

The Islamic State's Eastern Frontier: Ramadi and Fallujah as Theaters of Sectarian Conflict

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Abstract

The part of eastern Anbar that runs from the provincial capital of Ramadi to the area around Fallujah represents an eastern frontier for the organization that calls itself the Islamic State (IS). The jihadist organization lacks the military capability to fully incorporate these areas into its Syria-based caliphate, but it can use them as a base for launching attacks on government forces in central Iraq, supplementing its limited core forces with local recruits. Key to its ability to do this is the effective exploitation of an environment in which much of the population, though not part of its ideological core, views a military alliance with IS as the only alternative to accepting the rule of Iranian-controlled state institutions and militias. Recent statements from "tribal shaykhs" purporting to represent Anbar's Sunnis have framed support of the Islamic State as essential in defending Sunni lives and identity, and pan-Arab media, while not expressly supportive of IS, has played into its narrative of the conflict in Iraq as a war to defend Sunni Arab identity instead of one waged for a narrow Salafi-Jihadist agenda.

Keywords: Jihadism, ISIS, Iraq, sectarianism, tribes, media

Introduction

Eastern Anbar, containing the province's capital, Ramadi, and its second city, Fallujah, form a key sectarian borderland between the Sunni Arab world and Shia Arab Iraq and, beyond it, Shia Persian Iran. While the leadership of the organization that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) is largely Iraqi, its power base is in eastern Syria and the areas of eastern Anbar which it controls are in areas it cannot easily resupply with either men or materiel. It is therefore dependent on the local population and has adapted its public diplomacy in accordance with the need to frame its war effort as being in the defense of Sunnis against an Iranian Shia threat and not an effort to promote a Salafi-Jihadist ideological agenda, including its core element, the implementation of Islamic law.

It is within this context that IS has arranged for groups of local tribal shaykhs (tribal leaders) to gather and give declarations of solidarity in war with IS, near Ramadi, on April 20 and May 30, and once in Fallujah, on June 3. This paper examines the original statements and analyzes how they played out in the Sunni Arab media environment. And since the number of people who watch television channels and other pan-Arab media outlets is many times greater than those who have actually watched these statements on YouTube, it is the dominant narrative in mainstream media, not the original content on YouTube or other social media, which is most important.

This paper's thesis is that the Islamic State's eastern Anbar propaganda efforts have been successful, in part because of IS' own realistic perception of its target audience, but even more because mainstream Arabic-language media have either consciously or subconsciously amplified their message in a way so as to make it credible within the Sunni Arab world. Add to this the sectarian reaction among Shia militia groups to IS' provocations, and we may conclude that IS has both bought itself a substantial degree of positive media coverage and even disrupted the Iraqi government's military operations by redirecting the militias' focus toward non-strategic goals.

The Islamic State in East Anbar: Narrative & Context

The fall of the Anbar provincial capital of Ramadi on May 17, 2015, to Islamic State fighters came as a shock to many, but it was the culmination of a long pitched battle. The spark to renewed insurgency in Anbar was the former government's politically-motivated decision in late December 2013 to destroy a prominent Ramadi sit-in site on the pretext that terrorists were present. (Iraq had parliamentary elections in April 2014 and then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki used the raid in his campaign, resulting in a large plurality for his coalition. Maliki's reelection was foiled only due to the fall of Mosul in June 2014.) On the insurgent side, the fight began with a mixture of core IS fighters and non-jihadist insurgents belonging to a range of nationalist Islamist and neo-Baathist groups. On the government side, combatants included soldiers from the 8th Army Division, which covers eastern Anbar, federal and provincial police personnel, and "tribal fighters" contributed from pro-government tribes.

Areas in the provincial capital changed hands numerous times, and Ramadi almost fell to IS in April 2015 – which by that point had consolidated dominance over the insurgency – a disaster barely prevented by the intervention of special forces units on April 17-18. While army and police units were weakened by desertions, many had fought for nearly a year and a half with limited support in terms of equipment, ammunition and salaries before collapsing during a three-day surge by IS on May 15-17 which skillfully employed armored truck bombs to shatter security barricades.

By contrast, Anbar's second city Fallujah fell with no visible local resistance. Within a few months of internal maneuvering IS came out on top, vanquishing local rivals. This included such insurgent groups as the Baathist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya (JRTN, or Army of the Men of the Naqshbandiya Way), the Islamic Army, and the infamous militant cleric Abdullah al-Janabi. (Al-Janabi had become renowned for his leadership of Fallujah's Mujahidin Shura Council during the war with American forces in 2004, had gone into exile in Syria only to return in early 2014. He briefly led a new Fallujah Military Council, but was ultimately forced to give way to the Islamic State[1]).

What Ramadi and Fallujah have in common is that they are part of what might be called the eastern frontier of IS' caliphate. Despite the impression given by maps which represent IS as controlling vast swaths of land across western Iraq, government forces have always retained control of certain areas, and many areas lack a military presence of any kind. The group lacks any capacity to defend the vast open spaces around Ramadi, which is about 80 kilometers west of Baghdad, with Fallujah about halfway between them. As explained in a recent article in the *CTC Sentinel*, IS' military strategy is based on a kind of "cult of the offensive"[2] – lacking the ability to defend spread-out territory, it is constantly launching offensives to keep government forces off-balance combined with tactical retreats whenever faced by counteroffensives. In eastern Anbar, it fought for part of 2014 in Abu Ghraib (between Fallujah and Baghdad), and the subdistrict of Ameriyat al-Fallujah (south of Fallujah proper). Both of those it ultimately lost. Along with other insurgents IS has held out in Karma, a district adjacent to Fallujah and to its northeast. Precisely because of a long battle that included Shia militias on the government side, Karma has taken on a strategic importance out of proportion to its size, and will play a role in the discussion below of IS' propaganda efforts in the theatre.

The information environment among Sunni residents is an important factor in the success of insurgents generally and the Islamic State in particular. As in other countries, what most people know about public affairs is defined by a combination of things they hear word-of-mouth from their community and what they see on television news programs. What makes Iraq different from most Arab countries is the high diversity of news sources and the corresponding fragmentation by demographic group. While no TV channel openly

supports IS, a range of channels support an insurgent narrative focused on the government's ties to Iran and sponsorship of Shia militias which kill, kidnap, torture and cleanse Sunnis in areas they wish to control.

An important barometer of this media environment is the *Baghdad* television channel, which is controlled by the Islamic Party, which is part of Vice-President Osama al-Nujayfi's Muttahidun bloc and a central actor in the political process. *Baghdad* reacted to the new insurgency in January 2014 by referring to insurgents as "revolutionaries," using the term whether the fighters in question were IS' global jihadists or national groups focused on Iraq. It continued to do this even after Islamic Party leader Salim al-Jiburi was elected speaker of parliament on July 14 of last year. But then once IS attacked the Kurds, with whom Muttahidun is aligned, it began referring to its fighters as "gunmen" (*musallahin*) instead of "revolutionaries" (*thuwar*). Then after the government was formed in September, all insurgents became "gunmen" (they were almost all IS by this point anyway). But by May 2015, when Ramadi fell, *Baghdad* was again running interviews with figures who equated Shia militias with IS or even suggested that the militias were worse than the jihadists.

Regionally, the Qatar-based *al-Jazeera* plays a similar legitimizing role. While not expressly pro-IS, *al-Jazeera* gives IS largely neutral coverage while covering the government as hostile and playing up militia crimes. Its role is addressed below.

The practical importance of this is that it creates a substantial segment of the population which does not hold to IS' core ideology but believes that working with it against the government makes sense, or that at least accepting it is no worse than the government. The pan-Arab newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi*, which has a negative line on the Iraqi government, has quoted local residents of expressing relief at IS' takeover. Not being IS core supporters themselves, at least some nonetheless feel persecuted under the government and relatively safe under the rule of the Islamic State.[3] And now that the army's failure to defend Ramadi has led to the Shia militias taking the lead in many Anbar operations, the narrative should become stronger still.

The Islamic State and the "Shaykhs" of Ramadi

Along with its final push to take the Anbar capital, the Islamic State has also recently arranged for two "conferences" of men endorsing it while claiming to be "tribal shaykhs" who represent Anbar. The first supposed pro-IS tribal conference, a "Proclamation of the First Conference of the Tribes of Anbar," published on April 20, emphasized the Islamic State as a defender of the people of Anbar. Only one unidentified man spoke, with others standing behind him. The word for Islamic law (*sharia*) did not occur; the closest to a statement of religious ideology was the claim that IS "only came to show the truth, and relieve the people of Anbar of oppression, and Sunnis in general..." The statement emphasized that there was no difference between the state's army and Iran-backed Shia militias, and that the crimes they committed in Diyala and Salah al-Din were coming to Anbar.[4] But Ramadi did not fall in April, and the statement received no substantial attention either inside or outside of Iraq.

On May 30, two weeks after Ramadi had fallen, IS put on a second tribal conference, "The Tribes of Anbar Hold Their Second Conference Under the Title, 'One Ship,' on the Ground of Victorious Ramadi." The video began showing the banner, which they appear to have put some time in designing, then gave a slow camera review of the faces of those attending. This was followed by a speech in front of the assembled "shaykhs" by the same unidentified speaker. The language was heavily Islamic, but again there was again no reference to Islamic law, but rather a focus simply on war, praise for IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and "the heroic soldiers of the caliphate." The speaker also called on Ramadi residents who had fled to Baghdad to return.[5]

More effort appears to have been put into this second presentation, but aside from the better production value and Ramadi's fall, there was no additional content to justify a second "conference." (Neither video actually gave audio of the shaykhs engaging in discussion, just some men sitting around and talking casually, with none of it intelligible.) Many of the unidentified "shaykhs" on close-up appeared sullen, with some consciously covering their faces when the camera approached. At the end there was a joint "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greatest) chant, repeated multiple times, but it was weak and some standing there did not participate in the chant.

What made this second Ramadi "conference" a major event was that *al-Jazeera* chose to make it the subject of their "Behind the News" program that evening with the provocative title, "Why Did the Tribal Shaykhs of Ramadi Give Bay'a to the State Organization?"[6] (*Bay'a* refers to an Islamic loyalty oath; *tandhim al-dawla* or "the Organization of the State" is how *al-Jazeera* routinely refers to IS.) The program chose one Abd al-Qadir al-Nayel as the representative of Anbari Sunnis, setting him against a Shia parliamentarian from the Shia Islamist State of Law Coalition, Muhammad al-Akayli. Nayel did not defend IS directly, in fact he said "these men did not give bay'a, but rather declared they were in one ship together in facing the Iranian threat." Unlike the speaker at the event, Nayel is a recognizable figure, having taken visible part in the 2013 protest movement,[7] often appearing on such mainstream media outlets as *BBC Arabic* to speak for Anbari Sunnis. [8] And since Akayli's coalition is that of former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki, whose very name is toxic among Sunnis in Iraq and regionally, the mere choice of guests – instead of setting a Sunni opponent of IS against Nayel – make the program slant toward IS.

Furthermore, *al-Jazeera's* framing of the issue was precisely, and unnecessarily, in IS' favor – stating as a fact that these men were "tribal shaykhs" of Ramadi who have given bay'a to IS. And indeed Nayel had a point – the word "bay'a" did not appear in either of these statements, though they clearly declared military solidarity with it. So when Nayel argued that these men represented local tribes who were joining with IS against an "Iranian-controlled government" after having attempted change through peaceful protest, this credibility provided a degree of legitimacy.

Whether these men actually were tribal leaders is also a matter of factual dispute in Iraq. The Iraqi television channel *al-Dijla* had a debate on the issue on June 7, but it placed a prominent member of the Anbari al-Bu Nimr tribe, Naim al-Kaud, against another Anbari shaykh, Raad Sulayman. Kaud condemned IS unequivocally, and asserted that the men who appeared in the IS videos did not include any notable tribal leaders. Sulayman was ambiguous and focused more on criticizing the Iraqi government and Iran, but he refused to endorse the pro-IS statements. And *al-Dijla* chose a headline that avoided presuming tribes in general endorsed IS: "Who Gave Baya to Daesh Among Anbar Tribes?"[9] A news consumer casually following the issue in pan-Arab media quite reasonably might assume all of Anbar's tribes had endorsed IS.

Other prominent Sunnis, from Anbar and elsewhere in Iraq, condemned the events. Iraq's Fiqh Commission, a self-governing body which has semi-official status, condemned the statements (including the one in Fallujah discussed below) on June 6, saying they had taken place under threat of violence and were therefore invalid, calling IS a "terrorist organization" organizing these events for "war propaganda." [10] Similarly, the pan-Arab *al-Arab al-Jadid* quoted Shaykh Taha al-Abud, representing the General Council of Anbar Tribes, saying, "a number of leaders who appeared in the recording have called us and told us that death stood behind the cameras," arguing that bay'a given under duress had no religious validity.[11] But Abud is just one of the individuals who has been quoted in the media as representing the Anbar tribal council over the past year, and those inclined against the government might not find this persuasive.

Along the same lines, government-aligned Ramadi tribal leaders held a press conference with the chairman of the provincial council, Sabah Karhut al-Halbusi, on June 7.[12] The event was held in Khalidiya, a town between Ramadi and Fallujah to which Iraqi forces have regrouped, and the statement was read by Rafia al-Fahdawi, of the Al-Bu Fahd, a prominent tribe in Ramadi. The statement declared that the individuals who “gave bay‘a” – again it is notable there was a perception of bay‘a even though the Ramadi statements did not use the term – did not include the leader of any tribe and did not represent Anbar. But the statement also included a reference to “the blessed Hashd al-Shaabi,” praising the Shia militia-dominated umbrella group, a statement with which many Anbaris would not agree.

Fallujah and Karma: Eastern Outposts of the Islamic State

The eastern edge of Anbar has a special sensitivity because of its proximity to Baghdad, while Fallujah and the adjacent district, Karma, are central because they are the two areas in which the Islamic State controls territory or has continually contested territory with government forces since January 2014. Thus the June 3 statement from a purported “Tribal Council” supporting the Islamic State drew attention across the region. And the template seems to have been taken from Ramadi, as the pan-Arab *al-Quds al-Arabi* and the Emirati newspaper *al-Khaleej* had similar headlines: “Tribal Council in Anbar Gives Baya to the Islamic State Organization,”[13] and “Council of Tribal Shaykhs of the Two Districts of Fallujah and Karma Give Baya to the State Organization.”[14]

While the Fallujah statement has much in common with the Ramadi statement, it was different in some ways, and the events in Fallujah deserve special attention because IS’ successful play on sectarian passions in Fallujah has had an impact on the Iraqi government’s military operations and the country’s fragile body politic.

Following is the full statement of this Fallujah “council” (minus boilerplate religious language at the beginning). IS gave the video the title, “The Tribes of Fallujah are a Fork in the Eyes of the Enemies”:

Many vain attempts have been made to give legitimacy to the war of the Safavid-Crusader Alliance on Sunnis and their territories, recruiting hundreds of satellite television channels and other media, and that which is propagated by a group of treasonous Muslim scholars, who claim to represent Sunnis, through what is referred to as the parliament and the provincial councils, yet now the matter has become clear and the truth has appeared, like the sun in the light of day. For this is simply an army of sectarian militias, who have occupied Ameriya, Khaladiya, Haditha and Nukhayb [all Anbar districts with a Shia militia presence]. These are assisted by what are referred to as tribal fighters, agents of the enemy used to expel the original residents of these areas and humiliate them, and to bring about demographic change among the local population in certain areas, attaching Nukhayb and a large part of Ameriya to other provinces.

And we call upon Sunni peoples in the Arabian peninsula, to be alert to the plans of Safavid Iran to encircle you from the south by the Houthis in Yemen, and also occupy those areas adjacent to you in Anbar [a reference to Nukhayb], and from the north by Hizbillat [derogatory term for Hizbullah), and the the treasonous Ghadir Corps [the Badr Organization] and Asaib Ahl al-Batil [Asaib Ahl al-Haq], and the Khorasan Brigades which is controlled by the Bloodletting Wali [satirical reference to Iran’s Supreme Leader]. These militias are supported by America, and kill, kidnap and rape Sunnis, taking their homes based upon the claim that they are terrorists, and bomb Sunni Arabs from land and waters with military bases in Arab territories with the participation of your rulers in the Arab Gulf, and so awaken O Sunni people, for this is a conspiracy against the followers of the Prophet

Muhammad, wherever they are.

The council of tribal shaykhs of Fallujah and Karma aim to clarify to Sunnis in Mesopotamia and the Arabian peninsula, you who have had your lands taken and your blood shed, along with the humiliation of the people of Anbar who are displaced. The greatest example is those trapped on the Zaybiz Bridge [crossing from Anbar into Baghdad], where Iranian henchmen violate Sunni honor, humiliating our mothers and our children. Anbaris cannot even enter Baghdad without someone to pledge for them. Furthermore they engage in daily shelling of women and children in Fallujah, destroying houses, mosques and schools.

From this pulpit we therefore declare, our solidarity and firm stand with the Islamic State, state of the caliphate, and with the Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of Muslims, Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, may God preserve him. And we declare to him that we stand with you, to fight the enemies of religion and the community of believers, among infidels, apostates and hateful rafidites [derogatory term for Shia]. The council of the shaykhs and notables of Fallujah and Karma, June 3, 2015 [also gave the Islamic date]. And peace be upon you, the blessings and mercies of God. Allahu Akbar![15]

Two points are notable regarding this statement. The first is the prevalence of sectarian rhetoric over standard Salafi-Jihadist ideology. The statement includes no reference to the word “bay‘a,” despite much Arabic-language media reporting to the contrary. The word “shari‘a,” or Islamic law, does not appear, just as it was absent in the Ramadi statements, nor any reference to the implementation of any Islamic civil or criminal provisions, measures for which IS is most known globally. Instead it is a statement of sectarian warfare, making use of inflammatory references to the demographic cleansing of Sunnis by Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias. Only near the end of the statement does this “tribal council” give something like an endorsement to IS’ religious ideology, referring to IS’ caliphate and Baghdadi as caliph and “Commander-of-the-Faithful.”

A second key feature of the statement is its regional paradigm. There are two frames of reference, Iraq itself and the Persian Gulf, although neither term is used. Early on the term “Safavid-Crusader” plays on the belief, widely held in the Sunni Arab world, that since 2003 there has been a secret alliance between the United States and Iran to remove Sunnis from power in Iraq and break up the country. Instead of Iraq the country is referred to as “Mesopotamia,” a term used for the country by IS since the founding of its predecessor entity of “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” by Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi in 2003.

And then the focus shifts to the Persian Gulf, which is first twice referred to as the “Arabian Peninsula” and once as “the Arab Gulf.” The statement brings in Hizbullah in the north, and the Yemeni Houthis from the south, and also references Iraqi militias.

Notably, the statement emphasizes Nukhayb, an area of significant local interest which means nothing to the broader world of Salafi-Jihadism, and then calls this to the attention of Gulf Arabs, claiming the Shia are trying to take it. Nukhayb is a district in southern Anbar that borders Karbala and runs southwest toward Saudi Arabia. Nukhayb was part of districts making up what is now Anbar during the 20th century, except for a one-year period from 1978-1979 when it was temporarily joined to Karbala.[16] It is routinely used by Karbala residents – Shia – to travel on pilgrimage, and there have been attacks on Shia in the district in the past. In May, Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi expanded the security responsibility of the army’s Central Euphrates Command, which covers Karbala and other nearby provinces that are Shia, to include Nukhayb, and Shia militias have taken up residence there. This is the basis for the fear of a Shia takeover.

Yet as with Ramadi, what the “shaykhs” statement actually said is less important than the message conveyed to the Sunni Arab public, both inside Iraq and regionally, and the message was that local tribal leaders had

given bay'a to IS. One report, published on June 4 in the widely-read pan-Arab daily *al-Quds al-Arabi* among other outlets, was entitled, "Tribal Council in Anbar, Iraq Declares Baya to the Islamic State Organization." This report even contained a verbatim quote which overlapped but also substantially deviated from the actual statement given the previous day. This statement, identifying the speaker as one Ahmad Dara al-Jumayli, declared that the council "met and decided to give bay'a to the Islamic State organization and also give bay'a to its emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, we hear and obey...The people of Karma have been fighting government forces under the names of a number of groups, including the Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia [JRTN or Army of the Men of the Naqshbania Way]" and the Army of the Tribal Revolutionaries and the Military Councils, but they are today united under the banner of the Islamic State organization." [17]

Al-Quds al-Arabi attributed this quote to Turkey's *Anadolu Agency*, which has an Arabic version that is often used as an information source in the region. [18] In between the opening and the ending quoted above, neither of which appeared in the actual statement, much of the content overlapped, including the attacks on Iran and Shia generally and the Houthis, tying the war in Yemen to a regional plot against Sunnis. But what it left out was crucial – Iraqi Sunni-specific concerns about cleansing in Nukhayb (which were not mentioned) and elsewhere, as well as the criticism of the Arab gulf states as "your rulers" and their ties to American military operations. The list of names of insurgent groups joining the IS coalition is also not in the video. The statement starts off by saying that it derives from a "video statement of the tribal council" on June 3, so it clearly references the same event, but it appears that IS was sending out a version which has a stronger endorsement. It is also possible that *Anadolu Agency* removed the offensive passages.

Again *al-Jazeera* framed the Fallujah statement in a way quite favorable to IS: "Tribal Shaykhs of Fallujah Give Baya to Baghdadi and Attack the Government," [19] and their internet article simply repeated what the "shaykhs of Fallujah" reportedly said, although it is not clear where they got their text as the quotes match neither the actual video released by IS nor the *Anadolu* version reported by *al-Quds al-Arabi* and others. The *al-Jazeera* article stated in part:

Local leaders and tribal shaykhs of Fallujah have declared that they are standing in solidarity with the Islamic State organization and giving bay'a to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the organization's leader, harshly criticizing Sunni representatives in the Iraqi government and parliament because of their stance supporting what they referred to as the sectarian attacks of the government of Hayder Abadi and its militias in Sunni areas.

The full video of the statement appears not to have been available until June 7, [20] so *al-Jazeera* and many other outlets used a picture from the Ramadi event on April 30 as well as a short clip showing part of the Fallujah statement without audio. [21] The Saudi owned *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, by contrast, reported the Fallujah statement in a way less favorable to IS, referring to the shaykhs as "the council of *what is referred to as* [emphasis added] the shaykhs of the tribes of Fallujah and Karma," who "declared their loyalty to the Daesh organization [using the pejorative Arabic acronym for IS) and gave bay'a to its leader." [22]

Even media outlets hostile to IS used the *al-Jazeera* headline. The Syrian opposition *Orient News* television channel, which is pro-rebel but generally critical of the Islamic State, entitled its report on the event, "Sunnis Tribes in Fallujah, Anbar Give Bay'a to the Islamic State." [23] After playing a clip, the narrator commented, "All current indications suggest that the Iraqi government has abandoned Anbar and Sunnis in general... the government of Hayder al-Abadi, which was to clean up the corruption left by Maliki, has given Sunnis nothing but oppression, refusing to arm the tribes in Anbar or grant an autonomous region, having violently suppressed protests before the organization (IS) appeared in the first place, unleashing militias supported

by Iran.” The report was clearly put together in haste – not only did it use video from the April 30 Ramadi statement, along the bottom of the screen it identified the Ramadi speaker as Ibrahim Abu Za’yan, who when mentioned at all is uniformly referred to in Iraqi sources as the reader of the statement in Fallujah.

Similarly, *BBC Arabic* also used the headline on June 5, “Why Did the ‘Tribes of Karma and Fallujah’ Give Bay’a to the Islamic State Organization?” But the BCC, in addition to putting quotes around the reference to “tribes,” had two guests who were Sunni – Yahya al-Kubaysi of the Iraqi Institute for Strategic Studies, and Anbar Councilman Tahir Abd al-Ghani. Both stated that these men represented only a portion of opinion in Anbar, and Kubaysi, who is a strong critic of the Iraqi government, is the only prominent commentator who noted that the statement was purely political and contained no “doctrinal” endorsement of the Islamic State as such. The BBC appears to have created its program based on the *Anadolu* version, since the journalist used the phrase “we hear and obey” in quoting the Fallujah shaykhs, and this phrase appears solely in the *Anadolu* version and not in the actual statement.

Indeed it is hardly clear how representative this “Council of Tribal Shaykhs” is of the local population. Unlike in Ramadi, many sources identify the Fallujah spokesman by name, which appears consistently as “Ibrahim Rashid Abu Za’yan.”[24] Yet there is not a single Iraqi news report or other internet reference to him prior to this statement, and no evidence that Za’yan is a prominent local leader.

The name put forward in the version originating with *Anadolu*, Ahmad Dara al-Jumayli, is likewise not that of a well-known Anbari tribal leader. An Arabic search for his name does not bring him up as a prominent individual in the area. A review of videos posted from Karma claiming to represent tribal leaders does turn up one showing a man resembling him reading a statement endorsing the Islamic State in October 2014. Other videos posted of individuals claiming to be Karma tribal leaders over the past year and a half show no consistent group, nor a consistent message. Some stress the humanitarian angle, calling on the government to lift its blockade of the city, while others are pro-insurgent without being pro-IS, and there is the previous one endorsing IS.[25]

IS’ most recent direct publication, a statement from spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released on June 19, followed the same line, emphasizing the sectarian conflict and the cleansing of Sunnis by Shia militias in areas around Baghdad, as well as the original purpose of the American invasion as having been to remove Sunnis from power. Like the June 3 shaykhs statement, Adnani’s message was unusually heavy on Iraq-specific details related to alleged Shia militia crimes, and light on Salafist themes.[26] The difference in terms of public impact is that this statement was likely listened to only by IS’ core audience, and was not broadcast across national and regional media as speaking for Sunnis in Iraq.

Fallujah and Karma: Center Stage of Sectarian Conflict

The Islamic State has certainly succeeded in making Fallujah and Karma a kind of “forward front” for sectarian conflict. Fallujah has a long history of Sunni Islamist militancy, and its role in the fight against U.S. forces in Iraq, especially in 2004, is well known. Karma is a mid-sized town which has significance out of proportion to its size in part because of its proximity to Baghdad, but also because, unlike Fallujah, it has remained contested between insurgents and government-aligned forces. The government’s lack of adequate regular forces has led to dependence on Shia militias, a factor which plays well into IS’ propagandist narrative. The Iran-backed militia Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH) has been active there since last summer,[27] and more recently, the Badr Organization has highlighted its role in fighting there.[28]

The June 3 statement was just part of IS' effort to use Fallujah as a theatre stage for sectarian polarization. On May 26, it had paraded through the streets of Fallujah a captured Iraqi soldier of Shia background, Mustapha al-Athari of Sadr City in Baghdad, and then killed him by hanging him from a bridge. They then released photos of residents cheering on the spectacle, as well as of the dead body.[29] It is hard to imagine anything more inflammatory, and the event reverberated strongly in Shia Iraq,[30] receiving attention from a wide range of media and establishment Shia politicians. Militias also responded directly; AAH promised to avenge Athari and condemned what it alleged to be the government "ignoring" soldiers in danger.[31] Kathim al-Jabiri, leader of the Ashura Companies, a key militia of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), likewise promised revenge, saying that Athari was a "model of sacrifice... we will not rest until we have avenged you." [32] During the June 3 statement, on video an executioner led an Iraqi soldier before the shaykhs and had him kneel in front of them while the statement was read aloud, and the video ended just after he had been shot in the back of the head, showing his bloodied corpse crouched over on the pavement. The soldier was a Sunni Kurd who was serving in the Iraqi army rather than a Shia Arab, but it was inflammatory nonetheless.

Al-Jazeera's "Behind the News" June 5 program addressed Fallujah and military operations in the area.[33] To discuss this sensitive topic, the program again invited Anbari activist Abd al-Qadir al-Nayel, and again set him against a Shia protagonist, this time Karim Nuri, a senior figure in the Badr Organization who is also a spokesman for the Hashd militia organization. Nayel again avoided defending IS' Salafi-Jihadist agenda, but instead began by discussing the historical role of Fallujah in resisting Iran going back to Babylonian times, before Islam, and framed the war in pure sectarian terms as an effort to "liquidate" Sunnis. He did at one point mention in passing that IS had human intelligence sources which had penetrated the security services, suggesting that he was in contact with them either directly or indirectly. (Nuri interjected at this point, asking, "Are you a spokesman for Daesh?") The program did not deal directly with the June 3 statement, even though it was widely reported, including by al-Jazeera.

Shia militia leaders reacted in the inflammatory fashion which IS presumably intended. Qays al-Khazali, AAH leader, on June 3 called on the government to give his fighters "immunity" before they entered Fallujah, saying of IS, "we will get to you even if you are in cities or provinces that are fortified." [34] Qasim al-Araji, the leader of Badr's parliamentary bloc who is often seen in the field wearing fatigues, called for the city's destruction. In a reported statement on his Facebook page (apparently deleted later), Araji called for Fallujah to be destroyed – "Fallujah is the head of the snake, and the solution is to level it." And Sunni politicians called for Araji and Khazali to be prosecuted for advocating war crimes.[35]

And about this time, Shia militia leaders began to change their minds about the strategic priority in Anbar and decided to turn back from Ramadi to Fallujah. On June 10, Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri, who was the de facto "field commander" for Anbar operations at that point, declared that the operation to liberate Ramadi was "frozen" to allow citizens to leave the city. Within a few days it became clear that Ameri had changed his mind completely, and now was focused on Fallujah. Speaking to reporters, Ameri now declared that "liberating Fallujah will allow us to enter Ramadi without a fight." [36]

There was no strategic logic to this turn in thinking – Fallujah is farther away from IS' center of strength than Ramadi, and at no point has IS been shown to have large military forces there. But the practical result of this was that militia forces pulled back, leaving depleted army and police units to face Ramadi, which they were in no condition to do. While the dynamics of Iraqi security policy are beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant to note the extent to which this created further confusion within the already ill-organized military efforts of government-aligned forces in Anbar. Throughout late June and early July the militias increasingly focused their efforts on Fallujah and Karma, forcing the government to go along even though the prime

minister never formally adopted Ameri's new "Fallujah First" strategy. Thus IS forces, vastly outnumbered and relying on local recruits, have thus been able to draw out the conflict in eastern Anbar as Baghdad-aligned forces each fight their own war.

Conclusion: IS' Dependence on Sectarian Polarization

The Islamic State has found success in framing its war in eastern Anbar as being for the sake of a much broader public interest than would normally be the case for an organization mainly known both regionally and globally for strict Islamic punishments and the execution of prisoners of war and even civilians. Carefully framing its fight as one with that of Sunnis who are not part of its ideological core but share its strongly anti-Shia views, IS' public diplomacy has gotten a large boost from mainstream television and online Arabic-language media. While a close examination of the three statements of "tribal leaders" suggests that IS has at most only the support of some elements of Anbari tribes, those whose information environment is the mainstream media—i.e., the bulk of the Arabic-speaking public—could quite reasonably conclude that a broad cross-section of Anbari tribal leaders have endorsed the organization.

Furthermore, while the Islamic State plainly has a certain degree of support among Anbar's population (without which it would not be able to maintain a war standing), it is equally clear that such support as IS does genuinely have is based upon political and sectarian considerations and not ideological support for IS' version of the Salafi-Jihadist worldview. Yet again even relatively well-read people in the region can easily conclude from the mainstream coverage of these events that Anbari tribal leaders have given an oath of religious loyalty (bay'a) to IS and its vision of a restored Islamic caliphate. Mainstream Arab media—albeit in some cases unwittingly—plays a major role in the ability of the Islamic State to propagandize itself in a time of war.

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Notes

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- [2] Alexandre Mello, Michael Knights, "The Cult of the Offensive: The Islamic State on Defense," *CTC Sentinel*, April 30, 2015. See <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-cult-of-the-offensive-the-islamic-state-on-defense>.
- [3] For example, see "The Organization of the State Raises Concrete Barriers and Calls Residents to Return," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 21, 2015. See <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=345236>.
- [4] "Declaration of the First Conference of the Tribes of Anbar," published on *Youtube* on April 20, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RN8RG0osjs>.
- [5] "For the Second Conference of the Shaykhs and Tribal Leaders of Anbar," published on *Youtube* on May 30, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7W9nk8jI7A>.
- [6] "Why Did Ramadi Shaykhs Give Baya to the Islamic State?" [tanthim al-dawla], Behind the News, *Al-Jazeera*, May 30, 2015. See <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/behindthenews/2015/6/3/%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%AE-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9>.
- [7] "Abd al-Qadir al-Nayel: The Oppressors Will Not Last," video from a protest site in Ramadi, published on *Youtube* on March 5, 2013. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVIE_6dvTHQ.

- [8] "Abd al-Qadir al-Nayel: The Government is Led by Iran," *BBC Arabic* video uploaded to *Youtube* on April 6, 2013. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ID3eFteqC7s>.
- [9] "Who Gave Baya to Daesh Among Anbar Tribes?" *al-Dijla*, June 7, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OET527QIgdM>.
- [10] "Islamic Scholars Issue Clarification on Baya Statements of Tribes of Fallujah and Ramadi," *Shafaaq*, June 6, 2015. See <http://www.ara.shafaaq.com/6026>.
- [11] "Daesh Coerces Tribal Leaders into Giving Baya," *al-Arab al-Jadid*, June 4, 2015. See <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/6/4/%D8%A7%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%B2%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%87>.
- [12] *Al-Sumaria Evening News*, June 7, 2015. See minute five here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrTbz1Qu9gs>.
- [13] "Tribal Council in Anbar Gives Baya to the Islamic State Organization," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 4, 2015. See <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=351858>.
- [14] "The Council of the Shaykhs of the Districts of Fallujah and Karma Give Baya to the State Organization," *al-Khaleej Online*, June 4, 2015. See <http://alkhaleejonline.net/#!/articles/1433420870565024500/>.
- [15] "Statement of the Council of Tribal Leaders of Fallujah and Karma," June 3, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3SPDwW2qCk>.
- [16] "The City of Nukhayb... the Beating Heart of Anbar," *al-Iraq News*, November 20, 2013. See <http://aliraqnews.com/%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B6-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%85/>.
- [17] "Tribal Council in Anbar Gives Baya to the Islamic State Organization," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 4, 2015. See <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=351858>.
- [18] At the time of the completion of this paper, there was no article on Anadolu's Arabic-language website of this type. Sometimes websites reuse URLs and this may be the reason the article does not appear.
- [19] "Tribal Shaykhs of Fallujah Give Baya to Baghdadi and Attack the Government," *al-Jazeera*, June 3, 2015. See <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/6/3/%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%AE-%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%BA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9>.
- [20] There have been several videos of this event posted online, and *Youtube* keeps taking them down, only to have the same video reposted by another account. But the first one up appears to be one that was originally posted on June 7 and has since been taken down.
- [21] Short clip from Fallujah statement from *al-Jazeera*, apparently right after the event and before the full video was available (the video is from a different angle). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwA7ZjVxNE>.
- [22] Munaf al-Obaydi, "Shaykhs of Fallujah and Karma Give Baya to Baghdadi... and Anbari Leaders Condemn the Baya," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 5, 2015. See <http://aawsat.com/home/article/377226/%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%BA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%88%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9>.
- [23] "Sunni Tribes in Fallujah Give Baya to the Islamic State," *Orient News*, June 4, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRkaRHK6y4Q>.
- [24] "In Pictures... Fallujah Tribes Declare Solidarity with Daesh," *Rudaw Arabic*, June 4, 2015. See <http://rudaw.net/mobile/arabic/middleeast/iraq/0406201517>.
- [25] Videos posted on *Youtube* by groups of men claiming to be "shaykhs" representing Karma over the past year: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0i28n3T7ay8>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLEWB0DZbi8>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stzrB_ebf7E; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwAWQfngGlc>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBPs4vl0qmo>.
- [26] Statement by Islamic Statement Spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, entitled "O Our People Listen to the Call of God." See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcEhzCqUGWI>.
- [27] "Field Tour with the Men of the Islamic Resistance (Asaib Ahl al-Haq) and Heros of the Iraqi Army," *al-Ahad TV*, August 20, 2014. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXR3zOD42zg>.

- [28] "Field Tour with the Hashd al-Shaabi in Karma, Anbar," *al-Ghadeer TV*, June 23, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbMWiVJv9KY>.
- [29] These links contain some photos released related to the killing of Mustapha al-Athari: http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.khabaar.net/files.php%253Ffile%253D2_569176938.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.qanon302.net/news/2015/05/26/57717&th=399&w=720&tbnid=icH9zgRo_F2NOM:&zoom=1&docid=YL4OU5IUU7euTM&ei=uI6FVcv-CoGE7gbryYGADQ&tbnid=isch;http://www.bawabatthiqar.com/2015/05/26/4185/.
- [30] ISCI leader Baqir al-Zubaydi, who is currently Transportation Ministry but has a background overseeing ISCI's paramilitary activities, is one of those who visited the soldier's family, and even donated his salary to this family. See "Zubaydi Gives His Salary to the Family of the Martyr Mustapha and Commits to the Ultimate Defeat of the Daeshists," *al-Forat News*, May 27, 2015. See <http://www.alforatnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=85802>.
- [31] "The Martyr Mustapha al-Athari, the Government's Ignoring of Them and the People's Response," *al-Ahad TV*, May 28, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0bO7NQQjS0>.
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- [33] "Fallujah... Escalation Brings Warning of Worse Conditions," *al-Jazeera*, June 5, 2015. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoyfOV8ulzQ>.
- [34] "Qays al-Khazali Demands Immunity from Legal Prosecution Before Entering Fallujah," *Iraq Press Agency*, June 3, 2015. See <http://www.iraqpressagency.com/?p=140827&lang=ar>.
- [35] "Shia Organizations Call for the Destruction of Fallujah," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 4, 2015. See <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=351975>.
- [36] "Hadi al-Ameri: Liberating Fallujah Will Allow us to Enter Ramadi Without a Fight," *Voice of Iraq*, June 13, 2014. <http://www.sotaliraq.com/mobile-news.php?id=206040#axzz3dclIkCqI>; For the Video of Ameri speaking to reporters, relating to the same conversation as the above link, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGyVtEIEenM> (posted on June 14).