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Whither Al-Anbar Province?

Five Scenarios Through 2011

James B. Bruce and Jeffrey Martini

Prepared for the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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Summary

The Question

What does the future hold for Iraq's al-Anbar Province? This question cannot be reliably addressed by attempting straight-line projections from the recent state of affairs or by extrapolating present trends into the future. These approaches will necessarily fail because the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, including Marines from al-Anbar Province, will create a vacuum in the way security is achieved and power is exercised throughout Iraq.

As U.S. Marines draw down in al-Anbar, significant changes can be expected throughout the province in security, political, economic, and even cultural relationships. Al-Anbar can thus fairly anticipate a period of potential instability as new factors emerge that will affect the exercise of power and other governmental functions. Precisely how province leaders and other actors will sort out these new challenges during and following the departure of the Marines will determine its future. While we cannot know these outcomes in advance, we can bound our understanding of the future by developing plausible scenarios for al-Anbar over the course of the next three years. That is the purpose of this study.

Multiple futures are possible for al-Anbar. On one trajectory, the province could achieve a modicum of political stability, providing effective governance and services and promising a hopeful outlook for Anbaris. On a rather different trajectory, the province could head into a period of deep political chaos, either struggling for its own survival against a Shi'a-run central government or against itself in an internal conflict among Sunnis fighting for their own particular interests. Other, less-extreme possibilities between these polar outcomes are also possible, though not necessarily more likely.

While this study does not address the probabilities and likelihoods of particular outcomes, it does identify five relatively distinct futures, or scenarios, for al-Anbar that provide plausible but alternative trajectories for the province between early 2009 and the end of 2011.

In brief, we characterize the five contrasting scenarios with the following names, each a shorthand expression of a more complex outcome. Each is more fully elaborated in the body of the study below:

- **Sunni Fight for Survival.** In this worst-case scenario, a renewed insurgency pits uniting Sunnis against the Shi'a-dominated central government in Baghdad.
- **Every Clan for Itself.** Also violent, this scenario sees greater fragmentation within al-Anbar, with nascent cohesion breaking down along tribal, clan, and family lines.

- **Iron Fist.** Strong government control exerted from Baghdad keeps a lid on muted violence and holds restive Anbaris in check.
- **Glueless in Baghdad.** A weak central government in Baghdad motivates provincial leaders to take greater charge over local affairs, leading to improved security and delivery of services.
- **Path to Stability.** In this best-case scenario, the Anbari provincial government and the central government work out effective power-sharing, reconciliation, and reconstruction arrangements.

How This Study Was Conducted

This three-year outlook is the result of an analytical experiment that we undertook as an alternative to formal research and modeling. With the participation of a subcontractor, Pherson Associates, and our government sponsor, the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, the RAND Corporation convened a series of three workshops in November and December 2008. The workshops involved more than 30 analysts who brought considerable substantive expertise to address this issue. Applying cutting-edge analytical tools developed in or for the Intelligence Community, these expert-based workshops produced this five-scenario set of projections.

The scenarios resulted from extensive consideration of the major assumptions that may underlie any future projections and the “testing” of those assumptions in a variety of exercises. The deliberations also focused on “drivers,” or the major factors that will shape the development of one or another scenario.

Implications

Some drivers (e.g., the perception of central government legitimacy) are less amenable than others to influence by deployed forces (for example, how Marines conduct their actual withdrawal). Identifying these key drivers, we discuss eight in the study. Knowing which among them can be influenced, how, and with what effects, and acting on this information in-theater could help encourage the development of a preferred scenario or discourage the development of others.

It may be hard to tell which scenario(s) will begin to take shape without specific attention to the indications and warnings that would signal their emergence. Thus, we also include a discussion of indications and warnings that can be identified and monitored through focused collection and analysis requirements in Iraq. Because some scenarios represent “wildcards” that could threaten unexpected developments in an uncertain environment, a well-postured intelligence capability can reduce the potential for surprise amid the emerging unknowns that now characterize al-Anbar Province.

Although specific courses of action are not included in this paper and operational and intelligence planning are already well along, this study is intended to support the ongoing process of campaign review.

Conclusions

- The future of al-Anbar Province is uncertain, and several different trajectories—some good, some bad—are plausible.
- Which of the five hypothesized scenarios (or combinations of them, or even others not identified here) will most accurately describe the province over the next two- to three-year period is highly dependent on how the key drivers work out in the coming one to two years.
- The four most influential of the eight drivers examined in the workshops are (1) whether an effective central government develops in Baghdad; (2) adequacy of the financial flows, especially into the province; (3) how Anbaris self-identify (i.e., as Iraqis first, or more narrowly along ethnic-sectarian, and tribal lines); and (4) the relative effectiveness of the provincial government in al-Anbar.
- The potential of the U.S. Marine Corps to influence some of these drivers will likely be limited, although it will potentially have higher leverage over other key drivers, such as how the United States withdraws from the province, the capacity of the Iraqi security forces (ISF), and the viability of Al Qaeda of Iraq (AQI) and other insurgency groups in al-Anbar. The fact that some of the drivers—all are important—are beyond the easy reach of Marine forces highlights the importance of seeking leverage even where it will be hard to do so and maximizing leverage opportunities where they already exist.
- How al-Anbar develops in the face of U.S. withdrawals should provide little surprise: Key indications and warnings will be mostly visible for monitoring and tracking, to the extent that Marine intelligence collection and analysis capabilities are postured for this critical task.
- The principal implications of this analysis are twofold. First, in the ongoing process of campaign review, Marine forces can be fully alert to how alternative al-Anbar trajectories may unfold as U.S. forces begin to draw down—but only by ensuring an appropriately calibrated and tasked intelligence posture. Second, ongoing course-of-action development can focus on potential points of leverage against the drivers that will determine which of the alternate paths the province takes over the course of the next three years.