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Backgrounder #11

Reconciliation Movements in and around Baghdad

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The refrain of ‘concerned citizens’ and ‘reconciliation’, so familiar in the news emanating from places like Anbar and Diyala, has found a degree of resonance in the Iraqi capital. More complex than in the provinces, the effort for local security and reconciliation within Baghdad has taken on a two-tiered nature. In the outskirts where tribal influence is greater, local sheiks are paramount in the process. Inside the city a cosmopolitan dynamic has made the push for local security rather more civic. Nevertheless, carried along tribal lines or given impetus by an increased U.S. presence, the movement for reconciliation and local security has found considerable traction in both Baghdad’s environs and her core.

The periphery

In the Taji area north of Baghdad and extending west and south to the region of Abu Ghraib, we find the movement for reconciliation and local security gaining significant ground. Brought in by an Abu Ghraib tribe whose wide geographic berth allowed it first to participate in Anbar’s ‘awakening,’ the movement received significant momentum when al Qaeda sought to assassinate a local sheik - an attempt which succeeded in killing the sheik’s brother. Resolved now to fight back, the effort spread from Abu Ghraib north to Taji, where it began to cross sectarian lines as some of the tribes in that area have a mixed Sunni/Shia composition.¹

A late August call for police recruits in Abu Ghraib netted over 2,400, of which the Ministry of the Interior hired 1,738. Seeking to engage as many as possible in the task of civic development, U.S. forces in the area took on the remainder as Critical Infrastructure Security (CIS), to be used in the security of fixed sites and roadway checkpoints. The CIS itself is seen as merely a waypoint before these men can be grafted into a formal government-sanctioned security establishment. As with most of these efforts, all volunteers must take an oath of allegiance to the government of Iraq and are enrolled into the Biometric Automated Tool Set (BATS).²

In Taji a fairly advanced 'neighborhood watch' has come into existence. Five-hundred strong, the group uses the one AK-47 each Iraqi household is authorized to own under national law. Like the others, they are biometrically monitored and utilized in only a defensive capacity. U.S. leaders, playing on the strengths of the Iraqi tribal system, rely on the local sheiks to enforce discipline and coordinate operations.³ These men have already aided in the discovery of multiple weapons caches and, according to Lt. Col. Peter Andrysiak, deputy commander 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, "these volunteers are hopeful that the government of Iraq will see their value and bring them on as part of the legitimate Iraqi Police."⁴

This success soon cross-pollinated back into the Abu Ghraib area, where local sheiks, both Sunni and Shia, met in late July to form their own neighborhood watch programs. With an end to attacks on civilians and the removal of al Qaeda as their goals, the leaders, with U.S. Army oversight, determined that a portion of the watch volunteers would become formal Iraqi policemen and form the core of new force in that locale.⁵ Attacks in the Taji/Abu Ghraib sector are reportedly down by 60%.⁶

Near Jisr Diyala, an ad hoc grouping of concerned locals has stepped up, leading coalition forces to weapons caches and helping in the detention of suspicious individuals.⁷ Though a comparatively small force, only 49 members, the concerned citizen program of Arafia has demonstrated perhaps most clearly the power of the new movement. As a suicide bomber attempted to bypass security and attack a group of American soldiers and Iraqi civilians, an Iraqi man at the local Concerned Citizen meeting intercepted the bomber, wrestling him out of the courtyard. The bomb detonated, killing the man. His body, however, absorbed the majority of the blast, saving the lives of all else present.⁸

Looking elsewhere, in early June more than 60 sheiks from the sprawling Rashid area of southern Baghdad gathered to discuss security issues and were asked by U.S. commanders, hearkening to similar successes in Anbar and Diyala, to take the lead in establishing stability.⁹ A kindred effort in western Rashid just recently succeeded in bringing together Sunni leaders, Iraqi Security Force representatives, and, surprisingly, members of the Shia Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM).¹⁰ The endeavor may be working. Members of a Rashid neighborhood watch group turned over 11 alleged insurgents to Multi-National Division - Baghdad troops as recently as late August.¹¹

Completing the Baghdad circuit is Arab Jabour, where the Governor of Baghdad, Husain al Tahan, recently visited the leader of that Concerned Citizen movement and held talks about opening a police station, repairing schools, constructing a clinic, as well as bringing in additional water pumps.¹² Progress has been tough going in this region that has been called "mini-failed state," but things began improving with an influx of American soldiers as part of the 'surge.' Functioning as part of the broader effort toward reconciliation, the Concerned Citizen group began with a former Iraqi general and local sheiks offering up men to serve as scouts for American units. Vetted and biometrically tracked, the fighters, some of them former insurgents, expanded their role and joined U.S. forces in the hard fight to rid Arab Jabour of al Qaeda. Still in its nascent stage, the battle to remove al Qaeda from Arab Jabour has not ended. But with at least 170 men now in the Concerned Citizens, al Qaeda must watch as the ranks of its enemies continue to swell.¹³

Baghdad Proper

Inside Baghdad, the movement for reconciliation, while often tribally influenced, is by no means exclusively tribal in nature. Illustrative of this is the western Baghdad district of Ameriya. Largely Sunni and formerly wealthy, especially in the Saddam years, Ameriya fell under al Qaeda's shadow following the siege of Fallujah in 2004, as terrorist refugees fled to find safety and succor among her denizens. Things soon deteriorated - murders against the Shia and those deemed too secular becoming a daily occurrence.¹⁴ By May of 2007 Ameriya reached its breaking point. A local security force, the Ameriya Freedom Fighters, formed and partnered with coalition forces to fight al Qaeda. Hoping to join the regular Iraqi Police, the Freedom Fighters, now calling themselves the Knights of the Two Rivers, number 240 effectives and actively partner with the Iraqi Army as well as U.S. forces.

They, like the others, are monitored by U.S. forces (an Army company is responsible for daily oversight) and coordinate with the military before engaging in operations. What are the drawbacks? For one, the Knights are in some ways connected to Jaysh al Islami and are still suspicious of the Shia central government. What are the benefits? Violence in Ameriya has dropped off substantially; the leader of the Knights is allowing Shia citizens to move back into Ameriya; and U.S. forces in the district estimate that 90% of al Qaeda operatives in that quarter have been killed, captured, or expelled. What makes the Freedom Fighters of Ameriya unique? They are not organized strictly along tribal lines. Rather the movement is a citizen effort aimed at defeating al Qaeda and restoring security to Ameriya. For the first time in a long time, businesses are reopening in Ameriya and officials are able to come in and resume basic services, like repairing water lines and removing trash.¹⁵ Local authorities have been likewise quick to incorporate the Knights into a more formalized relationship with the local government. They are now under contract with the U.S. and some have already received training in community policing, ethics, detainee processing and crime scene management from police instructors of the Mansour District Police Department.¹⁶ Observers have also noted that while relations between the Knights and central government remain cool, they are working well with the largely Shia Iraqi Army.¹⁷

Turning north to Baghdad's Adhamiya district- on the 5th of August residents, enraged by the news that terrorists had killed two relatives of a local sheik, stormed the Abu Hanifa mosque, a known terrorist base. Subsequent operations allowed coalition forces to detain approximately 50 suspected terrorists and seize five large caches of weapons, consisting of, in part, rockets, dynamite, land-mines and other various and sundry bomb-making materials.¹⁸

The citizens of Adhamiya, having shouldered responsibility for their neighborhood, can now be found signing up for, among other things, the Critical Infrastructure Guard Force, an Army effort to transition grass roots initiative into legitimate government practice. Similar to other local security establishments, the guard force will allow residents to protect crucial local facilities, such as schools, hospitals and government offices. Following five days of training by Iraqi Security officers and U.S. Army personnel, the volunteers will take up their posts, in the process freeing up U.S./Iraqi Army forces to carry out more difficult missions.¹⁹

¹ Major Randall G. Baucom, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, Camp Taji, Iraq. 2007. Interview by author. 19 Aug.

² SPC L.B. Edgar. "Sworn to protect: Volunteers begin service in Iraq." *MNF-I Featured Stories*, Aug 24, 2007.

³ Major Randall G. Baucom, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, Camp Taji, Iraq. 2007. Interview by author. 20 Aug.

⁴ 1st BCT, 1st Cav. Div. Public Affairs Press Release No. 20070713-09, "Taji's 'Neighborhood Watch' turns over fourth cache in two weeks," July 13, 2007.

⁵ SSG Jon Cupp. "Sheiks meet in reconciliation effort," *MNF-I Daily Stories*, July 21, 2007.

⁶ Major Randall G. Baucom, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, Camp Taji, Iraq. 2007. Interview by author. 19 Aug.

⁷ SGT Natalie Rostek. "Concerned Citizens step toward self-reliance." *MNF-I Feature Stories*, Aug 18, 2007.

⁸ SPC Ben Hutto. "Soldiers remember Iraqi man's sacrifice that saved their lives." *MNF-I Feature Stories*, Aug 30, 2007.

⁹ SFC Robert Timmons. "Sheiks meet, discuss progress." *MNF-I Daily Stories*, June 19, 2007.

¹⁰ SFC Robert Timmons. "Sheiks meet to reconcile in West Rashid." *MNF-I Feature Stories*, Sep 7, 2007.

¹¹ Multi-National Division - Baghdad Press Release No. 20070820-13. "Residents capture, turn over 11 suspected terrorists." Aug 20, 2007.

¹² Multi-National Division - Center Press Release No. 20070905-18. "Baghdad governor meets Arab Jabour leaders." Sep 5, 2007.

¹³ Michael R. Gordon. "The Former-Insurgent Counterinsurgency," *The New York Times*, Sep 2, 2007.

¹⁴ Dan Murphy and Awadh al-Tee, "In the struggle for Iraq, tug of war over one Baghdad neighborhood," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 1, 2006.

¹⁵ Captain David Levasseur. 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. 2007. Interview by author. 1 Sep.; SGT Jack Androski. "Ameriya Leaders Establish Trash Collection Program." *1st Cavalry Division Daily Charge*, Aug 27, 2007. Available online at <http://pao.hood.army.mil/1stcavdiv/daily%20charge/07Aug/DCaug27.pdf>

¹⁶ SGT John Androski. "Volunteer Security Force Receives Police Training." *1st Cavalry Division Daily Charge*, Aug 24, 2007. Available online at <http://pao.hood.army.mil/1stcavdiv/daily%20charge/07Aug/DCaug24.pdf>

¹⁷ Captain David Levasseur. 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. 2007. Interview by author. 1 Sep.

¹⁸ *MNF-I Daily Stories*, "Citizens oust terrorists from mosque, help uncover weapons." Aug 7, 2007. SGT Mike Pryor. "Iraqi, U.S. Forces build on residents' stand against terrorism." *Multi-National Division - Baghdad Public Affairs Office*, Aug 15, 2007.

¹⁹ SSG Randy Randolph. "Adhamiyah residents screened for security positions," *MNF-I Feature Stories*, Aug 12, 2007.