

After Action Report: Working with the Awakening in Central Anbar

By Captain Elliot Press, U.S. Army

AS A STATUS of Forces Agreement between the United States and Iraq nears, discussions are heightening about the withdrawal of coalition forces.¹ One area in Iraq where the United States has withdrawn a large number of troops is Anbar Province, the strategically vital area bordering Baghdad in the east and three countries—Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia—in the west.² My unit, the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 3rd Infantry Division (1-3 BCT) of Ft. Stewart, Georgia, was stationed in Anbar for a 15-month deployment from January 2007 until April 2008. When we left in April, we were part of a large drawdown in forces from Anbar.³ In conjunction with the Anbari leaders assuming Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC), the drawdown represents a success achieved by both military and security units and the local population.⁴ Although many factors led to this success,⁵ I primarily dealt with the local tribal leadership since I was the brigade's Tribal and Engagement Officer (TEO). The tribal heads largely form the core leadership of the Iraqi Awakening movement.

1 Campbell Robertson, "Maliki Pushes for Troop Withdrawal Date," *New York Times*, August 25, 2008.

2 Anbar is geographically the largest province in Iraq and is populated by a majority of Sunni Muslims. In January 2007, Ramadi was the most violent city per capita in the world. Al-Qa`ida in Iraq was claiming Ramadi as the capital for the Islamic State of Iraq; with a stronghold in Anbar, al-Qa`ida would be able to smuggle foreign fighters into Iraq from Syria.

3 Erica Goode, "US to Hand Over Security in Anbar to the Iraqis," *New York Times*, August 28, 2008. A Marine spokesman in Anbar said the number of American troops in the province had dropped from 37,000 in February 2008 to 25,000 in August 2008, a 33% reduction.

4 Ann Scott Tyson, "US to Hand Over Security Duties in Anbar to Iraqi Forces," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2008. Provincial Iraqi Control is a joint decision between the Iraqi government and MNF-I to systematically hand over security responsibility in a province to the Provincial Civil Authorities under the control of the province's governor.

5 Other factors include kinetic military operations, Marine Corps division leadership, and local economic and political development.

Our relationship with the Awakening yields timeless lessons that include knowing who to trust, finding middle ground, and capitalizing on ideological commonalities.⁶ This article will discuss each of these lessons in detail and illustrate the important lessons learned from our fight against al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and the subsequent defeat of this terrorist organization in Ramadi.

The Mission: Defeating Al-Qa`ida in Iraq

When my unit first arrived in Ramadi in January 2007, Shaykh Sattar Bizea Fitkhan Abu Risha had already established the Awakening movement and it had spread throughout the city. The 1st Brigade, 1st Armor Division (1/1 AD), led by Colonel Sean McFarland, conducted operations that targeted AQI and created coalition combat outposts in Ramadi. Col. McFarland, along with 1/1 AD's deputy commander, Lieutenant-Colonel James Lechner, also built strong bonds with the local tribal leadership, which yielded a great amount of mutual respect between the tribes and American forces. When our unit assumed control of the area in mid-February 2008, we conducted a series of offensives to purge the city of AQI. Our mission was to defeat al-Qa`ida in Iraq and secure the area. In doing so, we would return a sense of normalcy to the population and set the conditions for economic and political reconstruction to sustain a functioning environment.

As the brigade's TEO, I supported the mission by studying the tribes, creating products for our intelligence assessments, and advising the brigade commander on tribal affairs. Iraq is a tribal society and many situations can be explained or improved by understanding the tribes' structure, background and intricacies. By researching databases, speaking to our subordinate units who dealt with the tribes, and meeting with the tribal leaders and members, I felt confident that I was capturing an accurate assessment of the tribes and disseminating products that would help coalition members understand the

6 *Sabwa al-Iraq* is the Arabic translation for the Iraqi Awakening. When referencing the Awakening in this article, it refers to the organization that Shaykh Sattar Bizea Fitkhan Abu Risha of Ramadi began in September 2006 that has also been referred to as *Sabwa al-Anbar*, *Sabwa al-Iraq*, the Anbar Salvation Council, the Anbar Awakening Movement and the Iraqi Awakening Movement.

nuances of the tribal environment.

Knowing your Counterparts

The first Iraqi that I met in Ramadi was Shaykh Sattar, the founder of Iraq's Anbar Awakening Council. He led the first known Iraqi group that declared American troops as friendly forces. Shaykh Sattar and his brother who succeeded him, Shaykh Ahmad Abu Risha, went so far as to say that an attack against an American was similar to an attack against the Awakening. During a time when al-Qa`ida maintained a stranglehold in central Anbar, such comments were bold.

There were other individuals claiming the desire to bring peace to Ramadi, but their strategy was to attract nationalist insurgent groups and then "convert" the nationalists to the peaceful side.⁷ For instance, one individual went on Arabic satellite television soliciting support to fight against al-Qa`ida, with free license to engage in attacks against Americans as well. Although that person was an acquaintance who never gave me a reason to distrust him personally, he embodies the following maxim: individuals who are publicly neutral or even portray opposing views may be trustworthy, but do not necessarily play a significant role in achieving stability. The Awakening leaders who risked their lives against al-Qa`ida in Iraq and the shaykhs' public support and recognition of our partnership gave the local people confidence to stand with us against violence and extremism.

Finding the Middle Ground

Toward the end of our deployment, an incident occurred at Joint Security Station (JSS) Wallah⁸ near Ramadi that threatened the accomplishments we had gained in the area. U.S. service members and their Iraqi counterparts in the Iraqi police were stationed at JSS Wallah. Early one morning, a fight broke out between a U.S. service member and an Iraqi police officer. Allegedly, the officer stabbed the U.S. service member who then used his bayonet in self-defense, killing the policeman. The Shaban

7 Due to the sensitivity of the subject and the disposition of some of the individuals, their names cannot be specifically referenced.

8 JSS Wallah is located in Shaban, an area three miles north of central Ramadi. Shaban is a small tribal area that is nestled within a larger regional tribe, the Thiyyabi.

tribal members were devastated by the incident. They demanded answers as to why their tribesman was “slaughtered”⁹ and if punishment would be applied to the U.S. service member responsible. The coalition unit at JSS Wallah reported the incident immediately, and I accompanied our brigade commander, Colonel John Charlton, to JSS Wallah first thing that morning. While surveying the scene, we called a

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local tribal leader, Shaykh Muhammad al-Thiyabi, to ask for advice. Shaykh Muhammad is a respected member of the Awakening and the most influential tribal shaykh north of Ramadi. I asked Shaykh Muhammad if we could speak with him personally; within 30 minutes we were sitting with him in his *mutbif*, the shaykh’s meeting hall.

After we told Shaykh Muhammad the facts, he asked us to give him time to speak with the family to mediate the situation. The next day, we went to meet with the slain police officer’s family. We first went to link up with Shaykh Muhammad at his meeting hall, this time surrounded by other Awakening leaders waiting with him. We all convoyed to the family’s house to begin the mediation process. When we arrived, hundreds of Shaban tribesmen were outside, some chanting “death to America” and “the occupiers must leave.” The emotions were running high, but we recognized that the situation had the potential to become worse if we did not deal with it directly.

After a few minutes of chanting, Shaykh Muhammad appeared in the crowd and yelled at the tribesmen to let us through. When we approached

⁹ The Iraqis were claiming that the Iraqi policeman was “slaughtered” because the initial bayonet strike was across his throat, similar to the way an animal is slaughtered.

the family, they demanded answers about what happened. Col. Charlton apologized for the unfortunate incident and explained to them what he knew at the time. He also ensured the family that our unit wanted to cooperate with them to handle the situation in the best possible manner.

Through a series of meetings, we finally came to a resolution with the father of the slain policeman and the Shaban tribe. Col. Charlton agreed to prioritize a project in the Shaban area that the tribe had requested. Within a week, the emotions in the area subsided. Without the Awakening’s support and Shaykh Muhammad’s mediation through the process, AQI would have exploited the situation to garner support from the Shabani, risking the close partnership that we built during our 12 months of working with Iraqi police. The lesson from this incident was clear: compromise is critical to achieve the goals of maintaining security and stability in an area. Our unit accomplished this by using a local shaykh as a mediator rather than trying to do it ourselves—our close relationship with the Awakening made this possible and yielded the results needed to avert a potentially disastrous situation.

Support Moderate Muslim Leaders

Many Iraqis whom I met either lived a religious lifestyle or held these concepts close to their heart. Although I met Iraqis who were not Muslim, such as Christian Iraqis, I met no one who disavowed religion. Although religion plays a large role in Iraq, this should not be intimidating. During my deployment, I met a few Iraqi leaders who transcended my stereotypical view of the Sunni Muslim cleric and taught me that we had much more in common than I had ever thought. By exploring our similarities, we gained a better understanding for one another and a greater acceptance of each other’s message.

Through the Awakening leaders, we met two influential religious leaders in Ramadi, Shaykh Abdullah Jallal al-Faraji and Dr. Thamir Ibrahim al-Assafi. Shaykh Abdullah was the Sunni Endowment representative for Anbar and Dr. Thamir was a well-respected local religious authority. When Shaykh Sattar first created the Awakening,

he asked Shaykh Abdullah and Dr. Thamir to issue a *fatwa* supporting the Awakening and its platform.¹⁰ The clerics obliged, and in September 2006 they issued the religious decree that in part said it was acceptable to oppose al-Qa`ida, join the Awakening, and cooperate with coalition forces.

Since Shaykh Abdullah and Dr. Thamir were moderate Sunni clerics, we often found common ground in our ideologies.¹¹ During our weekly meetings, we would discuss international news, sports, and a myriad of the shaykhs’ other favorite topics. In the end, however, our engagements always had a purpose. There were times when we would meet with the clerics after we received reports about an imam giving an anti-American sermon, calling for violence and possibly destabilizing the area. Since al-Qa`ida often uses mosques as a platform to spread its extremist ideology and recruit operatives, it was important that we all knew the possible threats to our causes. At other times, the clerics would call to meet with our brigade commander or his deputy, Lieutenant-Colonel Thaddeus McWhorter, to request his assistance in gaining support for the Endowment’s functions. Although Col. Charlton and Lt. Col. McWhorter made it clear that we could not provide any material support for religious activities, our unit was able to repair mosques and schools that were damaged during combat operations.

The assistance we gave to the imams to rebuild after the destruction was symbolic of our commitment to the Iraqi people despite perceived differences in our beliefs. Shaykh Abdullah went so far as to distribute a message from Col. Charlton to the local imams to be read before Ramadan. In addition to wishing the people a healthy and safe Ramadan, the message informed Iraqis of the additional measures that would be in place to ensure their safety, such as increasing checkpoints and changing the curfew. This let Iraqis know in

¹⁰ The *fatwa*, or religious decree, was issued apprehensively. Shaykh Abdullah remarked on more than one occasion that his reservations stemmed from Shaykh Sattar’s alleged alcohol consumption and disreputable past.

¹¹ The clerics believed that extremism had no place in Islam and all people have rights that should be upheld. By the same token, people have communal responsibilities and should function in society in ways that improve humanity.

advance of conditions that, if imposed by us without warning, would aggravate them. Without their support, more individuals would have likely opposed our efforts and al-Qa`ida in Iraq would have had a greater base of passive and active support.

Conclusion

My unit met its mission of defeating al-Qa`ida in Ramadi and we created the necessary environment that facilitated growth and opportunity for the future. Our relationship with the tribal leaders and the members of the Awakening was a key factor in our success. Along the way, I learned the value of a “public” partnership while conducting a counter-insurgency; the importance of finding middle ground and dealing with situations through compromise; and the importance of cultivating relationships with moderate Muslims due to the strong role religion plays in Iraqi society. These valuable lessons are critical as we move forward and learn new ways in which the tribal system fuels modern warfare.

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