FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE | Center for the Study of Intelligence and Nontraditional Warfare

Iraq's Unfinished War:

Security in the Post-Saddam Era

Diane Zorri

FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE | **Center for the Study of Intelligence and Nontraditional Warfare**

Iraq's Unfinished War: Security in the Post-Saddam Era

Diane Zorri

This report was initially presented as a paper at the Post-9/11 Irregular Warfare Lessons Learned Conference in Annapolis, Maryland from September 17-18, 2024. The conference was sponsored by FPRI's Center for the Study of Intelligence and Nontraditional Warfare and the Department of Defense's Irregular Warfare Center.

February 2025

Center for the Study of Intelligence and Irregular Warfare

Mission: To facilitate the study of intelligence activities and nontraditional warfare to help educate and explore how they best support national security.

Vision: The Center's scholarly research of intelligence, and irregular warfare and political warfare combined as nontraditional warfare, aims to facilitate understanding by the general public, as well as government and academic specialists, on how these specialties provide for the nation's security, caveats in their application, and lessons learned from past actions to inform future policy decisions. It will do this via two methods:

Educate to help others navigate: The Center will conduct scholarly research of the past to help educate the general public on intelligence and nontraditional warfare, and why they are important to U.S. national security. It will also assist practitioners with lessons learned from history to guide them in their current duties.

Trailblaze new paths: The Center will investigate current challenges in the fields of intelligence and nontraditional warfare and recommend possible solutions to these challenges, with an emphasis towards the unorthodox or the revolutionary. It will also explore the horizon for both oncoming challenges and threats to America's ability to conduct these operations.

About the Author

This article is the opinion of the author and does not reflect the views of their affiliated organizations or the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Diane Zorri

Dr. Diane M. Zorri is a national security expert, former military officer, and academic with extensive experience in defense, intelligence, information warfare, and emerging technology. During her two years in Iraq amid the surge, she gained firsthand operational and strategic insights into US military and foreign policy in the Middle East. A seasoned researcher and educator, she is dedicated to shaping the next generation of security and defense professionals.

Key Points

The Iraq War offers critical lessons in irregular warfare, particularly regarding the use of local forces, and highlights the challenges in recruiting, training, and coordinating with Iraqi police and militias.

This study analyzes the long-term consequences of decisions made during the conflict. It examines factors that contributed to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and identifies missed opportunities to prevent its emergence.

Key takeaways include the necessity of preserving existing security structures unless there is a sufficient occupation force and understanding ideological divisions within the population to identify opportunities for realignment.

A 2009 cordon and search mission with the Sons of Iraq, Iraqi security forces, and US Soldiers near Forward Operating Base Warrior, in Kirkuk, Iraq. (US Army | Sgt. Canaan Radcliffe)

Introduction

The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States prompted numerous counterinsurgency operations across various theaters of conflict. The Iraq War offers a wealth of lessons learned in irregular warfare. This article delves into the successes and failures that characterized US and allied efforts to stabilize Iraq post-2003. It seeks to answer critical questions regarding the utilization and challenges of local Iraqi police and militia forces in counterinsurgency campaigns. It explores how these forces were best utilized and identifies the main challenges encountered in recruiting, training, supplying, communicating with, and operating alongside them. Furthermore, this article aims to distill critical insights that can inform future operations by assessing some of the negative consequences of actions, including several factors that led to the emergence of the Islamic State. It also examines the second-and third-order effects of tactical, operational, and strategic decisions made during the conflict, emphasizing how some long-term consequences could have been avoided with greater foresight and understanding of the political landscape. By reflecting on both the positive and negative outcomes of the Iraqi experience, especially the Sunni Awakening, this study seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of modern irregular warfare and the enduring challenges of nation-building in a post-conflict setting.

From the author's perspective, these are the critical insights resulting from an analysis of the Iraq War:

1. Do not be too quick to dismantle the existing security apparatus unless you have a large enough occupation force.

2. Look for ideological cleavages in the population and opportunities for realignment, then move toward creating a security business.

3. Quickly restore basic services, but know that greater capacity-building will be difficult.

4. Understand how military action is connected to the local politics.

5. Have a long-term plan to protect the allies you create.

6. Prioritize border security.

Insight 1

Do not be too quick to dismantle the existing security apparatus (unless you have a large enough occupation force).

Several academics, journalists, and scholars have noted that critical issues could arise if you invade a country and quickly dismantle the existing security apparatus.[1] The sudden absence of a central authority and security forces can create a power vacuum, leading to widespread lawlessness and chaos. Various groups, including criminal gangs, militias, and insurgents, may attempt to fill this void, resulting in increased violence and instability. Disbanded military and police personnel may become disillusioned and join insurgent groups or criminal organizations, significantly bolstering these groups' capabilities with their knowledge of security operations and access to weapons. Maintaining public order becomes extremely challenging without an effective security apparatus, and looting, rioting, and general disorder can spread, further deteriorating the country's infrastructure and quality of life.

The breakdown of law and order can exacerbate humanitarian issues, including food, water, and medical supply shortages. The lack of security can disrupt economic activities, leading to a collapse in trade, investment, and overall economic stability, resulting in widespread unemployment and poverty, further fueling discontent and unrest. The local population may lose trust in any new government established and see the invading force as bringing not freedom or liberation but anarchy and chaos, hindering efforts to stabilize and rebuild the country as cooperation

The Joint Chiefs of Staff testify before the Senate Arms Services Committee in September, 2000. (catalog.archives.gov/id/6611082)

with local communities becomes more difficult. This initial instability can lead to a prolonged conflict, with various factions vying for control. The protracted violence and insecurity can make long-term peace and stability more difficult to achieve. In summary, dismantling an existing security apparatus without a clear and effective plan for maintaining order can lead to severe and far-reaching consequences, complicating efforts to stabilize and rebuild the country.

Before the US-led coalition invasion of Iraq, US Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee, asserting that hundreds of thousands of troops would be necessary to effectively occupy the country, a nation with a population of approximately 22 million. In contrast, the Department of Defense challenged Shinseki's projections, advocating for a force closer to 100,000 troops.[2] Ultimately, the department deployed significantly fewer troops than initially requested by the Army.

In March 2003, the quick fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime exposed the fragile facade of public order, leading to chaos as Iraqi citizens took to the streets, looting and setting fires across Baghdad. The subsequent power vacuum greatly challenged the rule of law and public order. Initially, coalition forces were not instructed to contain the violence that followed the air campaign, a critical error in decision-making. This unchecked lawlessness further deteriorated Iraq's already dilapidated infrastructure, making the provision of basic services even more challenging. The rampant looting hindered the coalition's ability to implement its post-war occupation and recovery plans.

The situation worsened after the Coalition Provisional Authority administrator disbanded the Iraqi military and police forces. Without an overwhelming coalition force on the ground, the subsequent de-Ba'athification of internal security forces exacerbated the issue, resulting in widespread criminal activity and a significant loss of control over the

population. Moreover, de-Ba'athification alienated a large segment of the Iraqi population, many of whom joined or supported the subsequent insurgency against coalition forces. The impact of the looting and lawlessness compounded the already dire state of Iraq's infrastructure, making it nearly impossible for coalition forces to operate under their devised plans for post-war occupation and recovery.

Insight 2

Look for ideological cleavages in the population and opportunities for realignment, then move toward creating a security business.

Concurrent with a "surge" of US forces in the region to correct the previous paucity of troop strength, the US Army published Field Manual (FM) 3-24, which revised the doctrine to counter insurgencies. The new doctrine advocated "population-centric" tactics and small maneuver units. Field commanders were also encouraged to engage the civilian population by leaving forward operating bases and dispersing forces throughout urban centers and villages. It has been difficult to distinguish which surge component—the military reinforcement or the doctrinal change—was most effective in Iraq, primarily because there was such little variation in force employment during this period.[3] Military historian Steven Biddle has carefully suggested that "the modest scale of reinforcements in 2007 suggests that doctrine may have been the decisive factor. Without observing independent variation in troop density and doctrine, however, it is impossible to make a definitive statement as to their relative causal impact."[4] Yet a third factor, a massive Sunni political and military realignment, proved to be another important (and often overlooked) component in the success of the surge.

Later, as more leaders joined the movement, these "Sons of Iraq" (SOI) were organized into a formal program and paid by the US forces to fight insurgent groups.

In 2006 and 2007, Iraq's Sunni population realigned with US forces to battle al Qaeda in Iraq.[5] Sunni tribal leaders in the western Anbar province of Iraq initiated the Sahwa or "Awakening" movement, which led them to side with US and coalition forces. Later, as more leaders joined the movement, these "Sons of Iraq" (SOI) were organized into a formal program and paid by the US forces to fight insurgent groups.

Explanations of the alliance that formed between US forces and the tribal sheikhs of Anbar province, as well as the broader SOI movement in 2006 and 2007, are often attributed to monetary factors or relative economic gains. Several policymakers have argued that the reason the Sunnis aligned with the United States is because we paid them to do so.[6] To the contrary, the Sunni Awakening shows that economic considerations are secondary to ideological constraints. According to sources in the country at the time, the Sunni Awakening was connected to a much larger social movement within Iraq, which was fed by the Sunnis' widespread discontent with the central government

Local Abna'a Al Iraq conduct a joint clearing operation south of Salman Pak in February, 2008. (DVIDS | Sgt. Timothy Kingston)

as well as the rise in al Qaeda's criminal activities in their neighborhoods and villages. The central government could not keep pace with the spread of the criminal organizations. By late 2005, al Qaeda had complete control over many Sunni areas, especially in west Baghdad and Iraq's western provinces.

In the beginning, the Sunni political and military realignment was largely tribal. From the onset, Sunni tribal leaders viewed the Iraqi government with distrust,[7] and by 2005, Anbar's tribal leaders had been enduring years of social, religious, and economic conflict with al Qaeda. Al Qaeda leaders posed a direct threat to the traditional power of the sheikhs and openly challenged their rulings in religious and social matters.[8] Sheikh Ali Hatim al-Suleiman, of the three-million-strong al-Dulaymi Sunni tribal confederation that was concentrated in al Anbar province, wanted to strike back but realized that such an effort would provoke an even stronger retaliatory response.[9] He also realized that the tribal leaders needed American support to be effective, but openly cooperating with the Americans would not garner popular support with the general Sunni population.[10] By mid- to late 2005, the tribes were already in open warfare against al Qaeda, but they did not have support from the US forces in the area.[11]

In Anbar province, Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha is often credited as the founder of the Anbar Sahwa movement. Like al-Suleiman, Abu Risha was a sheikh from the al-Dulaymi tribe, albeit a second-tier one, which caused some consternation among other sheiks in the confederation. In 2006, he approached US Marine forces operating in Anbar province to build an alliance to fight al Qaeda. Abu Risha encouraged his followers to join the local police forces in Anbar province to fight against the insurgency. Other tribal leaders followed suit, and the Sahwa spread throughout the province. Later, US forces discovered the killing

of his three brothers and his father by al Qaeda militiamen, prompting Abu Risha to switch sides.[12] As his movement grew, he founded a formal council for Sahwa matters, which included dozens of Sunni tribal leaders from his region. The collaborative pattern "spread rapidly through the province,"[13] and thousands of young Sunni men joined the local police forces.

The Anbar Awakening was particularly successful because the Sunnis knew exactly where the al Qaeda fighters lived and how to target them.[14] The legitimacy of Anbar's tribal leaders was instrumental in the recruitment and retention of young Sunni men. Because it was so successful, the Anbar Awakening became the model for exploiting the fissure between Sunni insurgent groups and the general Sunni population.[15] The integration and focus on tribal leaders were also key because they provided the critical link between Sunni politicians in Baghdad and former military officers working at the local level.

By late 2006, al Qaeda was controlling the population in the upper-class neighborhood of Ameriyah in western Baghdad through kidnapping, torture, and murder.

When the commander of the US Army's 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, then-Lt. Col. Dale Kuehl arrived in western Baghdad in late 2006; he recalled there was no rule of law or municipal services, and violence was very high.[16] Over the next several months, the violence did not abate. This did not change until Lieutenant Colonel Kuehl worked with one of the first leaders of the Awakening movement in Baghdad, Sa'ad Ghaffoori (also known as Abu Abed). By late 2006, al Qaeda was controlling the population in the upper-class neighborhood of Ameriyah in western Baghdad through kidnapping, torture, and murder.[17] Tactically speaking, Ameriyah was in an ideal position to hit Radwaniyah Palace Complex (Victory Base), the biggest coalition base in Iraq, with Katyusha rockets and other Soviet-era artillery pieces. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, al Qaeda had vowed to protect Ameriyah's residents from Shi'a militias and American soldiers. Without the rule of law, however, al Qaeda grossly abused their power and the residents of the neighborhood, which was deemed by many al Qaeda operatives as the capital of the Islamic State in Iraq. Encouraged by the success of the Anbar Awakening, and with the help of a local sheikh, in May 2007 Abu Abed took charge of the Sahwa movement in Ameriyah. Over the course of the next several months, Abu Abed worked with the US military through Lieutenant Colonel Kuehl to gain control over the neighborhood. The collaboration aided both sides: Abu Abed's men gained military support from the US Army, and the US Army gained critical intelligence that aided in targeting al Qaeda and finding their weapons caches.[18]

The Awakening movement also spread to other provinces. In 2007, former Ba'ath party members in Baqubah aligned with US forces and provided intelligence on al Qaeda strongholds in the city.[19] The SOI's intimate knowledge of the local population, insurgent strongholds, and access to reliable intelligence facilitated the efficiency and success of the Sahwa

Iraqi national police paying the Sons of Iraq in 2008. (DVIDS| Petty Officer 2nd Class Todd Frantom)

movement. With the help of US forces and momentum gained from tactical successes, the Sahwa quickly spread to Baghdad's other neighborhoods. By early 2008, the SOI had grown to a force of over 100,000.[20] Many of the SOI leaders were former Iraqi officers and soldiers under Saddam Hussein.[21] The men were familiar with formal military doctrine as well as unconventional, small arms, and guerrilla tactics. Once the program was formalized by the United States, the SOI were paid the equivalent of US$300 per month for providing security services.[22] By way of comparison, the World Bank documented that in 2007, the poverty line in Iraq was around 76,896 Iraqi dinars per month (equivalent to US$50–$60 at that time), with approximately 23 percent of Iraqis living below this threshold.[23]

In the summer of 2007, US forces were authorized to appropriate funds from a Commander Emergency Response Program (CERP) for security projects, like the SOI; however, the initial negotiations took several months. Lieutenant Colonel Kuehl intended for CERP to pay local militiamen and volunteers a salary for their time spent aiding coalition forces. During the intense fighting period of May 2007 through August 2007, Abu Abed's militiamen were not paid, and from the perspective of the US commander on the ground in Ameriyah, money did not appear to be the motivating factor behind the initial realignment.[24] Yet, as the Awakening movements grew, it became a way for former military members and jobless men to find meaningful employment.[25] So, while the initial recruitment was ideologically driven, over time it became a security business.[26]

The relationship between realignment and the occupying force's policies in facilitating realignment is also important. In these cases, the United States didn't approach Abu Risha or Abu Abed with the notion of realignment. To the contrary, the US military's role was to gain them success on the battlefield, which in turn gave them more legitimacy and popular support.

Insight 3

Quickly restore basic services, but know that greater capacity-building will be difficult.

The US and coalition involvement in Iraq was not only military; there were also massive reconstruction efforts taking place. During the reconstruction phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, coalition forces had worked alongside State Department officials to rebuild legal, security, political, economic, and regulatory institutions—another important underpinning of the counterinsurgency doctrine found in FM 3-24.[27] Colonel Kuehl recounted that reconstruction projects were just as important in helping the Iraqis regain a sense of normalcy.[28] It is impossible to assess the success of the surge, without also looking at the simultaneous reconstruction efforts by the US Army Civil Affairs units and Corps of Engineers, and the State Department's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Billions of US taxpayer dollars were spent on CERP projects, which went directly toward civil capacity-building.[29]

> **In parallel with the restoration of municipal services, US and coalition personnel worked to install market-oriented policies and legal changes as well as to transition state-owned enterprises to the private sector.**

Yet, despite the influx of cash, the country was ill-prepared to handle the challenges it faced. In parallel with the restoration of municipal services, US and coalition personnel worked to install market-oriented policies and legal changes as well as to transition state-owned enterprises to the private sector. This task proved to be enormously complicated for the relatively inexperienced Coalition Provisional Authority officials as well as the State Department's PRTs and the US military.[30] Furthermore, the rapid influx of cash promoted widespread corruption among Iraqi officials and individuals involved in the contracting process.[31] The Iraqis were also expected to meet structural benchmarks set by organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. These benchmarks included audited reviews of the domestic oil sector to reconcile the flows of oil and oil products at key points in the national system with the financial flows between the various state-owned companies and the budget. Additionally, they were required to prepare detailed reports of outstanding stock advances and conduct a census of workers on the government payroll. The challenges posed by corruption and government inefficiencies further exacerbated the problem.[32] During this period, the Iraqi government was also unable to make decisions on how oil revenues would be divided, the process for maintaining a robust security apparatus, or finalizing plans for economic stabilization. The challenges posed by corruption, government inefficiencies, and the Coalition Provisional Authority's limited capacity not only slowed the progress of reconstruction but also eroded trust in both local and international institutions, ultimately hindering the long-term stability and economic development of Iraq.

Iraqi soldiers, local police, and the Sons of Iraq handed out backbacks and soccer balls in July, 2009. (DVIDS | Pfc. Ali Hargis)

Insight 4

Know how every military action is connected to the local politics.

In Iraq, political parties and militant groups were often intertwined. Because Iraq's security situation was so dire, most of the individuals seeking power were forced to have two faces: one that was political and one that was militant.[33] This complex interplay between politicians and militant groups is readily apparent when assessing Iraqi politics over the past two decades. Most political parties are associated with a major militant group, and it often was difficult to separate the two.

At the elite level of Iraq's society, once the SOI movement gained initial successes, Sunni political leaders stood by the formation of Sahwa forces. They also took steps to encourage the US military to accept their legitimacy. This was an important political move, and it was one that did not last for the entire duration of the program. For instance, the Sahwa movement did not have a fatwa that legitimized it with religious clerics, something very important in the society. On the political front, despite being a major success in thwarting al Qaeda activity, the Sahwa directly challenged the authority of the Iraqi central government in Baghdad. Moreover, because the SOI was perceived to be "legitimate" by the US forces in Iraq and even marginally supported by some senior politicians in Baghdad, it exacerbated the fear that the SOI would eventually become a threat to the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad. In the eyes of many Iraqi politicians, a popular, legitimate armed group like the SOI could easily become a powerful political party.

As a case in point, in early 2007, three senior Sunni politicians met with coalition military leaders to convince them that arming local Sunni forces in Abu Ghraib would not be a threat to the Shi'a-led government in Baghdad.[34] Their support of the movement was critical in getting broader acceptance of the SOI. The support of many Sunni politicians was

short-lived, however. In late 2007, the Iraqi vice president came to Ameriya in Baghdad to check on the security situation, and SOI soldiers holding the area fired upon his convoy. Some SOI soldiers perceived him as trying to take credit for their hard-earned successes and promote his own political agenda.[35] The vice president perceived the SOI to be a political and a security threat.[36] The SOI had a complete monopoly on the use of force in the west Baghdad neighborhoods, which alienated Baghdad's politicians. This sentiment grew over time, and by early 2008, there was widespread concern among both Sunni and Shi'a politicians that the SOI program was "out of control."[37] The escalating distrust between the SOI and Baghdad's political leaders ultimately undermined efforts to stabilize the region, fueling tensions that complicated the integration of Sunni forces into Iraq's security framework and threatened the fragile political balance.

Insight 5

Have a long-term plan to protect the allies you create.

The Sahwa allowed the United States to take advantage of the internal cleavages among Iraq's Sunni population, seize the momentum, and provide stability. The combination of the surge in US forces, doctrinal changes, and the Sunni Awakening led to a decrease in violence and a strategic pause that enabled the US forces to negotiate a status of forces agreement with the Iraqi government and develop a plan to withdraw from the region. In addition, the decrease in violence led to a gradual improvement in the ability of the Iraqi Army to control and hold ground during operations.

The successes allowed coalition forces to transfer security responsibilities to the Iraqi Security Forces and focus on capacity-building.[38]

Shi'a and Sunni politicians were both wary of the disparate groups and feared that the SOI's power could grow into a movement that would threaten their power base.

Once a modicum of stability was achieved, the Americans planned to integrate the SOI into the newly organized Iraqi Security Forces and Iraqi Police Service.[39] At the time of the handover of the SOI program from the United States to the Iraqi government in 2009, the movement "could boast 118,000 personnel, grouped in over 130 Sahwa councils."[40] The Shi'a-led government in Baghdad, though, was not enthusiastic about the SOI, and neither were many Sunni politicians who saw the program as being disorganized and a threat to security.[41] Shi'a and Sunni politicians were both wary of the disparate groups and feared that the SOI's power could grow into a movement that would threaten their power base.[42]

In October 2008, the United States began to transition the SOI program to the Government of Iraq (GOI). To facilitate the transparency of the program, coalition forces had agreed to hand over a biometric database they had created of all the SOI participants. The transition of the SOI program to the GOI was marked with uncertainty and concern,

An Iraqi army soldier speaking with Sons of Iraq members at a check point outside of Haswah, Iraq, in 2009. (DVIDS | Petty Officer 1st Class Wendy Wyman)

as well as funding issues.[43] The GOI was reluctant to make significant political concessions to the Sunnis because they saw their organization as a threat to the government's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Many of the SOI had also been a part of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party and police forces. The Sunni political leadership and tribal sheikhs suspected that the GOI would use information about the SOI to make arrests and leverage their power.

Although there was doubt that the program would transition well, over the next few years, around two-thirds of the SOI were integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces or Iraqi Police Service or were given civilian jobs.[44] Unfortunately, many SOI were also killed or were forced to leave the country. For example, Abu Risha was assassinated in a bombing, allegedly orchestrated by al Qaeda in Iraq.[45] Some Awakening leaders have been involved in politics at the provincial and national levels after the drawdown of coalition forces in the region, but most have been forced to leave the political arena.[46] This was seen by many of the Sunnis as a betrayal and exacerbated the underlying sentiment that they had been marginalized and excluded from the new political order, deepening their resentment and contributing to the escalating unrest in the region.

One of the biggest issues facing irregular operators is that for realigned factions to aid in counterinsurgency, they must be able to self-organize and protect themselves as well as their communities. The problem is that self-organization by militant groups, especially those with a leading figure, can be perceived as a threat to the state and entrenched politicians. There is also the problem of legitimacy of organization. While the United States and many Iraqi citizens appreciated the efforts of the SOI, they were never truly seen as a legitimate organization. Ironically, the Sunni Awakening movement had the effect of securing the Shi'a-led government in Baghdad, but Sunni Awakening leaders were later abandoned, targeted, and forced into political exile by Baghdad politicians.

Moreover, when the United States left

Iraq in 2011, the GOI stopped integrating the SOI into the formal security apparatus. Instead, the GOI legitimized many Iranian-trained paramilitary units (PMUs) by giving them formal missions and authority in police matters. Iraq's PMUs were often portrayed as legitimate organizations that kept the peace. Importantly, nearly all the PMUs were tied to formal political parties, many of which had existed for decades. Because of their longevity and ties to political groups, the Shi'a PMUs were oftentimes better funded and equipped than the Iraqi Army and police forces. By way of contrast, while the US military and government officials may have seen the SOI as a legitimate fighting organization, many Iraqis did not. Iraq's PMUs had much wider support from the government, Shi'ia religious leaders, and citizens. The religious front is especially important. After the fall of Mosul in June 2014, the Shi'a religious cleric Ali al Sistani issued a fatwa for a "righteous jihad" against the Islamic State. To the contrary, the Sunni Sahwa never had a fatwa that legitimized it with religious clerics. On the political front, the Sahwa directly challenged the authority of the Iraqi central government in Baghdad and had been paid by the Americans, while the PMUs were working in direct coordination with the Iraqi government and being paid on a regular basis.

Insight 6

Prioritize border security.

Iraq's powerful neighbor to the east, Iran, was quick to fill any voids in security. Iranian officials also seized upon the opportunity to work with the longstanding Shi'a militias by providing military and financial support.[47] Iran pushed a soft-power strategy: non-oil industry trade as well as economic support to Shi'a organizations and political parties.[48] Iran's intentions in Iraq complemented their long-term strategy in the Middle East. The soft-power strategy gave the Iranian government a way to foment relationships with the Iraqis and gain an economic foothold in Iraq, while at home they focused on developing hard power.

The borders remained so porous that they were an easy way for criminals and terrorists to come back into the country.

In part due to pressure by the Iranians, the Iraqis failed to secure the border with Syria, which left Sunni-dominated Anbar province and most of western Iraq completely exposed to an influx of foreign fighters. Given the instability in Syria, the plight of refugees, and foreign fighters, border security should have been a top priority for the Nouri al-Maliki administration. Instead, the borders remained so porous that they were an easy way for criminals and terrorists to come back into the country. There was some speculation that border security was kept in this ambiguous state to appease Tehran's support for the regime in Syria.[49] Porous borders meant that Tehran could control the supply lines all the way to Damascus, which was vital given the strict economic sanctions on the country. The borders remained a gateway for illegal activities, including smugglers, drug-runners, and arms dealers trafficking goods between Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Later,

Members of the Sons of Iraq in line waiting to be paid by the Iraqi government. (DVIDS | Joint Combat Camera Center Iraq)

the Islamic State in war-torn Syria and western Iraq filled a political and security vacuum.[50]

Conclusion

The US military routinely uses the advantages of superior airpower, battlefield intelligence, and precision strikes to target hostile adversaries. Yet a deep political and socio-cultural understanding can also facilitate more efficient operations in an irregular context, especially for multi-year operations. In 2011, US forces left Iraq after nearly eight years in the country, but most of the military, political institutions, as well as economic and market-oriented processes put into place by coalition officials had not taken hold to the point of becoming legitimate sources of authority and influence. Politically, there was concern that the Iraqi government would not fully integrate the Sunnis into the political and security apparatus. The Iraqi constitution, in its lack of thoroughness, did not provide a way forward on the 2010 elections, which were deadlocked between the Shi'a-dominant State of Law coalition and the secular, predominantly Sunni bloc, al-Iraqiyya. On the military front, while the Iraqis successfully generated and fielded ground forces, deficiencies remained in maintaining, supplying, and supporting them.[51] When the United States left the country, the economy faltered, governance was at a standstill, and the Iraqi military and security services had a difficult time conducting anything other than checkpoint operations.[52] The nascent state was left alone to handle Iraq's internal and external defense, and three years later, after much atrocity and brutality, it nearly fell into the hands of the notorious terrorist organization ISIS. Today, Iraq is heavily influenced by its Iranian neighbors and, while democratic, it has not achieved the stability or economic prosperity that many had hoped for. Many of the ongoing political and sectarian challenges continue to impact the country's development and governance.

The challenges encountered by US forces in Iraq offer critical lessons for future engagements. The reliance on

military might, without a concurrent, robust understanding of local political and socio-cultural dynamics, can lead to fragile outcomes that fail to sustain themselves after foreign forces depart. The incomplete integration of Sunni groups into Iraq's political and security apparatus and the lack of lasting, legitimate institutions laid the groundwork for the resurgence of violence and the rise of extremist forces like ISIS. These shortcomings underscore the importance of building not only military capability, but also resilient governance structures and inclusive political processes that endure beyond immediate conflict. For future missions, policymakers and military leaders must prioritize this broader approach to avoid similar pitfalls.

As the United States and its allies confront similar challenges worldwide, it is essential to learn from the Iraq experience. Achieving stability requires a commitment to fostering local political legitimacy, strengthening economic foundations, and addressing sectarian divides. By taking a holistic approach and recognizing the interconnectedness of military, political, and socio-economic factors, future operations can aim to establish self-sustaining peace rather than temporary order. Iraq's struggles serve as a powerful reminder that long-term success hinges on creating conditions where local institutions can thrive independently, ensuring that the sacrifices of both foreign and local partners lead to lasting stability.

1 David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (Penguin Press, 2006); Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (Times Books, 2005); James Dobbins, *After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush* (RAND Corporation, 2008); Chaim Kaufmann, "Intervention in Ethnic and Ideological Civil Wars: Why One Can Be Done and the Other Can't," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 62–100; Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003).

2 For comparison, at the end of World War II, the United States stationed around three million troops in Germany, which had a population of 70 to 75 million.

3 Stephen Biddle et al., "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012)" 8.

4 Biddle et al., "Testing the Surge," 39.

5 Dale Kuehl, interview by author, Rock Island Arsenal, IL, May 2, 2014.

6 David Petraeus, "Multinational Force–Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guide," *Military Review* (September-October 2008).

7 Alissa Rubin and Stephen Farrell, "Awakening Councils by Region," *New York Times*, December 22, 2007.

8 Norman Cigar, "Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle," Middle East Studies Occasional Papers, September 2011.

9 Cigar, "Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government."

10 Cigar, "Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government."

11 Gary Montgomery, "Setting the Conditions for Insurgency," in *Al-Anbar Awakening*, vol. II, *Iraqi Perspectives*, ed. Gary Montgomery and Timothy McWilliams (Marine Corps University Press, 2009), 12.

12 Montgomery, "Setting the Conditions," 251.

13 Mark Wilbanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the Sons of Iraq Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 59–74.

14 Wilbanks and Karsh, "Sons of Iraq."

15 Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, "Sons of Iraq Program: Results Are Uncertain and Financials Controls Were Weak," https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA545951.

16 Kuehl, interview.

17 Dale Kuehl, "Galula and Ameriya," *Military Review* (March/April 2009): 77.

18 Sa'ad Ghaffoori, interview.

19 Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (Encounter Books, 2009), 118.

20 Farooq Ahmed, "Backgrounder #23: Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces," Institute for the Study of War, February 21, 2008, 2–5, http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/sons-iraq-and-awakening-forces.

21 Ghaffoori, interview.

22 Greg Bruno, "Finding a Place for the Sons of Iraq," Council on Foreign Relations, January 9, 2009, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/finding-place-sons-iraq.

23 The World Bank, "Household Socio-Economic Survey 2006–2007," https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/69.

24 Kuehl, interview.

25 Ray Chakmachi, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, FL, August 11, 2014.

26 Chakmachi, interview.

27 Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Headquarters Department of the Army, 2006), 5–20.

28 FM 3-24, 5–20.

29 FM 3-24, 2–5.

30 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (Vintage Books, 2006), 54–72.

31 Chakmachi, interview.

32 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Corruption and Integrity Challenges in the Public Sector of Iraq," http://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/2013_Report_on_ Corruption_and_ Integrity_Iraq.pdf.

33 Ghaffoori, interview.

34 Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (Vintage Books, 2012), 386.

35 Ghaffoori, interview.

36 Ghaffoori.

37 Ghaffoori.

38 Hamid Ahmed, email to author, July 15, 2008. Dr. Ahmed worked for the 10th Mountain Division at Iskandaria to establish training bases.

39 Wilbanks and Karsh, "Sons of Iraq," 65–67.

40 Cigar, "Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government," 56.

41 Ahmed Dulaymi, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, FL, September 3, 2014. Dulaymi was elected as the governor of Anbar province in 2013.

42 Dulaymi, interview.

43 Dhia al Dherzi, email to author, July 28, 2008. Al Dherzi worked for the Civilian Police Assistance Training Team in the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior finance section.

44 Kenneth Katzman and Carla E. Humud, "Iraq: Politics and Governance," Congressional Research Service, March 9, 2016, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21968.pdf.

45 Renee Montagne and Jamie Tarabay, "US Ally Sheikh Abu Risha Killed in Anbar," National Public Radio, September 13, 2007, https://www.npr.org/2007/09/13/14383382/u-s-ally-sheik-abu-risha-killed-in-anbar-province.

46 Montagne and Tarabay, "Sheikh Abu Risha Killed."

47 US Department of the Treasury, "Sanctions Against Iran-Aligned Militias in Iraq," November 17, 2013, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1921.

48 Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 111, April 2011, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/. Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus111.pdf; David Ignatius, "Tehran's Vote-Buying in Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/24/AR2010022403479.html; David Ignatius, "Bush's Lost Iraqi Elections," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/29/AR2007082901930.html; Dexter Filkins, "Police Seize Forged Ballots Headed for Iraq from Iran," *New York Times*, December 14, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/14/international/ middleeast/14iraq.html.

49 Ghaffoori, interview.

50 Also known as ISIS, ISIL, Da'esh.

51 Ghaffoori, interview.

52 Ghaffoori.

FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) is a nonpartisan Philadelphia-based think tank dedicated to strengthening US national security and improving American foreign policy. Established in 1955 by the noted 20th century geopolitical strategist, Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé, FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is essential for the United States to understand complex international issues and formulate foreign policy. FPRI remains committed to this principle and strives to inform both policymakers and the general public through FPRI research and educational programs.

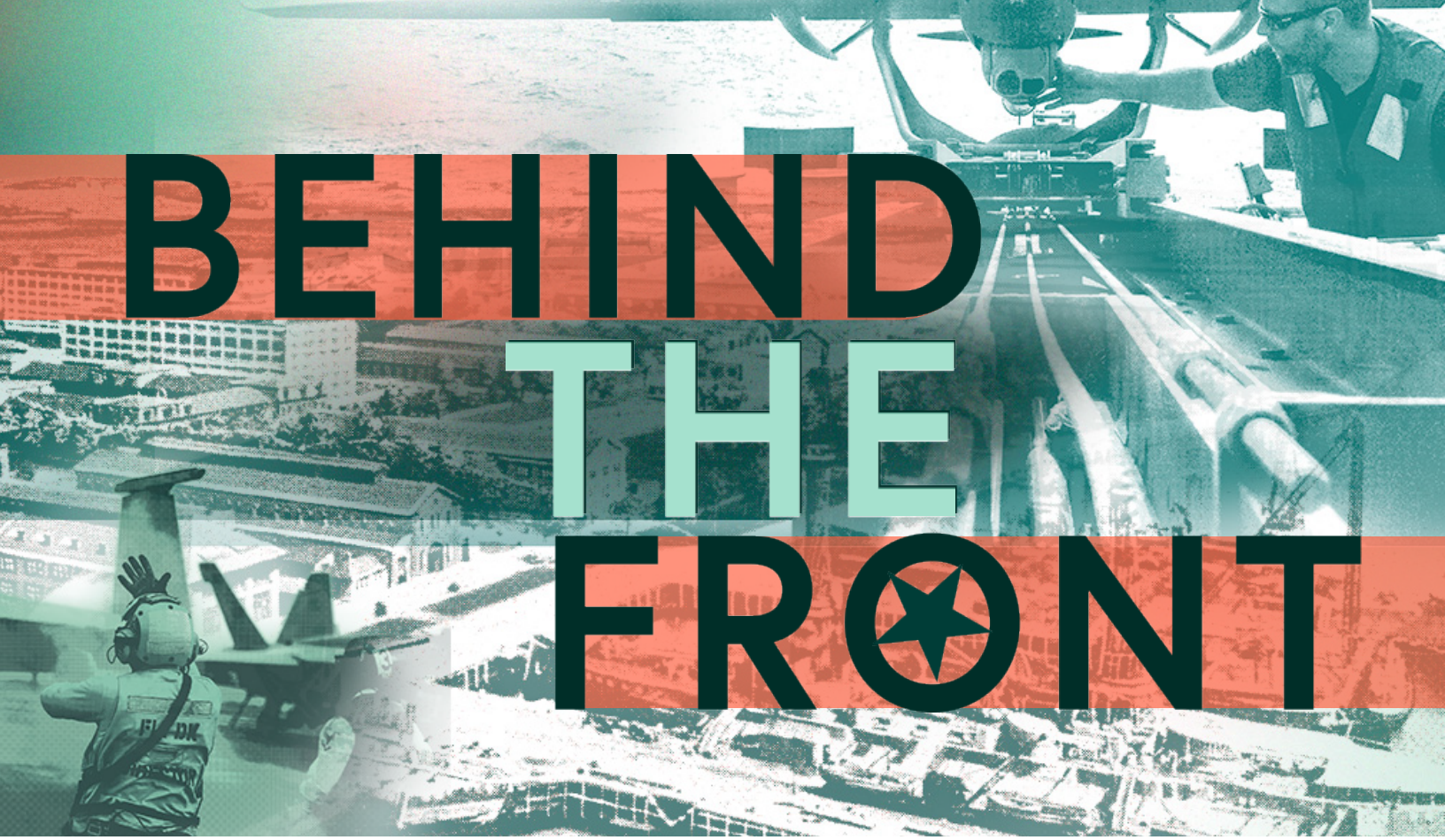
FPRI is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and takes no institutional positions on issues andt conducts no advocacy. The organization has six main research programs, covering US National Security, the Middle East, Eurasia, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Each program produces reports, articles, public events, and private briefings for policymakers, FPRI members, and the general public.

FPRI Editorial Team

Director, Center for the Study of Intelligence and Nontraditional Warfare
Philip Wasielewski
Editing
Lisa Yambrick
Layout and Design
Leah Pedro
Cover Image Credit
A Sons of Iraq member stands at a guard post near Samarra, Iraq. (US Army | Staff Sgt. Ian M. Terry)

Join the Conversation

123 S Broad St, Suite 1920,
Philadelphia, PA 19109
215.732.3774 | fpri.org | @FPRI



NOW ON substack

Subscribe on behindthefront.substack.com or the Substack ioS app

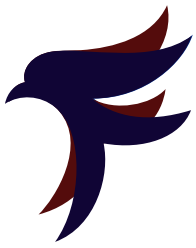
The United States faces a myriad of challenges, ranging from an antiquated defense contracting process to the inability to build and procure new military platforms quickly and efficiently. For the past three decades, American power went largely unchallenged.

The rise of China, coupled with the return of revanchist Russia, requires new thinking about the future of American and global security. The United States has serious shortcomings, linked to deindustrialization after the Cold War and assumptions about US military supremacy, that require urgent thinking to address.

The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)'s new project, Behind the Front, will analyze current and future national security challenges with a focus on:

- The Defense Industrial Base
- Military procurement
- Lessons learned from ongoing conflicts
- Challenges and opportunities in the technology and space sector

For more from the Foreign Policy Research Institute please visit www.fpri.org.
Follow along on X @FPRI.



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE