

## OTHER NATIONS

# The Origins of the Sunni Awakening

**THE SOURCE:** "Explaining the Awakening: Engagement, Publicity, and the Transformation of Iraqi Sunni Political Attitudes" by Marc Lynch, in *Security Studies*, Jan. 2011.

FROM 2005 TO 2007, A CHANGE in sentiment rippled across Iraq—the Sunni population turned against Al Qaeda and started working with U.S. forces. Many analysts believe this transformation is what turned the war around and gave the 2007 American military surge the legitimacy among Iraqis it needed to succeed. What kindled this transformation? The surge can't be the cause; it began after the Awakening was already under way. Other common explanations include Al Qaeda's extremism, which repelled Sunnis, and America's counterinsurgency strategy, which attracted them. But to understand how anger at Al Qaeda's violence spread and how the United States was able to communicate its good intentions, says George Washington University political scientist Marc Lynch, it's necessary to examine an overlooked force: Arab-language news media.

Television is the primary source of news for an estimated 80 percent of Iraqis. Until 2004, there was really only one channel available: al-Jazeera. Its "close and often emotional coverage" sparked outrage against the U.S. occupation. But in 2004, competitors began emerging. The Iraqi

government-backed al-Iraqiya was received skeptically, but Arab options from outside Iraq, particularly the Saudi-supported al-Arabiya, gained popularity. Launched in 2003 to compete with al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya was no friend of Al Qaeda. One program, *Death Makers*, showcased "an endless series of exposés featuring hitherto unknown [Al Qaeda] defectors, stories about their extremism and brutality, allegations about their sources of funding," and other revelations. Sunni leaders who had turned against Al Qaeda were al-Arabiya's go-to sources and commentators.

At the same time, al-Jazeera's portrayal of Al Qaeda began to shift. The network now refused to air videos of Al Qaeda's beheadings and often hosted critical discussions about Iraqi jihadists. Jihadists came to hate al-Jazeera, calling it "al-Khanzeera," a pun meaning "pig station," and regarding it as part of the "Zionist-Crusader media."

In this changing media environment, public opinion rapidly tipped

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away from Al Qaeda. It wasn't so much that the alternative channels directly persuaded anyone, Lynch believes, but that the proliferation of choices meant that new ideas and opinions could emerge and spread.

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## India's Vulture Void

**THE SOURCE:** "India's Vanishing Vultures" by Meera Subramanian, in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 2011.

IT'S NOT EASY TO MUSTER EMPATHY for eaters of the dead. But in India, a precipitous drop in the native vulture population, from 50 million in the mid-1990s to fewer than 60,000 today, has created an environmental and cultural catastrophe. Gone are the creatures that once "scoured the countryside, clearing fields of dead cows and goats," writes Meera Subramanian, a widely published journalist who is also an editor of the online literary magazine *Killing the Buddha*. And while other animals, notably wild dogs, have taken over some of the carrion-eating on land, no scavengers can fill the role vultures once performed for the Parsis, the small, ancient religious sect who give their dead "sky burials" in sacred "Towers of Silence." The massive vultures, their wingspans sometimes reaching eight feet, used to consume the bodies left on open-air scaffolds in a matter of days, but now it can take months for the Parsi dead to decompose.

American microbiologist Lindsay Oaks finally pinpointed the cause of the vultures' demise in