

# Iraq War: Teaming Up with Insurgents

By Gareth Porter | August 16, 2007

In hailing what he has called an “almost breathtaking” turnaround in Anbar Province that has weakened al-Qaida as a triumph for his new military strategy in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus has put a favorable spin on a development that actually challenges the central rationale for continued U.S. military occupation of Iraq.

The dramatic change in Anbar, in which Sunnis have replaced U.S. forces and largely Shiite troops in providing security against al-Qaida, is likely to be a primary theme in Petraeus’s September report on the surge. It has also become the favorite theme of war supporters, from right-wing columnist Charles Krauthammer to the duo of Michael O’Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack.

But the new situation in Anbar cannot be attributed to U.S. military operations or presence in the province. After five years of unsuccessful U.S. military operations in Anbar, the U.S. military’s agreements with Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar represent an acknowledgment that it is dependent on the very Sunni insurgents it once considered the enemy in Iraq to reduce al-Qaida’s influence in the province.

In an interview with ABC News May 30, Petraeus admitted that the Sunnis “can figure out who al-Qaida is a heck of a lot better than we can.”

The apparent success of Petraeus’s shift from relying on U.S. military force to relying on Sunni troops to take care of al-Qaida could be used as an argument against continuation of the U.S. military presence in Anbar.

Recognition that there is a far more effective alternative to U.S. military operations to reduce al-Qaida’s influence would be a major blow to President George W. Bush’s argument against a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops, which has relied increasingly on the threat of an al-Qaida haven in Iraq.

It would also contradict the rationale for the Democratic Party leadership’s inclusion in troop withdrawal legislation of a major exception for U.S. troops fighting terrorism in Iraq—a reference to al-Qaida in Anbar Province.

In several press interviews in recent months, Petraeus has described the new security arrangements as the result of Sunni tribal leaders’ change of heart. In a June 8 CNN interview, he said that, in just a few months, “Tribes

that turned a blind eye to what al-Qaida was doing in that province are now opposing al-Qaida very vigorously.”

But the background of the agreements reached in Anbar indicates that it was the Bush administration that was forced to adjust its policy. Several major Sunni armed groups, most of which are Arab nationalist in their ideological orientation, began to quarrel with the foreign-dominated al-Qaida organization in Iraq as early as 2005. By early 2006 they were at war with al-Qaida across much of Anbar Province.

The leaders of the anti-al-Qaida Sunni armed groups have made repeated proposals to the United States for cooperation against al-Qaida as well as Shiite militia groups. In December 2005, a representative of the Sunni insurgents in Anbar asked the top U.S. commander in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, to let former Iraqi soldiers from the area replace U.S. forces in providing security for the city of Ramadi, according to a report in the *Sunday Times* of London.

But Casey refused, on the ground that that would allow Sunni insurgents to take over the city. A *Times* of London story in September 2006 reported that Sunni leaders in Anbar were complaining that U.S. military operations were strengthening al-Qaida by disarming local Sunni forces. The Sunni leaders were pleading for the U.S. military to arm Sunnis in the province, according to the story.

The reason the U.S. military refused to allow Sunnis to control security in their own provinces is that earlier in the war Sunni troops and police collaborated with the Sunni insurgents. In April 2004, when Sunni insurgents went on the offensive in the Sunni heartland, the number of Sunni “Civil Defense Corps” troops in the three Sunni provinces fell by 82% from 5,600 to about 1,000, according to a U.S. General Accountability Office report, because whole units deserted to the insurgents.

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So it was Petraeus and the U.S. command, not the Sunni leadership, who have had a change of heart.

Under the arrangements negotiated with Sunni tribal leaders, Sunni troops have been given de facto authority over local security, without any official status, meaning that they are unofficially approved Sunni militias. The same arrangements have now been extended to other Sunni provinces and to Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad.

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates denied Sunday that the United States is providing arms to the Sunni militias, but confirmed that it is providing training and financial support.

U.S. officials have said the Sunni recruits for these militias are carefully vetted and that they must sign a statement pledging support for the government. But a July 27 report in the *Washington Post* revealed how the process of vetting Sunni recruits actually works in Baghdad.

The U.S. commander in Baghdad's Rasheed district, Col. Ricky D. Gibbs, met with "half a dozen influential Sunni leaders" to discuss the formation of "neighborhood protection groups," according to the story, and was handed a list of 250 names of Sunni residents willing to serve on the force.

Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, commander of the Third Infantry Division, assured reporters in June that no support would be given to any Sunni group that had attacked U.S. forces. But the U.S. command has too little intelligence on the Sunni insurgents to know whether Sunni guerrillas have entered the program. Sunni insurgents who remain determined to expel U.S. forces from Iraq in the future are certainly participating in U.S.-sponsored Sunni militias.

McClatchy's Leila Fadel reported June 7 that members of the anti-U.S. Islamic Army of Iraq are collaborating with U.S. troops in the Sunni neighborhood of Amariyah in

Baghdad to expel al-Qaida. The Sunni insurgents do not acknowledge their insurgent affiliation to the U.S. forces, who have turned to them because, as the U.S. company commander explained, finding al-Qaida attackers was "like fighting ghosts."

But Amariyah Abu Bilal, the Islamic Army cell leader, told Fadel he remains committed to expelling the "occupation" once al-Qaida has been defeated.

Fadel and Nancy A. Youssef reported for McClatchy Newspapers June 17 that some military officers see the new policy as a dangerous reversal of the previous U.S. policy of refusing to allow those with ties to the insurgency to gain access to local security organs.

Opponents of the program argue, according to Youssef and Fadel, that supporting Sunni militias "reinforces the idea that U.S.-trained Iraqi forces cannot control their country," according to the opponents. The McClatchy reporters interviewed six different U.S. officers who had served in Iraq. All "shook their heads when asked about the idea of arming the Sunnis" and expressed distrust of Sunnis, whom they had been fighting only months earlier.

Only last December, the Bush administration was aghast at the idea that Saudi Arabia would actually provide money and arms to Sunni militias in Iraq if the United States withdrew, leaving a Shiite force that would threaten the Sunni community, as King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia warned U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney on a visit to Riyadh.

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