

# THE MYTH OF THE SURGE

HOPING TO TURN ENEMIES INTO ALLIES, U.S. FORCES ARE ARMING IRAQIS WHO FOUGHT WITH THE INSURGENTS. BUT IT'S ALREADY STARTING TO BACKFIRE.

A REPORT FROM THE FRONT LINES OF THE NEW IRAQ

BY NIR ROSEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANFUNG DENNIS

IT'S A COLD, GRAY DAY in December, and I'm walking down Sixtieth Street in the Dora district of Baghdad, one of the most violent and fearsome of the city's no-go zones. Devastated by five years of clashes between American forces, Shi'ite militias, Sunni resistance groups and Al Qaeda, much of Dora is now a ghost town. This is what "victory" looks like in a once upscale neighborhood of Iraq: Lakes of mud and sewage fill the streets. Mountains of trash stagnate in the pungent



A child looks on as U.S. soldiers in the 2-2 Stryker Cavalry Regiment conduct a joint operation in Baghdad with officers of the 172 Iraqi National Police.



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## THE AWAKENING

1. Former Iraqi insurgents known as Sahwa on patrol in Muqdadaya in January. The U.S. now employs 80,000 men, nearly all Sunnis, who until recently were aligned with Al Qaeda and other jihadists. 2. Members of the group operate a checkpoint in Baghdad. 3. Capt. Travis Cox (center) at a meeting to arrange security contracts for the militias; his regiment is handing out \$32 million in a single district of Baghdad.



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liquid. Most of the windows in the sand-colored homes are broken, and the wind blows through them, whistling eerily. House after house is deserted, bullet holes pockmarking their walls, their doors open and unguarded, many emptied of furniture. What few furnishings remain are covered by a thick layer of the fine dust that invades every space in Iraq. Looming over the homes are twelve-foot-high security walls built by the Americans to separate warring factions and confine people to their own neighborhood. Emptied and destroyed by civil war, walled off by President Bush's much-heralded "surge," Dora feels more like a desolate, post-apocalyptic maze of concrete tunnels than a living, inhabited neighborhood. Apart from our footsteps, there is complete silence.

My guide, a thirty-one-year-old named Osama who grew up in Dora, points to shops he used to go to, now abandoned or destroyed: a barbershop, a hardware store. Since the U.S. occupation began,

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Osama has watched civil war turn the streets where he grew up into an ethnic killing field. After the fall of Saddam, the Americans allowed looters and gangs to take over the streets, and Iraqi security forces were stripped of their jobs. The Mahdi Army, the powerful Shiite paramilitary force led by the anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, took advantage of the power shift to retaliate in areas such as Dora, where Shiites had been driven from their homes. Shiite forces tried to cleanse the district of Sunni families like Osama's, burning or confiscating their homes and torturing or killing those who refused to leave.

"The Mahdi Army was killing people here," Osama says, pointing to a now-destroyed Shiite mosque that in earlier times had been a cafe and before that an office for Saddam's Baath Party. Later, driving in the nearby district of Baya, Osama shows me a gas station. "They killed my uncle here. He didn't accept to leave. Twenty guys came to his house, the women were screaming. He ran to the back, but they caught him, tortured him and killed him." Under siege by Shiite militias and the U.S. military, who viewed

Sunnis as Saddam supporters, and largely cut out of the Shiite-dominated government, many Sunnis joined the resistance. Others turned to Al Qaeda and other jihadists for protection.

Now, in the midst of the surge, the Bush administration has done an about-face. Having lost the civil war, many Sunnis were suddenly desperate to switch sides — and Gen. David Petraeus was eager to oblige. The U.S. has not only added 30,000 more troops in Iraq — it has essentially bribed the opposition, arming the very Sunni militants who only months ago were waging deadly assaults on American forces. To engineer a fragile peace, the U.S. military has created and backed dozens of new Sunni militias, which now operate beyond the control of Iraq's central government. The Americans call the units by a variety of euphemisms: Iraqi Security Volunteers (ISVs), neighborhood watch groups, Concerned Local Citizens, Critical Infrastructure Security. The militias prefer a simpler and more dramatic name: They call themselves Sahwa, or "the Awakening."

At least 80,000 men across Iraq are now employed by the Americans as ISVs.

Nearly all are Sunnis, with the exception of a few thousand Shiites. Operating as a contractor, Osama runs 300 of these new militiamen, former resistance fighters whom the U.S. now counts as allies because they are cashing our checks. The Americans pay Osama once a month; he in turn provides his men with uniforms and pays them ten dollars a day to man checkpoints in the Dora district — a paltry sum even by Iraqi standards. A former contractor for KBR, Osama is now running an armed network on behalf of the United States government. "We use our own guns," he tells me, expressing regret that his units have not been able to obtain the heavy-caliber machine guns brandished by other Sunni militias.

The American forces responsible for overseeing "volunteer" militias like Osama's have no illusions about their loyalty. "The only reason anything works or anybody deals with us is because we give them money," says a young Army intelligence officer. The 2nd Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, which patrols Osama's territory, is handing out \$32 million to Iraqis in the district, including \$6 million to build the towering

walls that, in the words of one U.S. officer, serve only to "make Iraqis more divided than they already are." In districts like Dora, the strategy of the surge seems simple: to buy off every Iraqi in sight. All told, the U.S. is now backing more than 600,000 Iraqi men in the security sector — more than half the number Saddam had at the height of his power. With the ISVs in place, the Americans are now arming both sides in the civil war. "Iraqi solutions for Iraqi problems," as U.S. strategists like to say. David Kilcullen, the counterinsurgency adviser to Gen. Petraeus, calls it "balancing competing armed interest groups."

But loyalty that can be purchased is by its very nature fickle. Only months ago, members of the Awakening were planting IEDs and ambushing U.S. soldiers. They were snipers and assassins, singing songs in honor of Fallujah and fighting what they viewed as a war of national liberation against the foreign occupiers. These are men the Americans described as terrorists, Saddam loyalists, dead-enders, evildoers, Baathists, insurgents. There is little doubt what will happen when the massive influx of American

money stops: Unless the new Iraqi state continues to operate as a vast bribing machine, the insurgent Sunnis who have joined the new militias will likely revert to fighting the ruling Shiites, who still refuse to share power.

"We are essentially supporting a quasi-feudal devolution of authority to armed enclaves, which exist at the expense of central government authority," says Chas Freeman, who served as ambassador to Saudi Arabia under the first President Bush. "Those we are arming and training

**OSAMA LOOKS AT THE UNIFORMED OFFICERS OF THE IRAQI NATIONAL POLICE IN DISGUST. "I WANT TO KILL THEM," HE TELLS ME, "BUT THE AMERICANS MAKE US WORK TOGETHER."**

are arming and training themselves not to facilitate our objectives but to pursue their own objectives vis-à-vis other Iraqis. It means that the sectarian and ethnic conflicts that are now suppressed are likely to burst out with even greater ferocity in the future."

Maj. Pat Garrett, who works with the 2-2 Stryker Cavalry Regiment, is already having trouble figuring out what to do with all the new militiamen in his district. There are too few openings in the Iraqi security forces to absorb them all, even if the Shiite-dominated government agreed to integrate them. Garrett is placing his hopes on vocational-training centers that offer instruction in auto repair, carpentry, blacksmithing and English. "At the end of the day, they want a legitimate living," Garrett says. "That's why they're joining the ISVs."

But men who have taken up arms to defend themselves against both the Shiites and the Americans won't be easily persuaded to abandon their weapons in return for a socket wrench. After meeting recently in Baghdad, U.S. officials concluded in an internal report, "Most young Concerned Local Citizens would probably not agree to transition from armed defenders of their communities to the local garbage men or rubble cleanup crew working under the gaze of U.S. soldiers and their own families." The new militias have given members of the Awakening their first official foothold in occupied Iraq. They are not likely to surrender that position without a fight. The Shiite government is doing little to find jobs for them, because it doesn't want them back, and violence in Iraq is already starting to escalate. By funding the ISVs and rearming the Sunnis who were stripped of their weapons at the start of the occupation, America has created a vast, uncoordinated security establishment. If the Shiite government of Iraq does not allow Sunnis in the new militias to join the country's security forces, warns one leader of the Awakening, "It will be worse than before."

OSAMA, FOR HIS PART, SEEMS like everything that American forces would want in a Sunni militiaman. He speaks fluent English, wears jeans and baseball caps, and is well-connected from his days with KBR. Before the ISVs were set up, Osama and a dozen of his original men were known to U.S. troops as "the Heroes" for their work

from his access to U.S. contracts. As a result, members of the Awakening who had previously attacked Americans and Shiites are now collaborating with Osama. "To a large extent they are former insurgents," says Capt. Travis Cox of the 2-2 Stryker Cavalry Regiment. Most of Osama's men had belonged to Sunni resistance groups such as the Army of the Mujahedeen, the Islamic Army and the 1920 Revolution Brigades, named for the uprising against the British occupation that year. Even Osama admits that some of his men's loyalty is questionable. "Yesterday we arrested three guys as Al Qaeda infiltrators," he tells me. "They thought that they were powerful because they are ISV, so no one will touch them. You got to watch them every day." Osama himself makes no secret of his hatred for the Shiite government and its security forces. As we walk by a checkpoint manned by the Iraqi National Police, which is comprised almost entirely of Shiites, Osama looks at the uniformed officers in disgust. "I want to kill them," he tells me, "but the Americans make us work together."

Although Osama insists that he has no connections to Al Qaeda or other jihadists, his fellow leaders of the ISVs in Dora are directly tied to the Sunni resistance. Since the Americans often require that each *mahala*, or neighborhood, have two ISV bosses, Osama has given half of his 300 men to Abu Salih, a man with dark reddish skin, a sharp nose and small piercing eyes. "We know Abu Salih is former Al Qaeda of Iraq," a U.S. Army officer from the area tells me. In fact, when I meet with him, Abu Salih freely admits that some of his men belonged to Al Qaeda. They joined the American-sponsored militias, he says, so they could have an identity card as protection should they get arrested.

The other leader working with Osama is Abu Yasser, a handsome and jovial man who wears a matching green sweatshirt and sweatpants, with a pistol in a shoulder holster. "Abu Yasser is the real boss," says an American intelligence officer. "That guy's an animal — he's crazy." A former member of Saddam's General Security Service, Abu Yasser had joined the Army of the Mujahedeen, a

the real enemy. "There is no difference between the Mahdi Army and Iran," he tells me. Now that he is working for the Americans, he has no intention of laying down his arms. "If the government doesn't let us join the police," he says, "we'll stay here protecting our area."

To watch the ISVs in action, I accompany U.S. soldiers from the 2-2 Stryker Cavalry Regiment on a mission in the neighborhood. After meeting up with Osama, Abu Salih and Abu Yasser at a police checkpoint, we walk down Sixtieth Street to the Tawhid Mosque, followed by Stryker armored vehicles from the 2-2 SCR. First Lt. Shawn Spainhour, a contracting officer with the unit, asks the sheik at the mosque what help he needs. The mosque's generator has been shot up by armed Shiites, and the sheik requests \$3,000 to fix it. Spainhour takes notes. "I probably can do that," he says.

The sheik also asks for a Neighborhood Advisory Council to be set up in his area "so it will see our problems." The NACs, as they're known, are being created and funded by the Americans to give power to Sunnis cut out of the political process. As with the ISVs, however, the councils effectively operate as independent institutions that do not answer to the central Iraqi government. Many Shiites in the Iraqi National Police consider the NACs as little more than a front for insurgents: One top-ranking officer accused the leader of a council in Dora of being an Al Qaeda terrorist. "I have an order from the Ministry of Interior to arrest him," the officer told me.

As Spainhour talks to the sheik at the mosque, two bearded, middle-aged men in sweaters suddenly walk up to the Americans with a tip. Two men down the street, they insist, are members of the Mahdi Army. The soldiers quickly get back into the Strykers, as do Osama and his men, and they all race to Mahala 830. There they find a group of young men stringing electrical cables across the street. Some of the men manage to run off, but the eleven who remain are forced into a courtyard and made to squat facing the walls. They all wear flip-flops. Soldiers from the unit take their pictures one by one. The grunts are frustrated: For most of them, this is as close to combat as they have gotten, and they're eager for action.

"Somebody move!" shouts one soldier. "I'm in the mood to hit somebody!"

Another soldier pushes a suspect against the wall. "You know Abu Ghraib?" he taunts.

The Iraqis do not resist — they are accustomed to such treatment. Raids by U.S. forces have become part of the daily routine in Iraq, a systematic form of violence imposed on an entire nation. A foreign military occupation is, by its very nature, a terrifying and brutal thing, and even the most innocuous American patrols inevitably involve terrorizing

## THE COST OF COLLABORATION

Violence in Iraq is on the rise again — and much of it is aimed at the Awakening, Sunni fighters who have abandoned Al Qaeda and sided with the Americans. At right, two U.S. soldiers pose with the severed head of an Awakening member — a U.S. ally — who was decapitated by Al Qaeda. (The soldiers were later reprimanded for their behavior.) The killing was intended to send a clear warning: Those who aid the Americans are marked for death.

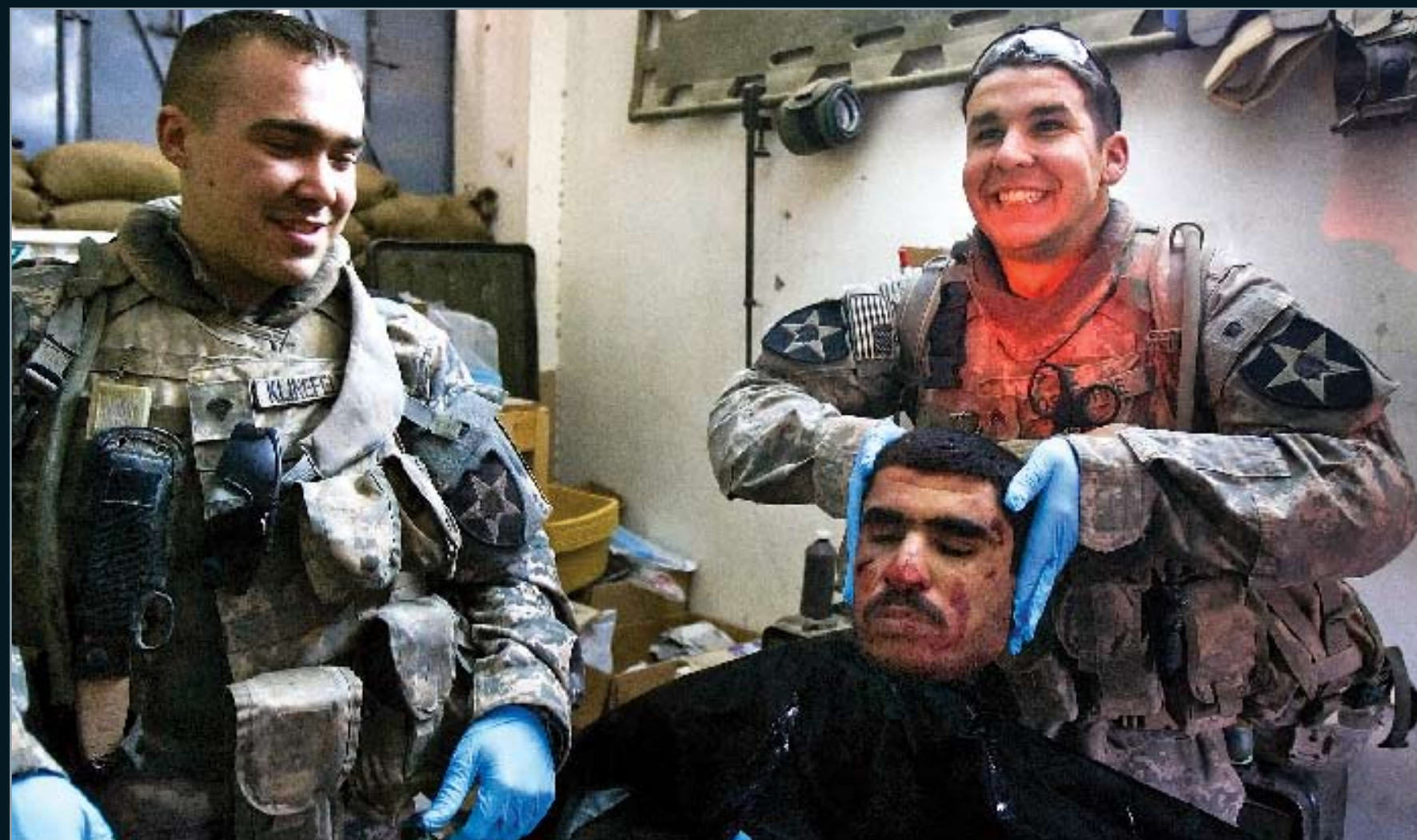
The killings escalated last September, when Al Qaeda assassinated Sheik Abdul-Sattar Abu Risha, who founded the Awakening movement in Anbar Province, once the stronghold of the Sunni insurgency. Since October, attacks on the group have doubled, and hundreds of its members have been killed. The violence spiked after Osama bin Laden released an audio recording in which he called the group "traitors" and "infidels." Among the most recent attacks:

■ On February 11th, two car bombs in Baghdad killed at least eleven people in what appeared to be a coordinated attack on Awakening leaders.

■ A day earlier, twenty-three people were killed by a car bomb at a checkpoint north of Baghdad run by Awakening patrols.

■ On January 20th, a teenage boy in Anbar Province blew himself up at a tribal gathering, killing a leader of the Awakening.

■ On January 2nd, a female suicide bomber struck a checkpoint manned by the Awakening in Diyala Province, killing four and wounding twenty-three.



innocent Iraqi civilians. Every man in a market is rounded up and searched at gunpoint. Soldiers, their faces barely visible behind helmets and goggles, burst into a home late at night, rip the place apart looking for weapons, blindfold and handcuff the men as the children look on, whimpering and traumatized. U.S. soldiers are the only law in Iraq, and you are at their whim. Raids like this one are scenes in a long-running drama, and by now everyone knows their part by heart. "I bet there's an Iraqi rap song about being arrested by us," an American soldier jokes to me at one point.

As the soldiers storm into nearby homes, the two men who had tipped off the Americans come up to me, thinking I am a military translator. They look bemused. The Americans, they tell me in Arabic, have got the wrong men. The eleven squatting in the courtyard are all Sunnis, not Shiites; some are even members of the Awakening and had helped identify the Mahdi Army suspects.

I try to tell the soldiers they've made a mistake — it looks like the Iraqis had been trying to connect a house to a generator — but the Americans don't listen. All they see are the wires on the ground: To them, that means the Iraqis must have been trying to lay an improvised explo-

sive device. "If an IED is on the ground," one tells me, "we arrest everybody in a 100-meter radius." As the soldiers blindfold and handcuff the eleven Iraqis, the two tipsters look on, puzzled to see U.S. troops arresting their own allies.

In a nearby house, the soldiers find Mahdi Army "propaganda" and arrest several men, including one called Sabrin al-Haqir, or Sabrin "the mean," an alleged leader of the Mahdi Army. The Strykers transport the prisoners, including the men from the courtyard, to Combat Outpost Blackfoot. Inside, Osama and Abu Salih drink sodas and eat muffins and thank the Americans for arresting Sabrin. Everyone agrees that the mission was a great success — the kind of street-to-street collaboration that the ISVs were designed to encourage.

The Sunnis from the first house the Americans raided are released, the plastic cuffs that have been digging into their wrists cut off, and three of them are taken to sign sworn statements implicating Sabrin. An American captain instructs them to list who did what, where, when and how. Abu Salih, the militia leader, walks by and tells the men in Arabic to implicate Sabrin in an attack. They dutifully obey, telling the Americans what they want to hear so

they will be released.

Osama, meanwhile, uses the opportunity to lobby the Americans for more weapons. Meeting with a sergeant from the unit, he asks if he can have a PKC, or heavy-caliber machine gun, to put on top of his pickup truck.

"No," the sergeant says. "But we can hide it," Osama pleads.

After processing, Sabrin is moved to a "detainee holding facility" at Forward Operating Base Prosperity. At least 25,000 Iraqis are now in such U.S. facilities — up from 16,000 only a year ago. "We were able to confirm through independent reporting that he was a bad guy" from the Mahdi Army, a U.S. intelligence officer tells me. "He was involved in EJKs" — extrajudicial killings, a military euphemism for murders.

**T**O THE AMERICANS, THE Awakening represents a grand process of reconciliation, a way to draw more Sunnis into the fold. But whatever reconciliation the ISVs offer lies between the Americans and the Iraqis, not among Iraqis themselves. Most Shiites I speak with believe that the same Sunnis who have been slaughtering Shiites

throughout Iraq are now being empowered and legitimized by the Americans as members of the ISVs. On one raid with U.S. troops, I see children chasing after the soldiers, asking them for candy. But when they learn I speak Arabic, they tell me how much they like the Mahdi Army and Muqtada al-Sadr. "The Americans are donkeys," one boy says. "When they are here we say, 'I love you,' but when they leave we say, 'Fuck you.'"

In an ominous sign for the future, some of the Iraqis who are angriest about the new militias are those who are supposed to bring peace and security to the country: the Iraqi National Police. More paramilitary force than street cops, the INP resembles the National Guard in the U.S. Along with the local Iraqi police and the Iraqi army, the INP is populated mainly by members and supporters of the Mahdi Army and other Shiite militias. The police had fought in the civil war, often targeting Sunni civilians and cleansing Sunni areas. One morning I accompany Lt. Col. Myron Reineke of the 2-2 SCR to a meeting at the headquarters of the 7th Brigade of the Iraqi National Police. The brigade is housed in a former home of Ali Hassan al-Majid, the notorious "Chemical Ali." Now called a JSS, or joint security sta-

tion, it is particularly feared by Sunnis, who were frequently kidnapped by the National Police and released for ransom, if they were lucky. The station is also rumored to have been used as a base by Shiite militias for torturing Sunnis.

Reineke finds the brigade's commander, Brig. Gen. Abdul Karim Abud, sitting behind a large wooden desk surrounded by plastic flowers. Behind him is a photograph of Iraqi President Jalal

## ONE RECENT INVENTORY FOUND 550 WEAPONS MISSING, INCLUDING ROCKET-PROPELLED GRENADES. IRAQI POLICE "TAKE WEAPONS WHEN THEY GO AWOL," SAYS AN AMERICAN MAJOR.

Talabani. To his side is a shotgun. Five or six of his officers, all Shiites, surround him. Karim and his men greet the delegation of Americans warmly — but then, the Americans are greeted warmly wherever they go. They assume that this means they are liked, but Iraqis have nothing to lose — and everything to gain — by pretending to be their friends.

Karim begins the meeting by accusing the Awakening of being a front for

terrorists. "We have information that the Baath Party and Al Qaeda have infiltrated Sahwa," he tells Reineke. "It's very dangerous. Sahwa is killing people in Seidiya."

A few days later, I return to meet with Karim without the Americans present. I find him talking to several high-ranking Shiite officers in the Iraqi army about members of the Awakening, who have been taking over homes in Dora that once belonged to Shiites. "We need to bring back the Shiites, but the Sunnis are in the houses," one colonel tells Karim. "This battle is bigger than the other battles — this is the battle of the displaced." To these men, the Awakening is reviled: Eavesdropping on their Arabic conversation, I hear him angrily condemn "killers, terrorists, ugly pigs!"

Karim's phone rings, and he begins talking with a superior officer about a clash the previous day between the Awakening and armed Shiite militias. The ISVs had battled the Mahdi Army, but Karim blames U.S. troops for establishing an ISV unit in the area. "American officers took Sahwa men to a sector where they shouldn't be," he says. "Residents saw armed men not in uniforms and shot at them from buildings. Four Sahwa were injured. My battalion was called in to help." After listening for a moment, he agrees with his superior officer on a solution: Members of the Awakening must be forced out. "Yes, sir," he says. "Sahwa will withdraw from that area. They started the problem."

Away from the Americans, Karim and his men make no secret of their hatred for the Awakening. One of the most frequent visitors to Karim's headquarters is a stern and thuggish man named Abu Jaafar. A Shiite known to the Americans as Sheik Ali, Abu Jaafar has his own ISV unit of 100 men in the Saha neighborhood of Dora. "He may not be JAM," an American major tells me, using the common shorthand for the Mahdi Army, "but he has a lot of JAM friends."

The Awakening, Abu Jaafar tells me,

Abu Jaafar looks at me and smiles. Shiites, he says, do not need the Awakening. "We are already awake," he says. "Our eyes are open. We know everything. We're just waiting."

**U**.S. TROOPS WHO WORK WITH the Iraqi National Police realize that beyond their gaze, the country's security forces do not act anything like police. "The INPs here are almost all Shiites," says Maj. Jeffrey Gottlieb, a lanky tank officer who oversees a unit charged with training Iraqi police. "Orders from their chain of command are usually to arrest Sunnis, not Shiites." The police have also been conducting what Gottlieb calls "United Van Lines missions" — resettling displaced Shiite families in homes abandoned by Sunnis. "The National Police ask, 'Can you help us move a family's furniture?' We don't know if the people coming back were even from here originally," Gottlieb shrugs. "We don't know as much as we could, because we don't know Arabic," he says.

Gottlieb had recently conducted an inventory of the weapons assigned to the 172 INP — short for 1st Battalion, 7th Brigade, 2nd Division. There were 550 weapons missing, including pistols, rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. "Guys take weapons when they go AWOL," he says. The police were also reporting fake engagements and then transferring to Shiite militias the ammunition they had supposedly fired. "It was funny how they always expended 400 rounds of ammunition," Gottlieb says.

Then there is the problem of "ghost police." Although 542 men officially belong to the 172 INP on paper, only 200 or so show up at any given time. Some are on leave, but many simply do not exist, their salaries pocketed by officers. "Officers get a certain number of ghosts," Gottlieb tells me. He looks at a passing American soldier. "I need some ghosts," he jokes. "How much are you making?"

When I go to visit the 172 INP, American officers from the 2-2 SCR admonish me to wear my body armor — to protect myself from accidental discharges by the Iraqi police. "I did convoy security in the Sunni Triangle and was hit by numerous IEDs, complex attacks, small arms," Capt. Cox tells me. "But I never felt closer to death than when I was working with Iraqi security forces."

The night I arrive, thirty-five mem-

bers of the Iraqi National Police are going out on a joint raid with Americans from the National Police Training Team. The raid is being led by Capt. Arkan Hashim Ali, a trim thirty-year-old Iraqi with a shaved head and a sharp gaze. Because seventy-five percent of all officer positions in the INP are vacant, officers like Arkan often end up assuming many roles at once. Arkan gathers his men in an empty room for a mission briefing. Cardboard and Styrofoam models have been arranged to replicate the Humvees and pickup trucks they will be using. The men all wear the same blue uniforms, but they sport a hodgepodge of helmets, flak jackets and boots.

"Today we have an operation in Mahala 830," Arkan announces. "Do you know it? Our target is an Al Qaeda guy." Salah and Muhamad, two brothers suspected of working with Al Qaeda, would be visiting their brother Falah's home that night. Falah was known as Falah al-Awar, or "the one-eyed," because he had lost one of his eyes. Arrested two weeks earlier by the Americans, he had revealed under interrogation that his brothers were involved in attacking and kidnapping Americans. "He dined his brothers out," an American officer tells me.

The briefing over, Arkan asks his men to repeat his instructions, ordering them to shout the answers. Then they head out on the raid.

At Falah's house, the INPs move quickly, climbing over the wall and breaking the main gate. Bursting into the house, they herd the women and children into the living room while they bind Muhamad's hands with strips of cloth. Muhamad begins to cry. "My father is dead," he sobs. Arkan reassures him but also controls him, holding the top of Muhamad's head with his hand, as if he were palming a basketball. The women in the house ask how long the two brothers will be taken for. Arkan tells them they are being held for questioning and describes where his base is. Then the INPs speed off in their pickup trucks, causing the Americans to smile at their rush to get away.

"We just picked up some Sunnis," jokes an American sergeant. "We're getting the fuck outta here."

The next day, Sunni leaders from the area meet with the American soldiers. The two brothers, they claim, are innocent. Before the 2-2 SCR arrived, the 172 INP had a history of going on forays into Sunni neighborhoods just to punish civilians. Fearing for their safety, the Sunni leaders ask if the two brothers can be transferred to American custody.

The Americans know that the entire raid may have been simply another witch hunt, a way for the Shiite police to intimidate Sunni civilians. The INP, U.S. officers concede, use Al Qaeda as a "scare word" to describe all Sunni suspects.

"Yeah, the moral ambiguity of what



we do is not lost on me," Maj. Gottlieb tells me. "We have no way of knowing if those guys did what they say they did."

**W**ITH AMERICAN FORCES now arming both sides in the civil war, the violence in Iraq has once again started to escalate. In January, some 100 members of the new Sunni militias – whom the Americans have now taken to calling "the Sons of Iraq" – were assassinated in Baghdad and other urban areas. In one attack, a teenage bomber blew himself up at a meeting of Awakening leaders in Anbar Province, killing several members of the group. Most of the attacks came from Al Qaeda and other Sunni factions, some of whom are fighting for positions of power in the new militias.

One day in early February, I accompany several of the ISV leaders from Dora to the Sahwa Council, the Awakening's headquarters in Ramadi. They are hop-

ing to translate their local military gains into a political advantage by gaining the council's stamp of approval. On the way, Abu Salih admires a pickup truck outfitted with a Dushka, a large Russian anti-aircraft gun. "Now that's Sahwa," Abu Salih says, gazing wistfully at the weapon. Then he spots more Sahwa men driving Humvees armed with belt-fed machine guns. "Ooh," he murmurs, "look at that PKC."

At Sahwa headquarters, in an opulent guest hall, Abu Salih meets Sheik Ahmed Abu Risha, brother of the slain founder of the movement, who sits on an ornate, thronelike chair. "How is Dora?" he asks Abu Salih, sounding like a king inquiring about his subject's estate. Then he leads us into a smaller office, where three of Abu Salih's rivals from Dora are gathered. All of the men refer to Abu Risha with deference, calling him "our older brother" and "our father." It is a strange reversal of past roles: urban Sunnis from Baghdad pledging their allegiance to a desert tribal leader, looking to the

periphery for protection and political representation. But the Americans have empowered Abu Risha, and Baghdad's Sunni militiamen hope to unite with him to fight their Shiite rivals.

It doesn't take long, however, for the meeting to devolve into open hostility. One of the rivals dismisses Abu Salih and his men as mere guards, not true Sahwa. "You are military, and we are political," he jeers, accusing Abu Salih of having been a member of Al Qaeda. Abu Salih turns red and waves his arms over his head. "Nobody lies about Abu Salih!" he shouts.

Abu Risha's political adviser attempts to calm the men. "Are we in the time of Saddam Hussein?" he asks. The rivals should hold elections in Dora, he suggests, to decide who will repre-

Check out a gallery of additional pictures taken by photographer Danfung Dennis for this feature at [rollingstone.com/surgemyth](http://rollingstone.com/surgemyth)



## THE POLICE AND THE PARAMILITARY

1. Two Sunni brothers accused of working with Al Qaeda are arrested during a raid by Iraqi police officers with the 172 INP. U.S. officers acknowledge that the operation may have been a way for the Shiite police – closely tied to the paramilitary Mahdi Army – to intimidate Sunni civilians. "We have no way of knowing if those guys did what they say they did," concedes a U.S. officer. 2. Capt. Arkan Hashim Ali of the 172 INP briefs his officers before the raid. Because he refuses to take sides, Arkan fears he has been targeted by his own men. 3. U.S. soldiers with the 2-2 Stryker Cavalry Regiment prepare to search a house during a Baghdad raid.



ture country. "In Saddam's time, nobody knew what is Sunni and what is Shiite," he says. The Bush administration based its strategy in Iraq on the mistaken notion that, under Saddam, the Sunni minority ruled the Shiite majority. In fact, Iraq had no history of serious sectarian violence or civil war between the two groups until the Americans invaded. Most Iraqis viewed themselves as Iraqis first, with their religious sects having only personal importance. Inter-marriage was widespread, and many Iraqi tribes included both Sunnis and Shiites. Under Saddam, both the ruling Baath Party and the Iraqi army were majority Shiite.

Arkan, in a sense, is a man in the middle. He believes that members of the Awakening have the right to join the Iraqi security forces, but he also knows that their ranks are filled with Al Qaeda and other insurgents. "Sahwa is the same people who used to be attacking us," he says. Yet he does not trust his own men in the INP. "Three-fourths of them are Mahdi Army," he tells me, locking his door before speaking. His own men pass information on him to the Shiite forces, which have threatened him for cooperating with the new Sunni militias. One day, Arkan was summoned to meet with the commander of his brigade's intelligence sector. When he arrived, he found a leader of the Mahdi Army named Wujud waiting for him.

"Arkan, be careful – we will kill you," Wujud told him. "I know where you live. My guys will put you in the trunk of a car."

I ask Arkan why he had not arrested Wujud. "They know us," he says. "I'm not scared for myself. I've had thirty-eight IEDs go off next to me. But I'm scared for my family."

Later I accompany Arkan to his home. As we approach an INP checkpoint, he grows nervous. Even though he is an INP officer, he does not want the police to know who he is, lest his own men inform the Mahdi Army about his attitude and the local INPs, who are loyal to the Mahdi Army, target him and his family. At his home, his two boys are watching

safe to talk, we sit in the front seat as he nervously scans every man who walks by. He is not optimistic for the future. Arkan knows that the U.S. "surge" has succeeded only in exacerbating the tension among Iraq's warring parties and bickering politicians. The Iraqi government is still nonexistent outside the Green Zone. While U.S.-built walls have sealed off neighborhoods in Baghdad, Shiite militias are battling one another in the south over oil and control of the lucrative pilgrimage industry. Anbar Province is in the hands of Sunni militias who battle each other, and the north is the scene of a nascent civil war between Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen. The jobs promised to members of the Awakening have not materialized: An internal U.S. report concludes that "there is no coherent plan at this time" to employ them, and the U.S. Agency for International Development "is reluctant to accept any responsibility" for the jobs program because it has a "high likelihood of failure." Sunnis and even some Shiites have quit the government, which is unable to provide any services, and the prime minister has circumvented parliament to issue decrees and sign agreements with the Americans that parliament would have opposed.

But such political maneuvers don't really matter in Iraq. Here, street politics trump any illusory laws passed in the safety of the Green Zone. As the Awakening gains power, Al Qaeda lies dormant throughout Baghdad, the Mahdi Army and other Shiite forces prepare for the next battle, and political assassinations and suicide bombings are an almost daily occurrence. The violence, Arkan says, is getting worse again.

"The situation won't get better," he says softly. An officer of the Iraqi National Police, a man charged with bringing peace to his country, he has been reduced to hiding in his van, unable to speak openly in the very neighborhood he patrols. Thanks to the surge, both the Shiites and the Sunnis now have weapons and legitimacy. And what can come of that, Arkan asks, ex-

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to join the police, but he was denied the job until a friend intervened.

"Before the war, it was just one party," Arkan tells me. "Now we have 100,000 parties. I have Sunni officer friends, but nobody lets them get back into service. First they take money, then they ask if you are Sunni or Shiite. If you are Shiite, good." He dreams of returning to the days when the Iraqi army served the en-

television in the small living room. "I've decided to leave my job," Arkan tells me. "No one supports us." The Americans are threatening him if he doesn't pursue the Mahdi Army more aggressively, while his own superiors are seeking to fire him for the feeble attempts he has made to target the Mahdi Army.

On my final visit with Arkan, he picks me up in his van. For lack of anywhere

cept more fighting? "Many people in Sahwa work for Al Qaeda," he says. "The national police are all loyal to the Mahdi Army." He shakes his head. "You work hard to build a house, and somebody blows up your house. Will they accept Sunnis back to Shiite areas and Shiites back to Sunni areas? If someone kills your brother, can you forget his killer?"