The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening

BY NAJIM ABED AL-JABOURI AND STERLING JENSEN

After the coalition forces invaded Iraq in 2003, Sunnis revolted against the idea of de-Sunnifying Iraq. Partnering with the United States in 2006 was mainly an attempt to recoup Sunni losses once the United States had seemingly changed its position in their regard. This happened as the Sunni community increasingly saw al Qaeda and Iran as bigger threats than the U.S. occupation. The Sunni Awakening had two main parts: the Anbar Awakening and the Awakening councils, or the Sons of Iraq program. The Anbar Awakening was an Iraqi grassroots initiative supported by the United States and paid for by the Iraqi government. The Sons of Iraq program was a U.S.-led and -funded initiative to spread the success of the Anbar Awakening into other Sunni areas, particularly heterogeneous areas, and was not fully supported by the Iraqi government. If not for al Qaeda's murder and intimidation campaign on Sunnis, and its tactic of creating a sectarian war, the Anbar Awakening—a fundamental factor in the success of the 2007 surge—most probably would not have occurred, and it would have been difficult for the United States in 2006 to convince Sunnis to partner with them in a fight against al Qaeda.

Anbar Awakening and Sons of Iraq Program: What's the Difference?

The Sunni Awakening is the Iraqi revolt against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in which Sunni Arabs partnered with U.S. forces to fight a common enemy. American accounts generally have the Sunni Awakening starting unofficially in February 2005 when men from the Albu Mahal tribe in al-Qaim fought against al Qaeda and solicited U.S. help to do so. However, this attempt and others

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quickly lost steam through al Qaeda's murder and intimidation campaign against tribal leaders and anyone, regardless of sect, associated with receiving U.S. help. The Sunni Awakening then officially started in September 2006 with the announcement of the Anbar Awakening in Ramadi under the leadership of Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha. American accounts then morph the Anbar Awakening into the Sons of Iraq program where Sunni tribesmen and former resistance fighters were paid by the United States to man security checkpoints in areas infested by al Qaeda and other militant jihadist groups opposed to the Iraqi government. This program started in mid-2007 under the leadership of General David Petraeus and was supported by the surge of U.S. troops. The roles Iraqis and al Qaeda played in the Awakening varied and have often been misunderstood and misrepresented in the American accounts. For example, Americans often fail to differentiate between the Anbar Awakening and the Sons of Iraq program connected with the surge, assuming that the Sunni Awakening was mainly due to deft U.S. counterinsurgency tactics, a surge in U.S. troops, and promises of personal security and financial gain to convince Sunnis to leave the resistance and fight alongside the United States against al Qaeda. Yet the Anbar Awakening and the Sons of Iraq program were two different initiatives, the former an Iraqi initiative and the latter an American one. It is important to make this distinction because there were different factors involved in the Iraqi roles before and after the surge. However, to understand the Iraqi and AQI roles in the Awakening, it is important to first put Sunni thinking after the invasion in the right context.

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Reasons for the Sunni Insurgency

Misunderstanding between the United States and Iraqi Sunni Arabs fed the insurgency. When coalition forces invaded Iraq in March 2003, the predominantly Sunni provinces of Anbar, Ninevah, and Salah al-Din did not want to confront the invading forces militarily. As Sunnis in the north saw the destruction and looting taking place in the south as coalition troops entered, a number of tribal leaders who had been in contact with U.S. military and intelligence personnel prior to the invasion convinced the Iraqi military and Ba'ath party leadership in Anbar, Ninevah, and Salah al-Din to meet with the Americans upon their arrival. The reigning U.S. assumption at the time was that the political vacuum created by the fall of the former regime would strengthen the position of the tribal leaders.[1] Therefore, brokering with the tribes was a means to communicate with civil-military leaders and in turn to influence the populace. Meanwhile, Sunnis—in particular those without deep ties to the former regime—assumed that the United States would broker with them, since Sunnis had more government experience than any of the other ethnic or sectarian groups. Sunnis also assumed it was not in the U.S. interest to give the majority of the next government to Shia and Kurdish opposition groups, most of which were connected to Iran. Giving the Shia and Kurds responsibility for the government would increase Iranian influence in Iraq. With established U.S. interests in Saudi Arabia, Egypt,

Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (all Sunni countries), changing the regional balance of power would be a tectonic policy shift the Sunni establishment did not think the United States would make. Also, the tribes talking with the United States assumed the invading forces would work within the established sociopolitical system, as had been the case with British forces after World War I. Moreover, modern Iraqi history suggests an asymmetric relationship between the power of the state and the influence of the tribes. Tribal leaders saw an imminent U.S. invasion as an opportunity to increase their influence. Thus, the tribal elite gave the United States the impression that they could be relied upon in a political power vacuum.

In the early days of the post-invasion, the tribes convinced military and political leaders in Anbar, Ninevah, and Salah al-Din to negotiate an arrangement until the next government took shape. Military and Ba'ath party leaders were chosen as interim governors and police chiefs through temporary elections in Ninevah and through appointment by tribal leaders in Anbar and Salah al-Din.[2] The Sunni leaders in these provinces thought that doing so would spare their cities and personal property and would put them in leadership positions for the next government.[3]

While Sunni tribal leaders tried keeping the established civil-military leadership on the side of the Americans, jihadist groups were recruiting Sunnis both inside and outside of Iraq to join the fight against the invaders. This was a time when many foreign fighters entered Iraq. However, the majority of Iraqi Sunnis were still in a "wait and see" mode, thinking that the United States would reorganize the government through them. When Paul Bremer replaced Jay Garner, the Coalition Provisional Authority's first two orders were the de-Ba'athification laws and disbanding the Iraqi security services. While many in the security services were not working after the invasion, these surprising mandates agitated the Sunni community and increased the momentum to organized insurgency. However, many of the tribal elite continued trying to convince the now-unemployed and de-Ba'athified Sunnis to wait and see the next U.S. move. While there were occasional attacks against U.S. forces in Sunni areas, such as the Fallujah killings of April 2003, these were limited and conducted by al Qaeda and small jihadist and resistance groups. The tribal elite and the Sunni moderate majority still expected the United States would give Sunnis a reasonable share of power in the next government, even though the Bremer laws were confusing to them.

Enter al Qaeda. After the United States started its war in Afghanistan in 2001, many al Qaeda and jihadist fighters fled the country, mainly to Pakistan, Iran, and Iraqi Kurdistan. Abu Musab Zarqawi was one of them. He went to Kurdistan through Iran and met with fellow fleeing jihadist fighters from Ansar al-Sunna, and after the U.S. invasion created his own organization called Tawheed wa Jihad.[4] Zarqawi came to Iraq at a time when the United States was increasing its rhetoric over weapons of mass destruction and sending signals that it would invade Iraq. When the United States used Iraqi opposition groups from abroad to assess an invasion, Zarqawi and other religious extremists inside the country were making assessments of their post-invasion role. At the time, al Qaeda and jihadists from Afghanistan enjoyed international notoriety, and since Iraqis did not know much about al Qaeda, other than that it was given credit for successfully attacking the United States and

U.S. Air Force (Stacy L. Pearsall)

evading capture, Iraqi Sunnis did not initially dismiss the group, and some joined its ranks. However, al Qaeda did not have significant presence in Iraq until after the invasion. When it appeared that the United States would invade Iraq in early 2003, al Qaeda members and others such as Zarqawi prepared to exploit a possible vacuum of power after an attack. Foreign fighters

Over 250 Shi'ite and Sunni sheiks, Iraq army and police force members, and U.S. Army personnel meet to draft peace resolution between feuding tribes in Diyala Province

came to Iraq in increasing numbers and were recruited not only by the former regime, but also by al Qaeda and other jihadist groups.

After the invasion, uncertainty reigned in Iraq. The security institutions fell and the looting of government property immediately ensued. As crime rose, so did uncertainty about where to

turn for security. Al Qaeda and militant jihadist groups were among the few organizations on the ground that offered protection and guidance to Sunni communities. Leaders in al Qaeda, Tawheed wa Jihad, and other jihadists assured Sunnis that they were performing their religious duty by fighting the invaders. They also told Sunni Arabs that the Shia and Iran were working with the Americans to expel them from Iraq. Since there was uncertainty about U.S. intentions, people were vulnerable to these conspiracy theories. While the tribal leaders in Anbar, Ninevah, and Salah al-Din were trying to reassure the people, the military, and the Ba'athist leadership that the United States would rely on them to reestablish the government (giving the tribe the prestigious role of mediator), al Qaeda was working within the lower class outside the influence of the tribal or military elite. Religious-minded Sunnis were more inclined to join AQI and company. As conditions deteriorated and the Bremer laws were introduced, more national resistance groups formed and gained sympathy from people upset with U.S. mistakes. Despite this, the tribal leaders still did not think the United States would abandon the Sunni establishment. However, the announcement of the Interim Governing Council in July 2003, 5 months after the invasion, confirmed Sunni suspicions that the United States intended to de-Sunnify Iraq and tilt the regional balance of power toward Iran. Choosing Shia and Kurdish opposition groups close to Iran to form the next Iraqi government not only was a catalyst for national resistance, but it also created the conditions for the national resistance—now being led by once-skeptical former military and Ba'athist officials—to tolerate, trust, and in some instances embrace jihadists and al Qaeda as means to spoil American objectives.

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After the interim government had formed, the majority of Sunnis, rather than just the margins, significantly distrusted U.S. intentions. Ideas circulated through the Sunni community that the United States was changing its alliances in the Middle East because it now considered Shia religious extremism less threatening to its long-term interests in the region than Sunni religious extremism, especially the Wahhabism coming from Saudi Arabia. Whether the United States intended to de-Sunnify Iraq and change the regional balance of power from Sunni to Shia leadership did not matter at this point. Sunnis were now convinced this was the case. This perceived shift in strategic alliances, along with U.S. violation of Iraqi customs, incidents of mistreating civilians, and not securing the civil areas of Iraq being overrun by criminal activity, fueled the Sunni insurgency. Not until perceptions of those strategic interests changed and Sunnis considered jihadist and insurgent crimes to be greater than U.S. crimes were the majority of Sunnis ready to openly work with the Americans against al Qaeda and the jihadists.

Sunnis Accept U.S. Support

By September 2006, there were four main reasons why Sunnis were receptive to U.S. support. First, security had greatly deteriorated, and Sunnis felt vulnerable to both AQI and sectarian attacks. Al Qaeda was waging a sectarian war, and it was using a murder and intimidation

campaign on Iraqis to achieve its objectives. Sunnis were disillusioned with the crimes that the insurgency and al Qaeda were committing. They seemed to be employing tactics without a purpose and targeting Iraqis rather than the American occupiers. The Iraqi Sunnis had heard about suicide bombings in Palestine and Lebanon prior to 2003, but they had not lived through them; they had never really lived with religious extremism. As AQI began living and operating in Sunni areas, the people gradually noticed their extreme behaviors and demands. Foreign Arabs would demand that Iraqi resistance groups follow their orders, claiming Islamic authority. They would force families to provide subsistence and shelter, compel families to marry their daughters to suicide bombers, force divorces for wives they desired, and forbid people from drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. In some areas AQI forbade people from selling or carrying cucumbers and tomatoes together because they resembled male and female sexual organs in contact with each other. Not only were their demands extreme, but they would also brutally kill anyone who did not support them or sympathize with their barbaric acts. This threatening environment was very difficult for the people to tolerate.

On another front, increasing sectarian violence in Baghdad was deeply disheartening, especially after the Samarra mosque bombing in February 2006. The Sunnis realized that they had lost Baghdad and were being expelled through sectarian cleansing—violence that went against fundamental Iraqi values. Also, AQI targeted symbols of Iraqi nationalism. They would decapitate tribal leaders or Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) recruits. They would also target families of anyone working with the government of Iraq or the Americans. People started saying secretly that AQI came to liberate Iraq from Iraqis, not the Americans. This comment reflected their disillusionment and disgust with al Qaeda. It was bad enough that Iraq was being occupied by a non-Muslim nation's military, but it was worse that it was being grossly mistreated by Muslims who claimed they were defending Islam. This environment of hypocrisy and fear discredited AQI claims.

Second, people noticed a change in the U.S. attitude toward the Sunnis. The Western news increasingly reported how the United States had made many mistakes at the beginning of the invasion. Some American officials regretted disbanding the former army and supporting the de-Ba'athification laws, and some U.S. commanders apologized for these mistakes. When senior American officers witnessed the hardships faced by former Iraqi army officers, they worked to help alleviate their suffering. For example, General Petraeus, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, responsible for Ninevah Province, often met Sunni officers from the former Iraqi army and empathized with their anguish. He appeared sympathetic to their problems and ordered that they receive a monthly salary of about $100 to work in factories and offices in his area of operation. At the time, this was a decent amount of money and helped the former officers provide for their families; it gave these officers hope. General Petraeus also organized conferences and meetings in Mosul for all the members of the Ba'ath party, both civilian and military. In return for their pledge to not work with the Ba'ath party

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or to work against the peace, he would help them return to their respective jobs.

American officers who shared Petraeus's view of the former officers were more empathetic and effective with this significant yet marginalized part of the community. In fact, there are instances when American officers refused to obey orders from the de-Ba'athification committee, Ministry of the Interior, and Ministry of Defense to retire Sunni officers. U.S. military officers argued that the new Iraqi army and police force needed these officers for their experience and skills. American commanders would listen to former officers in their first tours, and then during their second and third tours they would be more sympathetic to Sunni needs since they better understood the ground realities. This type of American behavior was a signal to the Sunni community that U.S. intentions had changed and they were no longer trying to de-Sunnify Iraq.

In 2006, the Democrats were campaigning for the midterm congressional elections on a platform that claimed going to Iraq was a mistake and that the United States needed to change course and prepare to withdraw its troops from Iraq. One of the main justifications for the insurgency was that Sunnis thought the United States intended to indefinitely occupy Iraq and install a government friendly to Iran. On the one hand, Sunni resistance groups were satisfied that they had changed U.S. goals in Iraq. But on the other hand, the idea of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq would leave them without an ally to fight al Qaeda and Iranian-backed militias supported by the Iraqi government. Meanwhile, Sunni resistance fighters started noticing that some of the weapons and explosives they used came from Iran. There were reports about how Iran was supporting al Qaeda and the Sunni insurgency against the U.S. occupation. Iran's desire to drive out the Americans was a red flag to Sunni resistance groups about Sunni prospects in a future Iraq. Resistance groups increasingly questioned the long-term effects of their efforts. This was also a time when Washington blamed Tehran for supporting sectarian militias and called for more sanctions against Iran for its nuclear program. The United States seemed more willing to work with the Sunni community as Iraqis increasingly felt the impact of Iranian-backed militias.

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Zarqawi's death in June 2006 also had an impact on Sunni willingness to work with the Americans. AQI's strategy was largely based on Zarqawi's personality, and the group became disoriented after he was killed. After Zarqawi's death, Iraqi vigilante groups such as the Anbar Revolutionaries increased their attacks on AQI fighters, and this gave Sunnis hope that AQI was beatable.[5]

The third reason why Sunnis were receptive of U.S. support in 2006 was because they saw that Sheikh Abdul Sattar was successfully working with the Americans. The 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division (1–1 AD), deployed to Ramadi from Tal Afar in May 2006, seemed to be listening to what Abdul Sattar was saying and actually doing something about it. This was a new development. When Sunni resistance groups and tribal leaders had approached the United States about starting anti-AQI campaigns in the past, Washington would initially sound receptive but in the end would

not act. There had been many attempts to talk with the Americans about ways to fight al Qaeda since 2004, but the Americans did not seem to trust the local leaders enough to support their initiatives.[6]

In July 2006, the U.S. Army brigade in Ramadi seemed serious about police recruitment, saying the Iraqi police (IP) could work in their areas of residence to ensure the safety of their families. The Anbar Revolutionaries and other vigilantes answered the call and joined the Ramadi IP. They did this to make their fight against al Qaeda official, to get paid by the Ministry of the Interior, and to avoid targeting by the Americans. In August 2006, when Sheikh Abdul Sattar was building police stations in his tribal areas outside of Ramadi, the stigma of working with the Americans was lessened. The people were hoping for someone to take a stand against AQI. Abdul Sattar started stating openly what people were thinking (but did not dare to say publicly): that al Qaeda and Iran were the real occupiers in Iraq, not the Americans. Then, on September 9, 2006, Abdul Sattar and Faisal Gaoud—a former governor of Anbar and representative of the tribal elite residing in Amman who had been soliciting U.S. support for an Awakening since 2004—announced the Anbar Awakening. In his guestroom, in the presence of the 1–1 AD commander as well as over a dozen of his tribal peers, Abdul Sattar boldly declared that the American troops were "friendly forces" and guests in Anbar.

Finally, Sunnis were receptive to U.S. support in September 2006 because the resistance groups had already been at war with al Qaeda. Tension started to rise as early as the spring of 2004. There was a rift between the ideology of AQI and resistance groups, with AQI using religious ideology and the resistance groups using more nationalistic ideology. Competition for financial resources was also a factor in this rift. AQI wanted to control the resistance groups' funding and told them to swear allegiance to AQI or die. When the resistance groups started fighting AQI, they were on a path that eventually led them to view the U.S. troops as a means to fight a common enemy.

After Abdul Sattar had announced the Anbar Awakening, working with the Americans was a means of securing Sunni areas. Contrary to a growing U.S. narrative about the Sunni Awakening being mainly the fruit of U.S. counterinsurgency tactics, in Ramadi having the U.S. forces in the neighborhoods was not what made the people feel safe. They felt safe when their men could join the police force and secure their areas by themselves. Joining the police and working in their own local areas were also a way to avoid being targeted by the Americans. As policemen, they might have wanted U.S. support doing operations, but they did not want to support U.S. operations—as experienced by the Fallujah Brigade in 2004. Also, as policemen they received official pay and had better chances of winning reconstruction work in their areas.

For others, though, the Americans were still seen as occupiers, which trumped any justification for working with them. It was not only a religious taboo to support the occupier, but also a cultural duty to fight the occupier—which is why Abdul Sattar cast AQI and Iran as the true occupiers and the Americans as guests. Those refusing to work with the United States not only saw the Americans as occupiers, but they also were allowing the Iranians to occupy their country. They felt marginalized and could not reconcile with the new government of Iraq. The prevailing thought was that de-Ba'athification was de-Sunnification

because they saw the incumbent parties employing Shia and Kurdish Ba'athists.

Types of Support Wanted

It is important to differentiate between the Anbar Awakening and Sons of Iraq when assessing the type of support that was most important to them. The Anbar Awakening was largely a grassroots Iraqi initiative to replace the provincial government with an emergency government led by the Awakening leadership. Police recruitment and partnering with the United States were means to that end.

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The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) controlled the Anbar Provincial Council, and al Qaeda's murder and intimidation campaign and word of a U.S. armored brigade (1–1 AD) coming to Ramadi in spring 2006 to conduct a large, Fallujah-like military sweep of the city sent the provincial and municipal council into exile. The tribal leadership was also in exile, leaving mainly third-tier tribal leaders in the province. Anbaris increasingly blamed the IIP and the tribal leadership for neglecting their responsibilities and abandoning them. When 1–1 AD came to Ramadi and was looking to partner with local leadership in its counterinsurgency campaign, third-tier sheikhs such as Abdul Sattar used the vacuum of local tribal and political power to assert themselves as the new provincial and municipal leaders.

At that point, AQI had effectively gained considerable influence over provincial and municipal operations. Tribal leaders in Jordan had been trying since 2004 to start an anti-AQI campaign using local former military officers and Anbari tribesmen, but the United States did not seem interested. Abdul Sattar saw 1–1 AD interest in local outreach as an opportunity to gain the support that the exiled tribal leaders in Jordan had been working for, but remotely.

As Sheikh Sattar was successful in gaining U.S. support in police recruitment, his popularity and influence grew. And as the Anbar Awakening in Ramadi was successful and gained more U.S. support, his vision of the Awakening also grew. He started talking about expanding the Awakening beyond Anbar and even Iraq, envisioning it as a way of changing the Sunni world. Sheikh Sattar often said that if the United States helped him fight al Qaeda in Anbar, Iraqis would be able to expel al Qaeda from Iraq. Once they were expelled, he would help the United States fight them all the way to Afghanistan. This statement was more than an idle promise; it reflected a view that Sunni Arabs in Anbar were disillusioned with what al Qaeda had brought to them, and al Qaeda was ruining the name of Arabs, Sunnis, and Muslims in general. It was clear to these Sunni leaders that the United States was incapable of effectively fighting al Qaeda and in fact made things worse when trying. It would bring great honor to the Anbari tribes to be the saviors of Iraq and Sunni Islam, and Sheikh Abdul Sattar aspired to be that standard bearer. Awakening leaders had seen how the Americans fought and knew that they did not know what they were doing against al Qaeda. In fact, since the United States was not effective in fighting al Qaeda and did not support local initiatives, many Sunnis thought that al Qaeda worked for U.S. forces. The Anbar Awakening changed that perception. Sunnis understood the Americans had a

lot of misused power. If the Awakening leadership were able to tap into that power and use it to expel al Qaeda from Anbar, they would be able to claim that they had conquered an enemy the strongest military in the world could not defeat—negating the argument that they were collaborating with the Americans.

In a planned visit to the United States before his death in September 2007, Sheikh Sattar wanted to tell President George W. Bush that the Awakening was Anbar's gift of condolence to America for the September 11 acts committed by Arab terrorists. As the Anbar Awakening gained momentum at the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007, this vision drove Sheikh Sattar, his brother Ahmad, and other leaders of the Awakening. What they needed was access to American leverage in Baghdad to gain support for the ISF in Anbar, political support against the IIP, and U.S. support to open Awakening offices in other troubled Sunni areas in Baghdad and Salah al-Din. They also needed the Americans to coordinate their operations with the locals. Once areas were secured, reconstruction contracts were needed to show that security cooperation reactivated the economy.

The Americans put an M–1 tank in front of Abdul Sattar's house after the Awakening had started, which he did not like. He asked the Americans to replace the American tank with an Iraqi one, which they did. However, when the Iraqi tank company left Anbar, the Americans replaced the Iraqi tank with an American one. Abdul Sattar still did not like having the American tank in front of his house. He wanted security walls around his compound and U.S. cooperation with those plans. However, as Abdul Sattar's popularity grew and it became more socially acceptable to work with the Americans, and as Ramadi became more secure, the tank became a symbol of how he could influence the Americans.

Sheikh Sattar's sense of security came from influence over the police in his area. He also had regular visits from the Americans at a time when other tribal leaders wanted to meet with them. His role as mediator increased his credibility with the other tribes, which in turn gave him more security. His increasing social status and access to his own personal security detail from the local police gave him more of a sense of security than any U.S. combat presence could offer.

However, support for the Sons of Iraq program is different from the Anbar Awakening. In early 2007, the popularity of the Anbar Awakening reached outside the province. Since tribes are cross-sectarian social organizations, news of the Anbari tribes defeating AQI traveled fast. Sunnis in other AQI-infested areas, such as in northern and western Baghdad, wanted the same type of access to the Americans as Sheikh Sattar. They would visit or contact him asking for help. Sheikh Sattar also had frequent visits from Southern Shia tribesmen asking for help to gain American assistance in fighting the Iranian-backed militias. Yet these visits were not fruitful because the American brigade in Ramadi had little influence outside its area of operation. Abdul Sattar's Sunni visitors were generally from the mixed cities in Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Baghdad, where the Iraqi Police were already well established but were heavily sectarian. The Americans in these mixed areas were less likely to work with former insurgents or people who did not fully support the local ISF or government—Americans were inclined to only support local military and political leaders, even if those leaders lacked legitimacy or were seen as sectarian. In these heterogeneous areas, the Iraqi Police were often an instrument for

sectarian violence where Sunnis sought a means to defend themselves legally. They thought that Abdul Sattar might help them get American support in their areas.

U.S. support for the Awakening changed, though, in February 2007, when General Petraeus replaced General George Casey and first heard about tribal movement. In an effort to expand the influence of the Awakening, General Petraeus started the Sons of Iraq program for operations in Diyala and Baghdad, usually paying Sunni tribesmen in al Qaeda–infested areas to work as paramilitaries with the hope that someday they would be integrated into the Ministry of the Interior. Initially, the ethnosectarian parties in the government agreed to integrate the Anbar Awakening fighters into the ministry because they were from a homogeneous Sunni province that was a former al Qaeda sanctuary. In fact, from the beginning of the Anbar Awakening, all ISF recruitment was done through the interior and defense ministries. Technically, the Anbar Awakening was an official government of Iraq initiative because it funded and equipped ISF recruits coming from the Anbar Awakening. Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and interior and defense officials were regularly visited by Anbar Awakening leaders, and Maliki fully supported their fight against al Qaeda. Integrating these fighters into the ISF was not a political threat to the incumbent political parties in Baghdad, and Anbari fighters were seen as reducing the threat of AQI.[7] However, the Sons of Iraq and Awakening councils outside of Anbar were being employed by the United States in mixed areas such as Diyala and Baghdad, where the Iraqi police and army units were mainly Shia.

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In addition to demographic differences, the U.S.-paid Sunni paramilitary fighters in these areas were not as interested in reconciling with the Iraqi government as the Anbar Awakening leaders were, and they posed a political threat to the Shia parties in their areas. Sunnis in these areas falsely assumed that Sunnis in Anbar were being paid by the Americans to fight AQI, so they thought it socially acceptable to do the same under the U.S.-led Sons of Iraq program. Popularity of the Anbar Awakening grew outside of Anbar just as the Americans became proactive in recruiting Sunnis into the Sons of Iraq program. When the Americans were able to directly contact interested Sunni leaders in these areas to be a part of the Sons of Iraq program, the Sunnis did not feel obligated to swear allegiance to Sheikh Sattar in Anbar, but they would call themselves Awakening fighters and form Awakening councils even though they were not officially affiliated with Abdul Sattar. Their main goal was to get a paycheck, ammunition, and permission to use their weapons, not be targeted by the ISF or U.S. forces, secure their areas, and obtain reconstruction contracts. They were not organized under a political campaign as Sheikh Sattar was in Anbar. Since the Sons of Iraq were being paid by the Americans, they did not have to rely on the Iraqi government for assistance. The irony is that the Anbar Awakening was a local initiative organized and named by locals and funded by the Iraqi government, whereas the later self-described Awakening fighters and Awakening

councils in Baghdad, Diyala, and Salah al-Din were recruited into a program that was organized, named, and funded by the Americans.

Role of the Surge

The surge did not have a role in the Anbar Awakening. Surge troops that came to Anbar in 2007 were not seen as useful, other than on the eastern border with Baghdad where the ISF acted as a sectarian militia. In fact, U.S. troops in general were not seen as useful even before the surge. When announcing the Anbar Awakening, Sheikh Sattar told the Americans that as long as the U.S. brigade helped locals become card-carrying security forces and be permitted to work in their areas, the U.S. forces could stay on their bases while the Anbaris fought, since they knew who the al Qaeda fighters were. When Anbaris had tried to give this information to the Americans in the past, the Americans rarely acted on it, so Anbaris thought it better that the locals be empowered to do it themselves. The Awakening leadership sought U.S. political leverage with the Iraqi government, coordination for ISF resources with the security ministries, and the use of U.S. forces as support for local ISF-led operations. In the Anbar Awakening, Sunnis did not see benefit in having the U.S. combat forces stationed in the cities taking the lead in security operations. Sunnis felt the best way to combat AQI was through local security force recruitment and permission to conduct their own operations with support from the American troops. This was because Anbar is largely a homogeneous province in which Sunnis saw a U.S. troop presence in the cities as a clear sign of occupation. All efforts were made by Awakening leaders to distance themselves from being seen as supporting a U.S. occupation. For them it was ideal if the Iraqis could take the lead, with the United States playing a supporting role. This way they could show the populace that the Americans were their guests helping them fight the real occupiers, al Qaeda and Iran.

However, this was not the case for Sunnis in ethnically and sectarian mixed areas where the ISF was politicized and acted as sectarian militias. In these areas, such as Baghdad, Diyala, and Salah al-Din, Sunnis saw the U.S. presence in the cities as an indispensable means for security. Sunnis who joined the Sons of Iraq program saw American troop deployments in the neighborhoods as a great benefit because they were a stabilizing force in what were otherwise potential grounds for increasing sectarian violence. This was the experience of Tal Afar, Ninevah, where Shia, Sunnis, Kurds, and Turkmen lived together but were torn apart due to the rise of sectarian violence and uneven sectarian representation in local government and security forces.

Sunnis who joined the Sons of Iraq program saw American troop deployments as a great benefit because they were a stabilizing force in what were otherwise potential grounds for increasing sectarian violence

The surge troops supported the Sons of Iraq program, which was primarily focused in these mixed areas. AQI and other jihadists would use these Sunni pockets as safe havens as they tended to be the Sunnis' only means for security against sectarian violence. When Sunnis heard there would be a surge of U.S. troops deployed in their areas, they assumed the troops would help protect them from the sectarian militias. They also thought

that the popularity of the Awakening would warm the U.S. forces toward them, as many of these Sunnis were involved in resistance groups such as the Islamic Army and the 1920 Revolutionary Brigade that had previously fought U.S. forces. They thought that the good reputation of the Awakening would give them a better chance to get jobs, be allowed to carry weapons, and not be targeted by the United States and ISF.

Summary

A change in perceptions of U.S. intentions to de-Sunnify Iraq, the rise of sectarian violence, and al Qaeda's extremist behavior were the main factors giving rise to the Sunni Awakening. In a way, the Awakening was the Sunnis' sudden awareness of what they had gotten themselves into and the dark future facing them unless they changed course. They awoke to the fact that AQI was their real enemy, especially as word spread that Iran was helping AQI and resistance groups. AQI continued its murder and intimidation campaign to prevent the Awakening from gaining traction. They killed the families of police officers, assassinated tribal leaders involved in the Awakening, and bombed police recruitment sites.

Had AQI not been so strict with Sunnis and done more to assure them that they were working for their interests, they would have been more successful in Iraq. Had they been more Islamic, they could have had more influence over the people. Had AQI not interfered with the nationalist resistance and supported a nationalist ideology, they could have retained the support of the majority of Sunni fighters and had more visible support from Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Jordan. Had AQI acted more humanely with Sunnis, it would have been nearly impossible for the majority of Sunnis to turn against AQI or the armed resistance. But AQI relied on foreign ideas and foreign leaders who did not know how to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis. While they spoke the same language and had the same religion and ethnicity as Iraqi Sunnis, they did not calculate the unintended consequences of their brutality. As AQI overstepped religious, cultural, social, and humanitarian boundaries and the stigma of Sunnis working with American forces was broken by the Anbar Awakening, the Sunni Awakening spread throughout all of Iraq.

It goes without saying that the Anbar Awakening would have failed had the United States not helped coordinate ISF recruitment in Ramadi in the fall of 2006. And the Anbar Awakening might not have been able to help Sunnis trapped in other AQI-infested areas in Diyala and Baghdad during a time when the government forces behaved as sectarian militias if General Petraeus had not recognized this change in Sunni feelings toward the U.S. forces and taken the initiative. But U.S. forces did not directly create the conditions for the Anbar Awakening; al Qaeda did. Accepting al Qaeda and other jihadists was a choice Iraqi Sunnis made at a time they were ignorant of AQI and perceived U.S. intentions as being to de-Sunnify Iraq. The Awakening occurred when Sunnis realized AQI was their greater enemy and the United States was their means to find their place in the new and changing Iraq.

The takeaway from understanding the difference between the Anbar Awakening and the Sons of Iraq program within the context of the Sunni Awakening is first to know the reason why people are fighting with you or against you. Sunnis first fought against the United States due to a misunderstanding about its intentions

after the invasion. Yet Sunnis also joined the Sons of Iraq program partly due to a misunderstanding about the origin and patronage of the Anbar Awakening. Without a doubt, General Petraeus seized the initiative of the Anbar Awakening to create a successful and meaningful Sons of Iraq program. But the question for other insurgencies, such as in Afghanistan, is whether the United States can replicate the experience of the Anbar Awakening. Without it, the surge would not likely have given General Petraeus the momentum needed to start the Sons of Iraq program. With al Qaeda's mistakes probably being more responsible than U.S. counterinsurgency tactics for the Anbar Awakening, what are the implications for U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan? While different in geography, history, and culture, the lesson to take from understanding the Sunni Awakening for fighting terrorism and insurgency in Pakistan and Afghanistan is being able to answer the questions: Who is fighting against you, why, and are extremists making fateful mistakes similar to those al Qaeda made in Iraq that inspired the Anbar Awakening? PRISM

This paper was commissioned for a January 2010 conference in Tampa, Florida, entitled "The Anbar Awakening: An After Action Review," cosponsored by the Center for a New American Security and the College of William and Mary, under a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Notes

[1] See Nibras Kazimi, "Of Tribes and Men," September 21, 2007, available at <www.talismangate.blogspot.com>; also interview with Sheikh Majid Ali Suleiman in *Al-Anbar Awakening, Volume II: Iraqi Perspectives from Insurgency to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004–2009*, ed. Gary W. Montgomery and Timothy S. McWilliams (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2009).

[2] Ghanem Basou was elected temporary governor of Ninevah, Hussein Jabara Jabouri was appointed governor of Salah al-Din, and Abdul Karim Burgis was appointed governor of Anbar. They were all former leaders in the Ba'ath party.

[3] See Kathem Faris, "Reality and Ambition," and Dr. Saleh Faraj, "History of the Anbar Awakening." These studies are in Arabic. Available from Sterling Jensen at sterling.jensen@gmail.com.

[4] Mullah Nadhem, "History of Al-Qaeda in Iraq." Mullah Nadhem was a former leader in al Qaeda in Iraq and has written a history of the organization; available from Sterling Jensen at sterling.jensen@gmail.com.

[5] See Faris's study. The Anbar Revolutionaries and Secret Police were vigilante groups that fought for self-preservation. They were usually former resistance fighters who had turned against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004 but were not working with the Americans. They would use AQI tactics such as laying improvised explosive devices and killing AQI fighters and leaving their bodies in the streets with signs warning anyone who worked with AQI that the same would happen to them.

[6] In 2004, a number of resistance groups were communicating with the Americans in Amman, Jordan, through tribal leaders such as Talal Gaoud. One of their early efforts to fight al Qaeda with U.S. support was with the Fallujah Brigade in early 2004. This brigade was not successful largely because it could not fight AQI and other jihadists through their own initiatives, but had strict instructions to support only U.S. operations. The gap between the expectations of these fighters and U.S. military expectations of how to use them was so great that the Fallujah Brigade was highly compromised by the insurgency and ended in failure.

[7] In late 2006 and early 2007, Prime Minister Maliki had strained relations with the Sunni bloc Tawafuq, and in particular with the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)—the leading party of Tawafuq. The Anbar Awakening called for the removal of the IIP from Anbar and Maliki saw Sheikh Abdul Sattar as a potential Sunni partner to undermine the IIP.