



## WHAT TURNED THE TIDE IN ANBAR?

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**I**N HIS RECENT book, *The War Within*, Bob Woodward attributes the largest role in turning the tide in Iraq to new methods of intelligence fusion and precision raiding that allowed special forces to eliminate insurgent leaders.<sup>1</sup> Although Woodward acknowledges that the surge and the Awakening were important, he gives the role of Special Forces special prominence:

Beginning in May 2006, the U.S. military and the U.S. intelligence agencies launched a series of top secret operations that enabled them to locate, target and kill key individuals in extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Sunni insurgency and renegade Shi'a militias. . . a number of authoritative sources say these covert activities had a far-reaching effect on the violence and were very possibly the biggest factor in reducing it.<sup>2</sup>

In post publication interviews Woodward repeatedly cited the key role of intelligence fusion and precision raiding above other factors.<sup>3</sup> Follow up reporting in the *Washington Post* also highlighted the role of Special Forces in eliminating insurgent leadership.<sup>4</sup>

This is not what I saw during my tour in Al Anbar during late 2006 and early 2007 when the tide turned in that province. In Anbar, the Awakening of the sheiks and the surge were the key events. Raiding by various special operations units was extensive, but its effects were unclear.

There is a lot of politics wrapped up in this question, so getting an objective assessment is difficult. The surge was a Bush cabinet initiative, launched against the advice of many military advisors. Woodward has become increasingly critical of the Bush administration, and his book is reluctant to give President Bush credit for improving conditions in Iraq.

Nevertheless, understanding what turned the tide in Iraq is vital. The answer will shape operations and policies elsewhere, particularly in Afghanistan as the Nation looks for a new strategy to turn that failing effort around.

### The Awakening—The Key Event

Much has been written about the “Awakening” of the sheiks in Anbar, and there is no need to repeat that story here. A few key elements are worth reviewing.

- The Awakening came first (September 2006), before the surge and the increase in raids. It was a local initiative, driven by Al-Qaeda’s brutal treatment of the population and its war against the sheiks. Although the coalition

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PHOTO: Shi’ite and Sunni members of the Joint Security Committee attend the First Anbar-Kabala JSC Meeting in Ramadi, Iraq, 20 October 2007. (U.S. Marine Corps, LCPL Sarah Furrer)

did not cause the Awakening, it was agile enough to respond quickly, encouraging the leaders and protecting its members.

- The Awakening was not just a political event. It had immediate effects in the field. First, it took dangerous young men off the streets as the sheiks made peace with the coalition.

- Most important, the Awakening brought thousands of new recruits into the police. Al-Qaeda feared the police more than the army or the coalition because local police knew who belonged and who did not. Local police also had linkages to the populace that procured tips and information unavailable to outsiders. Thus, police could attack Al-Qaeda cells in a way outsiders could not.

## The Surge

The “surge” was also important. In Anbar, it came early (November 2006) and was relatively small—one Marine Expeditionary Unit Special Operations Command was broken up and spread around the province. Two companies reinforced the U.S. Army brigade (1-1 Armored Division, later 1-3 Infantry Division) in Ramadi. Two companies went to the Hadithah “triad,” the three cities of Hadithah, Barwanah, and Haqlaniyah. The expeditionary unit headquarters and remaining ground elements went out west to Ar Rutbah. Although contrary to doctrine, this dispersion allowed Multinational Force-West to pressure several key points at once.

Despite the small increase in manpower (only a 10 percent increase), the surge had a significant impact. In both Rutbah and the Hadithah triad police forces were recruited and took hold. Prior to the surge, Rutbah had virtually no police, while Hadithah’s few police hunkered down in a limited number of locations. Now they covered their entire towns. The number of incidents in the Hadithah triad plummeted. In Ramadi, the number of police grew and their coverage spread to every neighborhood, although the level of violence remained high for many months.

With the surge, there were no longer blank spots—areas where Al-Qaeda in Iraq could operate with little fear of coalition interference. Further, the surge showed the sheiks of the Awakening that the U.S. was serious in its support.

## The Impact of Raids

Ascertaining the effect of raids is difficult because so many other factors produce changes on the counterinsurgency battlefield. Certainly, raids captured or killed many targets (“jackpots”). Intuitively, it seems reasonable to believe that the loss of key leaders would weaken an insurgency. Although leaders can be replaced, the replacements might be less skilled or more cautious. Eventually, the scale and effectiveness of insurgent actions would decline.

However, raids also have a significant, but often unappreciated, downside. Many resulted in “dry holes”—that is, the target was not present. Maybe the intelligence was bad. Maybe the timing was bad. The result, however, was a door smashed, a family terrorized, and sometimes, unintended casualties. Generally, the males in the house were detained for screening anyway since the house was under suspicion. Thus, the after-action report for many, perhaps most, raids concluded: “No jackpot, X detainees.” These raids rarely collected the forensic evidence to sustain a court case, so generally within two weeks the now-angered detainees were released to return to their neighborhoods. Occasionally there were spectacular errors. One such error nearly turned a key friendly tribe against the coalition.

Raiding organizations tend to be less sensitive to this downside because they do not own the territory. They conduct their operations and return to base. Line units, who do own the territory, deal with the aftermath. In early 2007, the multinational force staff attempted to assess the effect of raids on the insurgency. No connection was evident. The number of raids had increased, the number of jackpots taken had increased, but the level of violence (measured by daily incidents) had also increased. Further, no decrease was visible in the skill level or

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Sheik Abd al Satar Abu Resha, founder of the Anbar Awakening movement, speaks in downtown Ramadi before the start of the second Anbar Forum in Iraq, 6 September 2007.

sophistication of insurgent operations. To be fair, it might have been that raiding took time to have its effects felt, or that it worked in conjunction with other factors. Perhaps a more nuanced analysis would have turned up a relationship. However, raids against the insurgent leadership were clearly not the dominant factor in reducing the level of violence.

## The Attractiveness of Raiding as a Tactic

Counterinsurgency theorists are very critical of strategies that rely heavily on raiding to decapitate insurgent leadership. Some examples:

- The U.S. counterinsurgency field manual (FM 3-24) cites “focus special forces primarily on raiding” as an “unsuccessful practice.”<sup>5</sup> Targeting insurgent leadership does not appear in any of the manual’s precepts. General David Petraeus, who oversaw the drafting of the manual, often returns to this theme: “You can’t kill your way out of an insurgency.” Indeed, he has gone further:

What we have learned over the years is that the killing of a leader does not decapitate an organization in the way that perhaps one might think. It’s an important blow, but let’s recall that Zarqawi was killed in Iraq, and Al-Qaeda recovered from that. Someone else—al Masri—stepped up in his place and in fact, the level of violence carried out by Al-Qaeda in Iraq actually went up.<sup>6</sup>

- The *Small Wars Manual*, the Marine Corps classic on counterinsurgency, does not even discuss targeting insurgent leadership.<sup>7</sup>

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- Proponents of “fourth generation warfare” view enemies as plastic networks of nonstate actors. Decapitation is not just ineffective; it is impossible because networks are self-healing.<sup>8</sup>

- David Galula’s recently rediscovered studies of counterinsurgency in Algeria focus on insurgent members, not the leadership. Thus his strategy includes arrests by the police. This is not part of a decapitation strategy by the military but a broad effort to eliminate insurgent cell members.<sup>9</sup>

- One British study of 44 insurgencies found that targeting insurgent leadership was actually counterproductive.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of targeting the insurgent leadership, all of these theorists focus instead on providing security for and maintaining control of the population. They are not just focused on “soft” power—all advocate violent action against irreconcilable insurgent elements—but they do not envision success arising from decapitation of the insurgency.

If both practical results and theory suggest decapitation tactics are dubious, why then is raiding so highly featured in contemporary discussions about counterinsurgency? The reasons are several. Raids by Special Forces capture the imagination of both decision makers and the public. Decision makers see in such operations the possibility of major gains for small risks and low casualties. Precision attack, on the ground as in the air, promises powerful effects and low collateral damage compared with conventional operations.<sup>11</sup> Much public imagination revels in the exploits of brave, competent, highly effective warriors. Finally, by necessity so much secrecy surrounds these actions that few can say what is really happening. The public only sees the “high-speed” images.

There are a number of theories about why raiding strategies might not succeed despite hitting targets. The U.S. counterinsurgency manual discusses at length how excessive use of violence can alienate the civilian population, which is the center of gravity for counterinsurgency operations.

Analysts at the Institute for Defense Analysis have offered another theory based on their analysis of counterdrug operations. What they learned was contrary to expectations. Taking out the kingpin was not very effective in suppressing the drug trade. There was always an ambitious and talented “number two” ready to step in. Most effective were actions that discouraged the foot soldiers because a general without foot soldiers was useless. Recent analysis of operations in Iraq indicates that the same dynamic occurs there with the insurgency.

## Other Perspectives

If this uncertainty about the effectiveness of a decapitation raiding strategy were the observation of just a single observer, one could dismiss it as an anomaly. But others in Anbar have expressed similar perspectives. For example, then-Colonel Sean MacFarland, who commanded a brigade in Anbar during the time of my tour, analyzed the reasons for the turning of the tide in the provincial capital of Ramadi.<sup>12</sup> He gives primary credit to the Awakening, and notes the contributions of the coalition supporting the Awakening, the building of the Iraqi police, and especially the importance of the effort to secure the population through forward presence. Although he pays tribute to the efforts of Special Forces, he does not mention any weakening of the insurgency because of attacks on its leadership.<sup>13</sup> Other analyses of the events in Ramadi—for example, Andrew Lubin’s “Ramadi: From Caliphate to Capitalism”—share the same perspective.<sup>14</sup>

Marine Corps perspectives not surprisingly focus on the Awakening and the strengthening of the Iraqi security forces, efforts that they were deeply involved with.<sup>15</sup> However, even analyses that focus on Special Forces in Anbar recognize the primary importance of conventional operations that secured the population.<sup>16</sup> None of the analyses mentions the weakening of insurgent leadership as a significant factor in turning the tide.

## Lessons for the Future

Of course, what happened in Anbar province may not be representative of other areas, particularly Baghdad. Anbar has virtually no Shi’as, so sectarian conflicts are absent. In particular, there was no Sadr militia, the neutralization of which was a major cause of the reduction in violence in Baghdad.

Nevertheless, because the tide began to turn in Anbar first, the experience there is worth considering for success in Afghanistan. If Woodward is right, the way forward in that country would be to hold a network of secure bases from which raiding forces would sally to attack insurgent leaders while negotiators would cajole tribal leaders. No surge would be necessary; boots on the ground provide relatively little value. However, if the experience in Anbar is representative, boots on the ground appear instrumental, even essential.

A thorough study could ascertain the real effect of raids. At issue is not the skill or valor of Special Forces conducting the decapitation campaign. Those qualities have been fully demonstrated. What is uncertain is the effect that this effort has on the overall counterinsurgency campaign. Clearly neutralizing “x” number of insurgent targets is insufficient evidence of success. However, there may be important secondary or tertiary effects that are not immediately evident, the effects may be cumulative over time, or it may be that, in fact, there is little lasting effect. No such study does appear to have been done. Nevertheless, evidence from Anbar indicates that Woodward is wrong—that boots on the ground are important and that, indeed, we cannot kill our way out of an insurgency. **MR**

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### NOTES

1. Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006-2008* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).
2. *Ibid.*, 380.
3. For example, “Secret killing program is key in Iraq, Woodward says,” CNN, 9 September 2008.
4. John Warrick and Robin Wright, “U.S. teams weaken insurgency in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 6 September 2008.
5. FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006).
6. *Army Times*, 27 October 2008, 28.
7. *Small Wars Manual, United States Marine Corps, 1940* (republished by Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 2004).
8. For example, Colonel Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone* (Osceola, WI: Zenith Press, 2004) and the original work, W. Lind, K. Nightengale, J. Schmitt, J. Sutton, and G.I. Wilson, “The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, 22-26.
9. David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria 1956-1958*, 1963 (republished by Santa Monica: RAND Corp., 2007); *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, 1964 (republished by Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2006). Galula does advocate a decapitation strategy of potential insurgent leaders in the pre-hostilities phase of an insurgency, before violence begins. However, he sees this as a police matter.
10. *Security Forces and Insurgent Success Factors in Counterinsurgency Campaigns* (UK Ministry of Defense, Policy and Capability Studies Department).
11. For a full discussion of why politicians are drawn to Special Forces, see Eliot Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians* (Cambridge: MA: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1978).
12. Major Neil Smith and Colonel Sean MacFarland, “Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point,” *Military Review*, March-April 2008.
13. Colonel Sean MacFarland, “Addendum: Anbar Awakens,” *Military Review*, May-June 2008.
14. Andrew Lubin, “Ramadi: From Caliphate to Capitalism,” *Naval Institute Proceedings*, April 2008, 54-61.
15. For example, Colonel Michael D. Visconage, “Turning the Tide in the West,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 2008, 8-12.
16. For example, Dick Couch, “The Lessons of Ramadi,” *Naval Institute Proceedings*, October 2008, 67-72.