



Sunni protesters wave Islamist flags and chant slogans 3 May 2013 at an antigovernment rally in Fallujah, Iraq. Iraq's Sunni minority felt maligned by the Shiite-led government in Baghdad, hounded by its security forces, and increasingly threatened, once again, by the militias that terrorized them during the darkest days of sectarian bloodletting in 2006 and 2007. (Photo by Bilal Fawzi, Associated Press)

Western Anbar after the Awakening

A Tale of Three Cities

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After the Islamic State (IS) seized control of Fallujah in January 2014, it extended its territory to most of Iraq's three Sunni majority provinces (shown in figure 1, page 109)—Anbar, Salah ad Din, and Ninawa—by the end of the year. IS capitalized

on the marginalization of Iraq's Sunni Arabs, particularly in the armed forces. Rather than reconciling with the Sunnis as it recaptured the major cities in these provinces in 2015, 2016, and 2017, Baghdad gradually displaced and eroded Iraq's Sunni Arab community, leaving behind

millions of internally displaced persons and empty, pockmarked cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi, Tikrit, and Mosul.¹ Not surprisingly, as early as 2015, alleged atrocities and ethnic cleansing by Shiite militias undermined efforts to bring about a new Sunni Awakening, prompting calls for the deployment of U.S. troops.²

In November 2017, Iraqi forces recaptured the last IS-held town in western Anbar.³ And, during the two-year campaign to defeat IS, U.S. advisors were once again training Iraqi counterparts at Al Asad Airbase in western Anbar, as well as advising and accompanying them in battle against IS in Tal Afar.⁴ Consequently, it is not inconceivable that U.S. forces could be directed to assist in rebuilding local security forces after the defeat of IS. This is the role that U.S. forces played in the Anbar Awakening in 2006, and it required advisors to become deeply involved in recruiting and training Iraqi army and police units, thereby determining which tribes controlled local security. There is no guarantee that such an approach would be successful again, particularly given Baghdad's systematic disenfranchisement of Sunnis following the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Nevertheless, it is instructive to reexamine the previous U.S. tribal engagement in Anbar as U.S. advisors once again plan for phases IV (stabilize) and V (enable civil authority) of joint operations.⁵

The period of five years following the Anbar Awakening offers important lessons and highlights potential consequences for such a tribe-based counterinsurgency strategy. Case studies of the three main western



(Graphic courtesy of Central Intelligence Agency; Base 803336AI [C00459] 1-08)

Figure 1. Iraq

2003, western Anbar's Sunni Bedouin population—with its homogeneous culture, religion, and ethnicity—has provided fertile ground for insurgent safe havens, recruitment, and training.⁷ And, as far back as 1995, Iraq's government considered dividing Anbar into two provinces because it was too difficult to govern and because tribal leaders in the west lobbied for more autonomy in order to compete more effectively with Ramadi and Fallujah for government resources.⁸ Today, Anbar's security forces are divided into western and eastern regions.⁹

Anbar towns of Hit, Haditha, and Al Qaim from 2010 to 2014 suggest that where outside tribes are used to secure towns or where powerful tribes are excluded from local security forces, the stability achieved may be fleeting.

Western Anbar

Anbar is dominated by desert and is the largest by area of Iraq's nineteen provinces; it can be divided into a sparsely populated west bordering Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and a more densely populated east on the outskirts of Baghdad.⁶ Since

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In 2009, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that over half of the province's one million residents lived in the two eastern cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, while the remainder were distributed among six districts with populations ranging from twenty thousand to over one hundred thousand residents.¹⁰ These are Hit, Haditha, Anah, Rawah, Al Qaim, and Rutbah. Each district has as its administrative center a town of the same name, and all of these towns, other than Rutbah, are located along the Euphrates River between Ramadi and the Syrian border.

Western Anbar is bisected by an east-west highway running from Baghdad through Fallujah, Ramadi, and Rutbah to Amman, Jordan. A second highway follows the Euphrates River running northwest from Ramadi through or nearby Hit, Haditha, Anah, and Rawah to Al Qaim on the Syrian border and continues on to Aleppo, Syria. Western Anbar is also bisected by a large valley, approximately 360 kilometers long and 50 to 100 meters deep, called *Wadi Horan*, that runs from the Saudi border in the southwest to the Euphrates River near Haditha in the northeast.¹¹ It provides an alternative route for travel

Flanked by security officials, Diyala Governor Raad Rashid al-Tamimi (*second from left*) and Shia Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (*center*) walk outside of the Diyala Operations Center 26 July 2007 in Baqubah, Iraq. Maliki's policies, widely perceived as prejudiced against the Sunni population and leadership, were key factors directly leading to early broad Anbar Province Sunni tribal support for the Islamic State. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Curt Cashour, U.S. Army)

across the province via dirt roads and has been a favorite location for insurgent training camps.¹²

The towns of Hit and Al Qaim are plagued by the province's worst power outages.¹³ In contrast, Haditha, located halfway between Hit and Al Qaim and less than twenty kilometers from Al Asad Airbase, has the province's fewest power outages.¹⁴ Haditha is home to Iraq's second largest hydroelectric dam and the K-3 pumping station connected via pipeline to the Beiji oil refinery in neighboring Salah ad Din Province.¹⁵ Haditha is also the most literate town in the entire province at 98 percent, higher even than the national average.¹⁶ Al Qaim's state-run cement and phosphate plants employ many local residents, giving it the lowest unemployment rate of the three towns at 3 percent, far lower than overall rates for



Anbar and all of Iraq.¹⁷ Following the 2003 U.S. invasion, Al Qaim was critical for the insurgency due to its remote location on the Iraq-Syria border and its role as a hub for smuggling weapons, equipment, money, and fighters.¹⁸ Anah and Rawah are small towns located between Haditha and Al Qaim. Rutbah is the smallest of the main western Anbar towns and the only one located on the east-west highway.

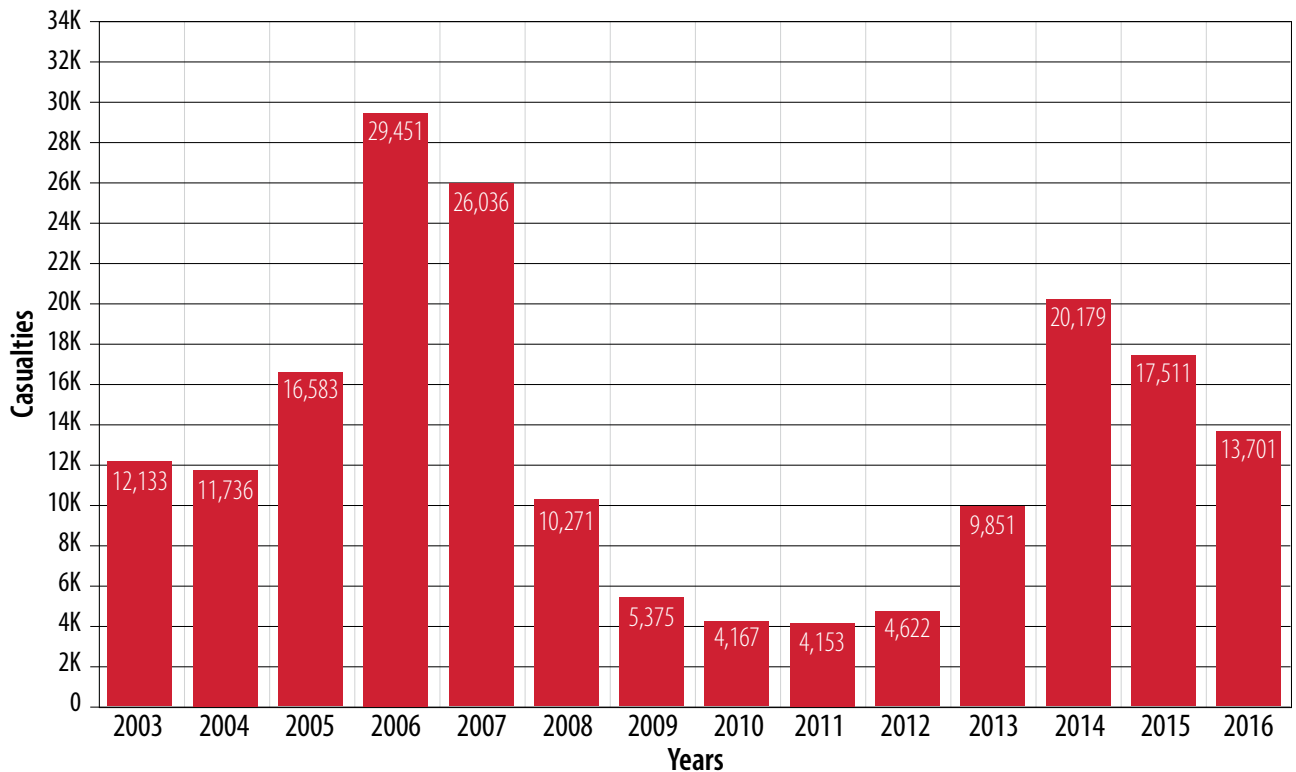
Following the battle of Fallujah in November 2004, insurgents in Iraq retreated to western Anbar.¹⁹ Many Anbar tribes initially welcomed the arrival of foreign fighters as a marriage of convenience against a Shia-dominated government increasingly aligned with Iran, especially after the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and commencement of the Coalition Provisional Authority's de-Ba'athification policy.²⁰ Al-Qaida in Iraq used its dedication, organization, funding, and a willingness to die to seize control of the insurgency in 2006 from Iraq's Sunni Arabs as the former regime elements, Islamic fundamentalists, and tribes eventually coalesced under Islamist organizations.²¹ The seeds of the Awakening were sown during this period, however. Al-Qaida

Iraqi Shiite tribal fighters raise their weapons while chanting slogans against the Islamic State 14 June 2014 in Baghdad's Sadr City district after authorities urged Iraqis to help battle insurgents. Hundreds of young Iraqi men gripped by religious and nationalistic fervor streamed into volunteer centers across Baghdad, answering a call by the country's top Shiite cleric to join the fight against Sunni militants advancing in the north. The poster at top depicts Imam Hussein, a revered Shiite figure. (Photo by Karim Kadim, Associated Press)

in Iraq began targeting tribal leaders and sought to undermine tribal society by replacing tribal law with sharia law, replacing tribal sheikhs with emirs, seizing control of smuggling and other revenue sources of the tribal leaders, and demanding daughters of local sheikhs as wives.²² Eventually, the major Anbar tribes turned against al-Qaida for their own survival.

Hit, Haditha, and Al Qaim during the Awakening: Disrupting the Tribal Equilibrium

During the Anbar Awakening, in the two key towns of Hit and Al Qaim, the Albu Nimr and Albu Mahal



(Graphic by author; source: Iraq Body Count, <https://iraqbodycount.org/database/>)

Figure 2. Casualties in Iraq from 2003 through 2016

formed early tribal militias that worked with U.S. forces and eventually formed the backbone of new local security forces, giving the Albu Nimr control of Hit and the Albu Mahal control of Al Qaim. These two closely aligned tribes with shared common ancestry were critical to the Awakening in western Anbar, because U.S. forces pushed from the “bookends” of Al Qaim and Hit toward Haditha, Anah, and Rawah in the center using Albu Mahal and Albu Nimr tribal militia.²³ As explained below, in both Hit and Al Qaim, U.S. forces gave control of the local security forces to a single tribe that had joined the Awakening early, in spite of being either outsiders (the Albu Nimr in Hit) or not the single dominant tribe prior to the Awakening (Albu Mahal in Al Qaim).

Hit. Hit and Al Qaim represent two distinct models of how a town’s tribal equilibrium can be disrupted, leading to future violence and instability. The town of Hit lies along a narrow strip of land between the Euphrates River and the highway, near Al Asad Airbase. It is comprised of families that identify themselves simply as *Hitawi*, indicating their origin in Hit, rather than members of Anbar’s prominent tribes. In contrast, at the time of the Awakening, the

Albu Nimr were a single, powerful tribe based in the towns of Zuwayah and Tal Aswad in the Al Phurat subdistrict (in Hit district), across the Euphrates River from the town of Hit; Al Phurat constituted a large, powerful, and homogenous tribal area.²⁴

Sections of the Albu Nimr rose up in revolt against Saddam Hussein in June 1995 following the torture and execution of an Iraqi general from the tribe who was suspected of plotting a coup.²⁵ It took two days for the elite Special Republican Guard and *Amn al-Khass* (Special Security Organization) to suppress the unrest.²⁶ The fact that elite units, rather than local police, were required to reestablish order illustrates both the strength of the Albu Nimr at the time and just how difficult it was for Saddam to control the Anbar tribes.

Shunned by Hussein, the Albu Nimr backed the U.S. invasion in 2003.²⁷ Unfortunately for the them, by mid-2005 insurgents had gained control over the Hit district council, and the Nimrawi leaders held them responsible for insurgent attacks on the Albu Nimr in their Al Phurat tribal area; relations became so strained that one sheikh threatened to level the town if any of his tribesmen were hurt.²⁸

In 2005, the U.S. Special Forces team in Hit stood up a Nimrawi tribal militia, called the Desert Protectors, and in 2006 they helped integrate the Desert Protectors into the local Iraqi Army battalion as its scout platoon and formed a SWAT unit comprised of Albu Nimr tribesmen.²⁹ Also in 2006, a U.S. Army battalion stood up a police force in Hit district, but the force was comprised entirely of Albu Nimr tribesmen.³⁰ By that time, U.S. advisors suspected that Hit's Nimrawi chief of police was participating in reprisal attacks against insurgents with a vigilante group formed by Anbar tribes in Ramadi, called *Thawar al Anbar* (Anbar Revolutionaries), that eventually functioned as the Awakening Movement's own militia.³¹ In early 2007, the police force, backed by U.S. Special Forces, seized control of the town of Hit.³²

Tensions continued to escalate, however. By May 2007, there were widespread allegations that the Hit police chief was responsible for extrajudicial killings, releasing insurgent detainees for bribes, and abusing detainees; night letters circulated in Hit, with one group condemning the police chief and another group defending him.³³ Members of the Hit district council demanded that the police chief be removed. Convinced that the police chief was assembling his force to confront the Hitawi townspeople and that a bloodbath would result, the local U.S. commander arrested the police chief.³⁴

Al Qaim. In Al Qaim, U.S. forces also gave control of the local security forces to a single tribe that had joined the Awakening early. The Albu Mahal were

arguably the first tribe to join coalition forces against al-Qaida in Iraq, and their path to dominance over the Al Qaim security forces was similar to that of their close relations, the Albu Nimr in Hit.

During the early stages of the insurgency in 2004, following the dissolution of the Iraqi army, the Albu Mahal established a tribal militia called the *Kata'ib Hamza*

(Hamza Battalion) specifically to fight coalition forces and the new government of Iraq.³⁵ In early 2005, tensions arose between the Albu Mahal and the influx of al-Qaida fighters who began to interfere in tribal smuggling and disregarded tribal custom.³⁶ By early May 2005, the Albu Mahal were in open revolt against al-Qaida in Iraq. In an attempt to intimidate the tribe, al-Qaida in Iraq beheaded the police chief, a Mahalawi tribesman, prompting the tribe to turn on al-Qaida

in Iraq's local supporters, the Albu Karbuli and Albu Salmani.³⁷ Within a week, al-Qaida in Iraq kidnapped the Anbar governor, a Mahalawi sheikh and cousin of the tribe's paramount sheikh; a prominent Albu Nimr sheikh, himself a former Anbar governor, requested assistance from U.S. forces.³⁸

After being pushed out by U.S. forces, al-Qaida returned in July 2005 and, joining forces with the Albu Karbuli and Albu Salmani tribes, drove several thousand Albu Mahal tribesmen and their families out of Al Qaim, killing dozens in the process.³⁹ Faced with an existential threat, the Albu Mahal began to collaborate with coalition forces. In August 2005, the Albu Mahal established a tribal militia, called the Desert Protectors (the same name as the Albu Nimr militia in Hit), and helped U.S. marines clear Al Qaim by the end of 2005 as part

Table. Casualties for Selected Cities during the Post-Awakening Period from January 2009 through December 2013

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Hit	3	8	6	8	14	39
Al Qaim	5	7	6	7	4	29
Haditha	3	2	8	9	4	26
Anah and Rawah	2	0	1	3	6	12
Rutbah	1	0	1	3	12	17
Total	14	17	22	30	40	123

(Graphic by author; source: Iraq Body Count, <https://iraqbodycount.org/database/>)

of Operation Iron Fist and Operation Steel Curtain, and reach as far as Rawah and Anah by September 2006.⁴⁰ The Albu Mahal were allowed to convert the Desert Protectors into the Iraqi army brigade based in Al Qaim and into the local police force, and they took control of smuggling operations across the Syrian border.⁴¹ The

Cumulatively, the three towns generally became more violent each year, however, the pattern was different each year in each town. In 2010, while overall attacks in Anbar were decreasing relative to 2009, attacks surged in Hit and Al Qaim, where the Albu Nimr had gained control of Hit and the Albu Mahal



Casualty patterns for the three main western Anbar towns . . . reflect an interesting correlation with the tribal composition of the local security forces.



brigade's commander, Col. Ismail Shihab al-Mahalawi, was a cousin of the paramount sheikh of the Albu Mahal, and two battalion commanders and various staff officers were also members of the tribe.⁴² While the author was deployed to Anbar in 2010, Mahalawi was promoted to major general and became the commander of the 7th Iraqi Army Division, headquartered at Al Asad Airbase, while his brother served as the Al Qaim chief of police.

Haditha. The same phenomenon did not occur in Haditha; however, where the dominant al-Jughayfi tribe turned against al-Qaida after the gruesome beheading of local al-Jughayfa policemen in the town's soccer stadium in 2005.⁴³ The al-Jughayfa are Haditha's largest and most powerful tribe and have significant popular support.⁴⁴ It was the al-Jughayfa, rather than a smaller or outside tribe, that U.S. forces worked with to push al-Qaida out of the Haditha area in 2006.⁴⁵

2009–2013: Interregnum

By 2010, civilian (noncombatant) deaths in Iraq had reached their lowest levels since the 2003 invasion (these include attacks on local police, militia, tribal, and government personnel).⁴⁶ Civilian deaths peaked again in 2014 when IS seized control of the Sunni provinces, but the years 2009 through 2012 represented a period of relative stability (see figure 2, page 112).

Casualty patterns for the three main western Anbar towns during this period, however, reflect an interesting correlation with the tribal composition of the local security forces. The table sets forth casualties for Hit, Haditha, and Al Qaim during the post-Awakening period from January 2009 through December 2013, the month before IS seized Fallujah (see page 113).⁴⁷

had gained control of Al Qaim. In 2011, attacks surged in Haditha. In 2012, attacks surged in the small towns of Anah, Rawah, and Rutbah. Finally, in 2013, attacks again surged in Hit—this time dramatically. Overall, violence was by far the highest and showed the greatest increase in Hit. Al Qaim was the next most violent. In contrast, Haditha experienced less violence than either Hit or Al Qaim. One hypothesis to explain this pattern is that formerly dominant groups allowed remnants of Sunni insurgent groups to conduct attacks on local security forces dominated by competing or outside tribes.

2014: Islamic State Returns

Following its capture of Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014, IS captured Al Qaim in August and Hit in October.⁴⁸ Haditha, in contrast, was the only major town in western Anbar (indeed all of Anbar) that did not fall to IS.

Al Qaim. Weeks after retaking Al Qaim, IS published a map of the Caliphate's provinces in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁹ It depicted the state of "Euphrates" as centered on the town of Al Qaim, extending east to Anah and Rawa and west to Deir al Zor in Syria, and capitalizing on Al Qaim's role as a smuggling hub with deep social and intertribal connections across the Iraq-Syria border.⁵⁰ IS lost little time in targeting the Albu Mahal. In April 2015, its fighters executed three hundred members of the local security forces and civilians—most of them members of the Albu Mahal tribe.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, the al-Karbouli tribe (who sided with al-Qaida against the Albu Mahal and refused to join the Awakening), are now ascendant.⁵² Under pressure in Mosul, Raqqa, and



Deir al Zor in 2016, IS appeared to be pulling back to Al Qaim where leaders reportedly held regular meetings and some of IS's largest improvised explosive device factories were reportedly located, and in late 2017, IS's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was believed to be hiding in the desert along the Iraq-Syria border.⁵³

Hit. In October 2014, IS retook the town of Hit.⁵⁴ IS did not simply push the Nimrawi-dominated local police out; they attacked the Albu Nimr tribal area of al-Phurat across the river, rounding up an estimated fifteen hundred families, executing over seven hundred Nimrawi tribesmen in less than twenty days, and forcing over a thousand others to flee to Haditha.⁵⁵

Haditha. In August 2014, IS laid siege to Haditha after the al-Jughayfa tribal militia, the "Lions of Haditha," refused to turn over some two hundred tribesmen accused of collaborating with the Iraqi government.⁵⁶ The siege lasted nearly two years, but IS failed to retake the town.⁵⁷ A local Iraqi army commander attributed Haditha's survival to the al-Jughayfa tribal militia, although U.S. airstrikes were also key when IS attempted to seize the Haditha Dam.⁵⁸ The tribe's resilience against IS over the past three years, together with Haditha's

Iraqi security forces deployed 17 November 2017 in Rawah, 175 miles northwest of Baghdad. Iraqi forces backed by the U.S.-led coalition retook the last town in the country that was held by the Islamic State (IS), more than three years after IS militants captured nearly a third of Iraq's territory. (Photo by Osama Sami, Associated Press)

strategic location near the dam, oil pipelines, and Al Asad Airbase, make the al-Jughayfa a very appealing partner for a future U.S. tribal engagement campaign in western Anbar. And, following the decimation of the Albu Nimr and the Albu Mahal, they may be asked to play a larger role in western Anbar. However, should they attempt to extend their control beyond Haditha, they may experience the same difficulties that the Albu Mahal and Albu Nimr experienced after the Awakening.

Conclusion: The Implications of Disrupting the Tribal Equilibrium

The experiences of Hit, Haditha, and Al Qaim after the Awakening suggest that following a successful counterinsurgency campaign in a highly tribal region, the tribal composition of local security forces may be a

useful predictor of future instability. Particular recruitment patterns among the local tribes may undermine popular support for local security forces. Giving a single tribe control over a town's security forces appears more likely to lead to violence and instability where control is given to an outsider tribe or to a local tribe that was not previously dominant than where control remains with the dominant tribe. Understanding this phenomenon

can help planners anticipate the possible consequences of disrupting the tribal equilibrium in other tribal engagement campaigns, perhaps even in western Anbar following the defeat of IS. ■

The views expressed do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense, the U.S. Army, the U.S. Intelligence Community, or the U.S. Government.

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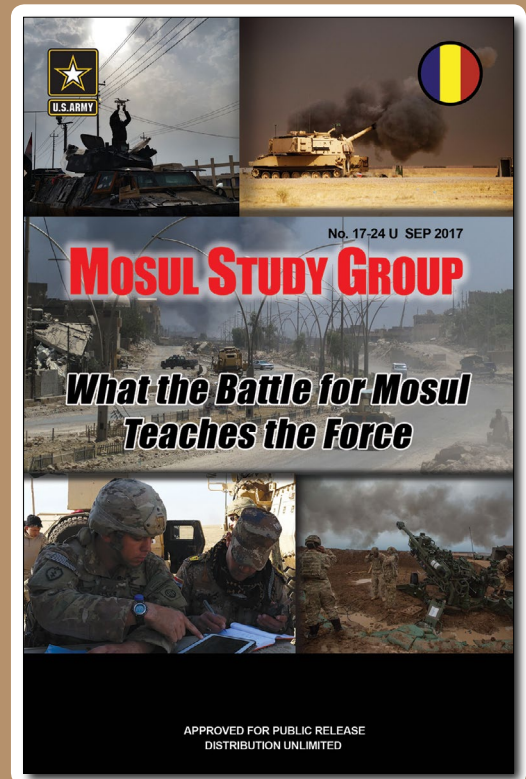
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Military Review

FOR YOUR INFORMATION



This report is the result of an intense forty-five-day effort to study Operation Eagle Strike in order to provide the Army with relevant observations that can be immediately applied by the force. Members of the Mosul Study Group (MSG) consulted with the units that participated in Operation Eagle Strike and accompanied them on the Mosul battlefield. In developing this study, the MSG reviewed numerous after action reports from key advise-and-assist elements and reviewed documents, interviews, and lessons learned captured by joint and combined units involved with the operation. The purpose of this report is to provide immediate impressions of Operation Eagle Strike that may or should directly impact the Army and how it approaches future conflicts. It does not attempt to form conclusions about what these observations mean for the future character of war. To read the complete report, visit <https://call2armymil/toc.aspx?document=17582> (CAC required).