

## Annual Award of Excellence 2018

### Honourable Mention

#### *A Coalition of Negatives: The Case of the Sons of Iraq and the US in their Counterinsurgency Alliance*

Nizar Mohamad

#### Introduction

Following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, American policy makers instituted a series of decisions that would later be deemed 'strategic blunders'. Among such 'blunders,' the de-Ba'athification policies imposed by Paul Bremer, coupled with the massive neoliberal restructuring of the state's economy, had the most corrosive implications on Iraqi society, triggering massive unrest across Iraq's fragile and insecure social and communal constituencies. With a civil war in full swing by 2004, American troops found themselves ill-equipped to deal with the multidimensional, multifront dynamics that erupted as a result of the spiralling conflict between Iraq's major ethnosectarian communities, particularly the Sunnis and Shiites. This strategic quagmire culminated in the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which emerged onto the scene in 2004 as an unexpectedly formidable adversary.

By 2006, the US, increasingly frustrated with the perils of what has become known as the “Sunni Insurgency”, formed an alliance with Iraq’s Sunni tribes, many of which had originally participated in the armed resistance against the Americans, in order to acquire support in defeating AQI and containing the insurgency. Formed in 2006 as the Sons of Iraq (SOI), this initiative became one of the central components of the US counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Iraq and was largely successful in reducing AQI’s presence in the country. While many have attributed the success of the US’ co-optation of the tribes to a shift in strategic thinking that placed emphasis on the axiomatic “hearts and minds” approach—in this case, winning the hearts and minds of the Sunni tribes—the success of the COIN strategy in combating AQI was based less on winning the support of the marginalized Sunnis and more on capitalizing on the insurgency’s loss of popular support. Employing the concept of a “negative” coalition<sup>1</sup>, this paper will seek to demonstrate how the SOI’s incentives were driven by an opposition to the status quo, first to the US and Iraqi forces, then to AQI. The American COIN strategy was successful precisely because it seized the opportunity afforded to it by the grievances of the tribes, which resulted in a temporary convergence of interests, as both sought to expel AQI.

This paper progresses in five main parts. The first part explains how the link between neoliberalization and de-Ba’athification under the Bremer administration resulted in a fragmented Iraqi state unable to inclusively govern and integrate its ethnosectarian communities. The second section charts the development of the Sunni Insurgency as a negative coalition that encompassed a plurality of actors in opposition to the Iraqi state and the Americans. The third part discusses the cleavages that emerged between the Sunni tribes and AQI, which, in the fourth section, culminates in the creation of the SOI as negative coalition between the Americans and tribes against

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper borrows from Robert Dix’s concept of a “negative coalition”, as cited in Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 2006), p 213. In its simplest form, the concept essentially denotes a coalition “which opposes the status quo but may not agree on much else”. While Dix applies it to actors in a revolutionary context, what matters for the sake of this paper is the conceptual focus on actors whose main convergence is an opposition against the status quo. It will therefore be applied to denote a situation whereby actors share a common interest in deposing a common enemy.

the jihadist group. The fifth section summarizes the successes of the SOI campaign and is followed by concluding comments.

### **The US Occupation of Iraq: A Series of Miscalculations**

From the outset, the US lacked a coherent blueprint regarding its invasion of Iraq. Particularly lacking in policy circles was a concrete vision of what a post-Saddam Iraq would like. To illustrate this point, “[i]n conversations with the first Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and then with US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in March 2002, two of Blair’s senior government officials noted that the Americans had put no plans in place for the postwar period.”<sup>2</sup> For example, David Manning, one of the top foreign policy advisors to then-Prime Minister Tony Blair, emphasized that his meetings with Condoleezza Rice made it clear that Bush “had yet to find the answers for the big questions,” including “what happens on the morning after” the fall of Saddam.<sup>3</sup> Then-Vice President Dick Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz provided clear examples of the short-sightedness that permeated US policy projections on the invasion of Iraq. While Wolfowitz stated that “it’s hard to conceive it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself,”<sup>4</sup> Cheney reasoned that “things have gotten so bad inside Iraq, from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, [that] my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.”<sup>5</sup> Rumsfeld went even further, proclaiming “[the war] could last, you know, six days, six weeks, I doubt six months.”<sup>6</sup> As will be demonstrated below, such miscalculations were part of a larger trend of decision-making principles that misinformed US policy, fuelling what became known as the Sunni Insurgency.

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew J. Flynn, *Contesting history: The Bush counterinsurgency legacy in Iraq* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2010), p 93.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p 97

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p 101

## US Policy: Neoliberal Reforms, De-Baathification, and the Dissolution of the Iraqi State

“Like the people of France in the 1940s, they view us as their hoped-for liberator”

Paul Wolfowitz on the Iraqi people just prior to the war<sup>7</sup>

The US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, militarily dubbed “Operation Iraqi Freedom”, led to disastrous consequences. After the fall of Baghdad, crime rates rose in the absence of a governmental authority, marked mainly by public looting.<sup>8</sup> One of the administration’s first responses to the ensuing chaos was to replace retired General Jay Garner with Paul Bremer. With Bremer officially succeeding Garner on May 12, the former general had hardly lasted a month in office.<sup>9</sup> Often referred to as the “governor of Iraq,” Paul Bremer, after being appointed head of the Coalition Provisional Authority—the main institutional body tasked with facilitating and overseeing the occupation, as well as the formation of a political body and the transfer of power to local actors—led a campaign that resulted in the dismantling of the institutions that loosely held together the Iraqi state. Many stood to lose from this campaign.

Bremer’s policies were based on the twin pillars of de-Ba’athification and neoliberalization, both of which had corrosive consequences. Upon entering office, his first official order was to effectively ban all public-sector employees affiliated with Saddam’s Ba’ath Party from current and future employment by the government, “including a majority who had party membership forced upon them.”<sup>10</sup> His second order, it followed, was to implement radical neoliberal reforms on the Iraqi state. “The removal of Saddam Hussein,” Bremer boldly insisted, “offers Iraqis hope for a better economic future. For a free Iraq to thrive, its economy must be transformed—and this

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p 98

<sup>8</sup> Oren Barak. "Dilemmas of Security in Iraq." *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007), p 462

<sup>9</sup> Matthew J. Flynn, *Contesting history: the Bush Counterinsurgency Legacy in Iraq* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2010), p 93

<sup>10</sup> Ali Al Jaber, "Iraq crisis: divide-and-rule in defence of a neoliberal political economy." *OpenDemocracy*, July 1, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/ali-aljaberi/iraq-crisis-divideandrule-in-defence-of-neoliberal-political-economy>

will require the wholesale reallocation of resources and people from state control to private enterprise, the promotion of free trade, and the mobilization of domestic and foreign capital.”<sup>11</sup> As Bremer insisted that foreign investment, and not security, would safeguard Iraq’s future, US policy initiated by Bremer in May of 2003, then, centered on constructing an institutional model for Iraqi statebuilding that essentially consisted of “a neoliberal utopia of hyperprivatization combined with a state that emphasizes policing and security while refraining from socioeconomic interventions, in a minimalist ‘night watchman’ fashion.”<sup>12</sup> Subsequent Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) orders reinforced this. Under the deigns of CPA order 39, for example, Bremer opened the Iraqi economy up to foreign investment, permitted 100 percent repatriation of profits, allowed foreign firms to be treated as equal to Iraqi investors, nominated 192 public sector firms for privatization, and permitted the complete ownership of all Iraqi companies outside the sectors of banking, insurance, and the “primary extraction of natural resources.”<sup>13</sup> Although oil was exempt, due to the sector’s distinctive status that designated it to be used to pay for postwar reconstruction, other realms, including the media, manufacturing, services, transportation, and finance, were all made fully privatized.<sup>14</sup> This is in stark contrast to the labour market, which was “strictly regulated” as “strikes were effectively forbidden in key sectors and the right to unionize restricted.”<sup>15</sup>

This “de-Ba’athification” process, combined with a neoliberal process which privatized the vast majority of components integral to the state, amounted to a form of “reverse state building” whereby almost all sectors of the Iraqi economy were

---

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Khalid Mustafa Madani, "State Rebuilding in Reverse, The Neoliberal "Reconstruction" of Iraq." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, January 1, 2004, p 1 <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer232/state-rebuilding-reverse>

<sup>12</sup> George Steinmetz, "Return to Empire: The New U.S. Imperialism in Comparative Historical Perspective," *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 4 (2005): p 349

<sup>13</sup> Toby Dodge. "Intervention and Dreams of Exogenous Statebuilding: The Application of Liberal Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq." *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 5 (2013): p 1294

<sup>14</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

relinquished to foreign investment and control.<sup>16</sup> More than simply dislodging former Ba'ath members from participation in a future Iraqi state, the dismantling of the Ba'athist state apparatus entailed the dissolution of the government-owned enterprises that constituted just under 40 percent of the Iraqi economy, as well as "the removal of various food, product and fuel subsidies that had guaranteed low-income Iraqis basic staples, even when they had no gainful employment."<sup>17</sup> Under this template, which sought to reverse any remnants of the largely centralized political and economic system utilized by the former regime, unemployment in the country reached levels as high as 60-70%, and since the CPA allowed US corporations in Iraq to outsource employment to Southeast Asian workers for globally competitive wages, this came at the expense of skilled swathes of the Iraqi workforce, including those who were tasked with rebuilding the country following the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>18</sup> The template imposed upon Iraq, inspired principally by the neoliberal and neoconservative currents which ideologically pervaded the Bush Administration, completely ignored the fact that since the 1991 Gulf War, the "institutions of the Iraqi state were subjected to 13 years of the most draconian sanctions ever imposed in international history [which] were specifically designed to bring the state to the verge of collapse."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, since the occupation forces prohibited organizing strikes, Iraqis increasingly turned to violence.<sup>20</sup> By 2006, as Michael Schwartz puts it:

[M]ost Iraqi cities had lost their historic economic centers of gravity, had become dependent on foreign capital for both products and services, were denuded on jobs that paid a living wage, and were populated by an

---

<sup>16</sup> Khalid Mustafa Madani, "State Rebuilding in Reverse, The Neoliberal "Reconstruction" of Iraq." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, January 1, 2004, p 1

<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer232/state-rebuilding-reverse>

<sup>17</sup> Michael Schwartz, "Neoliberalism on crack, Cities under siege in Iraq," *City* 11, no. 1 (April 2007): p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Madani, Khalid Mustafa. "State Rebuilding in Reverse, The Neoliberal "Reconstruction" of Iraq," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 1 January 2004,

<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer232/state-Reverse>

<sup>19</sup> Toby Dodge, "Intervention and Dreams of Exogenous Statebuilding: The Application of Liberal Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq." *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 5 (2013): p. 1211

<sup>20</sup> Madani, Khalid Mustafa, "State Rebuilding in Reverse, The Neoliberal "Reconstruction" of Iraq." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 1 January 2004,

<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer232/state-Reverse>.

---

economically marginal population mired in a downward spiral of poverty and desperation. If the military aspects of the Iraq war could be called “Vietnam on crack”, then the economic aspects could be called “neo-liberalism on crack.”<sup>21</sup>

The stage was thus set for unrest, with one particular community—the Sunnis—being disproportionately impacted by the new status quo.

### The Implications for the Sunnis

Bremer’s de-Ba’athification policy effectively ordered the dismantling of the Iraqi army as well as any remnants of the former Ba’ath regime and its model of state-run enterprise. This process was done hastily and without the mechanisms put in place to ensure that the army was properly disbanded.<sup>22</sup> As a result, over 350 thousand former Iraqi soldiers, described as “well trained, well armed, and deeply angry at the Americans,” were “sent out into the bitter shame and unemployment.”<sup>23</sup> At the behest of Bremer, an additional 1 percent of the Ba’ath party’s former 2 million members—in essence, those who occupied the first four levels of the regime—were banned from employment, a move which the head of the CIA concluded drove an additional 50 thousand Ba’athists underground overnight.<sup>24</sup> This political and institutional purge refused to distinguish between Ba’athists with ideological allegiances to Saddam Hussein and those who either simply sought employment or had their membership forced upon them. “The mistake I made, and I freely admitted it,” claimed Bremer in a 2015 Aljazeera interview, “was that we are not going to be able to make the fine distinctions about whether Abdul joined the Ba’ath party because he believed in its

---

<sup>21</sup> Michael Schwartz, “Neo-liberalism on crack: cities under siege in Iraq,” *City* 11 (2007): p 27

<sup>22</sup> Garner, in conjunction with the Pentagon’s Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), had put forth a disarm, disband, and reintegrate (DDR) program for militias during his first few weeks in office as a response to the chaos that erupted in March 2003. The program, which had received a US \$70 million pledge from the Pentagon, was abandoned by Bremer. See David Ucko, “Militias, tribes and insurgents: The challenge of political reintegration in Iraq,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 3 (2008): pp. 344-345.

<sup>23</sup> Oren Barak, “Dilemmas of Security in Iraq,” *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): pp. 459-60.

<sup>24</sup> Toby Dodge, “The Ideological Roots Of Failure: The Application Of Kinetic Neo-liberalism To Iraq,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 6 (2010): p. 1280.

ideology, or he joined because it was the only way to get a job...the mistake I made was turning it over to Iraqi politicians, who then applied it to teachers and people who were not part of the original decree."<sup>25</sup>

Since many of the positions within Saddam's regime—both civil and military—were occupied by Sunni Muslims, Sunnis came to view the de-Ba'athification process as a direct plot intended to socially and political undermine them. The suspicion of "de-Sunnification" gained even more momentum as the CPA occasionally chose to employ ex-Ba'athists who were Shiite or Kurdish, but not Sunni.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, since the regime set in place by the former ruler had relied on what he viewed as the most "trustworthy" elements of Iraqi society: Sunnis, natives of Tikrit—his birthplace—and members of his extended family, as well as his elite army units,<sup>27</sup> Bremer's policies disproportionately impacted Sunnis of all classes, who had now suffered socioeconomically as a result.

The impact extended not only to cities like Baghdad, which had a high pre-war Sunni population, but to majority-Sunni cities outside of the capital that were once home to the largest proportion of state enterprises and government employees.<sup>28</sup> Although the Ba'ath communiqué of 1968 on which Saddam allegedly based his rule ideologically deposed both sectarianism and tribalism (Ba'athism's ideological principles consist essentially of an eclectic combination of socialist and secular Arab nationalist tenets), the former president utilized a strategy of both "state" and "auxiliary" tribalism in order to co-opt the tribes, with the aim of ensuring their loyalty and deterring potential coups.<sup>29</sup> This relationship was particularly strengthened in the

---

<sup>25</sup> AlJazeera English, "Did the US occupation create ISIL? - Head to Head.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7xfS3LXSOk>, 6:07-6:50

<sup>26</sup> Najim Abed al-Jabouri and Jensen Sterling, "The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening," *Center for Complex Operations*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> See Barak, Oren. "Dilemmas of Security in Iraq." *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007), p 462.

Notably, these elite units included the Republican Guard, the Special Republican Guard, and the Fedayeen Saddam militia

<sup>28</sup> Michael Schwartz, "Neo-liberalism on crack: cities under siege in Iraq," *City* 11 (2007): p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> See Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (March 2008): p. 70.

Long states the following: The Ba'ath Party in the 1970s had three main mechanisms to conduct this strategy. The first was the Ba'ath military bureau, which selected and organized party members for military service under the direction of the Bejjat clan. The second was the security-service bureau, which was controlled by Saddam. The final and most obviously tribal instrument was the Committee of Tribes



aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, as Saddam became dependent on tribal networks to smuggle oil in order to circumvent the sanctions regime put in place by the West. Sheikhs from prominent tribes like the Dulaimi tribe of Anbar, for example, were able to accumulate wealth due to this partnership by smuggling oil across the Syrian border.<sup>30</sup> From land reform, which redistributed land to Sunni-led peasant collectives, to extending employment to tribesmen and future sheikhs—employment opportunities that ranged from the security and intelligence sector to smuggling, as well as to professional posts, like engineering—Saddam’s former state had guaranteed the material wellbeing of the Sunni tribes in particular.<sup>31</sup> Thus the Sunnis, including their tribal counterparts, had much to lose from Bremer’s policies.

Much of the Sunni tribal elite in Iraq, although agitated by what they viewed as the antagonism of their community, decided to proceed pragmatically. They adopted a “wait and see” approach regarding their relations with the Americans, urging young, newly unemployed Sunnis to be patient, even as AQI’s numbers began to grow.<sup>32</sup> However, the announcement in July 2003, a mere 5 months after the invasion, that the Governing Council issued by the US would consist overwhelmingly of Shiites and Kurds, further alienated Sunnis, confirming in their eyes that the “United States intended to de-Sunnify Iraq and tilt the regional balance of power toward Iran.”<sup>33</sup> Notably, the decision to choose “Shia and Kurdish opposition groups close to Iran to form the next Iraqi government not only was a catalyst for national resistance, but it also created the conditions for the national resistance—now being led by once-skeptical former military and Ba’athist officials—to tolerate, trust, and in some instances embrace jihadists and al-Qaeda as means to spoil American objectives.”<sup>34</sup> From technocrats to

---

(Lajnat al-’Asha’ir), which was established to work with the tribes of the Sunni Triangle northwest of Baghdad, including Anbar, to secure the porous Syrian border. These three organizations, combined with booming oil revenue after the oil shock of 1973, enabled the Ba’ath Party (and particularly the canny Saddam) to place kinsmen in power (state tribalism) and buy the loyalty of other clans (auxiliary tribalism).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> See Austin Long, “The Anbar Awakening,” *Survival* 50, no. 2 (March 2008): pp. 70-73.

<sup>32</sup> Najim Abed al-Jabouri, and Jensen Sterling, “The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening,” *Center for Complex Operations*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

clergymen, the government became dominated by Shiites—many of whom had ties to sectarian militias—who began implementing policies that were largely driven by sectarian motivations. This resulted in the relegation of Sunnis from the political process. Consequently, “the Sunnis, particularly the middle class, the technocrats and former army officers, watched in alarm as the country was increasingly held hostage, in their view, to a more assertive Shi’a clerical establishment.”<sup>35</sup> Politically excluded, economically marginalized, and religiously disenfranchised, the Sunnis became convinced that the American policies aimed at de-Ba’athification characterized an intention to de-Sunnify their country and uproot them in the process.

Utterly discontented by the occupation in general—and Bremer’s policies in particular—many Sunni tribesmen joined the ensuing insurgency, forging an alliance with Sunni nationalists, ex-Ba’athists, and puritanical jihadists, the most prominent of which was al-Qaeda in Iraq. Hence, “with one stroke of the pen, Paul Bremer, who headed the occupation forces in Iraq, granted jihadi groups the ultimate recruitment ground: an ‘army’ of jobless men who know their way around weapons.”<sup>36</sup> Notably, even the US Defense Department singled out Bremer’s policies as being primarily responsible for driving Iraqis into the insurgency once the resistance intensified.<sup>37</sup> Combined with the sectarian massacres that emerged during the civil war, Sunni tribesmen were driven into the insurgency as a means to restore some semblance of security, becoming part of a negative coalition against the Americans and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).

### **The Tribes Join the Sunni Insurgency**

The US invasion of Iraq created a vacuum of power and security that provided an opportunity for transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to utilize the American invasion as a pretext aimed at establishing an operational base in the country. In 2004, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), also less commonly referred to as al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia,

---

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 288.

<sup>36</sup> Ali Al Jaber, "Iraq crisis: divide-and-rule in defence of a neoliberal political economy," *OpenDemocracy*, 1 July 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/ali-aljaberi/iraq-crisis-divideandrule-in-defence-of-neoliberal-political-economy>.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 100.

surfaced from the shadows in the midst of raging inter-communal violence between Iraq's main ethnosectarian communities and the Americans. "The spark has been lit here in Iraq," proclaimed Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi, "and its heat will continue to intensify—by Allah's permission—until it burns the crusader Armies."<sup>38</sup> When Bremer dismantled the state in May 2003, Iraq's major ethnic, religious, and sectarian communities were "suddenly left without their chief arbiter, the state—arbitrary as it was."<sup>39</sup> AQI sought to exploit both the vacuum of security caused by the occupation and the grievances of the Sunnis to establish an operational base for the organization, with some senior figures, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, pushing for the creation of a caliphate.<sup>40</sup> Since 'competition' within Iraq's free market overwhelmingly favoured the interests of foreign investors and US firms, the ensuing response from Iraq's ethnosectarian mosaic was an eruption of violence over territory, resources, and opportunity, which increasingly evolved to take on greater sectarian tones. In light of an absence of security and employment, many Sunnis decided to resort to armed violence. The tribes of the Sunni Triangle—an area roughly stretching between Baghdad in the South to Ramadi in the West and Tikrit in the North, and sharing proximity to both the Syrian and Jordanian borders—were amongst those that decided to partake in the Sunni Insurgency.

The Sunni Insurgency constituted a negative coalition of actors, which at its height consisted of Sunni nationalists, former Ba'athists, jihadists, and tribesmen. These actors, whose tactics, motives, and ideologies varied sharply, were driven by a convergence, so it seemed, over a common goal: their opposition to US and Iraqi forces. Even as the insurgency intensified, Coalition policies in Baghdad continued to ignore the plight of the Sunnis with comments such as "why should we address these concerns?" and "the Sunnis don't deserve anything" comprising much of the norm.<sup>41</sup> As one Sunni cleric and professor at the University of Islamic Sciences in Baghdad states:

The Americans don't treat the Sunnis well at all, and there are a lot of us in the population: thinkers, experts, scientists, military leaders. They

<sup>38</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2016), p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> Oren Barak, "Dilemmas of Security in Iraq." *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): p. 460.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Phillips, "How al-Qaeda Lost Iraq," *Terrorism, Security and the Power of Informal Networks*, 10 March 2009, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 81.

sidelined the Sunnis, and we don't appreciate this because we want to rebuild the country, too.<sup>42</sup>

As the civil war intensified, sectarian massacres ensued. While often occurring within ethnosectarian communities—indeed, fierce rivalries did exist amongst Shiite militias, just as they did between varying Sunni militants—they occurred between Shiite and Sunni insurgents with the highest frequency and intensity, which fermented greater sectarian resentment. This sectarian resentment was deepened by the myriad atrocities committed by these armed factions against civilian populations hailing from opposing religious denominations. Muqtada Al Sadr, leader of the Shiite militia *Jaysh al Mahdi*, Arabic for the “Army of Mahdi”, was particularly renowned for his opposition to both the Americans and many other Shiite factions, but also for the atrocities his militias committed against Sunnis. These atrocities included kidnapping, intimidation, and “night letters”, all of which were intended to force Sunnis to leave their home, allowing Shiite communities to replace them in acts of ethnic cleansing.<sup>43</sup> At one point in the conflict, two officials linked to Sadr had reportedly turned Baghdad's hospitals into torture facilities.<sup>44</sup> They were implicated in supporting the murder of Sunni doctors, the use of ambulances to transfer arms to Shiite militias, and the torture and kidnapping of Sunnis patients, effectively turning them into “death zones” for Sunnis seeking treatment.<sup>45</sup>

While many of these atrocities went both ways—from blowing up mosques to targeted assassinations, Sunni insurgents, too, engaged in indiscriminate repression—Sunni tribes joined the insurgency in hope of seeking security. Moreover, since the US, for its part, failed to distinguish between the various types of insurgents, Sunnis, from tribesmen to nationalists, were routinely viewed as suspects, linked either to AQI or to “former regime elements.”<sup>46</sup> As such, they were regularly arrested, interrogated,

---

<sup>42</sup> Dr Abdullah Hassan al-Hadithy quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> Russell W Glenn. *Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency* (Abingdon, Ox: Routledge, 2016), p. 210.

<sup>44</sup> See David Ucko, “Militias, tribes and insurgents: The challenge of political reintegration in Iraq.” *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 3 (2008): pp. 347-353.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, from the very beginning of the occupation, senior politicians like Wolfowitz insisted that the insurgency consisted mainly of former “elements of the regime”. See Matthew J. Flynn, *Contesting history: The Bush counterinsurgency legacy in Iraq* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2010), p. 103.

tortured, or worse, handed over to the Iraqi authorities, which, driven by reactionary sectarian sentiments, repressed them heavily. The Americans “made every single mistake they could have thought of to alienate the Sunnis,” recounts one English-speaking Iraqi Sunni, “behaving as if every Sunni is a terrorist.”<sup>47</sup> Another English-speaking Iraqi Sunni sarcastically echoes this sentiment, claiming “the Coalition and US military’s Sunni engagement strategy was, ‘When you see a Sunni, engage him (militarily that is).’”<sup>48</sup> Thus the Sunnis, who at the time constituted roughly 22% of the population,<sup>49</sup> became easy targets for ethno-sectarian militias, insurgents, the Iraqi Security Forces, and the Americans. They were therefore often the victims of discrimination and persecution.

Many Sunni tribes, disillusioned with post-Saddam Iraq and the policies of the CPA, felt they had everything to lose by remaining passive. By 2006, “the situation had reached a nadir, marked by insurgent attacks, roaming Shia death squads targeting Sunni civilian populations and a government infiltrated by sectarian agents.”<sup>50</sup> However, by then, the Sunni tribes were once again alienated, this time by the very insurgency they had been a part of. This will be examined in the following sections.

### **From Insurgency to Counterinsurgency: The Alienation of the Tribes, and the Shift from Sticks and Carrots to Just Sticks**

The Sons of Iraq (SOI) traces its roots to a predecessor movement in which Sunni tribes turned against AQI. The movement now known as *Sahwa*, or “The Awakening”, borrowing from its Arabic meaning, consisted of an uprising sparked by Sunni tribes in the Anbar province who, upon being alienated by the particular practices of AQI, formed militias to oust them. Although AQI’s approach to the tribes originally

---

Wolfowitz was famously quoted as saying “Unlike Spain and Algeria, these guerrillas [in Iraq] do not live among a sympathetic population; they represent elements of the old regime”

<sup>47</sup> Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p 79

<sup>48</sup> See *Ibid.*, p 282. Some jokes took on a more morbid tone, such as “arrested while Sunni” — a joke circulated amongst both Sunni civilians and US officers.

<sup>49</sup> See *Ibid.* This figure includes Sunni Arabs and Turkmen, but not Kurds, who are generally treated as separate category in statistics citing demographic dynamics.

<sup>50</sup> David Ucko, “Militias, tribes and insurgents: The challenge of political reintegration in Iraq,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 3 (2008): p. 342.

contained a strategically appropriate balance of sticks and carrots, this changed as the group began to crystalize power and assert control.

Described as a “marriage of convenience”, AQI and the tribes originally benefitted from a two-way tactical and strategic alliance.<sup>51</sup> Through its substantial revenues, which in part come from its illicit activities in Iraq and in part from its network of global donations, “Al-Qaeda was able to turn clans and families from the same tribe against one another with a combination of carrots (money and other patronage) and sticks (threats of assassination).”<sup>52</sup> In fact, US government reports concluded that by 2006, AQI’s alliance with local Sunni insurgents allowed it to generate between US\$70 million and US\$200 million from criminal enterprises alone.<sup>53</sup> In return, the tribes were able to offer AQI support in the form of combatants, as well as access to terrain in northwest Iraq, which they had traditionally used as smuggling routes. This allowed Anbar to serve as “a crucial portal through which to infiltrate Iraq from either Syria or Jordan, with a network of sympathetic mosques and safe-houses along the Euphrates river valley forming a conduit through which jihadists could be funnelled to Baghdad via Ramadi.”<sup>54</sup> AQI’s membership, although 90 percent Iraqi,<sup>55</sup> at its peak consisted of 1500 foreign fighters—made up largely of Saudis who would enter from the porous Syrian border.<sup>56</sup> The militants originally offered protection and guidance to some Sunnis while also reinforcing the widespread sentiments circulating within their communities that the Shiites in Iraq were working with Iran and the Americans to expel them from the country.<sup>57</sup> The jihadist group reinforced these ideas in order to exploit Sunni grievances and thus further their cause. Given the legacies of Bremer’s policies, the proliferation of repressive Shiite militias (many of which were

---

<sup>51</sup> John A. Mccary, "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): p. 43.

<sup>52</sup> Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (March 2008): p. 79.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2016), p. 59.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Phillips, "How al-Qaeda Lost Iraq," *Terrorism, Security and the Power of Informal Networks*, 10 March 2009, pp. 70-71.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Phillips, "How al-Qaeda Lost Iraq," *Terrorism, Security and the Power of Informal Networks*, March 10, 2009, p 69

<sup>56</sup> Matthew J. Flynn, *Contesting history: the Bush Counterinsurgency Legacy in Iraq* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2010), p. 110.

<sup>57</sup> Najim Abed al-Jabouri, and Jensen Sterling. "The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening." *Center for Complex Operations*, p. 8.

funded by Iran), the persecution of Sunni civilians, and of course, the publication of the Abu Ghraib scandals, accomplishing this task had proven far from difficult. AQI, among other insurgents, were also actively assisted by the Syrian regime, which was driven by a desire to keep the Americans occupied in neighbouring Iraq. By keeping the Americans embroiled in a strategic quagmire, the Syrian regime sought to disrupt the US from materializing any greater regional ambitions that would potentially target Syria or unfold at their expense. The Syrian regime actively assisted the insurgents, particularly AQI, by allowing them to freely transit through Syrian territory, at times even providing or facilitating transportation.<sup>58</sup> However, as AQI attempted to entrench itself into the local populations, particularly within the province of Anbar, its policies began to alienate the deeply tribal society, provoking resentment that fractured the alliance, which no longer seemed rational from the perspective of the tribes.

Over time, the alliance with the puritanical jihadist group failed to provide Sunni tribesmen with either physical or economic security, but instead, had served to exacerbate both. First, the jihadists failed in the long run to provide them with physical security and protection from other sectarian militias, particularly those led either by Sadr or those linked to Iran. Although “AQI could certainly provoke the Shi’ites into conflict, it could not effectively protect Sunnis from the retribution of Shi’ite death squads, either in Baghdad or elsewhere.”<sup>59</sup> Second, the jihadists, although cautioned by Osama bin Laden as well as local Sunni groups, engaged in violence against Sunni civilians for ideological and strategic reasons, which was carried out by utilizing tactics that, among others, included targeted assassinations, public beheadings, and suicide bombings.<sup>60</sup> Iraq’s Sunnis, prior to 2003, had only heard of suicide bombings in

---

<sup>58</sup> See Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts. 2016), pp 101, 111. Weiss and Hassan report that “[a]n office situated across from the US embassy in Damascus even helped would-be insurgents book bus travel to the Syria-Iraq border”, with CENTCOM in 2007 confirming that militias were setting up training camps for Iraqi and foreign fighters on Syrian soil.” Moreover, a number of Iraqi intelligence officials accused the regime of providing support to several insurgents.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew J. Flynn, *Contesting history: the Bush Counterinsurgency Legacy in Iraq* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2010), pp. 108-109. Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, who was head of AQI until his assassination by US forces in June 2006, had constantly ignored letters sent by al-Qaeda leaders that condemned his attacks on Sunni civilians as counter-productive. One Sunni group, the Islamic Army in

neighbouring Palestine and Lebanon, but now had to live through them.<sup>61</sup> In fact, by February of 2006, after elections put in place a Shiite-dominated government, casualties peaked, soaring to 120 a day from “guerrilla-related activity.”<sup>62</sup> Third, AQI attempted to hijack the tribes’ primary sources of revenue—extortion and smuggling—in which they had been engaged for decades.<sup>63</sup> These smuggling routes, which stretched from Iraq into the porous border with Syria in the Northwest, had become more critical than ever as a source of financial and economic revenue due to Bremer’s policies and their exclusion from the political institutions of the state. The Albhu Mahal tribe of Anbar, known for their smuggling activities across the Syrian border, for example, were particularly affected by this, as was Sattar Abu Risha himself, the tribal sheikh who would play a key role in founding the tribal movement.<sup>64</sup> Abu Risha was a smuggler and a highway robber who had become known for orchestrating a group of bandits to lead highway robberies<sup>65</sup>; AQI’s infringement on his smuggling routes is something that jeopardized one of his main sources of economic and financial stability. Fourth, AQI’s puritanical *takfiri* ideology, one that permits committing a host of violent acts in the name of Islam against those deemed “apostates” and “disbelievers”, had overtime made them widely unpopular amongst the people of Anbar. This transnational *salafi-jihadist* ideology, which is predicated on a revivalist militant approach to Sunni Islam, embodies an extreme interpretation of the religion that was foreign to the tribes, and thus clashed with their customs. Although this ranged from imposing *niqab* (a veil worn by women that covers the entire face) on the local populace to outlawing cigarettes and alcohol, what aggravated the tribes most of all was AQI’s attempt to forcibly marry their women in order to penetrate their tribal structures.<sup>66</sup> Areas such as Anbar in

---

Anbar, even posted an open letter on the Internet as a plea to al-Qaeda demanding that the organization halt the killing of Sunnis.

<sup>61</sup> Najim Abed al-Jabouri, and Jensen Sterling. "The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening," *Center for Complex Operations*, p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew J. Flynn, *Contesting history: The Bush counterinsurgency legacy in Iraq* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2010), p 105

<sup>63</sup> John A. Mccary, "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (March 2008): p. 80.

<sup>65</sup> Myriam Benraad. "Iraq's Tribal "Sahwa": Its Rise and Fall," *Middle East Policy Council* 18, no. 4 (2011): p. 2. <http://www.mepec.org/iraqs-tribal-sahwa-its-rise-and-fall>.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Wilibanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the "Sons of Iraq" Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4, 58: p. 59.



---

particular stressed tribal traditions and loyalties, based on familial lineages and communal conceptions of honour, as it reflected a central component of their social structure.<sup>67</sup> They therefore had a history of opposition to foreign rule, “violently resisting the encroachments of successive central governments from the establishment of the British Mandate onwards.”<sup>68</sup> Tribal identities and affiliations thus served to trump any devotion to a form of Islam that was widely perceived as both extreme and foreign to their social and cultural traditions. From coercing tribal families into sheltering insurgents to forcing them to marry off their daughters to jihadists and suicide bombers,<sup>69</sup> by late 2006, “the extremists’ efforts to embed themselves had resulted in a backlash” from the Sunni tribes,<sup>70</sup> cultivating the conditions that sparked an uprising that began in the province of Anbar.

Although the carrots at the beginning seemed plenty, when left with disproportionate swings of the stick—indeed, the carrots seemed almost nonexistent by late 2005—the resulting equilibrium created a status quo that triggered an armed revolt in the same year from the Sunni tribes, who had once again been alienated. No longer a strategic alliance, the tribes had every incentive to turn against the jihadists, and thus many partook in the Anbar Awakening in late 2005. Out of this Awakening grew the Sons of Iraq, a militia that had emerged in full swing by mid 2006. This militia established a negative coalition—this time with the Americans against their former insurgent counterparts.

---

<http://www.meforum.org/2788/sons-of-iraq>

<sup>67</sup> See Myriam Benraad, “Iraq’s Tribal “Sahwa”: Its Rise and Fall,” *Middle East Policy Council* 18, no. 4 (2011): p 4. <http://www.mepc.org/iraqs-tribal-sahwa-its-rise-and-fall>.

Iraq’s tribal structures are based on complex social relations that exist among and between tribes and kinships—including divisions into clans, lineages, houses, and families. As such, the composition of their social relations and ideological affiliations derived from structures that are difficult to co-opt and integrate into a governing structure that seeks to subvert and/or rule over their traditional tribal customs.

<sup>68</sup> Austin Long, “The Anbar Awakening,” *Survival* 50, no. 2 (March 2008): p. 71.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> David Ucko, “Militias, tribes and insurgents: The challenge of political reintegration in Iraq,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 3 (2008): p. 358.

### The Birth of the SOI

The Sons of Iraq (SOI), originally referred to by the Americans as “Concerned Local Citizens” (CLC), and often misleadingly referred to as the “Sons of Anbar”, the “Anbar Awakening”, the “Sunni Awakening”, and “*Sahwa*”, consisted of a negative coalition that brought together Sunni tribal militias and US forces. On the American end, the initiative grew out of a necessity to co-opt the tribes into a COIN campaign to contain the violence in Iraq. By 2007, the US had launched the “Surge,” a policy approved by the Bush administration, which permitted the deployment of an additional 30 thousand troops to Iraq in an effort to restore security and thus stabilize Baghdad and Anbar, the two areas facing the highest unrest at the time. The SOI, which began in the Anbar province, was instrumental in restoring security to a number of Iraqi cities at a time in which the Iraqi state was for all functional purposes on the verge of collapse. In late 2005, the tribes, alienated by AQI, formed militias to lead a revolt in hope of permanently expelling them. In the aftermath of a meeting led by Sheikh Abd al-Sattar al Rishawi, the Anbar Salvation Council (ASC) was created, which united 45 tribal leaders from across Ramadi, and aimed to rally roughly 4500 Sunni tribesmen, including many former insurgents, in an armed struggle against AQI.<sup>71</sup> By mid-2006, “low level contacts had led to a formal meeting between Col. Sean MacFarland, the newly appointed commander of U.S. forces in Ramadi, and Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha, a minor sheikh and tribal leader in Anbar, commonly known as ‘Abu Risha’, who had just issued a manifesto officially denouncing al- Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and pledging support to U.S. forces.”<sup>72</sup> Recognizing the momentum sparked by the tribal awakening, General David Petraeus, who upon being appointed had become the fifth commander in Iraq, helped orchestrate such a coalition, launching the Sons of Iraq in 2006 as an official US-sanctioned program. While the Anbar Awakening was an organic and local movement, the SOI was funded by the Americans<sup>73</sup> as a calculated move to reconfigure COIN policy by adding a potent weapon to its arsenal—motivated tribesman who understood the terrain, both rural and urban, as well as the nature and location of the

---

<sup>71</sup> Michael Knights, "The Status and Future of the Awakening Movements," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 1 June 2009, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> David Ucko, "Militias, tribes and insurgents: The challenge of political reintegration in Iraq." *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 3 (2008): p. 61.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

insurgents. When the Coalition “adopted a new counterinsurgency policy in early 2007,” it “shifted the paradigm and turned to Iraq’s long-existing traditional tribal structures.”<sup>74</sup>

The SOI’s operations were, in principle, limited in scope. As part of the official policy of the Coalition, these tribesmen needed to pass a “probationary period” before being allowed to carry their own weapons, and were prohibited from conducting “offensive operations”, instead being restricted to actions considered strictly defensive.<sup>75</sup> These included manning checkpoints, as well as gathering intelligence and providing insights on suspected insurgents, locations of improvised explosives (IEDs), and weapons caches.<sup>76</sup> Here, the SOI played a pivotal role in forcing back the retreat of al Qaeda in several provinces through, officially, a series of these largely stated “defensive” operations, which in essence allowed them to effectively function as “neighbourhood watches.”<sup>77</sup> By late 2008, the movement had included over 100,000 members and spread beyond Anbar to encompass nearly two-thirds of the state’s provinces, including Nineveh, Diyala, Babil, Salhuddin, and Baghdad,<sup>78</sup> and had included decision-making amongst sheikhs, tribal leaders, and local power brokers.<sup>79</sup> By then, it was increasingly seen as an integral element in stabilizing Iraq’s security, with the 2009 Report to Congress stating that violence in some districts dropped by up to 90 percent due to the involvement of the tribal militia.<sup>80</sup> This even included areas surrounding Ramadi and Fallujah, which had witnessed some of the greatest casualties throughout the war.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Ahmed Farook, "The Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces," Institute for the Study of War 23 (21 February 2008);, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend... The Dynamics of Self-Defense Forces in Irregular War: The Case of the Sons of Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 11 (2014): p. 295.

<sup>79</sup> Greg Bruno. "The Role of the 'Sons of Iraq' in Improving Security." *Washington Post. Special Report*, 28 April 2008. Accessed 21 January 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/28/AR2008042801120.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Report to Congress, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," *Www.defense.gov*. 7 March 2008, pp. iii-iv. [http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/9010\\_Report\\_to\\_Congress\\_Sep\\_08.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/9010_Report_to_Congress_Sep_08.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

## **An Alliance of Incentives: Why the COIN Campaign Worked**

The COIN campaign launched by General Petraeus was successful largely because it offered an arrangement that allowed both Sunni tribes and US forces to converge interests over a common goal: expelling al-Qaeda from Iraq. The SOI campaign, which coincided with the Surge, reversed previous standing policies that the occupation forces had regarding Iraqi's Sunnis, and instead sought to engage them. Petraeus, who is often considered the strategic father of the initiative (that is, from the American side), comments in an op-ed piece to *Foreign Affairs* magazine on the change in overall US policy: "[a]s important as the surge of forces was, however, the most important surge was what I termed 'the surge of ideas' — the changes in our overall strategy and operational plans."<sup>82</sup> Among these changes, he goes on to list establishing bases amongst the local populations in order to be embedded amongst them and thus win support, but more importantly, an acknowledgement of the damage caused by Bremer's policies, the need to address the grievances of the Sunnis, and the importance of distinguishing amongst the insurgents between those who were "reconcilable" and those that he deemed the "irreconcilables."<sup>83</sup> This allowed Petraeus to strategically implement amnesties for many former insurgents in order to encourage their participation in COIN operations. He claims that the SOI program was built on seizing the opportunity that arose when the Sunni Awakening intensified in the summer of 2006<sup>84</sup> in the province of Anbar, during which Colonel McFarland agreed to support Abu Risha in his resistance against AQI<sup>85</sup> and thus co-opt the tribes. This strategy, which is echoed in the 2006 US Counterinsurgency Manual, edited and signed by Petraeus himself, <sup>86</sup> places emphasis on the "hearts-and-minds" approach to COIN

---

<sup>82</sup> David Petraeus, "How We Won in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, 29 October 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> It should be noted that there are many accounts for when the Awakening movement began, with literature varying between late 2005 and early 2006, even amongst US military sources. The accounts diverge in part because many of the tribes were split and thus many misleadingly trace it back to Abu Risha's official manifesto.

<sup>85</sup> David Petraeus, "How We Won in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2013

<sup>86</sup> See United States of America, Department Of The Army, Headquarters, Counterinsurgency (Washington: Department of the Army, 2006), p. 47. The first element is to diminish support for the insurgency, while the second element "involved neutralizing the bad actors, a combination of irreconcilable former regime elements and foreign fighters".

policy.<sup>87</sup> Due to the implications of AQI's rule, however, which had served to alienate Sunni tribal leaders, US policy was in effect "a variation on 'hearts and minds' theory [as] Coalition troops were not so much winning public support as insurgents were losing it."<sup>88</sup> This is evidenced in the fact that discontented tribes revolted prior to US assistance, as well as the general nature of the relationship that existed between the Americans and the Sunni tribes, which was marked by a convergence of temporary interests that revolved around the ousting of AQI.

I've read the reports...You don't get to be a sheik by being a nice guy. These guys are ruthless characters...That doesn't mean they can't be reliable partners. - Colonel MacFarland on working with the tribal sheikhs<sup>89</sup>

We consider the Americans to be our friends at the moment so that we can get rid of the extremists. - Unnamed tribal sheikh from the Anbar province<sup>90</sup>

American policymakers wanted a reduction in casualties and the Sunni tribes wanted to reinstate some sense of physical and economic security. Both objectives were largely achieved during the SOI campaign. US and Iraqi casualties dropped dramatically within the first year.<sup>91</sup> The intelligence gathered from SOI helped US forces address arguably the most daunting strategic task of any COIN operation: identifying the insurgents. This task was particularly challenging in light of the fact that the most intense combat took place in densely populated civilian areas, such as Ramadi and Fallujah, and was exacerbated by the tactics of the insurgents, which ranged from suicide bombings to the utilization of IEDs. Here, the SOI's intelligence had been a

<sup>87</sup> See p A-5 in *Ibid.*, section entitled A Guide for Action.

<sup>88</sup> David Romano, Brian Calfano, and Robert Phelps, "Successful and Less Successful Interventions: Stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan," *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2013): p. 390.

<sup>89</sup> John A. Mccary, "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): pp. 49-50.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>91</sup> See David Romano, Brian Calfano, and Robert Phelps, "Successful and Less Successful Interventions: Stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan," *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2013): pp. 388-405. In fact, according to the study, which examined the SOI's participation in conjunction with the Surge across a 91-month period, it conclusively stated that co-opting the tribal militia was more of a critical factor than the Surge itself, singling it out as the one variable responsible for the greatest reduction in civilian and Coalition casualties.

substantial asset in routing out Sunni militants. This was mainly because many of the recruits knew where al-Qaeda fighters were since they had initially harboured them.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, Sunni tribesmen were ultimately placed on US payrolls, receiving \$300 US monthly, which amounted to roughly 70 percent of an Iraqi policeman's salary.<sup>93</sup> Although the tribes were responsible for arming their members, they received uniforms, Iraqi flags, communication equipment, and training from the US, all of which amounted to improved security in their areas.<sup>94</sup>

The program set up by the Americans acted like "an employment sponge on unemployed military age males and provided them with a position of respect in their communities...[which] contributed significantly to a reduction in al-Qaeda recruits due to people simply having a job."<sup>95</sup> In the words of a local tribal sheikh:

They established the Sahwa in our city after all the doors had been shut in our face because there was no chance to hold jobs [...] When we joined the Sahwa, we had to remind each other why most of us were insurgents ... Either get us a job or Iraq will go back to the way it used to be.<sup>96</sup>

A former Saddam-era general, insurgent, and SOI member, commenting on joint projects set up by the tribal councils and the Coalition forces, echoes this claim:

Through that initiative, we were able to provide the people with drinking water, with many services, and with jobs, because the area had been neglected since 2004. Through the Coalition forces, I was able to get enough projects going, such as pumping stations, paving roads, repairing and refurbishing schools, clinics, building schools. We were able to put

---

<sup>92</sup> Mark Wilibanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the "Sons of Iraq" Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4, 58: p. 61. <http://www.meforum.org/2788/sons-of-iraq>.

<sup>93</sup> Russell W Glenn, *Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency*. Abingdon, Ox: Routledge, 2016, p. 210.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Daniel R. Green, "The Fallujah awakening: a case study in counter-insurgency," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 4 (2010): p. 596.

<sup>96</sup> Mark Wilibanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the "Sons of Iraq" Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4, 58: p. 66.

people to work. We were able to put engineers to work . . . to repair the electricity and water.<sup>97</sup>

Employment thus mitigated some of the grievances of the Iraqi tribesmen, providing them with economic security and deterring them from joining the insurgency.

Employment programs, however, were compounded by American willingness to look the other way regarding the tribes' illicit activities, particularly smuggling.<sup>98</sup> This also included their ruthless repression of former jihadists. Although the SOI were only designated to execute "defensive" missions, such as manning checkpoints and enhancing intelligence on the activities of insurgents, the "dividing line between these activities and actual participation in fighting was, however, more often than not blurred," as they often employed the same tactics as AQI in retaliatory "revenge-based frenz[ies]."<sup>99</sup> In addition, "since the Sons of Iraq were being paid by the Americans, they did not have to rely on the Iraqi government for assistance" and thus many members, even those who lacked affiliation with Abu Risha, would claim they were part of the SOI movement in order to receive steady income, as well as ammunition, permission to use their weapons, secure areas, obtain reconstruction contracts, and, above all, immunity from being potentially targeted by either US or ISF forces.<sup>100</sup> Marine Colonel Stacy Clardy, who commanded the Coalition forces in Anbar in 2007, comments on her experience with the tribes, stating "[y]ou can only trust people to do

---

<sup>97</sup> Staff Major General Jasim Muhammad Salih Habib interviewed in Colonel Montgomery Gary W., ed. *Al-Anbar Awakening, Volume II. Iraqi Perspectives, From Insurgency to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009*. Vol. 2. Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University, 2010. *Iraqi Perspectives*, p. 70.

<sup>98</sup> Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (March 2008): p. 80.

<sup>99</sup> As one American soldier recounted: "They hunted al-Qaeda down with a vengeance. They dragged al-Qaeda guys through streets behind cars...they had videos of feet on the alters in mosques...It was pretty much just a ruthless slaughter." In another case, an Iraqi official recalled how a tribal leader informed him that he had an AQI operative beheaded: "I want to show you something you will like.' One of the [al Qaeda] people who tried to assassinate him, and he showed me on the telephone a picture of a head." See Wilibanks, Mark, and Efraim Karsh. "How the "Sons of Iraq" Stabilized Iraq." *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4, p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> Abed Al-Jabouri, Najim, and Sterling Jensen. "The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening." Ch 1-2, no. Commissioned for a Conference Entitled "The Anbar Awakening: An After Action Review" (2010): p. 14. Accessed December 14, 20. [http://cco.dodlive.mil/files/2014/02/Prism\\_3-18\\_Al-Jabouri\\_Jensen.pdf](http://cco.dodlive.mil/files/2014/02/Prism_3-18_Al-Jabouri_Jensen.pdf).

what is in their best interests. The Iraqis are doing what is in their best interest. . . These are a practical people," indicating that the success of alliances on the ground will be contingent on whether interests converge around common incentives.<sup>101</sup> Thus the Americans and the tribes, although having different incentives for teaming up, benefitted greatly from the alliance, as they converged over their opposition to AQI, a common enemy that, by the nature of its actions, had served as an obstacle to their objectives.

### **Conclusion: Negative Coalition and the Fate of the Tribes**

The Sons of Iraq were born out of a political, social, and economic climate that marginalized, disenfranchised, and excluded them. Their objective in joining the program that operated under the umbrella of the US stemmed from their desire to oust al-Qaeda and reverse some of the damaging implications of American policies during the occupation of Iraq. As many were former insurgents, their opposition was that of a negative coalition, resisting first the status quo set in place by the US and Iraqi authorities, then second by the rule of AQI. Far from winning the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi tribes, US COIN strategy under General Petraeus was effective because it seized the opportunity afforded to it by capitalizing on the disillusionment of the Sunni tribes to form an alliance based on the common goal of ousting the jihadists. Seen in this light, the hearts and minds of the tribes were not so much won as they were purchased at a relatively low cost by the Americans after AQI had alienated them. This strategic transaction made sense given the context in which it occurred. The Iraqi government, for its part, remained highly suspicious of this large, overwhelmingly Sunni force, and despite pledging to reintegrate approximately 94 thousand by 2011 of the list of over 100 thousand SOI recruits provided by the Americans, by 2010, less than 40 thousand had been reintegrated into the state's apparatus, 30 thousand of which were employed by ministries outside the security realm.<sup>102</sup> After the US withdrawal in 2011, SOI

---

<sup>101</sup> John A. Mccary, "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): pp. 53.

<sup>102</sup> Mark Wilibanks and Efraim Karsh. "How the "Sons of Iraq" Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4, p. 28.

<http://www.meforum.org/2788/sons-of-iraq>.



suffered a different fate. As a former high-ranking official in the Iraqi government stated, “the history of the Anbar Awakening is very bitter...the people who fought al-Qaeda were later abandoned by their government. Many of them were also executed by al-Qaeda, and some of them were even arrested by Iraqi forces.”<sup>103</sup> Abu Risha himself was assassinated in late 2006 by AQI. Once again alienated, several Sunni tribes hailing from Anbar joined ISIS after its takeover of Mosul in 2014—not for ideological reasons, but for reasons of either “brute necessity” or calculated power politics.<sup>104</sup> Since the Iraqi state refused to hold its side of the bargain, many SOI members, disenfranchised by their former partners’ betrayal and what they perceived as America’s tacit acceptance of these policies, defected back—this time to the ‘Islamic’ State—forming yet another negative coalition against its former sponsors.

---

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts. 2016), p. 68.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p 209

## Bibliography

- ABed al-jaBouri, Najim, and Sterling, Jensen. "The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening." *Center for Complex Operations*, January 2010, pp. 3-18. Accessed 5 December 2017. [http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism\\_2-1/Prism\\_3-18\\_Al-Jabouri\\_Jensen.pdf](http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_2-1/Prism_3-18_Al-Jabouri_Jensen.pdf).
- AL Jaberi, Ali. "Iraq crisis: divide-and-rule in defence of a neoliberal political economy." *OpenDemocracy*, 1 July 2014. Accessed 5 December 2017. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/ali-aljaberi/iraq-crisis-divideandrule-in-defence-of-neoliberal-political-economy>.
- Barak, Oren. "Dilemmas of Security in Iraq." *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): pp. 455-75. Accessed 5 December 2017. doi:10.1177/0967010607084996.
- Benraad, Myriam. "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall." *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 1 (2011): pp. 121-31. Accessed 5 December 2017. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00477.x.
- Bruno, Greg. "The Role of the 'Sons of Iraq' in Improving Security." *Washington Post. Special Report*. 28 April 2008. Accessed 21 January 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/28/AR2008042801120.html>
- Clayton School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, UK, Govinda, and Andrew Thompson. "The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend ... The Dynamics of Self-Defense Forces in Irregular War: The Case of the Sons of Iraq." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 11 (2014): pp. 920-935.
- Montgomery, Colonel Gary W., ed. *Al-Anbar Awakening, Volume II. Iraqi Perspectives, From Insurgency to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009*. Vol. 2. Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University, 2010.
- Dodge, Toby. "The ideological roots of failure: the application of kinetic neo-liberalism to Iraq." *International Affairs* 86, no. 6 (2010): pp. 1269-1286. Accessed 5 December 2017. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00942.x.
- Dodge, Toby. "Intervention and dreams of exogenous statebuilding: the application of Liberal Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq." *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 05 (2013): pp. 1189-1212. doi:10.1017/s0260210513000272.
- Farook, Ahmed. "The Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces." *Institute for the Study of War* 23 (February 21, 2008): 1-17. Accessed 5 December 2017. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/Backgrounder%2023%20Sons%20of%20Iraq%20and%20Awakening%20Forces.pdf>.

- 
- Flynn, Matthew J. *Contesting History: the Bush Counterinsurgency Legacy in Iraq*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2010.
- Glenn, Russell W. *Rethinking western approaches to counterinsurgency*. Abingdon, Ox: Routledge, 2016.
- Goodwin, Jeff. *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006. Green, Daniel R. "The Fallujah awakening: a case study in counter insurgency." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 4 (2010): pp. 591-609
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Hashim, Ahmed. *Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Iraq*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- "Did the US occupation create ISIL? - Head to Head." Interview by Mehdi Hassan. YouTube. 4 December 2015. Accessed 8 December 2017.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7xfS3LXSOk>. 6:07-6:50
- Long, Austin. "The Anbar Awakening." *Survival* 50, no. 2 (March 2008): pp. 67-94. Accessed 5 December 2017. doi:10.1080/00396330802034283.
- Mccary, John A. "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives." *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): pp. 43-59. doi:10.1080/01636600802544905.
- Measuring stability and security in Iraq: report to Congress, in accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2008 (Section 9010, Public Law 109-289 ; Section 9204, Public Law 110-252)*. Washington, D.C.: Dept. of Defense, 2008. Accessed 5 December 2017.  
[https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq March 2009.pdf](https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/Measuring_Stability_and_Security_in_Iraq_March_2009.pdf).
- Medani, Khalid Mustafa. "State Building in Reverse: The Neo-Liberal 'Reconstruction' of Iraq." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, no. 232 (2004): pp. 1-4. Accessed 5 December 2017. doi:10.2307/1559480.
- Petraeus, David. "How We Won in Iraq." *Foreign Policy*, 29 October 2013. Accessed 10 December 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/29/how-we-won-in-iraq/>. Phillips, Andrew. "How al-Qaeda Lost Iraq." *Terrorism, Security and the Power of Informal Networks*, 10 March 2009, pp. 64-84. doi:10.4337/9781849805322.00014.
- Romano, David, Brian Calfano, and Robert Phelps. "Successful and Less Successful Interventions: Stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan." *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2013): pp. 388-405. doi:10.1111/insp.12067.
- Schwartz, Michael. "Neoliberalism on crack, Cities under siege in Iraq." *City* 11, no. 1 (April 2007): pp. 21-69.

Steinmetz, George. "Return to Empire: The New U.S. Imperialism in Comparative Historical Perspective." *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 4 (2005): pp. 339-67.

Ucko, David. "Militias, tribes and insurgents: The challenge of political reintegration in Iraq." *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 3 (2008): pp. 341-73

United States of America. Department Of The Army. Headquarters. *Counterinsurgency*. Washington: Department of the Army, 2006. Accessed 8 December 2017.  
<http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>. Field Manual

Weiss, Michael, and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. New York: Regan Arts, 2016.

Wilbanks, Mark and Efraim Karsh. "How the 'Sons of Iraq' Stabilized Iraq." *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4, 58. <http://www.meforum.org/2788/sons-of-iraq>