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The CIA's Secret Victory in Iraq

by William Doyle

Editor's Note: This essay is based on research conducted from the author's recently released book, A Soldier's Dream: Captain Travis Patriquin and the Awakening of Iraq.

The success of the bin Laden raid represents an exceedingly rare public triumph for the CIA, but the agency had a mostly unknown contribution to another recent American success that holds major significance for America's position in the Middle East – its role in incubating and launching the Awakening of Iraq.

Interviews with government officials and U.S. military documents consulted during the research for my book reveal a vital supporting role played by the CIA at several crucial moments in the birth of the Awakening. The CIA, it turns out, was a midwife to the Awakening. The Iraq War began turning around in large part in Anbar Province in 2006, when the previously obscure Sheik Sattar abu Risha, a suspected gangster, declared war on the existentially brutal local rule of al Qaeda in Iraq. He was given crucial help by a young Army Special Forces and Afghan combat veteran named Captain Travis Patriquin, an Arabic-speaking, Koran-studying tribal affairs expert, and his army and marine colleagues based in the provincial capital of Ramadi. Patriquin's charismatic personality was a key to his effectiveness with Sattar and his fellow sheiks. "My God," one Iraqi told me, "there is no one who made a deeper connection with the Iraqi people than Travis. They adored him."

Sattar's tribal revolt became known as "the Awakening," and it largely defeated the insurgency in the province and spread to other parts of Iraq in 2007, helping set the stage for the success of General Petraeus' famous "surge," the Sons of Iraq program and reductions in violence in the country.

Working from posts in Iraq and the agency's super-station in Amman, Jordan, CIA operatives had been courting Anbar's sheiks as sources of information and potential allies ever since the earliest days of the war, and in some cases even before the war started. Many of these efforts were dead ends, but among the sheiks the CIA cultivated were several who were influential in helping the Awakening succeed. Relationships were nurtured, intelligence was shared, and payoffs were made.

In the summer of 2006, for example, U.S. military officers struck deals with local sheiks to channel young tribal fighters, many of them previously insurgents, into the dormant local Iraqi Police force. To sweeten the pot, the CIA provided cash payments to be made available to the recruits as signing bonuses. The cash acted as a highly effective lubricant in generating a flood of hundreds and eventually thousands of new police recruits, a manpower shift that helped tip the order of battle in Anbar against the insurgents.

Earlier, in 2005, the CIA launched a program with a small Sunni tribe in Ramadi to field volunteer anti-al Qaeda patrols. This embryonic project was later staged on a national scale by the Sons of Iraq program launched by General Petraeus.

When a shadowy anti-al Qaeda death squad called Revolutionaries of al Anbar unleashed a campaign of public executions and terror against al Qaeda suspects in Ramadi, U.S. intelligence operatives saw a psychological warfare opportunity and followed up with a propaganda campaign that spread a chilling message aimed at insurgent commanders: “We know who you are and we’re coming to get you.” Soon, the attitude of al Qaeda fighters in the area appeared to shift from battlefield élan to nervousness, even fear. An intercepted al Qaeda situation report from the period refers to the Revolutionaries as “this vicious organization.” And in the fall of 2006, when many outsiders considered Anbar province to be irretrievably lost to the insurgents, the CIA station chief in Ramadi did something that helped jump-start American government support for the Awakening “from the top down.” He sent a cable to his bosses at the agency’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia, alerting them that a real game-change seemed to be underway. Captain Patriquin’s brigade commander, then-Colonel Sean MacFarland of the Army, told me, “The CIA cable served as a wake-up call to the U.S. government that what was going on in Ramadi was a tectonic shift, a really decisive development.” He added, “I can’t overestimate the impact of it. It was just as important in the intelligence community as the briefings that Jim Soriano [the State Department officer in Anbar province] was giving to his superiors and the positive impact they had within the executive branch. Those two tracks are what suddenly changed the attitude in Baghdad and Fallujah and Washington, D.C., about what was happening in Ramadi.”

In November 2006, a delighted Patriquin told a colleague that top officials in Washington were learning about the Sunni tribal initiative he was spearheading with Sheik Sattar. “People in the Pentagon are starting to see what’s going on,” Patriquin said. “The Joint Chiefs of Staff and even the president are being briefed about this!”

Captain Travis Patriquin died in an IED explosion on December 6, 2006, but he already saw the war beginning to turn around in Ramadi.

The birth of the Awakening of Iraq was made possible by Sheik Sattar, who himself died in an IED attack in 2007, by Captain Travis Patriquin and a small group of key Iraqis and U.S. military personnel who risked their lives to forge a new alliance that created a great turning point in the Iraq War. It was also made possible by the exceedingly hard work and blood sacrifices made by all the Marine, Army, Air Force, SEAL, JSOC, DIA, Task Force 145/77 and other U.S. units who served in Anbar during 2003 to 2006.

And in the shadows was a team of nameless CIA operatives who stepped in to help at critical moments, their work so sensitive and compartmentalized that many U.S. military personnel had no idea what the agency was up to in Iraq.

The failures, abuses and limitations of the CIA have been well documented, and legion, over its sixty-four year history.

But sometimes when the stars line up, as they did with the bin Laden raid and the Awakening of Iraq, the organization is capable of helping to facilitate great foreign policy victories for the United States.

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