

Sons of Iraq: A Study in Irregular Warfare

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Iraq's mainly Shia central government appears intent on limiting the power of the U.S. military backed Sons of Iraq (SOI) and its approximately 100,000 armed security volunteers. The SOI has been credited by the Coalition Forces for helping turn the tide against al-Qaeda in Iraq and are as of this writing remains on the U.S. military pay roll in return for providing security in local neighborhoods throughout the country. The Maliki government initially consented to Coalition Forces recommendation to integrate approximately 20% of these fighters, many of which are former insurgents, into the state's security forces and to assist in providing vocational training for the remainder. But the Maliki government has begun to hedge on its promise. The Shia led government views these Sunni fighters as a threat in being and the U.S. sponsored neighborhood watch program itself simply a means for opponents to bide their time and worse, to infiltrate Iraq's fledgling security forces. Fear of lost opportunities and resumption of sectarian violence has been cause for some to call for making U.S. military assistance conditional on the Maliki government keeping its word to the members of the SOI.¹ The premise of this article is not to argue the merits of leveraging Iraq's dependency on U.S. air power, logistic support, intelligence or training to gain concessions. A reengineered U.S. strategy may well be in order in light of the evolving security and political landscape. The intent rather is to provide further cultural and historical depth to the conversation and hopefully a more detailed appreciation of the operational environment to assist in reengineering existing U.S. strategy if required. The rationale of the Maliki government to limit the power of the Sunni auxiliary forces is much more complex and nuanced than causal reasoning would lead us to believe and expresses a unique blend of Iraq's unique culture and historical experience.

This paper will address the types of behavior and political relationships shaping the current political and security landscape in Iraq. Included is an introduction to the uniquely Arab institution of neighborhood watch and tribal security. The remainder of the paper discusses the relationship between these organizations and the central government as an expression of irregular warfare. It concludes with some thoughts on the limits of U.S. strategy in shaping and influencing the behavior of Iraq's social networks and tribal politics.

Neighborhood Watch and Tribal Security Deciphering Iraq's political landscape is a challenge even during the best of times. The most challenging feature of Iraq's social and political landscape is the parallel existence of two social and political patterns with their social origins in significantly different historical periods. What is very confusing is that much of today's behavior continues to be influenced by the norms and customs of a distant past. These norms and customs remain the basic group reference, despite the fact that they may have been suppressed from time to time or rhetorically renounced whether

¹ "Don't let al-Maliki sell 'Sons of Iraq' short", by Shawn Brimley and Colin Kahl, *Stars and Stripes*, Thursday, August 28, 2008.

within the framework of a universal Islamic umma or in the present with reference to the secular idea of the nation-state.

The idea of forming neighborhood watch groups isn't new. Baghdad was founded in 776 C.E. by the second Abbasid caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur. The city rose to prominence as an important center for Islamic scholarship and international trade between the 8th and 9th centuries. It reached its height between the 8th and 12th centuries as one of the prominent centers of Arab civilization.

The city itself was divided into quarters. Each quarter might contain from a few hundred to a few thousand inhabitants. A mosque would be found at the center of the quarter adjacent to the local market. Powerful families would own homes in the neighborhood where they could maintain influence and exercise patronage.

The quarter belonged to its inhabitants, and in a sense was an extension of the home. It was protected by its young men, sometimes organized into groups called *zu'ar*, *ayyarun* or *fityan*. These groups were continuously maintained by the inhabitants of the quarter themselves. The quarter watch was expected to possess a certain moral ideal. In case of emergency, each quarter might be called upon to deploy its neighborhood watch group to protect the quarter itself or support government forces in other parts of the city.² If the city was threatened by a foreign invader, quarter watch groups might be attached to the professional soldiery for the duration of an operation.

The *shurta* or military police in key cities would maintain order and serve as the eyes and ears of the caliph or his representative. Shurta commanders were chosen by the city administrator from the ranks of the local elites and served as mediators between those elites and the authority of the caliph and his representatives. A registry or *diwan* of *muqatila* or fighting men was maintained by the state to supervise strength levels and manage pay. Each person in the diwan appears to have been assigned a *maktab* or area of operation for which they bore responsibility and where they drew their *ata* or salary. Payments could also be made in the form of *rizq* or supplies.

The similarities between choosing a commander and members of a shurta and those measures taken to control armed auxiliaries of today are striking. During the formation of the SOI, Iraq's Ministry of Interior was adamant that a registry containing the vetted names of all the volunteers be made available to the state. This list would be used to monitor and manage strength levels. Furthermore, each group was assigned a specific maktab or area of operation and compliance closely monitored.

The penchant to recruit smaller scale communities into state service has a long tradition in Iraq. We can recognize a distinct social and political pattern emerging throughout Iraq's history in which governments; whether during the caliphates, Ottoman period or modern times, attempted to create security systems linking disparate social networks to a central administration. This pattern of behavior has not changed over the millennia. The decision by the U.S. military to support the creation of a Sunni centric urban and rural security network is nothing new and exploits an inherent predisposition for communities to mobilize against a common threat.

Tribal Security

Tribes mirror urban neighborhood watch groups in that they too rely on a security system that draws on bands of local men to take up arms at times of danger. The tribal militia system is a social institution and from a professional military perspective should not be considered a functioning military organization.

² Albert Honrani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 1991, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard, page 123.

Governments throughout Iraq's history understood that rural communities could function either as conduits of state authority or as organizers of resistance to that authority. Administrators located in the urban areas had to resort to various methods to retain power and prevent attacks from the countryside or to check the process by which a new dynasty might arise to seize power. State power, then as now, spread outward from a number of urban centers with a force that tended to grow weaker with distance. In an outlying region where the population could not be checked or forced to yield, the administrative authority attempted to secure a certain level of influence by political manipulation setting one powerful family against another or giving formal investiture to one family rather than another. At a minimum, the ruling authority would attempt to prevent rebellion.

Not much has changed in present day Iraq in this regard as well. The central government applies similar methods today that were used throughout Iraq's history to gain and maintain control over the outlying areas. The central government actively seeks to create security systems linking disparate social networks to a central administration. The methods to accomplish this goal have not changed. Regions are divided into areas of influence. Some are administered directly others become the responsibility of loyal administrators or military commanders who manage local affairs, settle disputes and preside over the markets. In areas outside the reach of direct administration, the population is organized under the authority of intermediaries. In some regions, local elites maintain their autonomy and are confirmed in their local power. The distance from the center of power influences the amount of force the ruling authority is capable of projecting to achieve national control at any given time.

During the formation of the Sahawa al Anbar movement, Iraq's Ministry of Interior also demanded that a registry containing the vetted names of all the volunteers be made available to the state. This list also would be used to monitor and manage strength levels. A concerted effort was made by the United States Marines to directly tie the Awakening forces to the central government. The central government went as far as confirming a local, Major General Tareq Youssefal-Thiyubi, who had no previous experience in law enforcement, as the Anbar Provincial Chief of Police. Major General Tariq had served as the Sahawa al Anbar security chief prior to assuming his post. He was also the favorite of the Anbari tribes. As a modern day Shurta commander, Major General Tariq was accepted by the central government because he was a member of the local elite and expected to serve as mediator between those elites and the representatives of the central government. This procedure has been repeated in a number of areas in Iraq where the central government is actively attempting to establish its influence and authority.

The success of the Sahawa is not easily replicated in other parts of the country. The Sahawa movement that originated in Anbar province represents a strategic engine for social change and embodies opportunity for some and danger to others. To those currently attempting to consolidate power, the idea of an awakening especially if expressed too vehemently, cannot be allowed to gain momentum. There are calculated differences between an awakening in Anbar and Salah ad Din, Diyala and Baghdad provinces.

Irregular Warfare

In irregular warfare, the operational focus is on relevant populations. The strategic purpose is to gain influence and support. The operational objective is to exploit the legitimacy of a political authority in order to control or influence that population. Belligerents seek to undermine their adversaries' legitimacy and authority and to physically and psychologically isolate them from the relevant population. Concurrently, each side will seek to bolster its own legitimacy and capacity to exercise authority over the same population.

There are currently three initiatives in play to create an appropriate security system to link disparate social networks to the central administration. The Sahawa and the SOI are sponsored by the U.S. military. The Maliki government is sponsoring its own security, economic and political initiative aptly named the Tribal Support Councils. All three initiatives seek to create an expanding network of security, economic and political alliances. The operational objective is to favorably influence the existing political authority of a relevant population so as to physically and psychologically separate Islamists, nationalist insurgents or sectarian militias from that relevant population.

A more detailed study of the three initiatives is warranted. In 2006, Anbari tribal leaders offered to enter into an alliance with the United States Marines and fight al-Qaeda. A series of military successes soon followed. The self-confidence that defeating al-Qaeda forces in the field evoked in Anbar's tribal society soon evolved into what would become known as the Sahawa or Awakening. The United States Marines control this patronage relationship.

The U.S. Army built on the successes of the Sahawa in Anbar province and throughout 2007 began to stand-up its own versions of neighborhood watch groups and tribal security forces that evolved into the SOI in Salah ad Din, Diyala and Baghdad provinces. The United States Army controls this patronage relationship.

Prime Minister Maliki's precarious position in the Iraqi government and the inability of Iraq's military to influence the fight placed his administration in the compromising position to condone U.S. military security initiatives. His administration quickly responded by developing its own security, economic and political alliance network called the Tribal Support Councils. The administration would make every effort to exploit the support councils to check and manage the growing power of the U.S. military's Sunni auxiliary. Prodding by the U.S. military to assume responsibility for SOI has placed the Prime Minister in a disadvantaged position primarily because he did not initiate nor shape this patronage relationship.

But why would the Maliki government not welcome the U.S. military's good faith effort at mediating reconciliation? Especially now since the U.S. military is attempting to transfer the patronage relationship and control over Sunni fighters to the Maliki government? It is true that the Maliki government is flexing its muscle in Diyala and Salah ad Din provinces against members of the SOI. This behavior could be attributed to overconfidence following what appeared to be a series of successful Iraqi military operations in the south but it could also mean that his administration is not quite ready to negotiate with all sides from a position of strength. The Maliki administration cannot be perceived to be weak; something that would be the result if the U.S. military withheld air power, logistic support, intelligence or training to impose a patronage relationship between the SOI and the Maliki government. The inhabitants of Baghdad, Diyala and especially Salah ad Din province would interpret any U.S. military sanction as a sign of weakness and begin to demand greater subsidies and role in decision making. The threat of renewed violence would always be an implied during the renegotiation of the social contract.

What the Maliki administration needs most is time to establish its' own security, economic and political alliance network. To gain time, Maliki may seek to disrupt the SOI security network in Salah ad Din and Diyala so as to slow and shape its momentum. The administration would not seek to defeat nor eliminate the SOI but only to weaken them sufficiently since he will need them at a future time to block Kurdish designs on Kirkuk in the north. The theme of an Arab Iraq resonates throughout the tribal territories regardless whether Sunni or Shia. Maliki only needs to fix the Anbar Sahawa in place. The Marines have managed the province well and the Anbaris appear to be favorably disposed towards an amiable accommodation with the Maliki government. Maliki continues to focus his efforts in the south. His administration's sponsored tribal support councils are the mechanism for building his own security,

economic and political alliance network so as to interdict and block Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq/Badr and Organization of the Martyr Sadr influences.

Conclusion

A reengineered U.S. strategy may well be in order in light of the evolving security and political landscape. The question remains if imposing concessions at this stage will assist or hinder the effort. In irregular warfare, the operational focus is on relevant populations. The strategic purpose is to gain influence and support. Publicly forcing the Maliki government to adhere to U.S. demands would only play into the hands of those that actively seek to undermine the legitimacy and authority of the Iraqi government. Any reengineered U.S. strategy that seeks to impose concessions on this issue from the Maliki government runs the risk of jeopardizing U.S. long-term interests in Iraq. There may be more appropriate ways to shape the operational environment so as to achieve our objectives. Especially if worked within the Iraqi cultural frame of reference.

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