

A Thin Blue Line in the Sand

Iraqization is a dead-end strategy. But there is still some hope of saving the country, and it lies in an unlikely place: local Sunni militias and police.

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or more than two years, the heart of U.S. military strategy in Iraq has been “Iraqization,” the creation of an effective Iraqi security force that can take the place of U.S. Marines and soldiers. Thereby, the United States can eventually withdraw without leaving behind a terrorist safe haven and fractured Iraq. A wide range of military officers, policymakers, and scholars argue that through re-invigorated American efforts at training, equipping, and advising the Iraqi Army, any shortcomings in the Iraqi security forces can be overcome. Even Democrats who oppose the surge strategy support Iraqization, contending that Iraqi security forces are perfectly capable of suppressing violence now but that only when the United States “stands down” will they truly “stand up.”

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Between February 2004 and February 2005, and later from February to August 2006, I served as an advisor to the I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) in Al Anbar province. During that time I interviewed members of the Iraqi Army and police, held discussions with American advisers, and directly observed Iraqi Army and police operations. Al Anbar is overwhelmingly Sunni and infamously is a center of insurgent activity. Therefore, it is critical to the success of the Iraqization strategy. Failure there means a U.S. withdrawal would leave hard-core insurgent groups, specifically Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), free to operate and possibly organize terrorist operations outside the province. Even if it is successful everywhere else in Iraq, Iraqization will have failed if it cannot work in Al Anbar.

My research in Al Anbar province suggests that Iraqization can never lead to a stable or unified Iraq. The Iraqi Army, the focal point of Iraqization, has been unable to win the support of the Sunni population, who view it as a Shia occupation force. Without the local population's help, the Iraqi Army cannot suppress insurgent activity, no matter how much advising, training, or equipping is invested into it. As long as ethnically integrated (and therefore predominantly Shia), the army will not succeed. If the United States draws down and tasks the keeping of the peace to the army, Al Anbar could very well become a safe haven for AQI and a breeding ground for international terrorism. Neither the recent surge nor the current Iraqization policy will alter that fate. Thus, continuing to advise, train, and equip the Iraqi Army only delays such a fate and sacrifices more American lives.

Fortunately, this outcome is not inevitable. A strategy of "grassroots Iraqization"—one that places greater resources and authority in the hands of local Sunni police units—could, based on my experiences in Al Anbar, create islands of stability and significantly constrain AQI's influence in a long Iraqi civil war. Because of close connections to the Sunni community, local Sunni police units, the other arm of the security forces in Al Anbar, enjoy stronger popular support and experience greater success against the insurgents than the Iraqi Army. The thing holding them back is their alignment with the United States and the Shia government, thus denying them the breadth of popular support necessary to secure more than two or three towns or neighborhoods. The police may never entirely overcome this constraint, but they can progress, and expand beyond Al Anbar, if the United States and the Iraqi government give Sunni sheiks, imams, former military, and other local leaders money, access to jobs, political positions, and control over military formations so that they have the authority to convince more of their followers to join the police and give the police information. Thereby, over time, local police can gain greater popular support, expand secure areas, and become a long-term constraint on AQI—America's number-one enemy in Iraq.

This is hardly an ideal course. By giving non-elected Sunni groups economic,

political, and military power, Sunni autonomy would be increased and the movement toward a unified democratic state would be weakened. The United States would be creating nothing less than Sunni militias and turning to them for security, rather than to the legitimate arm of the state, the Iraqi Army. The United States obviously would prefer to avoid this scenario and hope that political reconciliation efforts and military operations—such as the ongoing surge—would allow the Iraqi Army to succeed. Yet, experts argue, the surge and political reconciliation efforts are not likely to prevent civil war from being the long-term reality. At this point in the conflict, strategy must be about choosing the least-worst options so that we can salvage U.S. interests in what is likely to be a divided and war-torn Iraq.

The Origins and Early Development of Iraqization

The United States and its coalition in Iraq began building Iraqi security forces as early as 2003, but it did not become the focal point of U.S. military strategy until General George Casey, commander of Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNF-I), ordered a review of his military strategy at the end of 2004. The review concluded that the formation of the Iraqi Army was lagging and needed to be accelerated so that it could shoulder counterinsurgency operations and allow U.S. forces to eventually withdraw. Even if insurgent activity could not be entirely eliminated, Casey hoped the Iraqi Army could suppress it to a level that would not fracture the Iraqi state and would keep AQI from operating freely. Accordingly, Casey directed the Coalition forces to shift their focus from fighting insurgents to training Iraqis.

The Coalition designed the Iraqi Army to be a national force that integrated Kurds, Shia, and Sunni. Some degree of integration in fact occurred—I encountered a number of Sunni officers—but overall the Sunnis were always under-represented throughout the country. In all, 10 divisions (recently raised to 13) were planned. In order to accelerate Iraqi Army development, MNF-I created the transition team concept—10 to 12 advisers embedded into every Iraqi Army unit, from battalion to brigade to division. Additionally, each Iraqi battalion was partnered with a Marine or U.S. Army battalion, which would assist in their operations and training. Usually, the partnership process began with an Iraqi company working with a U.S. company. Eventually, the company would operate independently, followed by the battalion, then the brigade, and ultimately the entire division. To be sure, the Coalition also developed local police forces, recruited from the areas where they would serve and organized into city and district stations. But they received fewer advisers and resources than the army.

THE IRAQI ARMY IN AL ANBAR

By March 2006, the Iraqi Army in Al Anbar numbered two divisions (about 10,000

personnel) and provided 40 to 50 percent of the infantry for counterinsurgency. Three brigades operated independently. Despite this growth in numbers and capability, the army faced incessant attacks and, as of early 2007, after two years of operations, it could not suppress the insurgency even with U.S. forces present, which made it highly unlikely it would be able to do so absent U.S. forces—the primary goal of Iraqization. Most disturbing for American interests, AQI continued to maintain a presence throughout the province. In a leaked intelligence report in September 2006, Colonel Peter Devlin, the I MEF intelligence officer, wrote, “AQI is the dominant organization of influence in Al Anbar, surpassing the nationalist insurgents, the Iraqi Government, and MNF [the Coalition] in its ability to control the day-to-day life of the average Sunni.” The inability of the Iraqi Army to suppress insurgent activity was mirrored throughout the Sunni areas.

Nevertheless, the difficulties experienced by the Iraqi Army in Al Anbar and elsewhere have not altered the consensus among top policymakers and U.S. military officers that Iraqization can eventually enable the United States to withdraw. In fact, there has been near-unanimity that the United States needs to invest more resources into training, advising, equipping, and manning the Iraqi Army. As General John Abizaid, commander of Central Command, told the Senate in November 2006, “In discussions with our commanders and Iraqi leaders, it is clear that they believe Iraqi forces can take more control faster, provided we invest more manpower and resources into the Coalition military transition teams, speed the delivery of logistics and mobility enablers, and embrace an aggressive Iraqi-led effort to disarm illegal militias.” Abizaid concluded that U.S. forces might thereby be able to hand over security to Iraqi forces within one year. Similarly, the Iraq Study Group emphasized, in its report, “the urgent near-term need for significant additional trained Army brigades, since this is the key to Iraqis taking over full responsibility for their own security.” The report implied that a shortcoming in “real combat capability” prevented the Iraqi Army from handling the insurgency. In his January 2007 speech on the surge strategy, President George W. Bush reaffirmed the importance of the Iraqi Army to the U.S. mission in Iraq and promised to increase its numbers, training, equipping, and advisory support. The surge may place greater emphasis on American military operations than previous efforts, but the expectation that Iraqi security forces will eventually be able to shoulder the burden of counterinsurgency remains the same. And though Democrats in the House and Senate disagreed with the surge and argued that the United States must stand down so that the Iraqis would be forced to stand up, they have never questioned that Iraqization itself could work.

True, myriad training, advising, equipping, and manning problems have afflicted the Iraqi Army. Formal training varies from zero to 16 weeks, with most battalions

receiving just three weeks of instruction in basic soldiering before being sent to Al Anbar. In terms of equipment, the Coalition initially left the Iraqis more lightly armed than the insurgents; they are transported in unarmored pick-ups and lack essential items such as boots and cold-weather jackets. While equipment improved over time, the Marines found that 12 advisers were not enough to train, administer, and operate alongside a battalion. Between 20 and 33 percent of the 750 men in a battalion are on leave at any time, while desertions and combat losses—because of poor living conditions, irregular pay, distance from home, and constant exposure to combat—reduce on-hand strength to between 150 and 600 men per battalion. In the worst cases, personnel attrition has forced certain Iraqi units to drastically cut back on operations.

But while undoubtedly weakening its performance, shortcomings in training, advising, and equipping are not at the root of the Iraqi Army's inability to suppress the insurgency. As noted by the Iraq Study Group, the purpose of training, advising, and equipping is to create "a real combat capability." Yet the Iraqi Army actually performed adequately in combat. On no occasion in Al Anbar since April 2004 did insurgents rout or overwhelm an Iraqi Army unit. Several could perform advanced tasks such as combining movement with suppressive fire, maneuvering, and assaulting insurgent positions. For example, the 3rd Brigade, 1st Iraqi Division won battles against as many as 50 insurgents. In fact, because of its aggressiveness, many Coalition officers candidly rated the brigade as better than certain U.S. units. Similarly, Coalition officers considered the 1st Brigade, 1st Iraqi Division, fighting in eastern Ramadi (the largest city and scene of the worst violence in Al Anbar), to be highly competent, especially at urban warfare. Its commander was sometimes upheld as the equivalent of the average U.S. brigade commander. Major Lloyd Freeman, the operations officer with the 1st Iraqi Division military transition team, summed up the Iraqi Army's combat performance well: "It might be ugly, but the job would get done."

THE SUNNI-SHIA DILEMMA

Unfortunately, just like the Coalition, the Iraqi Army could fight well and understand counterinsurgency tactics, yet have little effect on the vibrant insurgency. Clearly, better training, advising, equipping, and manning will accelerate the pace of operations and enable more units to conduct advanced tasks. Doing so may even allow certain units outside Al Anbar (sometimes described as losing battles to insurgents or Shia militia) to stand and fight. However, the fact that good units like the 1st and 3rd brigades still faced heavy attacks suggests that improving the performance of the Iraqi Army is not likely to make much of a difference in suppressing insurgent activity.

The real problem facing the Iraqi Army, and Iraqization itself, is that Sunnis too often sympathize with the insurgency. They generally do not provide intelligence on the identity and location of insurgents, and without good intelligence, counterinsurgent forces cannot identify and remove insurgents. In Al Anbar, insurgents could mass freely, because local residents would not inform the Iraqi Army. Worse, some locals have hidden insurgents or even joined the insurgency as fighters; one Iraqi officer estimated that 25 to 30 percent of locals were insurgents. Consequently, the Iraqi Army could win every firefight and patrol diligently without ever rooting out the insurgents.

Different people have different reasons for supporting the insurgents, but the majority opposes the Iraqi Army primarily because of its Shia identity. The Shia-dominated Iraqi government's insistence on denying Sunnis political power and economic wealth upsets them and raises fears of oppression. Sectarian violence in Baghdad only magnifies this perception. Polling in 2006 found that 77 to 90 percent of people in Al Anbar viewed the government as illegitimate, while 80 percent considered civil war likely. Further polls confirmed that the majority of Iraqis in Al Anbar view the Iraqi Army as a threat, not as a stabilizing force.

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Such numbers are reflected in the Iraqi Army's experience in Al Anbar. For example, in Falluja, the second-largest city in Al Anbar, Iraqi Army officers believed that people perceived them as occupiers and allowed the insurgents to attack them. They heard imams call the people to attack the Iraqi Army. Indeed, at one city council meeting, city officials laughed derisively at an Iraqi officer when he noted his men received no cooperation from locals. City leaders regularly accused the Iraqi Army of being members of Shia extremist groups. Once, a prominent imam said that the people of Fallujah were fighting a Persian occupation.

Unfounded tales of atrocities often accompany such accusations. To be sure, the Iraqi Army occasionally feeds fears by treating the population harshly. Iraqi soldiers have cursed at Sunnis, stolen from homes, and occupied residences as observation posts. Iraqi soldiers also could be physically brutal; however, Iraqi officers usually intervened. Some soldiers whom I encountered had militia connections and many admired Moqtada Sadr. But no entire brigade or battalion in Al Anbar pursued a sectarian agenda as other Iraqi divisions, most notably the 5th Division in Diyala, reportedly have done. The absence of such sectarianism in Al Anbar, though, did little to win the support of locals against the insurgents.

THE HABBANIYAH MUTINY

If Shia identity inhibited the effectiveness of the Iraqi Army, then the obvious answer would seem to be to recruit more Sunnis. Accordingly, the Marines made recruiting Sunnis, particularly in early 2006, a priority. Unfortunately, recruiting Sunnis has proved quite difficult. In early 2006, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense permitted 6,500 Sunnis from Al Anbar to be recruited to serve throughout the country. The first recruiting effort took place at the end of March, when the Marines enlisted 1,017 men, largely from Falluja. Unfortunately, the Sunni recruits were led to believe they would be serving near their homes, and were given further assurance by the mayor; by all accounts, his assurances had induced many to volunteer.

On April 30, the new soldiers graduated from training at Camp Habbaniyah. During the ceremony, replete with Coalition and Iraqi generals, it was announced that many would be deployed outside Al Anbar. Yelling and throwing their uniforms to the ground, 600 of the newly trained soldiers refused to deploy. Not only did they feel cheated, but they also feared sectarian retribution if they joined predominantly Shia units outside the Sunni Triangle; many told U.S. officers they would be attacked if they left Al Anbar. The mayor of Falluja supported the recruits, telling Coalition officers, “As long as I am receiving corpses from Baghdad, I will not send soldiers there.” In the end, more than 600 of the 1,017 recruits deserted. If Sunnis refuse to serve, there is no way we can expect the Iraqi Army to bridge sectarian differences and handle the insurgency. Indeed, the only way Sunnis will ever support the army is if it loses its structure as an integrated and national force and becomes a set of locally recruited brigades—no different from the police or a militia.

Police and Local Sunni Forces

As the Iraqi Army faced continuing difficulties in 2006, the Coalition and the Iraqi government increasingly turned to local Sunni police forces, which proved to be remarkably more effective in countering foreign terrorists and keeping some semblance of law and order. By the end of 2006, roughly 20 percent of the infantry conducting counterinsurgency operations in Al Anbar were police. Although they had no love for the Iraqi government, certain Sunni sheiks, imams, and former military officers were upset with AQI’s heavy-handed tactics and domination of the black market. Sunnis particularly disliked foreign fighters, who were often affiliated with AQI; in fact, 65 to 47 percent favored killing them (unfortunately, foreign fighters were a very small minority within AQI). This rivalry compelled these Sunni leaders to back the formation of locally based police forces, which, in contrast to the army, provided them a legitimate avenue to secure their own territory and power.

In Falluja, a set of local tribes, civic leaders, and imams supported the creation of a police force of 1,200 following the clearing of the city at the end of 2004. In

Ramadi, a group of tribes under the leadership of the fearless Sheik Abd al Sittar created a police force of more than 1,000. In September 2006, Sittar openly announced the opposition of those tribes to AQI. In Al Qa'im, a city on the Syrian border, the powerful Abu Mahal tribe formed the majority of the local security forces, which number over 2,000. AQI had upset members of the tribe by disturbing their control over the black market and infringing on their territory in 2005. Police forces equally committed to fighting AQI formed in other towns along the Euphrates. And there are examples in other Sunni provinces of Sunni tribes battling AQI directly or as part of the local forces; In Mosul, the Iraqi government granted the Jabbari tribe influence over the police forces in order to counter AQI.

In return for backing the police, the Iraqi government gave local Sunni leaders greater military, economic, and political power. Doing so was a necessary step in inducing Sunni leaders to support the police, and it enabled those leaders to get more members of their community to join the police and stand against AQI. In Ramadi, Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki backed Sittar and openly met with the leaders of his tribal movement. The government effectively granted Sittar economic power by turning a blind eye when he regained control of criminal activity along the highways near Ramadi, which AQI had disturbed. At the end of October 2006, the Ministry of the Interior granted Sittar authority over security in Al Anbar and permitted his movement to create three "emergency" battalions, totaling 2,250 men. This was a huge concession. For all intents and purposes, the government was permitting Sittar and his movement to have their own militia.

In Al Qa'im, the Ministry of Defense gave the Abu Mahal tribe control over the resident army brigade by putting aside the standard rule that brigades in Al Anbar could not be composed of Sunnis. Abu Mahal tribesmen rapidly filled its ranks. The brigade's commander, two battalion commanders, and several staff officers were all Abu Mahal. The Abu Mahal received other forms of power as well, including freedom to retake control of the black market and run smuggling operations into Syria. Control over the black market meant the Abu Mahal had deep interests in ensuring AQI never returned to Al Qa'im.

Despite less training, fewer advisers, and lighter equipment, police proved far more effective in dealing with the insurgency than the army. In Al Qa'im, the Abu Mahal cut off insurgent infiltration, and as a result incident levels were by far the lowest per capita in the entire province and less than one-tenth of those in Falluja.

In contrast to the Iraqi Army, local Sunni forces can control territory, collect intelligence, and cripple Al Qaeda in Iraq—precisely what the U.S. needs.

The police were too few in Falluja to match the success in Al Qa'im, but they were still able to reduce violence. The support of imams, sheiks, and former military officers enabled them to lock down the city for the October 2005 referendum, the December 2005 election, and the March 2006 Army recruiting drive. In Ramadi, the police suppressed insurgent activity in their own tribal areas and neighborhoods (and by March 2007, many U.S. Marines were "cautiously optimistic" that the police had suppressed insurgent activity throughout most of the city). By the end of 2006, police were killing and capturing more insurgents than the Iraqi Army, even though the army outnumbered the police. One policeman told a Marine adviser, "What makes an insurgent's heart turn cold is to see an Iraqi policeman in uniform. It is as if he has been stabbed in the chest with a cold knife."

These police forces were so effective because, as Sunnis and members of their local community, they were able to collect actionable human intelligence. In Al Qa'im, the Abu Mahal aggressively pursued leads and regularly captured insurgents. In Falluja, most tips on insurgent activity came from the police. Marines patrolling or standing post with the police were impressed with their knowledge of insurgent activity, insurgent tactics, and the allegiances of the local population. At least five insurgent cells were taken out in July and August alone. In Ramadi, on one patrol into a neighborhood controlled by AQI, the residents were in tears at the sight of police. When asked in a poll if tribes were a good source of security, 69 percent of respondents in Ramadi strongly agreed; when asked the same question about the Iraqi Army, 81 percent strongly disagreed.

Nonetheless, the Sunni police have not been an unqualified success. Insurgents constantly targeted the police and their supporters with sniper attacks, assassinations, and suicide car bombs (sometimes laden with chlorine gas). Casualties in Falluja included the deputy police chief, the traffic police chief, two capable senior officers, a senior imam, and two chairmen of the Falluja city council. The Coalition counted more than 30 assassinations in July and August 2006 alone. In Ramadi, AQI killed off-duty police and members of their tribes almost daily, including the sheik of one of the key tribes.

Ultimately, the police have faced the same problem as the army, albeit to a lesser extent: Sectarian violence and disaffection with the government prevents popular support from reaching levels necessary to suppress the insurgency. In turn, the local police have been too small in number to eradicate AQI throughout Al Anbar. Plenty of Sunni leaders have either stayed neutral or supported the insurgents, and public support for armed resistance remains high. For many Sunnis, I observed, the insurgency represented a form of protection against persistent sectarian violence. Some Sunnis in Falluja hold a favorable view of AQI because of its role in fighting the Shia militias in Baghdad. This continuing violence in the

capital has made many imams in Falluja resistant to moderation. With the imams not on their side, the police have lost their best means of securing popular sympathy and discouraging insurgents from attacking them. In Ramadi, Sittar has now built support among most of the tribes, but many insurgent fighters and certain key tribes are still aligned with AQI elsewhere in Al Anbar. As long as sectarian violence and disaffection with the government continue, the likelihood that police will ever enjoy sufficient support is doubtful. Yet, with the right resources, the local police can turn more locals to their side and reduce, though not eliminate, the strength of AQI. That is something that Iraqi Army is incapable of doing, and why local Sunni police forces must be the focus of Iraqization.

Grassroots Iraqization

Neither the insurgency nor AQI can be defeated if Al Anbar is not secured. Unfortunately, the Iraqi Army appears unlikely to do so. The widely accepted recommendation to invest more advisers, training, or equipment will not change the ethnicity of the Iraqi Army, lessen sectarian tensions, or reverse popular disaffection with the government. Even more preposterous is the idea that expediting U.S. withdrawal will somehow enable the army to provide security. Perhaps the Iraqi government could massively reinforce the Iraqi Army and crush the Sunnis but, considering the strength of the insurgency, this could only be accomplished through wanton brutality, which would have prohibitive domestic and international political ramifications for the United States, as well as destabilizing repercussions throughout the region.

Given the likelihood of continued ethnic conflict, the United States needs to look to limited means of protecting its interests in Iraq. First and foremost, that means constraining AQI's influence. Pursuing a grassroots Iraqization in which greater effort is placed on developing local police forces—throughout the Sunni provinces—could allow the areas that enjoy relatively restricted insurgent activity to be expanded, thereby constraining AQI's influence. In contrast to the Iraqi Army, local Sunni forces can control territory, collect intelligence, and cripple AQI—precisely what the United States needs as it looks to draw down its forces. To start, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior must expand police recruitment and, as training capacity permits, lift caps on personnel numbers. Additionally, the United States needs to put as much effort into training, advising, and equipping the police as the army. In particular, the quality of the advisory teams working with the police should be improved. Like the army, the best active-duty Marines and soldiers ought to be embedded with the police.

But these are the simple actions. The U.S. and Iraqi governments need to go further and empower local Sunni leaders, as they did with the Albu Mahal and

Sittar in Al Anbar province. Local Sunni leaders should be given the power and authority to motivate their communities to join and support the police. Imams, sheiks, and other local leaders need to be lavished with political and economic rewards, to be distributed to their communities, for supporting the police: political positions, command of military formations, civil affairs projects, economic compensation packages, salaries, and permission to run black-market activities. There will, of course, be corruption as local leaders take money and profits for themselves. In Iraq, that is the cost of doing business.

Such a policy may sound like a minor technical change, but it would actually be a fundamental shift in U.S. strategy. It would undermine America's key strategic goals of forming a democracy and a unified state. The United States would be tacitly permitting Sunnis to field militias and defend themselves. This would be one more step toward the fragmentation of Iraq into Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish areas. Indeed, a real possibility exists that Sunni police would clash with Shia militias in defense of their neighborhoods. Additionally, the government would be devolving power from democratically elected officials to traditional nonelected authority figures, such as imams and sheiks, which could further undermine the democratization effort.

These downsides are undeniable, but they should not be exaggerated. National unity would probably be no more weakened than it is now, and fighting between the government and Sunni police outside Baghdad is unlikely. In fact, Sunni police forces have a better relationship with the Iraqi government than any other element of Sunni society, and there are no cases of Sunni police from Al Anbar attacking Shia areas. The Iraqi Army and local Sunni police regularly conduct combined operations against AQI. Sittar has even openly proposed cooperation with Shia tribes. Similarly, the Iraqi government is not set against working with Sunnis; the fact that Maliki has backed local Sunni forces suggests that he does not view them as a threat. The risk of clashes with Shia militias could be mitigated by not forming Sunni police within Baghdad.

Ultimately, the United States faces a choice. It can continue to push a national and unified state, and risk letting hardcore insurgents and terrorists go unchallenged. Or the ties that bind the state can be loosened to counter AQI with local police forces, but at the cost of formalizing sectarian divisions and weakening democratization. The latter is hardly optimal, but optimal is no longer a luxury the United States can afford. Right now, we must focus on avoiding the worst possible outcome, and that means doing what we can to prevent AQI from having uncontested control over the Sunni provinces. Grassroots Iraqization would accomplish that goal, and hopefully, the local forces that are empowered through this strategy one day could contribute to producing a peaceful and stable Iraq. **D**