

# UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE SONS OF IRAQ

## THE AWAKENING

In 2007, after experiencing large losses and increased violence in Iraq, the U.S. adopted a new counterinsurgency strategy that included a troop increase as well as a new emphasis on cooperation with the Iraqi population. Coalition forces succeeded in co-opting tribal leaders, alienated by al-Qaeda's extremist ideology and brutal tactics, and "turned formerly passive supporters as well as some former insurgents into active supporters of the counterinsurgency effort."<sup>1</sup> They convinced tribal leaders to recruit young men, mostly Sunni-Arabs, and created volunteer security forces around the country.

The new alliance with Sunni tribes began in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, where Sheikh Abdul Sattar Buzaigh al-Rishawi, also known as Abu Risha, spearheaded the Awakening Movement to rid the area of al-Qaeda militants. Sattar struck a deal with U.S. forces in which he provided recruits for a local security force in exchange for U.S. assistance in building and securing police stations in the Ramadi area.<sup>2</sup> The deal proved successful, and the U.S. trained hundreds of local volunteers. Security in Ramadi gradually improved. The success was duplicated elsewhere and the Awakening Movement spread across the country. By spring of 2008, the local volunteer forces, now called Sons of Iraq (SoI), were present at nearly two thirds of Iraqi provinces.<sup>3</sup>

It was clear that the short-term goal of the Sons of Iraq program was achieved. In most areas in which they operated, security and stability increased.

The program complemented the operations of Coalition and Iraqi forces, allowing them to accomplish far more than they could otherwise have been able to on the security front.<sup>4</sup> As the security situation improved, far fewer SoI recruits were needed to maintain stability and U.S. forces began to transition the members to other professions in the private and public sectors.

## A CHALLENGING TRANSITION

The first step in the transition was to transfer control of the SoI program from the U.S. military to the Iraqi government. Once the transfer was complete, the Iraqi government was tasked with finding new employment for the members. When volunteers were recruited into the SoI program they were notified by the U.S. military and the Iraqi government that the program was only temporary. SoIs were promised they would be transitioned either into the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iraqi Police, or will receive vocational training and a government job. Roughly 100,000 SoIs across the country were paid \$300 a month by the U.S. military. The transfer of the program to Iraqi hands was on the whole smooth; by 2009, the Government of Iraq (GoI) assumed responsibility for salary payments to the Sons of Iraq. They also began the transition of SoIs to alternative employment.<sup>5</sup>

The transition of SoIs into other government agencies has not gone as smoothly as was hoped. The stated goal was to transition twenty percent



A GROUP OF THE SONS OF IRAQ (SOI) WAIT TO BE PAID BY IRAQI SOLDIERS ASSIGNED TO THE 47TH IRAQI ARMY BRIGADE, DURING AN SOI PAYMENT MISSION WITH U.S. SOLDIERS ASSIGNED TO THE 1ST BATTALION, 8TH CAVALRY, 2ND BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION, IN MULTAQ, IRAQ, OCT. 22, 2009. (U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. CANAAN RADCLIFFE/RELEASED)

of SoIs into the Iraqi Security Forces and the remaining eighty percent into other government agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, or private-sector jobs by the end of 2009. As of March 2010 only forty percent of SoIs were integrated into new employment. The remaining force is still under GoI control and receives regular payment by the Iraqi army or police.<sup>6</sup>

The transition has proved problematic for several reasons. The GoI still does not have the logistical infrastructure, administrative capacity, or the resources to swiftly integrate thousands of SoIs and provide them with civil employment. Related to this is the question of need. Even if the Iraqi government had the capacity to integrate these fighters, there are limited positions for young and uneducated men. The U.S. military worked diligently to assemble lists of the names of SoI fighters it received from local leaders, and gave them to the Iraqi government to receive approval. According to CPT Jay Ross, who was intimately involved with the transition north of Baghdad in early 2008, this process proved more difficult than initially expected.<sup>7</sup> The bureaucratic challenges

have caused not only a delay in integration to new positions but also in payments to SoI members.

Lack of trust has also been an issue. The Sons of Iraq are primarily Sunni while the Iraqi government has been Shi'a dominated since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Elements within Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government have long distrusted the SoIs,<sup>8</sup> fearing they would threaten government authority.<sup>9</sup> Such distrust has meant that many SoIs were denied approval on the basis of their tribal affiliation, not their actual criminal past.<sup>10</sup> Some SoIs have been arrested since the Iraqi government took charge of the program while others felt forced to flee the country.<sup>11</sup> The feeling of distrust is mutual. SoIs are often suspicious of government actions; even when members are denied transition approval for legitimate reasons, some SoIs view the denial as illegitimate and based solely on their Sunni identity. Even though the transition was delayed partially in order to maintain increased security during the March 7, 2010 parliamentary election,<sup>12</sup> the SoIs have felt that the government was purposefully delaying their integration into the security forces

and civil service. The same sentiment is echoed when payments from the government are stalled—members see it as intentional though it is most likely institutional.

## UNDER ATTACK

Since their inception, Sons of Iraq members have regularly been the target of attacks by al-Qaeda and affiliated groups. Sheikh Abdul Sattar, the founder of the initial Awakening Movement, was killed in one such attack in September 2007 when a roadside bomb exploded near his house in Ramadi, Anbar province.<sup>13</sup> 528 SoI members were killed and 828 were wounded in 2008.<sup>14</sup>

According to the U.S. military, there has been a decline in attacks on SoIs in 2010.<sup>15</sup> Yet, such attacks, albeit less frequent, continue to claim the lives of hundreds of SoI members. Two suicide bombs killed forty-eight people on July 2010. Most SoIs lined up to get their paychecks at a military base southwest of Baghdad.<sup>16</sup> This was one of the most lethal attacks in Iraq this year but it was only one in a string of attacks targeting SoIs. In June, eleven members died in a series of attacks;<sup>17</sup> nine members were killed in less than a week in May, and earlier in 2010, fifteen members were killed in one attack in Abu Ghraib.<sup>18</sup>

The pervasive feeling among SoI members and leaders is that the government is not doing enough to protect them. The leader of the movement in Radwaniya, the site of the aforementioned attack in July, echoed popular sentiment when he expressed his suspicion that government agencies helped facilitate the attack that took the lives of forty-three SoIs.<sup>19</sup> Without support from the Iraqi government, the SoIs fear retribution from al-Qaeda as American troops withdraw.

## CONCLUSION

Overall the integration of the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi Security Forces and the civil service has steadily progressed, with many of the volunteers receiving some vocational training and new government jobs. The government remains largely committed to the process as seen by their recent

allocation of \$300 million from their budget to pay SoIs.<sup>20</sup> However, distrust between the SoIs and the Iraqi government, complaints of late paychecks, non-payment of salaries, and arrests of SoI members continue to strain the process. In addition, SoIs have been a primary target for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in Iraq, making them feel increasingly threatened yet under-protected. A bitter and resentful Sunni population spells danger to future Iraqi stability. The U.S. will benefit from keeping a close watch on the transition process and assisting in finding alternative employment for all SoIs within the Iraqi government or the private sector.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Farook Ahmed, Sons of Iraq and the Awakening Forces. *Backgrounders*, Institute for the Study of War, February 21, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Kukis, “Turning Iraq’s Tribes Against al-Qaeda” *Time*, December 26, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Bruno, Finding a Place for the Sons of Iraq. *Backgrounders*, Council on Foreign Relations, January 9, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Farook Ahmed, Sons of Iraq and the Awakening Forces. *Backgrounders*, Institute for the Study of War, February 21, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Bushra Juhi, “Blast Targets Sunni Groups Allied with Government Forces Fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq” *The Associated Press*, July 18, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq, Department of Defense, March 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Captain Jay Michael Ross, Platoon Leader, 4<sup>th</sup> Striker Brigade Combat Team. July 23, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Peterson, “Government, Sunnis Blame al-Qaeda in Iraq for Sunday Bombing” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 19, 2010; Martin Chulov, “US-Backed Militia Attacked”, *The Guardian*, July 23, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Greg Bruno, Finding a Place for the Sons of Iraq. *Backgrounders*, Council on Foreign Relations, January 9, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Captain Jay Michael Ross, Platoon Leader, 4<sup>th</sup> Striker Brigade Combat Team. July 23, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Lourdes Garcia Navarrrro, “Bitterness Grows Amid U.S.-Backed Sons of Iraq” *NPR*, June 24, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq, Department of Defense, March 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Partlow, Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright, “Bomb Kills a Key Sunni Ally of U.S.” *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2007; Alissa Rubin, “Sunni Sheikh who Backed U.S. in Iraq is Killed” *New York Times*, September 14, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Greg Bruno, Finding a Place for the Sons of Iraq. *Backgrounders*, Council on Foreign Relations, January 9, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Leila Fadel and Aziz Alwan, “Sunni Fighters Targeted in Attacks” *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Bushra Juhi, “Blast Targets Sunni Groups Allied with Government Forces Fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq” *The Associated Press*, July 18, 2010; “Bombs Targeting

Sons of Iraq Leave at Least 44 Dead” *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, July 18, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> “11 Dead in Attacks on the Sons of Iraq” *BBC News*, June 8, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> “Sons of Iraq Turned the Tide for the U.S. Now they Pay the Price” *The Guardian*, May 13, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Chulov, “US-Backed Militia Attacked”, *The Guardian*, July 23, 2010

<sup>20</sup> DOD News Briefing with General Ray Odierno from the Pentagon, July 21, 2010.