencers on their guns, residents say. Two others were stabbed to death.

That growing desire to challenge IS rule—evident also elsewhere in the swaths of Iraq captured by IS since June—is boosting Sunni support for the proposed national guard, designed to bypass sectarian problems that have plagued Iraq's Shi'ite-heavy security forces. The Pentagon has determined that half of Iraq's 50 combat brigades are too sectarian to be reliable partners, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chief of Staffs, said this week.

The national guard, as proposed by Iraq's new Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, would enable locals to provide for their own security and be commanded at province level, yet also be integrated into Iraq's national security infrastructure. Sunnis envision an institutionalized version of the Sahwa Awakening—the homegrown Sunni militia that, alongside U.S. troops who paid their wages, suppressed al-Qaeda in Iraq from 2005 to 2010.

“We are waiting for Mr. Abadi to activate the policy of the national guard, and we are so happy to hear of the possibility of guarding our own city with our own local people,” said Yunis in Mosul.

President Barack Obama, laying out his anti-Islamic State strategy last week, said the U.S. would “support Iraq’s efforts to stand up national guard units to help Sunni communities secure their own freedom from [IS] control.”

Sunni awakening

Years ago, Iraq’s powerful Sunni tribes welcomed al-Qaeda as fellow insurgents against the U.S. occupation and the Shi’ite-led government. But unrelenting kidnapping, beheadings and violent abuses eventually provoked a backlash, creation of the Sahwa, and a decision to side with the Americans.

The same dynamic is at play today, as IS imposes its will and proudly broadcasts its atrocities. In Mosul alone, the list of complaints grows every day, from expelling and abusing Christians and other minority groups—hundreds of Yazidi women are reported to have been captured and enslaved by IS in Nineveh Province—to this week ordering “punishment” when children stay away from school to avoid the new IS curriculum.

Islamic covering for women also grates for many, as does Rule No. 10 forbidding non-IS groups and flags—the price of disobedience “beheading by sword.”

Indeed, eight Sunni men accused of plotting against IS were publicly executed in a small village in northern Iraq over the weekend, according to Reuters.

A key sign of changing attitudes toward IS came last week from Sheikh Ali Hatem Suleiman, a vocal leader of a two-year Sunni uprising against the central government, who had initially welcomed the IS in Iraq.

“The IS has passed beyond all limits and now we have to fight back,” Suleiman told a press conference. “I can assure you that the [Sunni] tribes are ready to cooperate with international forces by any means.”

He also praised the national guard idea as “insurance for Iraq, for a safer condition.”

Payroll and liberation

Yet details are still not clear about how that force would be stood up or who would pay for it. Iraqi officials hope the necessary legislation will be passed within two weeks.

“It’s not easy, because 50 percent of residents have given complete loyalty to IS, because of 11 years of injustice [against Sunnis],” said Zuhair al-Chalabi, a Mosul native who heads the National Reconciliation Committee and an early proponent of the national guard.

Every week, he said, the Mosul morgue receives 30 to 40 bodies of citizens killed by IS. And yet there are no more car bombs in Mosul, “because the people who were making car bombs control Mosul now.”

With seven of Mosul’s nine districts controlled by IS, Chalabi suggests that one district should first be “liberated” by local forces, in tandem with non-Sunni militias. Local recruits would then be drawn from that first district to form the Mosul unit of the national guard—which would then expand with more recruits as it seized one district at a time from IS.

“I want Mosul to only be liberated by her own people,” Chalabi said, speaking in Baghdad. “I’m not sure U.S. airstrikes will minimize IS in Mosul, because they must walk on the ground” to control territory.

A 'failed experiment'

A new national guard could fill that role, without relying upon the Shi’ite-led Iraqi Army, which Sunnis accuse of targeting them—just as Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-led army in the 1980s and 1990s targeted both Kurds and Shi’ites, killing tens of thousands.

Sahwa was a “failed experiment” because it was never integrated, Chalabi said. He claims the national guard “will be very organized with rules and laws.” He worked for years to integrate some 20 percent of the 92,000 Sahwa militiamen into the Iraqi Army, and find jobs and continued salaries for others.

But the Shi’ite-first government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki viewed Sahwa as a dangerous fifth column that was better left unpaid and neglected. Unlike the ad hoc Sahwa, the new national guard is meant to be a local army, similar to the Kurdish peshmerga militia, which operates in northern Iraq.

In theory, the peshmerga and Shi'ite militias—some of them backed by Iran—are to be incorporated into the national guard.

“It’s for every province, because now the military—this is one of the mistakes—is doing a police job,” said a senior government adviser who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of his post. The peshmerga have agreed to join, he said, but their participation is on the condition that Kurdish units merge and reduce their numbers.

Still, a key immediate aim is rectifying the sectarian imbalance in Iraq’s security forces, to regain trust among Sunnis so that they will challenge IS, not host them.

“If we are going to take back those cities, the people of [the Sunni province of] Anbar are going to have to secure their cities,” added the adviser. “It’s very good, it’s what they want.”