



Stabilisation Unit

**Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project:
Iraq's Sunni Insurgency (2003-2013) Case Study**

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Background to Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project

This case study is one of a series commissioned to support the Stabilisation Unit's (SU's) development of an evidence base relating to elite bargains and political deals. The project explores how national and international interventions have and have not been effective in fostering and sustaining political deals and elite bargains; and whether or not these political deals and elite bargains have helped reduce violence, increased local, regional and national stability and contributed to the strengthening of the relevant political settlement. Drawing on the case studies, the SU has developed a series of summary papers that bring together the project's key findings and will underpin the revision of the existing 'UK Approach to Stabilisation' (2014) paper. The project also contributes to the SU's growing engagement and expertise in this area and provides a comprehensive analytical resource for those inside and outside government.



Executive Summary

The Sunni insurgency in Iraq that followed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 initially took the form of resistance to the occupation of the country by the international (but predominantly US) coalition forces. It soon developed a sectarian dimension, with various Sunni insurgent groups on the one hand, and Shia militias and the Government of Iraq on the other. The nature of the insurgency then changed in 2004 with the emergence of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). While AQI did not manage to rally all the Sunni insurgent groups to its cause, it became the most effective component of the insurgency. Its targets included US forces, the Shia-dominated Iraqi state, and the Shia more generally given that AQI regarded all Shia as heretics.

What factors led to the containment of the insurgency?

From 2003 to 2007, the US put vast military and financial resources into trying to bring the insurgency to an end. (The US had disbanded the Iraqi army in 2003, so it was several years before any government forces could make any contribution to the counter-insurgency effort.) Even with 132,000 troops in country in 2006, US forces were unable to achieve this goal. However, a shift came about when, from 2005, Sunni opinion turned against AQI, and some local leaders in Sunni-majority areas of Iraq formed 'Awakening' groups, which sought US protection against AQI reprisals.

Changes in the US forces' approach enabled them to exploit this opportunity. These changes included a willingness to work with and pay former insurgents; greater engagement with the community, including a more sensitive approach to Iraqi civilians in general; and, after January 2007, increased troop numbers. The impact of the changes was then reinforced by the US forces' programme of targeted killings of insurgents, which altered the cost-benefit calculation for many leaders of insurgent groups and persuaded them to abandon the insurgency.

These two factors (the change in Sunni attitudes and the new US approach) and the interaction between them, produced a sharp drop in violence in 2007. The methods employed by the US forces before and during the 'surge' would almost certainly not have worked in the absence of a receptive local community, a conclusion which supports the hypothesis that 'insurgent re-alignment' is crucial to the success of such endeavours.

The Shia-dominated Iraqi government was a generally reluctant participant in this process. US commanders in Iraq, backed by the US Ambassador, succeeded in getting Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to agree to the incorporation of former insurgents into the security forces and other official bodies. But the reversal of this policy following the departure of US forces suggests that he was not committed to the project.

The lack of durability of the process

There was no single deal which brought the conflict to an end, but rather a process by which actual and potential insurgents in the Sunni community separated themselves off, or were weaned away, from AQI and other insurgent groups. Indeed, the conflict did not definitively end, as AQI and other insurgent groups continued to operate, albeit with greatly reduced effectiveness.

The number of violent deaths was at its lowest point in 2010. It remained relatively low until early 2013, when it began to rise steeply, as the insurgency regained its vigour. This was the result of a renewed marginalisation of the Sunnis, traceable to policies at the national level decided by Prime Minister Maliki that were based, in turn, on his fear of a Sunni resurgence.

The role of external actors

The influence of US forces in Iraq waned progressively after November 2008 (when the signature of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) set a date for their departure) and vanished almost



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completely with the departure of the last US troops in December 2011. As a result, the US military lost the ability to control important aspects of its stabilisation initiative. Moreover, the Obama Administration (in office from January 2009) did not give the initiative the support it would have needed to ensure that it survived and prospered. This points to the need for third-parties to present a consistent, sustained and united front to the governments and political forces of conflict-affected countries in order to protect successful stabilisation initiatives.

Furthermore, after the 2010 elections for the Council of Representatives, the US Administration missed the chance to reverse the marginalisation of the Sunnis by not resisting Maliki's attempts to manoeuvre his way back into the premiership. This demonstrates that the gains of stabilisation initiatives can be lost if third-parties with influence fail to use it to shore up positive outcomes.

Finally, while local expenditure by US commanders and others in Sunni-majority areas helped draw Sunni insurgents away from al-Qa'ida in Iraq and other insurgent groups, structural failings in both Iraqi governance and US development efforts meant that little lasting developmental benefit was produced. It is impossible to say whether a more effective and sustained development effort would have had a decisive effect on the course of the insurgency but it seems unlikely.



List of Acronyms

AQI: Al-Qa'ida in Iraq

CERP: Commander's Emergency Response Programme

CLCs: Concerned Local Citizens

COIN: Counter-Insurgency (doctrine, operations)

COP: Combat Outpost

CoR: Council of Representatives (parliament)

CPA: Coalition Provisional Authority

Gol: Government of Iraq

IFCNR: Implementation and Follow-up Committee for National Reconciliation

IGC: Iraqi Governing Council

IIG: Interim Iraqi Government

ISF: Iraqi Security Forces (Army, National Police – later renamed Federal Police – and local police)

ISI: Islamic State in Iraq

JSS: Joint Security Station

MNF-I: Multi-National Force – Iraq

PRT: Provincial Reconstruction Team

SIGIR: Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction

SMAs: Sunni-majority areas

SOFA: Status of Forces Agreement

Sol: Sons of Iraq, initially known as the Awakening movement

VBIED: Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device



Background to the conflict in the Sunni-majority areas (SMAs) of Iraq¹

The SMAs of Iraq include the provinces of Anbar, Salahuddin and Ninawa, as well as the mainly-Sunni districts of Baghdad and Diyala and Kirkuk Provinces.² The conflict in Iraq, which followed the overthrow of Saddam in April 2003, began primarily as resistance to the occupation of the country by the predominantly-US Coalition Forces. This resistance progressively developed another, sectarian dimension, namely between Sunni insurgents on the one hand and Shia militias and the Government of Iraq on the other.

In 2004, the nature of the insurgency then changed with the emergence of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). While AQI did not manage to rally all the Sunni insurgent groups to its cause, it did become the most effective group in the insurgency. Its targets included the US forces, the Shia-dominated Iraqi state and the Shia more generally (as AQI regarded all Shia as heretics).

The nature of the insurgency also varied from one area of Iraq to another. The insurgency in the Sunni-majority provinces (and especially in the strongly Sunni-majority provinces of Anbar and Salahaddin) differed from that in Baghdad. In the former, it was directed against the US forces and (to the extent that it was present) the Shia-dominated Iraqi government. In Baghdad, the insurgency had a much more sectarian character, with armed Sunni groups resisting or taking revenge for sectarian cleansing of Sunnis by Shia militias or the police, who were heavily infiltrated by Shia militias. In Ninawa, Diyala and Kirkuk Provinces, there were local conflicts which were as much Sunni-Kurd or Shia-Kurd as Sunni-Shia.

Structural and proximate causes of the conflict

Under Saddam, Sunnis (who make up about 20% of Iraq's population) held most of the senior positions in the Baath Party, the military and the administration. Therefore, the structural cause of the conflict was the collapse of the state after April 2003 and, with it, the marginalisation of the Sunnis and the loss of the privileged position they had previously enjoyed relative to the Shia Arabs and Kurds.³

In addition, there were a number of proximate causes, all of which relate to the marginalisation of the Sunnis. The most potent of these were de-Baathification and the disbanding of the military, both

¹ For a number of reasons, objectivity about the Sunni insurgency in Iraq is elusive. Among the most important of these reasons is the emotional investment in the success of the 'new Iraq' on the part of many Western participants and, on the part of others, the desire to protect their reputations. In other cases, differences of view may arise from preconceived ideas concerning the lessons which should be drawn from the experience. As a result, there is little agreement and certainly no consensus on any of the key points concerning the way in which the Sunni insurgency was tackled. Another challenge in attempting to identify what worked and what did not is the lack of independent assessment of the effectiveness of measures taken. One honourable exception is the work of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, whose report "Hard Lessons" examined the effectiveness of US expenditure in Iraq (though not directly the effectiveness of military or diplomatic initiatives); and another is the work of Biddle, Friedman and Jacobs, who conducted detailed and disaggregated statistical analyses of 38 different areas of CF operations in Iraq in an attempt to identify the impact of the Sunni 'Awakening' and the 'surge'. Therefore, it is difficult to be categorical about what succeeded in Iraq in respect of the Sunni insurgency and what did not, and the present paper should be read with these caveats in mind.

² In this paper, "Sunni" refers to Sunni Arabs. Sunnis are also a majority among Iraqi Kurds but members of this community generally identify as Kurdish rather than as Sunni or Shia.

³ Emma Sky, Yale University, personal communication, Jun 2016. Sky was Political Advisor to Lt Gen. Odierno, Commander of MNC-I from late 2006, and a member of his Initiatives Group. She later became Special Assistant to Gen. Petraeus.



of which the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) decreed in May 2003. These measures directly deprived many Sunnis of their livelihoods and their status in society. De-Baathification led to the dismissal of many senior and middle-ranking officials (mainly Sunni) from government posts, and “was perceived by Sunnis as de-Sunnification”.⁴ Moreover, the disbanding of the Iraqi army meant that there were large numbers of men who were trained, armed and unemployed – and therefore disgruntled. These men were willing to be recruited to an insurgency that was resisting foreign occupation.

The second proximate cause of the conflict was the failure of the occupying forces to restore order after the fall of the regime. The ensuing breakdown of security encouraged a retreat into communal solidarity on a sectarian basis as a substitute for the state. The third cause – and one that reinforced the second – was the US-led move to base Iraqi politics on communal identity, which “undermined any hope of building a ‘nation’”.⁵ This ethno-sectarian system was never formalised. But the practice of allocating posts on the basis of ethnicity and sect became a convention known as *muhasasa* (Arabic for “sharing out”). The most powerful post in the country, that of Prime Minister, went to a Shia Arab. This too became a convention. But it was also the natural result of the combination of a democratic system based on community and a Shia majority of around 60%: together, these naturally delivered a ‘Shia ascendancy’. In these circumstances, national politics failed to meet Sunni aspirations.

Further proximate causes included heavy-handed tactics by US forces, involving a lack of respect for Iraqi customs, which alienated the Sunni population; US forces’ abuse of Iraqis held in Abu Ghraib prison, which became public in January 2004; and assaults by US forces on Fallujah (a Sunni city in Anbar Province) in April and November 2004. In addition, the bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra in February 2006 by Sunni insurgents and the violent response, mainly in the form of sectarian cleansing of Sunnis by Shia militias and the Shia-dominated police, particularly in Baghdad, further alienated the communities from each other. Finally, the failure of the CPA and its successors to restore essential services such as water and electricity further exacerbated the situation.

Main actors

Multiple actors were involved in the conflict in Iraq’s SMAs. First, was a variety of Sunni insurgent groups, often made up of former members of the Iraqi armed forces. Their main aims were to bring an end to the US presence, reverse the ‘capture’ of the state by the Shia and avenge acts of violence by Shia militias against Sunnis. Second, was AQI, which shared the aims of the other Sunni insurgent groups but which contained a substantial proportion of foreign fighters and had wider objectives related to global jihad. Third was the US forces, whose aim was to suppress the insurgency. In Baghdad, a variety of Shia militias, motivated mainly by a desire to remove Sunnis from as much of Baghdad as possible, to maintain the Shia domination of the state and to avenge acts of violence by Sunni insurgents against Shias. There were also the Iraqi police forces (national and local), which were heavily infiltrated and controlled by the Shia militias and shared their goals. Finally, the Shia-dominated Government of Iraq became an increasingly important actor following its assumption (at least in theory) of full sovereign powers under Prime Minister Maliki in May 2006. Maliki was motivated by a desire to consolidate both Iraq’s sovereignty and his personal grip on power, although his freedom of action was constrained by the Iraqi government’s dependence on the US forces.

⁴ Sky, Emma, “Why Violence Decreased in Iraq in 2007”, unpublished paper, 19 December 2007.

⁵ Sky, Emma, *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, London, Atlantic Books 2015.



The political economy and the state

Saddam's Iraq was highly centralised, with decision-making concentrated in the hands of the President and his family and a small coterie of loyal supporters. This ruling group adopted an authoritarian, divide-and-rule approach as a means of controlling a religiously and ethnically diverse country. Iraq's political institutions were kept intentionally weak, although some of its ministries functioned fairly well and its security forces, including the army, were highly effective in protecting the regime. Moreover, the country's economy had been severely weakened by more than two decades of wars and sanctions.

The war of 2003 and the dismissal (under de-Baathification) of many of the country's most experienced administrators did further damage. The capacity of the state's administrative organisations to run the country was greatly reduced. The US put enormous resources into attempting to rebuild the country. However, a misunderstanding of Iraqi society, a lack of coordination among implementing agencies, a shortage of Iraqi capacity, a disconnect between national and local Iraqi authorities, and rampant corruption, meant that the results were frequently disappointing.

The geopolitical context

Iraq's position within the Middle East was also important. While the geopolitical context was not decisive in the emergence of the conflict in the SMAs or its evolution, neither was it helpful to efforts to bring it to an end. In relation to the conflict in the SMAs, the main players among Iraq's neighbours were Iran and Syria. (Turkey meddled in Iraq too, but largely in the Kurdistan Region.) Iran's influence was indirect: its closeness to the Shia-dominated Iraqi government fuelled Sunni suspicions that Baghdad was taking direction from Tehran, leading to a fear among Sunnis that Iran was taking Iraq over. Moreover, Iran provided practical support to a number of Shia militias attacking Sunnis in Iraq. For its part, Syria provided support to Sunni insurgent groups by allowing them to use its territory. There were persistent suggestions that Saudi Arabia was funding or arming tribes in Anbar Province but these have not been supported by evidence.

Religious, sectarian and ethnic components of the conflict

As noted above, the main drivers of the conflict were the measures which caused the marginalisation of the Sunnis as a community, together with their resistance to occupation. However, over time, the sectarian (Sunni-Shia) aspect of the conflict became central, as the Shia came increasingly to dominate the state and as the Shia-hating AQI emerged as the leading player in the insurgency. This was especially the case in areas which were mixed in sectarian terms.

Significant stabilisation initiatives, approaches and programmes

Security initiatives

From 2003 to 2007, the US army put a large number of troops, and a great deal of money and effort into trying to bring the insurgency to an end. But even the 132,000 troops in country in 2006 were not enough to achieve this goal. The reason for this failure was that their approach was faulty in a number of ways. First, it was undifferentiated: most US units classed all armed groups as "Anti-Iraqi Forces" and applied the same techniques to all groups in all provinces. Second, US troops were stationed in large bases and were detached from the local communities and the information they could have provided: when the troops went out to engage the insurgents, they were to some extent fighting blind. Third, as far as the less committed insurgents and the Sunnis in general were concerned, it was all stick and no carrot: there was no incentive for them to align themselves with the US forces/Iraqi government side.



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While this was the prevailing situation, more imaginative US commanders, such as Col. HR McMaster in Tal Afar, were trying to engage with the Sunni community in their areas. According to most sources, this work began in 2005, although one source asserts that many US units had started to do so as early as mid-2004.⁶ These local initiatives were made possible by a shift in Sunni attitudes to AQI, which began in 2005 and gathered pace in 2006.⁷

Three main developments lay behind this shift. The first was the attempt by AQI to supplant the traditional local leaders in Anbar Province and seize their sources of livelihood. As part of this effort, AQI tried to take over the locals' smuggling trade across the border into Syria and the highway-robbery 'business' on the Amman-Baghdad road, both of which were important sources of income for some Anbaris. AQI's attempt to usurp the smuggling trade was the main driver of the resistance to AQI at al-Qa'im in Spring 2005 – one of the earliest examples of such resistance.⁸ Moreover, in late 2005, AQI began to target tribal sheikhs in the province. Some sheikhs were assassinated and many more fled abroad.⁹

The second development was the increasing revulsion among ordinary Sunnis at the austere ideology of AQI and the brutal methods which it used to impose that ideology. Complaints about behaviour of this sort on the part of AQI began to grow from Summer 2005.¹⁰

Third, Sunni leaders were coming to the conclusion that they had lost the civil war to Iran and its Iraqi Shia clients. Against this background, the US forces began to appear less as enemies and more as a potential bulwark against an Iranian/Iraqi Shia takeover of Iraq.¹¹

These changes predisposed many Sunni leaders to respond to outreach by US force or to initiate engagement themselves. At the same time, a different and more sensitive approach to Iraqi civilians in general reduced Sunnis' inhibitions about dealing with the US forces – a change which occurred, according to Gen. Graeme Lamb (a British general serving as deputy to Gen. George Casey, Commanding General, MNF-I), as a result of the influence of Emma Sky (a British adviser seconded to US forces) on Lt Gen. Ray Odierno, Commander of MNC-I from late 2006.¹²

In themselves, these contacts between the US forces and Sunni leaders did not constitute a security initiative. They were often opportunistic on the part of US commanders, who took advantage of growing resentment of AQI's conduct and a changing discourse in the media (social and traditional) which made engagement with the US forces more acceptable to Sunnis in general. However, they did serve to develop some mutual understanding and a degree of trust. And they appear to have created the conditions in which later bargaining could succeed.¹³

⁶ Col. Gian Gentile, 'A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and Its Defects', *World Affairs*, Summer 2008: <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/slightly-better-war-narrative-and-its-defects>.

⁷ Lynch, Marc, 'Explaining the Awakening: Engagement, Publicity, and the Transformation of Iraqi Sunni Political Attitudes', *Security Studies*, 20:1, 36-72, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2011.549017.

⁸ Gen. Graeme Lamb, personal communication, June 2016, and Biddle *et al*, 'Testing the Surge'

⁹ Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, US Marine Corps University, *The al-Anbar Awakening: Comparative Assessment of Strategies and Tactics Used to Instigate the Awakening Movement, vol 1, US Perspectives*, 2012, <http://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/61/Docs/Al-AnbarAwakeningVolIII%5B1%5D.pdf>, last accessed 8 March 2016. (The project was not completed but the preliminary findings and the text of the interviews on which those findings were based are available via the link above.)

¹⁰ Lynch, 'Explaining the Awakening'.

¹¹ Emma Sky, personal communication, June 2016. Sky also remarked on the difference with Afghanistan, where the Taliban were unreceptive to coalition approaches because they did not believe they had lost.

¹² Gen. Graeme Lamb, personal communication, June 2016.

¹³ Lynch, 'Explaining the Awakening'.



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Significantly, in Anbar Province, Col. Sean MacFarland's 1st Brigade, 1st Armoured Division (which deployed to Ramadi in June 2006) reached out to local leaders to exploit their growing hostility to AQI and ensure them of US military support if they actively opposed the organisation.¹⁴ The result was the 'Awakening' movement (sometimes termed the *Sahwa*, Arabic for awakening).

As a consequence, the first of the Awakening groups proper, the Anbar Awakening Council, emerged in September 2006. It was established and led by Abdul-Sattar al-Rishawi, who claimed to be a leader of the Albu Risha tribe.¹⁵ Similar 'Awakening' groups then began to appear elsewhere in Anbar Province, their spread apparently accelerated by AQI's declaration, in October 2006, of an independent Islamic state or emirate in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).¹⁶

At the same time, the 'Fusion Cell', a team led by Gen. Graeme Lamb (a British general serving as deputy to Gen. George Casey, Commanding General, MNF-I) was complementing these efforts by identifying leaders of the Sunni insurgency who were both influential and 'reconcilable' and reaching out to them. In some cases, this involved releasing from US detention individuals with blood on their hands – something which involved a relaxation of policy on the part of US commanders.¹⁷

There was an important difference between the Awakening groups which emerged in Autumn 2006 and many of their predecessors. The latter had generally disintegrated in the face of ferocious AQI reprisals. With US combat power to protect them, the new Awakening groups were able to survive AQI's onslaught.¹⁸

Despite these positive but still localised developments, the overall counter-insurgency effort looked to be failing (as measured by the number of successful attacks carried out by insurgents). To redress the situation, President Bush decided on a change of approach. In January 2007, he announced the New Way Forward for Iraq, commonly known as 'the surge'.¹⁹

'The surge'

There were two main elements to this new approach. The first was an increase of some 30,000 in the number of US troops deployed in the SMAs. The second was the deployment of US forces out of their large bases to forward bases in local communities. This enhanced contact with the people was intended to enable US troops to protect them better and therefore secure their support and also gain more intelligence about insurgent groups. President Bush also appointed Gen. David Petraeus (who had served in Iraq before) as Commanding General of US forces in Iraq.

Most of the sectarian violence (as opposed to anti-US forces/Iraqi government insurgent activity) was taking place in and around Baghdad, as President Bush recognised in his speech. In Baghdad, the

¹⁴ Steven Clay, Interview with Col. Sean MacFarland, 4 January 2013: <http://www.amazon.com/Interview-Sean-MacFarland-Steven-Clay/dp/1288535317>

¹⁵ Dodge, Toby, *Iraq: from War to a New Authoritarianism*, London: IISS, 2012. It is important to note that claims to be able to mobilise large numbers of fighters on the basis of tribal allegiance were often made by leaders of anti-AQI groups. The basis of such claims was sometimes flimsy. However, they were made more plausible by the self-imposed exile of the paramount sheikhs, whose absence greatly reduced their ability to maintain the leadership of their tribes. And the very fact of having secured US backing enhanced the standing of these local leaders in their own communities. To some extent, this undermined traditional tribal structures but these were already crumbling as a result of long-term trends pre-dating the occupation. So any unintended consequences may not have been as serious as might be suspected.

¹⁶ Lynch, 'Explaining the Awakening'.

¹⁷ Gen. Graeme Lamb, personal communication, June 2016.

¹⁸ Biddle *et al*, 'Testing the Surge'.

¹⁹ Washington Post: 'President Bush Addresses Nation on Iraq War' (transcript), 10 January 2007). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/10/AR2007011002208.html>



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surge involved first clearing districts of insurgents and then guarding those districts with high concrete walls – essentially, they became ‘gated communities’. In these districts, new Sunni leaders came forward to provide hundreds of young men willing to work alongside the US forces and ISF (Iraqi Security Forces) to protect their neighbourhoods.²⁰ These groups were named ‘Concerned Local Citizens’ (CLCs).

In addition, US commanders used the funds at their disposal – the Commander’s Emergency Response Programme (CERP) – to begin rebuilding government services in the areas they controlled. In other words, the approach was the remodelled COIN method of “clear, hold and build”, as articulated in Field Manual 3-24 and published in 2006 under the direction of Gen. Petraeus.

Convinced of its benefits, Petraeus sought to spread the Awakening model to other parts of the country. The US forces recognised the risks involved in dealing with groups which included criminals, smugglers, former insurgents and tribesmen. (From the point of view of the US forces and the Iraqi authorities, the tribes were inherently unreliable as security actors: each tribe is its own ‘mobile mini-state’ with no intrinsic loyalty to any other authority.) But the potential gain – when existing methods were not working – was deemed to outweigh the risks. For instance, in an interview in 2013, Col. MacFarland asserted that “indigenous forces are the key to winning a counter-insurgency fight.”²¹ The importance of this ‘insurgent re-alignment’ also emerges clearly from the rigorous academic analysis conducted by Biddle *et al.*²² For its part, the US got intelligence and local support. In theory, the newly-recognised militias were also supposed to be fighting AQI, but in reality largely lacked the military skills to do so.

In exchange, the US forces gave these groups the status of recognised militias and some basic training. In many instances, the US forces and the militias carried out joint operations, which increased mutual trust. The US forces also paid wages to members of these groups, with the money coming from the CERPs. In some places (e.g., Diyala Province), Awakening members were offered employment or re-employment in provincial police forces. These measures, while they lasted, gave Sunnis both dignity and employment.²³ While the US did not directly arm the Awakening groups, in many cases individual members of these groups had their own weapons, and money given to members of the groups was often used to buy weapons

The Awakening programme was expensive: by January 2009, the US Government had spent more than \$400 million on wages for Awakening group members.²⁴ According to Gen. Petraeus, testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2008, this was a worthwhile investment in terms of lives saved and army vehicles not destroyed.²⁵ However, there was no comprehensive plan or precise objectives or metrics with which to measure success. Rather, the idea was to “buy time for the government of Iraq to mature”.²⁶ And there was undoubtedly a substantial fall in the number of attacks against US troops in Anbar – from 1,350 in October 2006 to just over 200 in August 2007.

²⁰ Sky, ‘Iraq 2007’.

²¹ Clay, interview with MacFarland, 2013.

²² Biddle *et al.*, ‘Testing the Surge’.

²³ Emma Sky, personal communication, June 2016.

²⁴ Wilbanks, Mark, and Karsh, Efraim, *How the “Sons of Iraq” Stabilised Iraq*, Middle East Quarterly, Fall 2010. http://www.meforum.org/2788/sons-of-iraq#_ftnref32, last accessed 9 March 2016.

²⁵ Quoted in Wilbanks and Karsh, *How the “Sons of Iraq” Stabilised Iraq*.

²⁶ Lt Gen. Odierno, quoted in Michael Gordon, “The Former-Insurgent Counter-Insurgency”, *New York Times*, 2 September 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/magazine/02iraq-t.html?_r=0, last accessed 7 March 2016. Odierno’s comment echoes those of President Bush in his speech of 10 January 2007: “When this [improved security] happens, daily life will improve, Iraqis will gain confidence in their leaders, and the



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By December 2007, the US forces (not the Iraqi government) had over 60,000 armed Sunnis on the payroll, providing local security.²⁷ These armed Iraqis were members of both the CLCs and the Awakening groups. Around this time, they began to be referred to collectively as the ‘Sons of Iraq’ (Sol) – although these terms were often used interchangeably and in an imprecise way.

There is limited evidence concerning the attitude of Maliki, his advisers and other senior Shia leaders to the Sol. They seem to have recognised the potential benefits of reduced levels of violence in the SMAs. But their predominant feeling appears to have been fear of the possible emergence of an armed Sunni force in Baghdad, which might eventually attempt a coup to restore Sunni domination of the country. In that regard, Maliki and other Shia leaders were less concerned about the Sol in Anbar and other places outside the capital.²⁸ What is clear is that they accepted the need to bring the Sol under Iraqi government control.

Economic initiatives

Having identified the particular threats and opportunities in their area of responsibility, US commanders were given the freedom to determine what responses would work best in the specific circumstances of each province. They could, encourage the establishment of local reconciliation committees; design projects that required different groups to work together; oversee the return of displaced persons; recruit CLCs; help the Iraqi government integrate CLC groups into the ISF; and assist the Iraqi government in delivering public services.²⁹

According to Gen. Petraeus, “[as] security improved, the tasks in the civilian arena took on greater importance. It was critical, for example, that we worked with our coalition and Iraqi civilian partners to help repair damaged infrastructure, restore basic services, rebuild local markets, reopen schools and health facilities, and support the reestablishment of the corrections and judicial systems and other governmental institutions.”³⁰ However, despite Petraeus’ optimistic assessment, much of this effort had only short-term effects and lacked long-term developmental impact.³¹ The impact was often less than it might have been because the failure to build up the necessary stocks in advance of the need.³²

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which predated the surge, formed part of this effort. The PRTs were staffed mainly by civilians but were embedded with the US forces. They operated under the joint command of the US Ambassador in Baghdad and the Commanding General of the MNF-I.

According to the SIGIR, “All PRTs were explicitly tasked to bridge the local-national disconnect [in Iraqi governance].”³³ However, given what the SIGIR described as the “breakdown” in the relationships between the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Provincial Councils, and between the Provincial Councils and the neighborhood and district councils, this task was next to impossible. Moreover, the PRTs were small, being made up of four to eight people – too small to do the job

government will have the breathing space it needs to make progress in other critical areas.” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/10/AR2007011002208.html>, last accessed 7 March 2016.

²⁷ Dodge, *Iraq*.

²⁸ Sky, Emma, and Safa Rasul al-Sheikh, ‘*Iraq since 2003: Perspectives on a Divided Society*’, *Survival*, Aug-Sep 2011

²⁹ Sky, ‘*Iraq 2007*’.

³⁰ Quoted in Wilbanks and Karsh, *How the “Sons of Iraq” Stabilised Iraq*.

³¹ Prof Toby Dodge, LSE, personal communication, May 2016.

³² Gen. Graeme Lamb, personal communication, June 2016.

³³ SIGIR, ‘*Hard Lessons*’, p. 256.



properly, according to one otherwise sympathetic assessment.³⁴ Even the ‘civilian surge’ presaged by Bush’s January 2007 speech did not correct this: for example, the PRT for the Baghdad district of East Rasheed had a staff of six to serve a population of 800,000. Their ability to work effectively was also constrained by the difficult security conditions.³⁵

Beyond military engagement

USAID was also active in its own right at this time. From 2006 to 2008, it provided jobs, training, and small grants to young men who might otherwise have been attracted to the insurgency.³⁶ While young men who benefitted from such programmes in other countries continued to be active in the insurgency out of hours, this was generally not the case in Iraq. A feeling that the US forces were no longer the enemy but rather a potential bulwark against Iran and the Iraqi Shia, together with widespread disgust among ordinary Sunnis at AQI’s extreme behaviour, rendered this an unattractive option.³⁷

Larger infrastructure projects were undertaken by the US Army Corps of Engineers.³⁸ CERPs funds were often used to make the ‘last mile’ connection between these large projects and local communities.³⁹ USAID also ran a ‘flagship’ governance programme called *Tatweer* – but this was directed at enhancing the professional qualifications of civil servants in Iraqi government ministries rather than anything specific to SMAs.⁴⁰

A good deal of money was spent in this way: in addition to the \$400 million spent on Sol wages, another \$2.4 billion was spent from the CERPs (although it is not clear if the whole of this sum was spent on local projects of the kind listed by Petraeus). In addition, the US Embassy and some coalition countries provided funds.

According to Petraeus, all “these initiatives proved essential to gaining the support of the Iraqi people for their government and to turning the people against both Sunni and Shiite extremists.” This statement is questionable on two counts. First, Sunnis who aligned themselves with the US forces were more concerned with protection against AQI reprisals than economic development. And second, while Sunnis no doubt welcomed the improvement in their daily lives and, as a consequence, felt less inclined to work with or tolerate AQI and other insurgents, there is little evidence to suggest that they became supportive of the Iraqi government – which, in most cases, failed to follow up the US-led reconstruction effort. Moreover, even Petraeus admits that these projects were “not determinative by themselves”.⁴¹ And as the SIGIR pointed out, the success of these ‘soft programmes’ is “hard to quantify”: the metrics used to measure the CERPs programme emphasised the amount of money spent rather than the effects achieved.⁴² In reality, the economic development

³⁴ National Public Radio, 12 December 2011, ‘Perito: PRTs In Iraq Improved Over Time: <http://www.npr.org/2011/12/12/143595464/perito-prts-in-iraq-improved-over-time>

³⁵ SIGIR, ‘Hard Lessons’, p. 272.

³⁶ “USAID Partnership Working with Iraq for Long-Term Stability”, article on USAID website, April/May 2011, last visited 30 March 2016: <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/frontlines/global-healthiraq/usaid-partnership-working-iraq-long-term-stability>

³⁷ Emma Sky, personal communication, June 2016; Prof Toby Dodge, LSE, personal communication, May 2016.

³⁸ Petraeus, David, ‘How We Won in Iraq’, *Foreign Policy*, 29 October 2013.

³⁹ SIGIR, ‘Hard Lessons’, p. 280.

⁴⁰ USAID website: <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/frontlines/global-healthiraq/usaid-partnership-working-iraq-long-term-stability>, last visited 29 March 2016. *Tatweer* is Arabic for ‘development’.

⁴¹ Petraeus, David, ‘How We Won in Iraq’.

⁴² SIGIR, ‘Hard Lessons’, p. 332.



work may have been “all about making us feel good about ourselves” rather than contributing to turning Sunni Iraqis against the insurgency.⁴³

Political initiatives

The US military put less effort into political work at the national level than they put into security, local ‘military diplomacy’ and socio-economic activities. This was mainly because national-level politics was not part of their formal mandate. As a result, they had much less direct traction in this area of Iraqi life. While top-level US commanders did occasionally see Maliki to explain the rationale behind their approach to the insurgency and seek his support, the US military were at least partially dependent on other parts of the US system to protect the Awakening movement.

In particular, a serious disconnect developed between US commanders and the US Embassy, following the departure of Ambassador Ryan Crocker in February 2009. (The new US ambassador, appointed by the Obama Administration, had no instructions to promote the Awakening movement in the face of scepticism on the part of the Maliki government.) At this point, the US military leadership in Iraq should perhaps have pressed Maliki and his advisers harder to secure their support for the Sol – although the Embassy might well have raised serious objections had they tried to do so.

In mid-2007, prodded by the US, Maliki set up the Implementation and Follow-up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR) to take control of the Sol. The movement was finally handed over to the Iraqi government in October 2008. At that point, there were over 103,000 men registered on the programme. While some of these were Shia, the majority – probably 80% – were Sunni.

The IFCNR was responsible for vetting members of the Sol for ISF and other government jobs. However, the process went much more slowly than the US commanders had hoped. It is hard to know whether the delays were deliberate or simply due to inefficiency, the poor qualifications of many Sol members, or other such factors. Suffice to say, the results of the programme were a good deal less than they might have been. This meant that the full potential benefit of the widespread Sunni rejection of AQI and the change in approach of the US was never realised – and the re-marginalisation of the Sunni community during Maliki’s second term had a greater impact than it otherwise might have done.

What worked, what did not work, and why

What worked and why

Overall, the surge and the more localised activities which preceded it worked well in terms of improving security in the SMAs. In so doing, these initiatives capitalised on trends among the Sunnis that made for a much more receptive audience than would otherwise have been the case.⁴⁴ In other words, there was a synergy between the surge with its higher force levels and improved practices on the one hand, and the Awakening on the other: both can be seen as necessary to getting the insurgency under control but neither was sufficient by itself.⁴⁵

⁴³ Emma Sky, personal communication, June 2016.

⁴⁴ Lynch, ‘Explaining the Awakening’.

⁴⁵ Biddle *et al*, ‘Testing the Surge’.



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The level of violence in Iraq certainly fell markedly: in October 2006, there were almost 3,100 violent deaths in Iraq; by October 2007, the total had fallen to under 600.⁴⁶ But it is hard to separate the impact of this initiative from other measures (including, in respect of the overall level of deaths in Iraq, the cease-fire ordered by Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr). As Petraeus himself put it, “the key was a comprehensive approach.”⁴⁷

One of the most effective of these other measures was the relentless, large-scale assassination of insurgents by the US Joint Special Operations Command operating out of Balad (an Iraqi air-force base 65 kms north of Baghdad) and using intelligence derived from mobile phones.⁴⁸ The pressure which the US put on Syria to reduce the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq probably also had a beneficial effect.

Another effective measure was “the 2006 decision by senior American officers to pay large sums of money to our former enemies to ally themselves with us in the fight against al-Qaeda—a decision that, according to a January 2008 report from U.S. Army headquarters in Iraq, made “significant contributions” to the lowering of violence.”⁴⁹

These measures, together with those associated directly with the surge, changed the cost-benefit calculation for many actual or potential insurgents among the Sunnis, making continued membership of the insurgency a much less attractive proposition – and an alliance with the US forces a more attractive one. For some Sunni leaders whose groups were under pressure from both the US forces and AQI, choosing the US side was “a survival choice”.⁵⁰

More specifically, the following surge-related measures worked well:

- Pre-surge, contacts between US officers and local Sunni leaders created the necessary conditions for later negotiations regarding the establishment of Sol groups.⁵¹ In this sense, local military diplomacy on the part of US commanders was very effective.
- The increase in the number of US troops helped to convince the Sunnis that the US was serious about suppressing the insurgency. Many Sunnis active in the insurgency “realised they could not defeat the United States militarily.”⁵²
- The US continued to use force when they judged it to be necessary: the surge was not just about winning hearts and minds.⁵³ Moreover, US commanders made sure that they and the ISF targeted Shia extremists as well as Sunnis.

⁴⁶ Figures from Iraq Body Count database, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>, last accessed 4 March 2016.

⁴⁷ Petraeus, David, ‘How We Won in Iraq’.

⁴⁸ Dodge, *Iraq*, and personal communication, May 2016; Gen. Graeme Lamb, personal communication, June 2016. According to Lamb, this programme was of “critical” importance.

⁴⁹ Col. Gian Gentile, ‘A (Slightly) Better War’.

⁵⁰ Lynch, ‘Explaining the Awakening’.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sky, *The Unravelling*. But note that this assessment is questioned by Lynch, who found no evidence to support it in the Arabic sources which he consulted: Lynch, ‘Explaining the Awakening’.

⁵³ Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, US Marine Corps University, *The al-Anbar Awakening: Comparative Assessment of Strategies and Tactics Used to Instigate the Awakening Movement, vol 1, US Perspectives*, 2012, <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/caocl/TRG/Assessment/al-Anbar%20Full%20Project%20Overview.pdf>, last accessed 8 March 2016. (The project was not completed but the preliminary findings and the text of the interviews on which those findings were based are available via the link above.)



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- The move to forward bases, joint patrols and joint manning of bases showed the Sunnis that the US forces were committed to protecting them from AQI. Protection of the Iraqi people became the central principle of COIN operations, with Iraqi civilian casualties becoming the main indicator of security.⁵⁴ Intelligence gains followed. And news of the beneficial effect of these contacts for Sunni communities spread widely across Sunni communities.⁵⁵
- Orders from US commanders to treat Iraqis with respect improved relations between the US forces and ordinary Sunnis, making it easier for Sunni leaders to maintain their cooperation with the US.
- The US forces paid salaries to the Sol and accorded them recognition which in turn gave them status within their communities.
- The US commanders put pressure on the Iraqi government to incorporate former anti-government forces into the ISF; this worked initially. The promise of respectable employment was a major incentive for Sunnis to switch to the US/Iraqi government side.
- In Baghdad, the physical separation of Sunni and Shia communities by concrete walls made it possible to protect them better, especially against VBIEDs.
- The security improvements enabled normal life to return to many Sunni-majority districts and were complemented by reconstruction efforts (even if the improvements were generally temporary).⁵⁶
- Local economic projects funded from CERPs helped convince the Sunni population that the US forces were on their side.⁵⁷
- The right personalities and good personal relationships on the US side facilitated the positive changes in US approaches.⁵⁸
- Having the right structures (such as the Fusion Cell) in place made it possible to exploit opportunities as they arose, as the Awakening got under way.⁵⁹

In assessing the effectiveness of these measures in any given location, it is worth bearing in mind Col. McMaster's comment that "... the actual mechanics of how you do it ... [is] going to depend on the unique ethnic, sectarian, tribal dynamics in the particular neighbourhood."⁶⁰

What did not work and why

While many approaches had a positive impact, the US forces and other US agencies failed on several levels. They failed to persuade local Shia leaders, especially in Baghdad, to accept the formation of Sunni forces, and local-level tension between the two communities persisted as a result.⁶¹ Second, they were unable to convince Maliki and his advisers that the Sol were not a potential threat to the Iraqi state and to continued Shia dominance of it. Third, they did not succeed in putting in place development efforts with long-term benefits. Fourth, they failed to ensure that Iraqi government service ministries took over the running of the projects which the US military had initiated (a failure particularly noticeable in Baghdad.) Finally, they failed to make the 'human terrain teams' deliver

⁵⁴ Sky, Emma, 'Iraq 2007'.

⁵⁵ Lynch, 'Explaining the Awakening'.

⁵⁶ Col. HR McMaster interview with Public Broadcasting Service:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/endgame/interviews/mcmaster.html> Further description in:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/10/the-lesson-of-tal-afar>

⁵⁷ Gen. Graeme Lamb, personal communication, June 2016.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ McMaster interview, February 2007.

⁶¹ *Baghdad Governorate Council Chief: We Are Worried Because the Americans Are Forming Local Armed Forces*, Asharq Al-Awsat (Arabic daily), 8 October 2007.



useful analysis, mainly because most of the anthropologists who made up the teams did not speak Arabic and had little or no knowledge of Iraqi society.⁶²

Failures around the durability of the deal

There was no single deal which brought the conflict to an end, but rather a process by which actual and potential insurgents in the Sunni community separated themselves, or were weaned away, from AQI and other insurgent groups. Indeed, the conflict did not definitively end, as AQI and other insurgent groups continued to operate, albeit with greatly reduced effectiveness. The number of violent deaths was at its lowest point in 2010 and remained relatively low until April/May 2013, when it began to rise steeply.⁶³

The insurgency regained its vigour for several reasons, the most important of which are traceable to Maliki's policies. These were traceable, in turn, to his fear of a Sunni resurgence. This fear manifested itself in a number of ways.

First, Maliki appears to have worried that the numerically-substantial Sunni armed force which the Sol represented might eventually mount a coup against Shia control of the state and against him personally. So, as the date for the handover approached, the Iraqi Army – on Maliki's orders – began to arrest and imprison the leaders of the Sol. The Iraqi government also broke the Sol's organisational capacity and used intimidation to demobilise its rank and file (those not admitted to the ISF and other forms of government employment). According to a former US official involved in the handover of the Sol to Iraqi government control, "He [Maliki] never attempted to fulfil his part of the bargain. Instead, the Sahwa were dismembered piecemeal, including extrajudicial killings, internment and expulsion from Iraq."⁶⁴

With the declining importance of the US forces in operations against AQI and their (the US forces') final departure on the horizon following the signature of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in November 2008, the US commanders lacked the influence to counter Maliki's actions against the Sol movement (and the Sunni community more generally). The rest of the US Administration, in the wake of the change in president from Bush to Obama in January 2009, and a change of US ambassador in Baghdad the following month, provided little backing for US commanders' attempts to save the Sol.⁶⁵

Second, Maliki's grip on the Iraqi government and his determination to hold on to power undermined any attempts at reconciliation. Following the March 2010 elections, Maliki out-manoeuvred a successful cross-sectarian electoral list and, in December 2010, managed to secure his re-appointment as prime minister – paradoxically, with the tacit support of the US as well as the active support of Iran.

Third, Maliki seems to have seen the attempts by leading Sunni politicians in 2011 to institute regional decentralisation, for which the Constitution and law provide, as a precursor to some form of secession. In response, he mounted a political and legal assault on the Sunni community more generally. He used his control of the security forces to have Sunni politicians in the provinces of

⁶² Prof Toby Dodge, LSE, personal communication, May 2016.

⁶³ Iraq Body Count database, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>, last visited 27 March 2016.

⁶⁴ Dermer, Philip, *The "Sons of Iraq", Abandoned by Their American Allies*, Wall Street Journal, 1 July 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/philip-dermer-the-sons-of-iraq-abandoned-by-their-american-allies-1404253303>, last accessed 9 March 2016.

⁶⁵ Sky, *The Unravelling*.



Anbar, Salahuddin and Diyala arrested. And he used his influence over Iraq's electoral commission to prevent provincial referendums on decentralisation from going ahead. When peaceful Sunni protests against his policies gained momentum in Anbar Province in late 2013 and early 2014, Maliki used lethal force to break up them up.

Other factors not related to Maliki's policies contributed to disillusionment on the part of the Sunnis by eroding their faith in the state. One was the widespread nature of corruption. In addition, the failure of the Iraqi government to follow up the US-led reconstruction efforts at local and provincial level and to deliver essential services more generally further disillusioned many Sunnis. That said, it is important to note that disillusionment resulting from corruption and the lack of essential services applied to Shia Iraqis as well as Sunnis.

In this context, such reconciliation, as had been created between the Sunni community and the Shia-dominated state dissipated. AQI and its successor, Da'esh, benefitted greatly from the alienation of the Sunni community consequent upon the absence of reconciliation.⁶⁶

Different approaches at different levels

Local and regional

The initial moves to stabilise the SMAs emerged locally, with deals between US commanders in the field and local Sunni leaders willing to stand up to AQI. The initiatives took on a regional character with the establishment of the Anbar Awakening Council and US forces' support for it. From early 2007, with Petraeus' decision to spread the approach to Baghdad and other SMAs, the regional framework became more explicit. But delivery remained essentially local, with commanders applying the doctrine in their areas of command as they saw fit.

Regional and national

National-level Sunni politicians could have provided constructive support for the Sol movement. But they did not represent the SMAs effectively, proving unable to work together for the good of their community. Moreover, for the most part, they were interested mainly in the privileges and perks to be obtained from participation in Baghdad politics. There was, therefore, an absence of effective support for the stabilisation initiatives for the SMAs at this level, making it all the easier for Maliki to destroy the Sol movement. But it also contributed to the general alienation of the Sunnis and to the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the eventual emergence of Da'esh.

National and international (US, Iran)

When the US commanders began their new approach during 2006 and more systematically from early 2007, US influence was still very strong. Maliki had only become Prime Minister in May 2006 and had not yet consolidated his hold on power. Moreover, the weakness of the ISF meant that the US forces were indispensable to any attempt to regain control of SMAs – so the CF had a largely free hand to take local and regional initiatives to create and support Sol groups.

This approach worked well at first. But the US did not sufficiently keep up its diplomatic efforts to secure the backing of the Iraqi government (and Maliki in particular) for the Sol. These diplomatic efforts fell away with the change of the US Administration in Washington and of the US Ambassador in Baghdad, leaving US commanders in Iraq to defend the Sol as best they could against a Prime Minister who felt increasingly threatened by the movement and was determined to suppress it.

⁶⁶ By October 2012, AQI's membership had more than doubled compared to 2011: "Al-Qaida is Rebuilding in Iraq", Press Association, 10 October 2012.



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As the Sunni insurgency receded and Maliki grew in confidence (and his success in Basra against Shia militants in spring 2008 was a major factor here), this balance shifted. Feeling stronger politically, and no longer as reliant on the US as before, Maliki felt able to move against the Sol movement.

Maliki may also have been encouraged by the Iranians to reduce his dependence on the US. Iranian influence is not likely to have been a decisive factor, though, as Maliki's own objectives in dealing with the US and containing the Sunnis coincided with those of Iran. However, for the US, the fact that the other really influential outside power in Iraq was not interested in supporting the US initiative to stabilise the SMAs made it harder to achieve that goal.



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