

Backgrounder #23

Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces

Farook Ahmed, Researcher, Institute for the Study of War

February 21, 2008

Introduction

Background

The United States' Joint Campaign Plan for Iraq has laid out a goal to achieve security in Baghdad and other critical parts of Iraq by the summer of 2008 and then extend a self-sustaining security environment to the rest of the country by the summer of 2009.¹ To that end, the United States surged its combat troops and changed to a counter-insurgency strategy that focused on providing population security. This coincided with an opportunity provided by the discontent Iraq's Sunni Arab population felt towards al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) militants and their draconian rule.² The United States took advantage of the situation by striking political deals with the disaffected local populations, most of whom are Sunni Arab.

After the invasion of Iraq, identity politics came to be viewed through an ethno-sectarian prism that delineated the vast majority of individuals as Sunni Arabs, Shi'a Arabs, or Kurds. Iraqis witnessed a great deal of ethno-sectarian violence, as various militias and insurgent groups armed themselves against one another. When it adopted a new counter-insurgency strategy in early 2007, the Coalition shifted the paradigm and turned to Iraq's long-existing traditional tribal structures. Despite their reservations about the Iraqi central government and their occasional prior support for insurgent groups, many tribal leaders were willing to work with the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) because they had been alienated by the religious zealots operating in their midst.

The Coalition successfully exploited this rift between the most radical insurgent groups and the tribal leaders and population. As a result, they turned formerly passive supporters as well as some former insurgents into active supporters of the counter-insurgency effort. The additional U.S. troops provided by the surge allowed the Coalition Forces not only to clear many areas that were previously insurgent strongholds, but also to remain there afterwards to ensure that AQI militants would not be able return to those areas and intimidate the population into providing support. To further increase their gains, local commanders tried to convince tribal leaders and former insurgents to provide potential recruits for local security forces. Because many of those local forces had provided at least passive support for the insurgency, the Shi'a-dominated Government of Iraq has been suspicious of these efforts.³ To address such concerns, the Iraqi government vetted those recruits and compiled their biometric data into a database to enable the Coalition to better monitor the new volunteers.⁴

These volunteer security forces vary greatly by region and even within the different regions of Iraq. Broadly, the leaders of these groups are considered members of the Iraqi Awakening ("Sahwa") political movement, which began in the previously-restive al-Anbar province in western Iraq. The members of these groups were known as "Concerned Local Citizens" (CLC), later renamed "Sons of Iraq" (SoI). Though the size and composition of the groups vary throughout the country, they generally function as neighborhood watches. These groups augment the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces by establishing checkpoints and providing tips on suspected insurgents as well as locations of improvised explosive device (IED)

and weapons caches. In addition to al-Anbar province, Sons of Iraq groups currently exist in and around Baghdad as well as in Northern Iraq.

After a probationary period, these forces are allowed to carry their own weapons (they are not issued arms by the Coalition). Sons of Iraq groups are not authorized to carry out their own offensive operations and are subordinated to local Iraqi or Coalition units.⁵ Furthermore, the Sons of Iraq forces are not meant to serve as a permanent solution, but rather a necessary but temporary measure meant to help the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces move forward in delivering security. Coalition commanders and the Iraqi Government plan to permanently transition a fraction (approximately 20%) of these forces into the Iraqi Security Forces. A reason for this is that the Iraqi government does not have a need to permanently add such a high number of police in these areas of Iraq.⁶

According to latest American military figures, there are currently around 80,000 members of SoI groups across Iraq, which would provide approximately 15,000 new recruits for the ISF.⁷ Because these groups are localized and generally prefer operating near their home areas, it is anticipated that the majority of those transitioning into the ISF will move into the Iraqi Police rather than the Iraqi National Police or the Iraqi Army.⁸ It is important to note that not all of the SoI and Awakening members want to work for the Iraqi Security Forces. Indeed, there are plans in place to ensure that those members not transitioned into the Iraqi Security Forces will continue to be employed after their services are no longer needed by transitioning into public works-type activities.⁹

Effects

Though the SoI program is still very new, Coalition commanders have repeatedly credited these forces for a large portion of the recent reduction in violence throughout Iraq as well as the staggering losses inflicted upon al-Qaeda in Iraq.¹⁰ Internal documents and interviews with members of al-Qaeda in Iraq show that the insurgent group has been driven out of many of its former strongholds over the past year. A senior AQI leader from Anbar province said that while they are not yet defeated, “the turnaround of the Sunnis against us had made us lose a lot and suffer very painfully.”¹¹ AQI leaders further state that their numbers throughout Iraq have dropped by over 70% in the past six months, from 12,000 to 3,500.

Despite their losses, the al-Qaeda in Iraq remains a lethal enemy. AQI was blamed for 4,552 attacks last year that killed 3,870 people and injured 17,815.¹² While this was a substantial decrease from 2006, it shows that the group has not yet been destroyed. Recognizing the hand of the SoI and Awakening Councils in their losses, AQI has focused its attentions on attacking leaders of those forces around the country in recent months.¹³

Despite recent successes, the war against al-Qaeda in Iraq will continue after the United States removes the last of the five surge Brigade Combat Teams. Coalition Forces hope that integrating the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi Security Forces will help counter insurgent and militia activities when the U.S. withdraws its surge forces. If this is the case, the SoI program could be a useful tool that allows the Iraqi government to provide security to the public and its legitimacy.

Sons of Iraq Groups and Awakening Movements by Region

Multi-National Division – Baghdad

The Baghdad Security Plan involved an increase in Coalition and Iraqi Security Force numbers and an evolution in strategy to one that sought to permanently retain control of cleared neighborhoods. To that end, U.S. forces shifted from a garrison mentality and moved out of their large Forward Operating Bases into smaller Joint Security Stations (JSSs) and Combat Outposts (COPs) that gave them a presence in nearly every neighborhood in the city. This has brought Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces into closer contact with locals and allowed them to deliver greater security and increased opportunities for intelligence gathering.¹⁴



The tactics paid off, as the security situation in Baghdad improved markedly from November 2006. By December of 2007, there was a 90% reduction in murders, an 80% decrease in attacks against citizens, and a 70% decline in vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) incidents. Coalition forces were able to discover many weapons before detonation at the same time as they rolled up insurgent networks in Baghdad.¹⁵

According to Major General Joseph Fil, the Sons of Iraq were largely responsible for the successes in this area. In Baghdad, there are approximately 25,000 members of the Sons of Iraq, of whom approximately 10,000 wanted to join the Iraqi Police. As of December, 635 of those had actually joined the police and 2,000 had received approval from the Ministry of the Interior to follow them. A smaller number wants to join the Army.¹⁶

Sadiyah

Since Baghdad is a mixed Sunni-Shi'a area, one should note that there are several mixed SoI programs. The Sadiyah neighborhood in southwest Baghdad, for instance, has a population that wanted a mixed SoI program as the initial group was primarily Sunni. Therefore, the Coalition began to vet local Shi'a citizens in an effort to reach a 50-50 mix within the program, with a total of 200 members.¹⁷

East Rashid

In the East Rashid neighborhood in southern Baghdad, there are over 2,000 Sons of Iraq members who man over 100 checkpoints. The forces in this area are paid through a supervisor by the Coalition but work for the Iraqi Army. Colonel John RisCassi, whose forces operate in East Rashid, says that the SoI are useful beyond providing security because they provide a credible voice to tell the local governments their needs, like electricity and other public goods.¹⁸

Kadhimiya and Mansour

In the Kadhimiya and Mansour security districts of northwest Baghdad (which comprise 36 square miles and contain 1 million people, the Coalition and Iraqi Forces sought to stop the sectarian violence that ravaged the areas through 2006. The Coalition committed one U.S. brigade along with ten Iraqi Army battalions and two Iraqi National Police battalions to secure these districts. Their efforts have been augmented by Sons of Iraq, 1,772 of whom have been vetted for entry into the Iraqi Security Forces. The results have been dramatic, with an 85% reduction in violence from May 2007. Murders were reduced by over 97%, IED attacks were reduced by 90%, and vehicle-borne IED attacks were reduced by 85%.¹⁹ This was largely due to efforts to defeat IED and VBIED networks in the area – efforts that were enabled by because of the Sons of Iraq Program.

Al-Fadhil

Despite these notable successes, there are continuing issues with the local security arrangements. One notable militia that conducts security in the al-Fadhil neighborhood, which is located in northwest Rusafa district in central Baghdad does not recognize the legitimacy or authority of the Iraqi central government. In an issue common to the SoI programs throughout the country, the SoI groups and Iraqi government do not trust one another, which means that the improved security that has resulted over the previous year is still quite fragile.²⁰

Multi-National Division – Center

Multi-National Division – Center (MND-C) comprises the southern and eastern belts of Baghdad, which had long been used by insurgents as staging areas and hubs to push accelerants of violence (notably weapons and fighters) into Baghdad. Lasting security in Baghdad not requires clearing and holding insurgent strongholds, but making it so that the Iraqi people and Iraqi Security Forces are able to keep insurgents from returning to those areas after the Coalition withdraws. Additionally, these areas (like Baghdad and Diyala province) are a mix of Sunni and Shi'a Arabs and saw high levels of sectarian violence, which would need to be reduced in order to foster an environment more amenable to sectarian reconciliation. To secure these objectives, the Coalition decided to insert a large amount of new forces into this area and increased the Coalition presence to five Brigade Combat Teams during the troop surge.²¹



Because they were being put into an area that had previously been ceded to extremists, there were large-scale initial operations that saw quite a bit of bloodshed. As was the case in other areas of Iraq, these operations were followed by attempts to engage the population and

enlist their aid through the Sons of Iraq program. This program grew exponentially in size and is extremely large when compared to the relative size of the population in the area of operations, with over 40,000 SoI members supporting Coalition and Iraqi Forces, approximately 20% of whom wished to join the Iraqi Security Forces.²²

Over the past year, operations in the Baghdad belts have been extremely successful. When they were first put in place in March 2007, the Soldiers of MND-C would come under attack 25 times per day. Presently, that number has decreased by 80%. Furthermore, Coalition and Iraqi successes have degraded the enemy system to the point where they are only able to carry out approximately one successful attack per day. In addition, there has been a 75% reduction in civilian casualties.²³ As in other areas of Iraq, the SoI program has enabled a great deal of the progress in these areas by providing tips as well as by setting up checkpoints that have denied insurgents access to the population.

Arab Jabour

The Arab Jabour area is located immediately south of Baghdad along the west bank of the Tigris river. This area is over 99% Sunni and once served as a stronghold for al-Qaeda in Iraq as well as other Sunni insurgent groups. Because the insurgents were deeply embedded in the area and employed a sophisticated network of defensive belts, it took quite some time for Coalition Forces to make inroads into this area. In September 2007, after three months of sustained operations, the brigade in this area began a Sons of Iraq program. Within three months, this had grown into five SoI programs stretching throughout the area of operations that including 1,200 people.²⁴ Within another month, these numbers grew to a total of 3,200 Sons of Iraq operating in eight groups.²⁵

The Coalition brigade commander in charge of this area of operations recently stated that operations in the Arab Jabour area had concluded and that the Coalition and Iraqi Forces had cleared all of the extremists' defensive belts as well as all of the terrain in the area of operations.²⁶

Mada'in Qada

The Mada'in Qada is located to the east of Arab Jabour across the Tigris River and includes the towns of Nahrwan and Salman Pak. That area is 70-30 Shi'a-Sunni, but the majority of insurgent activities seem to have taken place in the Sunni areas, particularly in Salman Pak. Coalition Forces worked hard to retake control of these areas from insurgents and have been enabled by approximately 5,000 SoI members operating in 28 groups. The local brigade commander plans to increase that number of Sons of Iraq to 6,000 people. Despite the Shi'a majority in the population, the breakdown of SoI in this province is 60-40 Sunni-Shi'a. This is due to the fact that the majority of insurgent activity was taking place in Sunni areas. Of the 6,000 planned CLCs, there are plans for 25% (1,500 people) to join either the Iraqi National Police or the local Iraqi Police. Currently, 400 members of the SoI have been cleared to go to train as Iraqi Police Officers.²⁷

The Colonel in charge of this area has stated that the operations are still ongoing but that Coalition and Iraqi Forces are very close to clearing the last insurgent strongholds in the Salman Pak area.²⁸

North Babil

The North Babil area lies just to the southwest of Baghdad and is mixed between Sunnis and Shi'a. It lies along the strategically vital Highway 8 corridor that connects Baghdad to Southern Iraq and had been used as a major thoroughfare for insurgent supply for both Sunni and Shi'a extremists. This area has 6,000 SoI operating in places where there is no Iraqi police or army presence. In this area, the Iraqi Security Forces generally operate within cities and then undertake operations to attack extremist sanctuaries outside of cities. The Coalition and Iraqi Forces have placed the Sons of Iraq in the areas between the cities and the insurgent havens in order to help secure the area and population so that the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces have greater freedom of movement when they undertake their raids.²⁹

Multi-National Force – West

Multi-National Force – West operates in Al-Anbar Province, which is almost entirely Sunni Arab and was a hotbed of insurgent violence for several years. The province is dominated by large tribes that initially sided with the insurgents against the Coalition and the Iraqi government. After being alienated by al-Qaeda in Iraq's draconian rule, a conference of twelve tribal leaders decided to turn against the insurgents, which had included many tribal members.³⁰ These leaders organized into an "Awakening" movement and furnished people for what were essentially SoI programs. These tribal leaders provided a great deal of intelligence on members of insurgent groups, many of whom were members of their tribes.

Coalition and Iraqi leaders took advantage of the rift between AQI and the population and the security situation largely stabilized during 2007. Attempted violent incidents (more than half of which are discoveries of unexploded IEDs) dropped by approximately 90%, bringing relative calm to a previously violent environment. With the help of the Awakening groups, Coalition and Iraqi forces had managed to expel al-Qaeda in Iraq from the major population centers into small, isolated pockets where they could be targeted and eliminated without being able to project force against the Coalition, Iraqi Forces, or Iraqi population.³¹ At the same time as Coalition and Iraqi operations have dealt severe blows to insurgent groups, the Iraqi Security Forces in the area have been able to take on an increasingly large role in providing local security. As violence has waned, Coalition forces have moved into operational and strategic overwatch positions, providing advice while Iraqi forces conduct operations and day-to-day patrolling.

MNF-W is different in that it does not have a formal SoI program. Al-Anbar's tribal structures are strong enough that they did not need as much guidance from the Coalition. Instead, there was a smaller neighborhood watch program to go along with the alliance with the Sahwa

groups. The Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces have plans to train and transition 3,000 locals who had been used in a neighborhood watch capacity into the local police. This would increase the size of the Al-Anbar police force to 27,000.³²



Despite the great successes in al-Anbar province in providing security and gaining the political support of the local population, there are still major issues as relate to the Sahwa movement. As in other areas, there is a significant and persistent mutual distrust between the Iraqi government and the Awakening groups because of their prior support for the insurgency. The Awakening groups believe that they are under attack not only from al-Qaeda in Iraq but also from Sunni political parties who seem them as serious political competitors for the support of the Sunni population.³³

The situation is not altogether dire, however. Some members of the Anbar Awakening have declared their goal to transition from a security-focused group into a political bloc that represents the tribes of al-Anbar province. This is an important and positive political development for the Coalition and for the Iraqi government as it signifies that the tribes of al-Anbar province have decided to buy into the political process. The tribal leaders of al-Anbar who take part in this will derive legitimacy from public support as well as the credibility they gained in helping oust al-Qaeda from their territory, which will provide a national political voice for Iraq's politically under-represented Sunni population. This was done with the blessing and encouragement of the Iraqi government. If it is successful, this transition could go a long way to alleviate the mistrust that characterizes a great deal of the relationship between Sons of Iraq

groups and the Iraqi government.³⁴ If it fails, the consequences would be as significant in a negative manner.

Multi-National Division – North

Multi-National Division – North comprises the areas of Iraq to the north of Baghdad and east of al-Anbar province going to the country’s borders with Iran and Turkey. This area has become heavily contested between radical Sunni groups in areas including the city of Mosul as well as Diyala province, which includes the city of Baqubah. MND-N is different from other areas of Iraq in that it is very heterogeneous in tribal terms as well as in an ethno-sectarian sense. There are a patchwork of tribes in many areas as well as Sunni, Shi’a and Kurdish fault lines in the different areas of the province. This has complicated efforts to enlist support from Sunni groups, as there is a lingering distrust between the Sunni Arab population and the Kurdish and Shi’a Arab-dominated Iraqi Security Forces.



In MND-North, there are approximately 15,000 Sons of Iraq, approximately 15-20% of whom would like to transition to the Iraqi Security Forces. As in other provinces, the majority of those aim to join the local Iraqi Police.³⁵ This is a relatively low number given the size of the area of operations and the ongoing operations through much of Multi-National Division – North’s area of operations.

Diyala

Diyala province has seen some of the heaviest fighting in Iraq for much of the past year as Coalition Forces sought to clear out militants who took refuge in the province’s cities and isolated villages. The province serves as a strategic crossroads, as it lies between Baghdad, Iran and insurgent strongholds in northern Iraq.³⁶ Diyala province is considered a “miniature Iraq” in that it has many of the different ethnic, religious, and tribal groups that exist throughout the country. Diyala has 25 major tribes as well as over 100 sub-tribes. Furthermore, there are sizable Sunni, Shi’a and Kurdish populations. All of these groups are in competition for power. In order to bring about reconciliation in Diyala, the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces are trying to eliminate rifts in the society that various extremist groups were successfully able to exploit a short while ago.³⁷

Despite these impediments to success, Coalition leaders have been able to recruit over 4,000 SoI in Diyala province that have operated with great success in uprooting various insurgent groups – particularly AQI – from their former strongholds.³⁸ This success, however, has been threatened by ongoing sectarian violence.

Recently, hundreds of mostly-Sunni Sons of Iraq in Baqubah protested in the streets in response to reports that the local Iraqi Police chief, a Shi’a, was responsible for the violent crimes against local Sunnis.³⁹ The protesters, who numbered over 10,000 and included nearly half of the local SoI, threatened to walk out in larger numbers or even to quit their jobs as SoI members, which would be a great defeat for Coalition efforts to foster reconciliation.⁴⁰ Coalition leaders have acknowledged that without the Sons of Iraq they would not have the numbers of troops necessary to deliver security to the citizens in the province.⁴¹

Just as Diyala serves as a small mirror for Iraq, this crisis within Diyala represents on a small scale issues that the Iraqi government must confront writ large, which is the ongoing sectarian suspicion and the occasionally adversarial relationship between the SoI and the Iraqi Security Forces. If the Iraqi Government is incapable of dealing with these issues in a timely and appropriate fashion, they risk losing the support of many Sunnis who would otherwise have been willing to buy into Iraq’s democratic political process.⁴²

Mosul

Mosul is Iraq’s third largest city (after Baghdad and Basrah). Besides its size, Mosul is important because it is near the Syrian border and has been used to transit accelerants to violence

into the rest of Iraq. Also, it is the site of a major struggle between Sunni Arabs and Kurds as they compete for power within the country. As a result, the eastern part of the city is secured by Kurds while the western half remains relatively ungoverned. Unlike in Baghdad, the Coalition has not been able to muster the forces necessary to successfully clear and retain the city, which has exacerbated both of these issues. The Coalition and Government of Iraq have both recognized the need to clear and retain Mosul and have announced a forthcoming operation to accomplish that goal.

Any attempt to clear Mosul, however, must be carried out without the benefit of a functional Sons of Iraq program within the city itself. Some might point out that Mosul itself is 80% Sunni Arab and Nineveh is 60% Sunni Arab, which would seem quite adaptable to an SoI program. The tribal structures in these populations are quite weak, however, and do not lend themselves very easily to an SoI program like that launched in al-Anbar, which is dominated by a single tribe.⁴³ Nineveh province represents many ethnic, religious, and tribal identities, including Sunni Arabs, Shi'a Arabs, Turkmen, Yazidis, Christians, and Kurds. As a result, some in the US military fear that trying to stand up a SoI program could promote a perception of favoritism to one side, which would further enflame the situation on the ground.⁴⁴

Additionally, the struggle between the Sunni Arab population in Mosul and the Kurdish population exacerbates efforts to create Sons of Iraq groups that would augment Coalition and Iraqi operations in the city. Sunni Arabs perceive that there has been significant encroachment by the Kurdish Pesh Merga militia in an attempt to annex Mosul as well as other parts of Nineveh province into the Kurdish Regional Government. This has fostered resentment among the Sunni Arab population, making them less willing to cooperate with the local government and the local Iraqi Security Forces, both of which are dominated by Kurds.¹ The Coalition is therefore wary of supporting a SoI program that could upset relations with the Kurds.⁴⁵

Political Issues

The Sons of Iraq groups that have sprouted up around the country are different in each theater in terms of their makeup. That said, they have several points in common. They are comprised of Iraqis who have chosen to place their loyalty with the Iraqi government and Coalition instead of the insurgents.

The permanence of this change of heart is hotly contested and lies at the heart of disagreements between supporters and opponents of the SoI program. The Shi'a-dominated Government of Iraq has repeatedly questioned the wisdom of supporting groups that formerly supported or participated in the insurgency.⁴⁶ On this count, an American military spokesman concedes that a "fair percentage of [the Sons of Iraq], if not part of the insurgency, at least supported it." But, he points out, "you can not reconcile with your friends."⁴⁷ The issues that the

¹ This situation largely resulted from Sunni non-participation in the Iraqi government. Sunnis are likely to participate in the Provincial elections that are slated to be held in October of this year, which will increase their representation in the local government.

Iraqi government is tackling with the Sons of Iraq program are unavoidable if it is to ever carry out reconciliation with former insurgent groups.

The Iraqi Government worries that it cannot control the Sunni-dominated SoI and Awakening groups to the degree that it can control the primarily-Shi'a Iraqi Security Forces.⁴⁸ The situation has been characterized by the United States' leadership in Iraq as being one where the Sunni groups recognize that they lost the sectarian struggle and have decided to come to the table. Conversely, the "Shi'a don't recognize yet that they've won" and are not yet willing to accept what amounts to a negotiated surrender on the part of the former supporters and members of insurgent movements.⁴⁹

At the same time, Sunni tribal leaders are growing increasingly frustrated with the Iraqi Government's perceived foot-dragging on integration into the Iraqi security forces. These leaders desire Iraqi governmental legitimacy, which they have not been given to the degree that they would like.⁵⁰ Although the Iraqi government has ostensibly approved approximately 12,000 SoI members to join the Iraqi Security Forces, only 490 have undergone the necessary vetting and training needed to make the transition.⁵¹ This gives credence to Sunni claims of Iraqi government stalling on the issue.

There are also growing tensions between these movements and the Iraqi Islamic Party, which has control of most local provincial governments in the predominantly-Sunni areas of Iraq and also represents the Sunni Arab population in Iraq's national government. Further complicating the mix are tensions between the Awakening Councils and SoI groups who feel that the Awakening Councils have received an undue portion of the credit for the gains against AQI.⁵²

Furthermore, over 100 Awakening Council leaders, several tribal leaders, and approximately have been killed in suicide bombings and ambushes, which worries Coalition leaders. U.S. officials say they believe that AQI and other Sunni groups are responsible have mounted most of the attacks. When Sunni insurgent groups attack a Sunni SoI leader or outpost, it often further alienates the local population from the insurgency and strengthens their resolve to fully defeat the extremist elements within their society.⁵³

A portion of the attacks, however, seem to have been carried out by the extremist Shi'as of the Sadrist Trend as well as the Badr Corps, which is connected to the Iraqi government's Shi'a leadership.⁵⁴ Some of the mostly-Sunni leaders of Awakening and Sons of Iraq groups perceive the threat differently, with the primary threat coming from the Iraqi government and al-Qaeda in Iraq as a lesser issue. If the SoI and Awakenings groups are unable to come to a political accommodation with the central government, the security situation could destabilize as US forces draw down from the surge.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the perceived inability of the United States and Iraqi Security to protect Awakening Council and SoI leadership is decreasing American credibility as well as Iraq's governmental legitimacy.

Some point out that the Sons of Iraq program is a temporary solution to a permanent problem because it does not permanently provide the public with security. They argue that the security in Iraq could quickly degenerate to the situation that existed prior to the troop surge.⁵⁶

This is only true to an extent. First, there has not been an instance whereby all the members of an SoI group have demonstrated recidivism. Therefore, if members of the Sons of Iraq program decide to defect to the insurgents, they will have to do so without the support of their fellow SoI members, who are in a position to inform on them. This self-policing mechanism mitigates the risk of entire SoI groups becoming compromised.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the biometric data that the Coalition and Iraqi forces have gathered on SoI members as well as the personal familiarity that would exist between those remaining loyal to the Iraqi government and any rogue members would make it more difficult for SoI members to defect. The threat of this issue therefore seems overblown.

Conclusions

On the whole, the Sons of Iraq program has been a major asset in the struggle to bring security to the Iraqi population. The SoI program is not a panacea; much remains to be done to address political concerns. Most glaringly, the Iraqi Government must find a way to satisfy the desires of the SoI and Awakening leadership in integrating a reasonable portion of those volunteers into the Iraqi Security Forces in a manner that all parties agree is equitable. This issue, however, is not unique to the Sons of Iraq program. Indeed, the issue centers on ethno-sectarian reconciliation, which would need to be resolved regardless of the SoI program.

On the flip-side, the Sons of Iraq program have allowed overstretched Coalition and Iraqi Forces to accomplish more than they would have been able to otherwise on the security front. On the political front, the Sons of Iraq and Awakening Councils represent hard evidence of Sunni buy-in into the legitimate political process as well as a firm repudiation of the civil strife and draconian ideology supported by al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Sons of Iraq program has done more than save lives as part of the counter-insurgency effort; it has allowed various Iraqi groups to gain positive momentum towards the goal of having a stable, pluralistic, and democratic Iraq.

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