



(AP Photo by Charles Dharapak)

President Bush shakes hands with Abdul-Sattar Abu Risha, leader of the Anbar Salvation Council, also known as the Anbar Awakening—an alliance of clans backing the Iraqi government and U.S. forces—during a meeting with tribal leaders 3 September 2007 at Al-Asad Air Base in Anbar Province, Iraq. Abu Risha, the most prominent figure in a U.S.-backed revolt of Sunni sheiks against al-Qaida in Iraq, was killed 13 September 2007 by a bomb planted near his home in Anbar Province, 10 days after he met with President Bush.

The Anbar Awakening in Context ... and Why It Is so Hard to Replicate

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The takeover of large swaths of Iraq by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 may invite new interest in the possible relevance of the Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)-era phenomenon known as the Anbar Awakening. In a remarkable turnaround—in the general time frame between spring 2005 and spring 2007—local Iraqi tribal forces converted from being enemies of U.S. forces to U.S. allies in the fight against al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and its domination of Anbar Province where it had become most entrenched. Organized tribal resistance to AQI, which had already begun in pockets of Anbar prior to obtaining U.S. support, was a process that emerged from a confluence of factors within a specific set of unique circumstances. Tribal forces did the majority of the fighting throughout the province and brought a critical mass of the Anbar population into Iraqi government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Defense units and police precincts), and a political party called Sahawa—at least for a period.¹

Even before 2014, the Anbar Awakening had engendered enduring interest by Western military and intelligence personnel as well as policy discourse over the outcome of OIF. For serious students of the movement who survey the literature produced on the subject, it becomes quickly apparent that one must appreciate the unique conditions that prompted these local figures and their constituents to reject AQI in the particular place, time, and manner in which they did, and that such conditions were requisite for the subsequent relationship they developed with U.S. forces.

Irrespective, debate continues over exactly what happened as the Awakening unfolded. Some authors have sought to assign ultimate credit for the success of the Awakening to a particular service, unit, or person. Others have attributed success to a darker side—a U.S. alliance with unsavory figures, some who had been insurgents fighting coalition forces until expediency enticed them to work with U.S. armed forces. Some accounts have depicted the Awakening as a failed process aimed at national reconciliation, while alternate interpretations have characterized it oppositely as primarily a Sunni challenge to the Shia-dominated Iraqi central government. While opinions differ, the most significant discussion of the debate concerns the extent to which the Awakening can be

a template for replicating the establishment of local defense forces to counter insurgencies.²

The problem with using the Awakening as a template for developing counterinsurgency programs elsewhere is that studies of the mechanics of providing support and training often isolate the Anbar Awakening from its historical and cultural contexts that made tribal forces receptive to U.S. support. This begs the question, “Can we apply similar principles again in other circumstances?” I assert that the answer is yes—as long as we are realistic about what the Awakening was and was not, and as long as we account for differences in culture and situational context in such efforts.

Observations on the Anbar Awakening

The synthesis of observations provided in this article are intended to build a greater appreciation for the Anbar Awakening’s place in history and to sharpen the way we think about the extent and limits of its potential applicability to other situations.

In the Anbar Awakening (Sahawa), the United States did not create something—it co-opted an indigenous trend. For example, the United States did not create the anti-AQI force that first emerged in western Anbar in 2005. Rather, the U.S. military and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense opportunistically backed an Abu Mahal-led tribal force, which had lost its control over an important town and trading route and had taken the lead on its own to promote general tribal rebellion against AQI. The United States essentially deputized the resisting tribes as an ad hoc military unit and worked with it to fight AQI and reclaim lost land from AQI-affiliated rival tribes.³ Observing the interim benefits associated with cooperating with the U.S.-led coalition, other tribes followed suit.⁴ Likewise, in Ramadi in September 2006 when the United States blessed Sahawa, it was not a question of whether we wanted Sahawa to exist but was rather a bid to influence an extant force to keep its efforts in line with U.S. goals in Iraq. Prior to that September, many of Sahawa’s constituent parts had been fighting AQI in the form of organized militias for months—some longer—and were determined to proceed with or without U.S. support.

Even though a movement is indigenous, the United States can help shape it. The Awakening tribes showed signs that, had they been left to their own



(U.S. Marine Corps Photo by Cpl. Erin Kirk)

Ali Hatem Abd al-Razzaq Ali al-Suleiman al-Assafi al-Dulaimi attends a tribal conference 24 March 2008 with U.S. Marines in Anbar Province, Iraq. Hatem is a paramount Sunni sheikh of the Dulaim tribe of Anbar Province and also the hereditary head of the Dulaimi tribal confederation, which includes a large number of tribal groups. Hatem was a high-profile figure in Anbar Province during the emergence of the Sunni Tribal Awakening.

devices, they probably would have failed for lack of the ability to unify their efforts.

It is important to observe that, as a confederation of tribes and groups with no tradition of compromising for a greater good, Sahawa was wracked by infighting. Even prior to its leader Sheik ‘abd al-Sattar’s assassination in September 2007, several of the founders broke and formed a competing group.⁵ After Sattar’s death, the movement splintered further. Notably, in the early months, Sahawa spokesmen often used a sectarian and militant tone that sharply contrasted with public decorum used later when key leaders were attempting to convert the movement into an anti-establishment, national political organization in 2007 that moved beyond merely an anti-al-Qaida coalition.

It is likely that, had Sahawa successfully converted itself into a Sunni-based tribal party and entered the political scene on its own as an overtly sectarian force hostile to the Shia-dominated Iraqi government, it would have risked either inciting a civil war or

achieving a tactical success that created a de facto, highly fractured, secessionist Sunni state at a time when retributive Sunni-Shia violence still raged in Baghdad.

Observing these fault lines among the tribes, U.S. officials who worked with the Sahawa leaders were able to promote a measure of unity by constantly encouraging them to remain cooperative and civil with one another as a condition for continued material and financial support. In conjunction, on a daily basis, the United States also had to stress nonsectarianism, political moderation, and inclusiveness.⁶

The Awakening originated from leaders rising to the occasion. The Awakening was enacted neither by the Iraqis with the grandest hereditary titles nor by the first to align with the United States; it was enacted by the ones who had earned credibility with the people through deeds.

U.S. officials in Anbar had initial contact with an array of locals who claimed to be the head sheiks for their tribal areas and demanded U.S. money and weapons.

Some of these were indeed senior by bloodline and title, but experience showed that such attributes did not always translate into influence with tribal members. Early in the war, most of the ostensibly senior hereditary sheiks failed to serve as actual leaders of any significant portion of the population. This resulted in part because insurgents and AQI cells targeted them, accusing them of being U.S. stooges and traitors. This caused many to flee to neighboring countries, further undercutting their influence. As a result, Sunni councils formed outside Iraq that were mostly comprised of persons who had all but abdicated real leadership. Although they asked to administer some sort of armed front against AQI encroachment, such assemblies of Anbar tribesmen and notables outside Iraq usually amounted to little more than forums to complain as a pretext for seeking lucrative reconstruction contracts.⁷

This dynamic opened the door for several so-called junior sheiks. On paper, many of these lower-tier sheiks were unimpressive, having been marginal figures before the war—petty smugglers, minor sheiks disparaged by their seniors, and Iraqi military or security personnel who had held menial positions under the Saddam Hussein regime. However, those who emerged as recognized drivers of the Awakening by the tribal members were those whose power came not from titles but from credibility acquired by action. They earned credibility by serving as point men, standing up for their constituents and, most importantly, by actual fighting against AQI and co-opted locals.⁸

This situation that involved alleged abdication of leadership by traditional leaders while at the same time other nontraditional leaders were stepping up to confront the crisis facing the tribal members, has profound implications for any future tribal engagement initiatives the U.S. Armed Forces might undertake. It underscores how crucial it is to carefully partner with the right people—not just the ones who are the easiest to reach, the ones we already know, or the ones who have learned how to glad-hand Westerners and manipulate them.

The Anbar Awakening was not reconciliation; it came at the expense of existing Iraqi institutions both in Anbar and Baghdad. The Awakening was a departure from the U.S. fixation on consolidating Iraq's power in Baghdad. Politically, Sahawa came at the expense of the state-sanctioned Anbar Provincial Council

and the main political party in the province, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). In fall 2006, the Anbar governor, an IIP member, viewed Sahawa as nothing short of a coup against him. (He would later support Sahawa in order to gain relevance.) But U.S. and Iraqi viewers had to admit that, while Anbar Province nominally had an IIP-led provincial council, Sahawa was the more credible body. It took a series of hotly contested negotiations brokered by the United States and Multinational Force–Iraq (MNF–I) to add Sahawa members to the Anbar Provincial Council for the sake of government legitimacy in the eyes of the Anbar populace—negotiations that proved controversial because they lacked a clear basis in the Iraqi constitution.⁹

The incorporation of Sahawa members—the Concerned Local Citizens (CLC), and later the Sons of Iraq (SOI)—into the Iraqi government caused problems for Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, who had good reason to be threatened by an empowerment of armed Sunni units. These Sunni groups remained opposed to the Shia-led government in Baghdad and were perceived more as an insurrection-in-the-making against Iraqi authority than a new component of it.¹⁰ United States concerns about Maliki's willingness to accept them were borne out over time. In 2008, Maliki reluctantly agreed to fund the CLC and the SOI, but in 2010, he suspended the process of incorporating them into the government, barring almost 100,000 Iraqis from the ranks of the Iraqi Security Forces. The status of these units was a perpetual sore point between the United States and Maliki, and was a festering source of bitterness among the SOI who believed commitments for integration into the Iraqi armed forces or police had been made as a condition for them joining to defeat AQI.¹¹ The quick collapse of Northern Iraq to ISIS in 2014 might be shown to be to some extent attributable to the lingering bitterness of former Sahawa fighters resulting in large part from Maliki's failure to honor perceived commitments and consequent reticence of the tribes to confront the new threat.

In any future plans to recognize a new base of power, if the United States has equities with whatever national government is losing some turf or control, it may require delicate management of our relations with the host government. This is important because the U.S. preference is so often for a strong central government in the host country.¹²



(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Megan Curry)

Sheikh Lawrence al-Aniza speaks with Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha during a sheikh shura 24 June 2009 at Camp Ramadi, Iraq. The shura provided a unique opportunity for paramount sheikhs and provincial government leaders of Al Anbar Province to discuss issues facing the province and work together to come up with solutions.

The solution in Anbar required an intimate U.S. knowledge of local realities. Solutions required an objective depiction of the so-called ground truth. Direct, on-the-ground knowledge was often the only option for understanding broader cultural issues and fast-breaking security developments in the absence of working phone lines, cell phone reception, Internet, and media outlets. The U.S. role in the Awakening required close first-hand observation and familiarity with local conditions to detect the anti-AQI currents and motivations of the tribal leaders. Gaining intimate knowledge of realities in Anbar was not possible by watching Anbar from afar, and, under the best of circumstances, it did not happen quickly.

U.S. elements successfully marketed these activities as part of a broader anti-AQI phenomenon and an expression of Iraqi initiatives. For example, at the police recruitment drives, a given recruit arrived to see an organized, safe event with Iraqi and U.S. personnel working together. The orderliness and efficiency of such programs made a tremendous positive psychological impact on such individuals, who were accustomed to the inefficient, uncaring, and usually corrupt management of similar programs under Iraqi holdover officials

of the previous regime. Once serving at the police station, the local policeman became part of a powerful anti-AQI front. U.S.-backed AQI degradation campaigns, media announcements of successful operations, neighborhood beautification programs, soccer field refurbishments, and pro-government messages worked together to further the Awakening's momentum.¹³

On the tactical side, the U.S. military and Awakening units vigorously targeted AQI, disrupted its networks, conducted raids on its cell leaders, and denied it a hospitable environment. The tribal rejection of AQI in 2006 involved tribesmen in fierce firefights with, and offensive operations against, AQI. Continued joint military work among MNF-I units, Iraqi security services, and Awakening units was required to clear and hold the key areas.

The Awakening required tremendous expenditures of U.S. taxpayer dollars—but with an important caveat. In addition to the costs of deploying a Marine expeditionary force and special operations forces in Anbar, training the Iraqi army and Iraqi police, and housing officials from other U.S. civilian agencies, the United States spent tens of millions of dollars in Anbar. In the form of Commander's Emergency

Response Program (CERP) funds, the U.S. military disbursed a total of more than U.S. \$2 billion countrywide in Iraq during fiscal years 2005–2007 on things such as agriculture, irrigation, neighborhood beautification, electricity, and education.¹⁴

In June 2007, MNF–I gained permission from the Department of Defense to use CERP funds to pay the CLC and the SOI that, according to a U.S. government audit, cost U.S. \$370 million for fiscal years 2007 to 2009.¹⁵ However, from spring 2006 to spring 2007, the key period for the Anbar Awakening, expenditures on the neighborhood watch units and Sahawa were much more modest. It was not massive financial outlays and public improvements that accounted for the growth of Sahawa in the crucial period through spring 2007; rather, it was the desire by key tribal leaders to wrest control from AQI and its local affiliates and come to power themselves.

The Awakening required Iraqis who had a vested interest in securing their own areas. The Awakening's emphasis on local empowerment differed from concepts of a "national" identity for Iraq's security services, in which a recruit from one area of Iraq could be deployed anywhere in the country in an attempt to generate a unified Iraqi security service. Real security in Iraq, where it existed, was an intensely localized affair. Residents were familiar with their neighborhoods. They knew—and cared—who belonged and who did not. Local control allowed a recruit to be confident that he would not leave his family vulnerable in a long-term absence. It also gave the security services credibility with the people, as opposed to the precarious climate when a member of another tribe or sect oversees security in what is effectively rival territory.

It was not easy for some U.S. and Iraqi officials to come around to this way of thinking as the new

emphasis on local control was antithetical to a national identity of the Iraqi security forces that the United States had been trying so long to promote.¹⁶

When working with one sub-national element, it was important for the United States to manage the perceptions of other sub-national elements. No matter how war torn Iraq was, the Shia and Kurds were closely watching what the U.S. government was doing with the Anbar Sunnis. Shia and Kurdish perceptions were important regardless of how the United States internally rationalized its Awakening program. For example, to the Shia, there was a serious contradiction of policy when the United States trumpeted Sunni militias as a stabilizing force in Anbar while trying to limit

the influence of Shia militias in the south. Similarly, from the Kurdish perspective, the same contradiction existed when the United States lauded the virtues of Sunni militias in Anbar while criticizing the Kurdish militia security presence in disputed territories in north-central Iraq.

To overcome objections, the United States had

to show that Sunni militias had state sanction in their transition into the ISF or their conversion into Iraqi Police precincts, and later in the form of the CLC and SOI. Had the United States not been able to do this, U.S. interlocutors would have had less credibility when opposing Shia militias or asking Kurdish authorities not to interfere in certain disputed areas. Some of the most restless places in the world are those in which multiple people groups live inside or among artificially imposed national borders, and U.S. relations with any one of those groups will affect the others.

We can gainfully work with people who do not think and act like us—but we have to be ready to defend doing so. Those who came to power in the Anbar Awakening had few attributes that would please



(U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Jason T. Bailey)

Iraqi police officers and members of Sahawa's Concerned Local Citizens (CLC) conduct a patrol 28 January 2008 with U.S. Army soldiers in Rusafa, Baghdad, Iraq.



(AP photo)

Sheikh Abdel Sattar Abu Risha, founder of al-Anbar Awakening, arrives for a meeting with tribal leaders of Iraq's Anbar Province in the provincial capital of Ramadi, 115 kilometers (70 miles) west of Baghdad, 16 August 2007. They promised to "work together against terrorism, militias, and al-Qaida until they're uprooted from the country." Prior to the Awakening, Sattar was a minor sheikh of little prominence with a criminal history that reputedly included smuggling and highjacking.

twenty-first century, Western, self-styled progressives. For example, in general, the key sheiks had no democratic or pluralistic impulses and would manifest no respect for the U.S. policy of democratization beyond what they had to utter in order to remain in U.S. graces if and when they chose to do so.

Instead, the Anbar Awakening figures were products of a society where power rested in tribal codes, patronage, and nepotism as opposed to legal state institutions. Their adherence to these codes, especially the custom of tribal retributions, were often viewed by U.S. officials as human rights violations, according to Western standards. One consequence of this situation was that, although Iraq ostensibly had a written code of law enforced by state security and judicial mechanisms, in reality, these institutions were nominal, co-opted by insurgents, or lacked the will to carry out their functions under the established law.

Among other concerns, U.S. officials were right to be vigilant about their contacts' deeds and to pressure

them to act within Iraqi law. However, in cases where individuals had committed extra-judicial acts, the United States had to assess whether there was a viable Iraqi governmental mechanism that could have provided a solution and be ready to make the case for the value of continued work with that person in the face of any potential scrutiny, whether from formal U.S. oversight bodies or from the media.

The United States found mutual interests with conservative Muslim populations that al-Qaida claimed to be helping. One of the ways al-Qaida tries to build support in a population is by depicting itself as a defender against, or liberator from, infidel aggression. For example, in Anbar, not only had a Western military occupied Sunni Muslim lands, but the Sunnis' Shia rivals had come to power in the national government. Both of these developments were fodder for public opinion exploitation. Of all the places al-Qaida sought to establish itself, Anbar, in theory, should have been receptive.

The United States helped locals regain or consolidate their social, religious, and economic roles that had been lost to foreign AQI leaders and AQI's co-opted Iraqi tribal elements. In Iraq, AQI gave too much power to non-local leaders and waged a distracting war between its local affiliates and their fellow Iraqis. The contest between al-Qaida and the locals was also one between al-Qaida's religious authority and tribal authority. Whereas al-Qaida propagated the view that authority served the ummah, or community of Islamic believers, the tribal system was inherently local, inward-looking, and exclusive. The leaders of the Awakening, even though some of them were quite religious in their personal lives, had a lot to lose from al-Qaida's brand of religious authority.

Additionally, most of "al-Qaida in Iraq" was not really al-Qaida. Actual al-Qaida leaders directly affiliated with Osama bin Laden were rare in Anbar. For example, in late 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's network declared allegiance to al-Qaida and became what the West called AQI. However, it was basically a loosely affiliated franchise enterprise of al-Qaida that frequently defied direction provided by actual al-Qaida leaders. Al-Qaida leaders, mostly foreigners who did little fighting themselves, attempted to co-opt the population by integrating through alliances with local clans and tribes. The rank-and-file AQI therefore had little engagement with greater al-Qaida outside of Iraq. As a result, the paradigm of "tribes vs. AQI" was more accurately understood as "tribe vs. AQ-aligned rival tribe."¹⁷

This mattered in the Awakening because it caused al-Qaida to become a major sponsor of Iraq-on-Iraq violence. Consequently, AQI brutality, loss of Muslim lives, and a senior leadership composed of foreigners provided an opportunity for the U.S.-led coalition to frame AQI as a hostile imposition on the Anbar people.

When the AQI-led Mujahidin Shura Council declared the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006, it was an act of desperation—an attempt to put an Iraqi face on AQI in the wake of the emergence of a popular movement, the Awakening, that was by then outmaneuvering AQI.¹⁸ To deflect assertions that AQI was a foreign-backed movement, AQI assigned an Iraqi, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, as the leader of ISI. However, he maintained a low profile and

withheld his identity from most of AQI, a spurious basis for leadership.

Because there was not one "insurgency" in Anbar, prevailing counterinsurgency thought was a poor fit. Many assumptions of counterinsurgency thought—even if they appreciate flexibility and avoid strict doctrine—were a poor fit for Anbar. One was the assumption implicit in most counterinsurgency thought that the various actors—whether those inside the country or those giving support from the outside—ultimately fell into one of two sides: the insurgency or the counterinsurgency. Trying to analyze the insurgency in Anbar this way was like analyzing a boxing match while paying no heed to a third boxer in the ring. In Anbar, there were three sides. The first was the U.S.-led counterinsurgency. The second was the indigenous Iraqi resistance that resented the war and attempted occupation by both the U.S.-led coalition and so-called AQI. The third was AQI and its local affiliates, whose designs on power made them ultimately appear to be a greater threat to the Anbar population than the United States was. This opened up the opportunity to assert publicly that a solution was only possible with the understanding—among both the resistance and the United States—that the resistance had more to lose from AQI than from the United States.

A second assumption was that the counterinsurgent must separate the insurgents from the population. This proved illusory in Anbar when most of the population also supported the anti-coalition insurgency at some level and in some form. When Anbaris used words like patriotism and nationalism, it was not in reference to their identification with, or support for, the central government of Iraq but in reference to loyalties behind opposition to it.

A third assumption was the need to market state instruments as superior to what the insurgency can offer. In Anbar, instead of marketing state services to appeal to the people, and instead of trying to court local leaders to participate in the Iraqi government through various state-provided incentives, success came in spite of Iraqi state institutions and the services they provided. Thus, the United States had to come to terms with the fundamental illegitimacy of the government of Iraq in the eyes of most Anbaris. By running extra-government militias and transitioning them into the Iraqi Security Forces, and by staging the recruitment of

local police based on arrangements with the sheiks, the United States helped build the instruments of state from the ground up.

Awakening activity during the Baghdad Surge can yield some dangerous conclusions if taken out of context. The best-publicized Awakening activity took place in the greater Baghdad area in spring-summer 2007. Most of the literature on the surge, as it came to be called, has focused on a select few senior U.S. commanders who were savvy with the press and had influential contacts among opinion makers. As the mainline story goes, a collection of counterinsurgency theorists arrived in Baghdad in early 2007 and implemented a plan that they had been devising during the previous year. The literature rightly describes how, in the surge, the U.S. military maintained an intimate presence in the streets, with combat outposts and joint security stations across greater Baghdad. Between June and August 2007, as MNF-I, the Iraqi Security Forces, and local units cleared and held more territory, the number of security incidents dropped precipitously.¹⁹

But this Baghdad-area activity, which was historic and well-led, cannot be treated independently from the Awakening activity that had been occurring in 2005 and 2006. By 2007, local empowerment schemes elsewhere in Iraq, in places such as Tal Afar in Ninawa Province; al-Qa'im, Ramadi, and Fallujah in Anbar; and the Abu Ghurayb area of western Baghdad, had provided several compelling examples of locally generated security initiatives. In contrast to the chronology of actual events, the mainline literature tends to promote a narrative that first talks about what happened in Baghdad in spring 2007 and then anachronistically deals with Anbar in 2006. This obfuscates in some ways the actual chronology.²⁰

Much had happened before the 2007 Baghdad phase. The U.S. National Security Council had noted the Anbar Awakening's importance during its late 2006 policy review, as had the authors of the December 2006 Iraq Study Group Report. President George W. Bush had even mentioned it in his January 2007 State of the Union Address—all pre-surge.²¹ In this author's conversations with U.S. officials and Awakening leaders in the Baghdad area, the Iraqis in early 2007 frequently invoked these prior incidences as motivation to work with the MNF-I in Baghdad.

To be sure, Baghdad is different from Anbar, and the Baghdad-area Awakening was not simply an Anbar model applied to the capital city. The point is that the momentum and success record in Anbar 2005 to 2006 greatly enabled the Awakening activity in Baghdad in 2007 and elsewhere.

This pre-2007 context matters because without it, the Baghdad-area Awakening in spring 2007 takes a too-elitist appearance, as if it originated in a top-down process. The reality was that by spring 2007, the Awakening had worked upward from a phenomenon in pockets of Iraq, encouraged and supported by elements such as civil affairs officers, special operations forces, and brigade commanders and their staffs—eventually recognized and supported by the MNF-I establishment in Baghdad.

We should be cautious in thinking that an Awakening-style program in another time and place can begin at the top. In Afghanistan, plans ostensibly drawing inspiration from the Iraq Awakening—even when respecting the vast differences between the two countries—began not from the ground up but from the top down by United States and Afghan elites in Kabul. However, in crucial areas of Afghanistan, such as Helmand Province and the mountains along the eastern border with Pakistan, many locals were already taking the initiative to defend their areas from Taliban or al-Qaida intrusion. Yet, programs supposedly patterned after the Awakening were put into the hands of Kabul-based ministries with little understanding or relevance to the people in the provincial areas. In contrast, the Awakening started at the bottom in response to popular resentment and worked upward; this cannot be forgotten.²²

Counterinsurgency obligations do not end once the worst of the violence has passed. The Awakening may cautiously be called a success during its time, especially considering the abysmal conditions that reigned before. In Baghdad, its purpose was not necessarily to end all fighting but to provide an environment in which Iraq could at least attempt to build a government apparatus. However, serious problems remained.

The most serious problem was Iraq's prime minister, who instead of seizing the opportunity for national reconciliation and establishing unity, used his security services to neutralize Sunni rivals and to prevent the Kurds



(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Erin Kirk)

Sheikh Aifan Sadun al-Issawi meets with Sen. Chuck Hagel, Nebraska, in Anbar Province to discuss the progress against antigovernment insurgents in Anbar Province (circa 2008). Aifan was one of the founders of the Sahawa movement and among the most active counterinsurgent leaders, personally leading his militia in numerous attacks against al-Qaida members operating in Anbar Province.

from developing their energy sector. These actions are difficult to explain in any context other than parochial sectarianism.

Saddam Hussein compelled the Sunni, Shia, and Kurds to live together, but in a post-Saddam Iraq, experience has shown that no two will submit to the third. As a result, Iraq's sectarian and ethnic fault lines have threatened political stability. These fault lines rumble over the notable failure to integrate the mostly Sunni SOI into the Iraqi Security Forces, tribal rivalries, sectarian identification of certain

security services, Arab-Kurd conflicts over disputed territories too inflammatory to deal with on the Iraqi constitution's time table, the emergence of the Islamic State, and the aspirations of Iraq's neighbors.

Any combination of these could bring back the level of violence and disorder of open civil war.

The Awakening is an indication that the United States must respect a country's diverse peoples and consider them the foremost potential ally without whom it cannot expect to meet any goal in the country worth pursuing.

Questions for Future Programs

Some questions to be asked of any program in another theater that invokes or draws inspiration from the Anbar Awakening follow:

- ◆ Does the proposed group have a shared interest—however narrow—with the United States that will make it cooperate with us? To what extent does this interest overcome any grievances the group may have with the United States?
- ◆ Do the components of the group have any internal disputes or factions? How would we manage these?
- ◆ To what extent would U.S. cooperation with the group taint the group's reputation, depicting it as a collaborator with an outside power? How can we manage the U.S. hand in order to not make the group look like a tool of the United States?
- ◆ Does the United States have the means and personnel resources to keep the group or its leaders acting in accord?
- ◆ To what extent is there already an indigenous trend that can be co-opted or guided?
- ◆ Would the program involve local control of the group's own area? (If the program envisions an expeditionary force outside the group's area, it should probably not claim inspiration from the Awakening.)
- ◆ How can the most influential and authentic leaders be determined?
- ◆ By entering into an arrangement with any one of the group's leaders, which other centers of power (government entities, parties, warlords, or tribes) will be angered, marginalized, emboldened, or otherwise affected? How would this be managed?

- ◆ Would empowerment of the group come at the expense of any host government entity—whether sovereign, transitional, or provisional—with which the United States has equities? How would we manage our relations with such a government entity?

- ◆ Does the host government have the capability and will to support the program, or at least not undermine it?

- ◆ Would the act of empowering the group be a tacit admission that some other U.S. goal for national sovereignty had failed? How would the program be reconciled with stated U.S. goals?

- ◆ Would the proposed program also require funds for reconstruction and civil affairs?

- ◆ Is the need for the program so dire that the United States is willing to work with people who may have poor human rights records and to defend the program from oversight and criticism?

- ◆ If the group is intended to counter al-Qaida or its affiliates, has al-Qaida misplayed its hand in some way that can be exploited?

- ◆ What are the de-escalation and transition plans in anticipation of the short-term objectives being met?

- ◆ What is the recovery plan in the event that the United States would supply the group with resources that may have to be accounted for later?

Conclusion

The above may or may not be relevant to a given case, and the answers need not demonstrate that a proposed program look like the Anbar Awakening. Where circumstances differ with the Awakening, we can ask why—and ask how we can tailor the program to the local reality. Doing so will confront each challenge as a product of its own locale and circumstance and may determine that an Awakening-like program may or may not be suitable. However, at a minimum, appreciation for the Anbar Awakening's context will assist the understanding of a major event in the history of recent warfare, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency. As a result, it will likely be a subject of continued debate—and seemingly influence—in the years and decades to come. ■

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Notes

1. William Knarr, "Al-Sahawa: An Awakening in Al Qaim," Global ECCO, CTX 3 (2)(May 2013), <https://globalecco.org/al-sahawa-an-awakening-in-al-qaim> (accessed 20 November 2014). This article uses the term "Sahawa" throughout, for ease. The movement, which had existed in disparate factions for several months, coalesced into the Anbar Tribal Sheiks Council in August 2006, went public in September 2006 as the Emergency Council for the Rescue of Al Anbar, and changed its name to Sahawa al-Anbar in November 2006. In February 2007, its leaders began referring to it as Sahawa al-Iraq, a name formalized that April.

2. Some of the more notable works that deal with the Awakening include David Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 115–85; Timothy S. McWilliams and Curtis P. Wheeler, eds., *Al Anbar Awakening Volumes I and II*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2009); Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How this Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

3. Neil Smith and Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review* (March–April 2008): 41–52; Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008); "Interview with Sheik Sabah," in McWilliams and Wheeler, Volume II, 139-47.

4. Smith and MacFarland, 41-52; See also Todd Pitman, "Sunni Sheiks Join Fight vs. Insurgency," Associated Press, 25 March 2007.

5. McWilliams and Wheeler, Volume II, 111-112, 135; Kathleen Ridolfo, "Sunni Groups Vie For Control of Western Region," Iraq Report: February 21, 2008, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty website, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1347743.html> (accessed 10 February 2015); Smith and MacFarland, 46-47.

6. Jim Michaels, *A Chance in Hell: The Men Who Triumphed over Iraq's Deadliest City and Turned the Tide of War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 95-98; Rafid Fadhil Ali, "Sunni Rivalries in al-Anbar Province Threaten Iraq's Security," *James-town Foundation, Terrorism Focus* 5(10)(11 March 2008), <http://>

www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4779 (accessed 10 February 2015).

7. Norman Cigar, *Al-Qaida, The Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle*, Middle East Studies Occasional Papers, Number Two, September 2011 (Quantico VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2011) 38-43; McWilliams and Wheeler, Volume I, 154-156; McWilliams and Wheeler, Volume II, 45-49, 54-57, 110-112, [http://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/61/Docs/Al-Anbar-AwakeningVolII\[1\].pdf](http://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/61/Docs/Al-Anbar-AwakeningVolII[1].pdf) (Accessed 10 February 2015); Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009) 221-222; William A. Doyle, *A Soldier's Dream: Captain Travis Patriquin and the Awakening of Iraq* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2011) 151-163; Neil Smith and Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review* (March–April 2008): 41–52.

8. McWilliams and Wheeler, Volume II, 45-49, 54-57, 110-112; Doyle, 123-130.

9. Mark Wilbanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the Sons of Iraq Stabilized Iraq," *The Middle East Quarterly* 17(14)(Fall 2010) 57-70; and Myriam Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall," *Middle East Policy Council* 18(1)(Spring 2011), <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/iraqs-tribal-sahwa-its-rise-and-fall> (accessed 10 February 2015).

10. Cigar, 61-73.

11. *Ibid.*, 64-88.

12. Wilbanks and Karsh, 57-70; Benraad.

13. Neil Smith and Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review* (March–April 2008), 41–52; Doyle, 123-130.

14. *Money as a Weapon*, The Washington Post Online Data Bank, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/business/ceerp/> (accessed 6 January 2015).

15. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), letter for the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Office of Management and Budget, "Commander's Emergency Response Program

Obligations are Uncertain," 31 January 2011, 4; and SIGIR, "Sons of Iraq Program: Results are Uncertain and Financial Controls are Weak," 28 January 2011, 1.

16. Cigar, 33-35; Ricks, 219-227.

17. Cigar, 9-32; Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, *Postwar Findings about Iraq's WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How they Compare with Prewar Assessments*, 109th Congress, 2nd Session, Senate, September 8, 2006, 90-93; Craig Whitlock, "Death Could Shake Al-Qaeda In Iraq and Around the World," *The Washington Post*, 10 June 2006.

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20. Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009); Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); David Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ricks. These are fine works but tend to understate the contributions from Anbar relative to the strategy that Petraeus and company brought in during 2007.

21. James A. Baker III et al., *The Iraq Study Group Report*, http://media.usip.org/reports/iraq_study_group_report.pdf (accessed 10 February 2015); *2007 State of the Union Address*, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070123-2.html> (accessed 10 February 2015).

22. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012). This book provides a critical account of the U.S. and Afghan bureaucracies in Afghanistan.

MR We Recommend



Tribal Militias

An Effective Tool to Counter Al-Qaida and Its Affiliates?

United States Army War College Press, Carlisle Barracks, PA

In this monograph, Dr. Norman Cigar identifies two models for tribal militias—either managed by local governments and supported by outside patrons or managed directly by an outside agent. It notes a number of lessons learned for the United States while acting as the direct managing patron of these groups.

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/PUB1230.pdf>