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## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE 'SONS OF IRAQ'

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Abu Abed was the head of the Sons of Iraq (SOI)/Sahwa in Baghdad's Amiriya late last decade. He cut a deal with the American forces to create security units in his district, and was known as a fierce fighter.

When the civil war ended, he was at a loss as to his future. Both the government and Al Qaeda in Iraq went after him with an arrest warrant and assassination attempts. He ended up fleeing to Jordan and then Sweden for his safety.

To help explain his story and the rise and fall of the Sahwa, or the Sunni Awakening in western Iraq, is an interview with Abu Abed, which was facilitated by Diane Maye, Associate Dean of Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies at Henley-Putnam University.

Could you explain what Amiriya was like in 2005-2006 before the Sahwa was formed there?

In 2005-2006 Al Qaeda had complete control over Ameriya and every aspect of our daily lives.

Al Qaeda used to conduct their own judgment processes according to their beliefs. They would hang citizens for minor infractions and publicly whip them. Nothing was off limits; they conducted themselves however they pleased. There was no law enforcement in the area to stop them, and they declared Ameriya as the capital of the Islamic State.

How did you get in touch with the US military? What did you tell them about your plans to form a local security force, and what was their reaction?

Initially we didn't have contact with the US military, but over time we started coordinating our movements with them. We would also inform them when we knew something about Al Qaeda's movements, and then we started sharing some of our intelligence with them.

The US forces couldn't believe that some young Iraqi Sunnis could help win the fight against Al Qaeda (especially when the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Security Forces couldn't). Most of them thought that we either had a death wish or that we were insane.

In 2006-2007 many Sunnis across central Iraq from Anbar to Diyala decided to turn on Al Qaeda in Iraq. What caused this turn in opinion against the Islamists?

By 2006 the people of Anbar and Diyala had endured years of harassment by Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda challenged them on the rule of law, and started extorting money from the people for security.

There came a point for the people when they realized that neither the Americans nor the Iraqi Army would be able to secure the area. So, in order to regain security, they realized they would have to organize local police forces themselves.

How did you go about cleansing Al Qaeda in Iraq from your neighborhood?

It started with people that were courageous enough to gather intelligence and penetrate Al Qaeda's network. We gathered all the information we could on the Al Qaeda members in the neighborhood: names, addresses, car plate numbers, their criminal intentions, and their weapons caches.

The second thing we did was try and ruin their operations by finding out where they put IED's, or telling the US about their operations. Finally, we ended up having to fight them in close combat on the streets of Ameriya.

Did you work with other local leaders and institutions like imams and mosques to build up support for your fighting force?

My relationship with local leaders consisted of meetings with imams from the local mosques. At that time, the relationship I had between relatives, friends, policy makers, and religious leaders was very complicated. There were some that were completely against Al Qaeda and their operations. Others were neutral, and they did not want to interfere for either side. Others were trying to sustain Al Qaeda.

Considering this, we had to be very careful in our relationship with imams and other local leaders.

The US promised that the Sahwa would receive public jobs after the fighting was over as a means of reconciliation between the Shiite led government and Sunni communities like Amiriya. What was the Iraqi government's attitude towards your group, and did any of your fighters get integrated into the security forces or civil service?

The Americans promised to merge the SOI [Sons of Iraq] with the security forces and other governmental organizations. Most of the people I know that were hired ended up being arrested, trapped or killed by the Shi'ia militias.

Initially, this was rather surprising for me because we had worked so hard on national reconciliation. For instance, I personally promised all of the displaced Shi'ia families from Ameriya that they could return home, and I ensured their protection. Over time, I began to realize that the new Iraqi government had no intention of reconciliation, and this never seemed to come up in the media.

When the heavy fighting was over do you think that the Americans did a good job maintaining its relationship with the Sahwa?

The relationship I had with 1-5 CAV, the US Army unit I worked with in the beginning, was great. These folks were professional and courteous and had every intent on getting the job done in the proper way. The next Army unit that came in really had no knowledge of the situation on the ground or Iraqi culture. So, we suffered because of this, and the relationship spiraled downward.

Iraq's new Premier Haider Abadi is pushing legislation to create a National Guard that would help raise local forces once more to battle the insurgency. What do you think of the idea, and do you

think it will work?

Prime Minister Abadi wants to build a National Guard. I'm skeptical about his ability to do this effectively.

First, I'm not confident he will be able to build consensus with the Sunni members of parliament. Second, it is going to be difficult to get Iran to concede on such a measure. There is going to be strong opposition to any sort of arming of Sunni forces, and I point to former Prime Minister Maliki's staunch position on the SOI as an example of this.

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