

The Iraqi Government Assumes Control of the Sons of Iraq in Baghdad

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The transfer of fiscal and command responsibility for the Sons of Iraq (Sol) program began in earnest with the assumption of responsibility of roughly 20,000 Sol in and around Baghdad by Government of Iraq (GOI) on November 10, 2008. Since that time, they have assumed responsibility for 51,000 additional Sol in Baghdad province.¹ With provincial elections only two months away and a timeline for the withdrawal of US troops set in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), this was a crucial step taken by the GOI towards integrating of the Sons of Iraq into their security operations in order to build sustainable security and reconciliation. This commentary briefly explains the integration process thus far, and the remaining challenges that the GOI and the Coalition will face as integration continues.

In the months leading up to the transfer, the future of the Sol was uncertain. The ongoing Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) murder and intimidation campaign, in combination with numerous arrests of Sol members by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) drove leaders into hiding and caused concern over the safety of Sol members following their integration into the GOI. Sol members feared the Shia-dominated GOI's possible dissolution of the movement upon assuming its oversight from Coalition Forces, leaving members unemployed and vulnerable to AQI retribution. This apprehension was heightened by the significant and unexplained delay in incorporating Sols into the Iraqi Police. In response to these perceived dangers, many Sols threatened a return to the Sunni insurgency.

The Coalition began addressing these concerns by creating a Civil Service Corps (CSC), including one in the Riyadh area of Baghdad on September 9, 2008. The corps provided vocational training to former Sol, and then gave participants jobs in their specific vocation.² The CSC was an important first step towards transitioning the Sol into long-term employment programs.

In addition to the creation of the CSC, Coalition Forces also announced plans to transfer control of the Sol program to the Government of Iraq in early September. However, despite the Sol's role in bringing security to much of Iraq, the GOI maintained its suspicions about the Sol members, many of whom were former insurgents. When the ISF in Diyala arrested 500 Sols and their affiliates in August and September 2008, the Sol questioned the government's intentions for the future of the movement.³ Additionally, the Ministry of the Interior's slow and limited integration of Sol into the ISF signaled the GOI's lack of commitment to legitimize and continue the movement as promised. This reciprocal mistrust led to mutual frustration and a shared apprehension regarding the Sol's integration into the GOI.

In early 2008, the GoI committed to incorporating a percentage of the Sol into the ISF, offering the movement the hope of a stable future. However, the GoI claimed that the security forces could absorb only a fifth of the Sol's roughly 120,000 members, with plans to offer non-security related jobs and training to the remainder. In Anbar Province, the region that saw the genesis of the Sol movement, 24,000 Sol were brought into the Iraqi Police. However, the government has thus far failed to keep its promise to increase that figure to 30,000 and, contrary to its promises, has provided limited opportunity for education and job training.⁴ So in early September, when Coalition Forces announced an October 1, 2008 date for the transfer of Sol responsibility to the GoI, many Sunnis expressed doubt as to whether they would continue to earn the money necessary to support their families.⁵ In advance of the transfer of authority, the GoI was slow to set up systems for paying for the Sol, a bureaucratic problem that many saw as a tactic designed to delay the transfer. In addition, on November 2, 2008, the GoI announced plans to lower the monthly pay of each Sol member from the \$300USD that Coalition Forces were paying them to \$250USD.⁶ While eventually the Sol accepted this pay decrease, it was not until November 13, 2008 that the first payments took place and the GoI assumed full control over the Sol.⁷

While the eventual transfer of responsibility did much to allay many of the fears concerning the immediate future of the Sol movement, several issues remain that threaten to rekindle apprehensions. First, the current transfer only represents the Sol program in Baghdad, and some 100,000 Sol members still fall under the responsibility of the Coalition Forces. While in Iraq's capital, the presence of Coalition Forces makes for a favorable security situation during which to affect the transfer, such is not the case in areas where the Coalition or GoI are not as visible in control, tempting opportunities for those who might wish to impede the process of Sol incorporation.

Second, while upcoming provincial elections provide the opportunity for a legitimization of the Sol, they also carry certain risks. For example, an April 6, 2008 decision by the Iraqi National Security Council prohibits any political party with an armed group from participation in elections.⁸ This decision could be used as an excuse by the government to disband the Sol, further exacerbating Sunni-Shia tensions over elections. Also, the results of elections could have a fracturing effect on the Sol depending on how much political power their Sunni constituents are able to regain from the current Shia majority. If the Shia retain their power in Sunni-dominated areas, or if they are seen using corrupt means to do so, some in the Sol may become reluctant to be incorporated into the government security forces.

Finally, the integration of the Sol will not end with their incorporation into the ISF. Rather, the Sol – and the Sunni population in general – must be integrated into the economic and political landscape of Iraq for the long term. AQI knows this and will try to manipulate the economic needs of disenfranchised Sol fighters. The GoI must therefore be vigilant in following through on the integration process until the end. This process will not be easy, and will not be without resistance and critics. However, the challenges and risks to Iraq and its people would be far greater in the absence of this integration and reconciliation. Therefore, the Coalition and GoI must continue to facilitate a non-sectarian Iraqi army which can meet the challenges to security that the Iraqi state is likely to face in the future.

¹ MNF-I Press Briefing, "Interview: Gen. Odierno with Fox News, Oct. 13," October 13, 2008.

² MNF-I Press Release No. 20080910-10, "Riyadh Civil Service Corps opens job opportunities in Iraq," September 10, 2008.

³ Hamza Hendawi, "Iraq Cracks down on US-backed Fighters," *Associated Press Worldstream*, August 18, 2008.

⁴ "Nuri al-Maliki, a Dogged Survivor." *The Economist, US Edition*. April 26, 2008.

⁵ "US Says Baghdad to Fund Anti-Qaeda Fighters," *Agence France Presse*, September 4, 2008.

⁶ Liz Sly. "Iraq Plans to Cut Sunni Fighters' Salaries." *The Chicago Tribune*. November 2, 2008.

⁷ Multi-National Corps-Iraq Press Release No. 20081112-10, "MND-B Troop Participates in Historic Sol Payday," November 12, 2008.

⁸ "Maliki Warns Sadrists on Poll," *Irish Times*, April 8, 2008.