

## **Could Awakening Fighters Rejoin Insurgency?**

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There are concerns that some Awakening Council members may return to the ranks of al-Qaeda if Baghdad fails them.

As American forces hand back control of the largely Sunni militia forces known as the Awakening (al-Sahwa) Councils to the Shia-led government, there are fears that sectarian rivalries could prompt some members of these groups to rejoin the insurgency.

With violence in Iraq at a four-year low, and United States troops gradually preparing to withdraw, power relations are changing. The United States-financed Awakening Councils, sometimes called the Sons of Iraq, who have been credited with playing a major role in battling al-Qaeda, are to be taken over by the Iraqi authorities.

The government says it will now foot the bill for the 100,000 al-Sahwa members – four-fifths of whom are Sunni – but there are serious doubts over its commitment.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's ruling Shia-Kurdish coalition has vowed to keep up the generous monthly pay cheques of over 300 US dollars per fighter. In an order issued on September 8, the premier pledged to integrate some 20 per cent of militia members into the army and police, and to find government jobs for the rest as positions become free.

“We will keep paying the salaries until jobs are offered,” said al-Maliki's order, which was quoted in an Associated Press report.

However, al-Sahwa members fear the government could renege on its promise.

They note that in recent months, they have come under increasing pressure from the authorities. They also question the government's plans to find civilian jobs for the 80 per cent of fighters – some 80,000 men – who will not be absorbed into the Iraqi security forces.

The mistrust is mutual. Shia politicians have long viewed the Awakening Councils with suspicion and feel that the US has effectively helped to establish an armed Sunni opposition. These doubts are fuelled by the pasts of some al-Sahwa members, who may have fought with the insurgents alongside to al-Qaeda.

Observers warn that if the transition goes wrong and Awakening Council fighters are left with no income, they could resort to joining the very insurgency they once helped defeat.

The al-Sahwa movement has its origins in the Sunni province of Anbar in western Iraq, where in August 2006, tribal leaders began to ally themselves with US forces, after previously backing the insurgency. The indiscriminate killings and extremist ideologies of al-Qaeda's foreign combatants led the tribes to turn against them.

Gradually, the movement began to spread to other provinces, including Babil, Diyala, Salahuddin, Tamim,

and Nineveh, as local tribesmen changed sides and became involved in driving out al-Qaeda. In Baghdad, a less tribal, more neighbourhood-based council expelled insurgents from Sunni areas.

Thousands of men joined the Awakening force – which at its height comprised 130 councils whose members were armed and financed by the US.

“The Awakening Councils were one of the essential ingredients in the decline in violence and in stabilising Iraq, so they wield a great deal of power in terms of security,” said Brian Katulis from the US-based Centre for American Progress, CAP.

Observers say the Awakening movement was a success because the fighters were not just encouraged by the US, but were also paid – an undertaking which is said to have cost the US treasury 360 million dollars a year.

However, having American officials fund the councils was never going to be a long-term solution for the country, and the absorption of the al-Sahwa irregulars into the security forces has been planned for months.

As most agree that continuing to pay the fighters’ salaries is key to securing their loyalty, US officers in Iraq have reportedly promised to guarantee government payments for a time.

“The US will remain engaged for several months and [will] make sure that payments are received,” said Katulis.

Yet while the transition, which began at the beginning of the month, will initially be overseen by American forces, nobody knows how it will work in the longer term.

Katulis said he was not certain that the finer details of the transition had been decided. “I don’t know if there is a real plan in place,” he said.

Nora Bensahel, a political scientist at the Rand Corporation, a think-tank, noted that, so far, the process of integrating the 20,000 Awakening Council members into the security forces had been very slow.

She also pointed that the US could only do so much in terms of guaranteeing payments.

“Although the US will take a great interest in it, there is very little [it] can directly do – US leverage over the Iraqi government is not great,” she said.

Michael O’Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a research organisation, says that while the US will try to make the transition work, he is not certain that the Iraqi government will stand by its promise to the council members.

"[Al-Maliki] may not really believe in the process, at least not enough to keep it going when the going gets tough," he said.

Some analysts believe the authorities' distrust of Sunni fighters may prompt them to seek a get-out clause to avoid having to integrate them into the military or provide them with public-sector jobs.

"Although the US has tried to convince [the governing parties] that it is in their best long-term interest to come to a peaceful settlement with the Sunni Arabs, the [governing] parties don't want that," said Joost Hiltermann of the Brussels-based think-tank International Crisis Group.

He said he thought the government was likely to use a harsh and selective vetting process to prevent fighters joining the army or police. He also had doubts over whether the government would find positions for the remaining 80 per cent of Awakening Council fighters who will not be absorbed into the security forces.

"In Iraq's oil economy, most jobs are government jobs, but that's precisely where the government doesn't want these men," said Hiltermann.

Analysts also believe it is unwise to incorporate al-Sahwa fighters into the security apparatus without undertaking a rigorous selection process that upholds the current requirements for admission.

"It would be unwise [for the government] to just admit [al-Sahwa fighters] into the police or military without going through the established procedures and due process," said Abbas Majid, an Iraqi analyst and an expert on the al-Sahwa groups. "These rules and procedures must be observed to ensure the continued professionalisation of the security forces."

Many al-Sahwa members fear they will not be granted positions in the security forces during the transition process, which is due to end on December 31 this year.

Sa'd Mahmud, 26, who guards an al-Sahwa checkpoint in the al-Salaam district of Baghdad, said that he applied for a post in the security forces in September after hearing that the Awakening Councils were to be disbanded.

Mahmud, who first joined the Awakening movement 18 months ago after Shia militias tried to take control of his district, said he needs his monthly salary to care of his family. He is also extremely concerned that if his application is rejected, he may be left vulnerable to retribution from al-Qaeda-linked militias against which he has fought.

"I don't know what I can do if my request is turned down. I may leave the neighbourhood together with my family. I am wanted by militias, and being present here without being a member of the security forces will make me an easy target," he said.

Mahmud believes the authorities should commit to integrating all the al-Sahwa fighters into the security forces without exception, "All of them are sons of Iraq and work with sincerity."

Muhammad Rajab al-Muhammadi, an Awakening Council leader in Anbar province, said members were surprised to hear that the government only planned to incorporate 20 per cent of the men into the security forces.

“We sacrificed our lives to fight al-Qaeda in battles the US forces could not fight. What is the reward for offering all these sacrifices, to be disbanded? What will be our fate?” he asked.

Abu Azzam, the commander of the Awakening movement in Baghdad, said in an interview with the US newspaper *The Nation* that the fact that the vast majority of Awakening members will be kept out of the security services means that they won't have work and will be left angry and alienated.

In a bid to gain the support of the al-Sahwa movement, representatives of the Sunni bloc in parliament, the Iraqi Accord Front, have demanded that all Awakening members be integrated into the military.

“The government must... not stall the completion of this project for combating unemployment and protecting the fighters against al-Qaeda, whom they have bravely fought,” said Saleem al-Jibouri, a spokesperson for the Accord Front and a member of parliament.

Another reason why Sunni Arab political parties are keen to win over al-Sahwa members is because they fear these groups could pose a serious challenge to their own position. Indeed, many Awakening movement leaders intend to run in provincial and national elections scheduled for next year.

“There is a serious distrust between the al-Sahwa leaders and the Sunni parliamentary bloc. The al-Sahwa leaders accuse the [latter] of appeasing al-Qaeda and other insurgency groups, while the [Sunni] parties accuse al-Sahwa of being a ragtag of bandits and mercenaries,” said Majid.

According to Waleed al-Zubaidi, a lawyer and commentator, whatever else the government decides, it is imperative that it continue to pay all the Awakening fighters.

“Regardless of the government's final stance on the integration of al-Sahwa fighters, they need to be put on the government payroll to protect security and stability,” he said.

Officials insist that this exactly is what they intend to do.

“The Iraqi government is committed to its pledge to integrate al-Sahwa elements into the security apparatus, in recognition of their cooperation with and backing of Iraqi security,” said Brigadier General Qasim Ata, spokesman for Baghdad security operations.

“Forty-nine thousand, three hundred and eighty-one members of al-Sahwa are now completely on the government payroll. The government will continue paying everyone until job opportunities are found for al-Sahwa [members].”

Despite the government's insistence that it will look after the al-Sahwa members, some suspect that it will

use the disbanding of the force as an opportunity to stamp out Sunni influence, particularly in Baghdad but also in the governorates of Diyala and Mosul, where they form the majority.

Al-Jibouri confirmed that many Awakening Council members in Diyala province – who continue to battle al-Qaeda – had come under pressure from the authorities in recent months.

“Some of them have been accused [by the authorities] of carrying out terror acts while they suffer attacks, suicide bombings and cleansing by al-Qaeda,” he said.

Earlier this year, the authorities issued arrest warrants against three al-Sahwa members who were trying to register as candidates for provincial council elections in Diyala. The warrants were released on May 27 – just one day before official registration was to begin – and meant that all three were disqualified from running.

“Our government is after us,” said one of the three men, Mullah Shihab al-Safi, in a report on the website of the newspaper USA Today. “We sacrificed hundreds of our sons to drive al-Qaeda out. Now the government says we are no different than the terrorists.”

While the authorities maintain that the Diyala arrests were security related, observers pointed out that those targeted were trying to establish a Sunni alliance to challenge the ruling Shia parties.

Even the prime minister’s representative in Diyala, Saad al-Duyali, acknowledged that there may have been a connection between the arrest warrants and the elections.

Some believe this pressure could stem from government fears that the Awakening Council members are a political force to be reckoned with.

Although the Diyala case seems to be politically motivated, there are real concerns regarding alleged crimes committed by some current al-Sahwa leaders and fighters in earlier times when they were allied to al-Qaeda.

“There are a large number of law suits against members of the al-Sahwa groups related to crimes committed previously,” said Majid. “Some al-Sahwa leaders might portray these law suits as baseless allegations, but the reality is many crimes have been committed by these fighters and this issue must be addressed by the government.”

Observers fear that heightened sectarian rivalry ahead of elections next year could scupper efforts to bring Awakening Council members under central control.

They warn that if the authorities abandon those credited with defeating al-Qaeda, by stopping their salaries and failing to find them work, this could help the extremist group to re-establish its presence. In Diyala, residents fear that al-Qaeda has already returned following incidents involving masked gunmen parading through the streets at night.

Hiltermann said al-Qaeda was just waiting for an opportunity to come out of the shadows, "It never really left but many of its fighters switched [allegiances]. Given the right circumstances, they will pop up again."

But defence ministry spokesperson Brigadier General Muhammad al-Askari dismissed these concerns.

"I do not think al-Sahwa elements have the ability or desire to take up arms against the government. because they are now in need of protection from [the groups they have been fighting]," he said.

"The [government] jobs will secure their financial needs to make a living, for them and their families."

The coming months will show whether the government honours its promise to provide for the militia fighters – and in doing so, take a tentative step towards national reconciliation.

Katulis noted that while the process itself may not be smooth, the time for the transition is right, " There is a great deal of danger, but the sooner the Iraqi leadership takes control, as opposed to outsiders stage-managing things, the better."

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