

Awakening Councils in Iraq

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The Anbar Awakening Council was the first of a growing number Awakening Councils to form throughout Iraq. Sunnis formed Awakening Councils in response to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Working with coalition forces in Iraq, these Awakening Councils have helped to greatly reduce the ability of AQI. The great power of the Awakening Councils comes from the grassroots nature of the councils. The Awakening Councils are seen as an Iraqi solution to an Iraqi problem. Maintaining its distance from outside influences is an important part of ensuring that the councils remain effective. In the efforts to support the councils, the U.S. is currently on the verge of providing too much support. In order to maintain the effectiveness of the Awakening Councils, there are changes that the U.S. can implement to provide support and prevent the destabilization of the councils.

By forming neighborhood councils that protect citizens, AQI has lost the popular support it once had. Sunnis have now turned against AQI. However, the progress made with the Awakening Councils has come at a price. There are now several challenges facing the future of the Awakening Councils. There are threats from without and within the Awakening Councils. The threats from without include AQI and the Iraqi government. Threats from within come from power struggles as the Awakening Councils seek to gain power over each other.

As Awakening Councils were formed, they began a shift in momentum for the Sunni population. AQI is formed primarily of Sunnis, and as Awakening Councils gained in strength and popularity there was a shift of support away from AQI. Insurgents stopped working for AQI and began to support the Awakening Councils and Coalition Forces (CF). The efforts of the Awakening Councils have led to the near demise of AQI. In response to the Awakening Council's pressure on AQI, AQI has begun to target members of the Awakening Councils. Since December of last year, there have been over 100 members of the Awakening Councils killed, as well as 6 of their leaders.

There is growing contention and power seeking taking place among the various Awakening Councils. These councils know that they will not last forever; therefore some Councils are seeking to gain power to have a base from which to compete. However, the largest obstacle facing the Awakening Council is the Iraqi government's refusal to add them to the existing security forces. This means that when the Awakening Councils are eventually disbanded there will be thousands of individuals without jobs. In order to ensure a smooth transition, there must be a method to place more people in jobs as they leave the Awakening Councils. One method would be to encourage the government to do a phased drawdown of the Awakening Councils to prevent a sudden influx of jobless individuals. Additionally, as part of being employed by Awakening Councils, Iraqi and non-governmental organizations could provide job training. Encouraging the Iraqi government to create a job training program for Awakening Councils is a way that the government can show appreciation for the councils, without adding them to the security forces. Ultimately one of the most important elements of security is to increase the job availability to Iraqis.

One potential solution to the problem is to increase cooperation between the Awakening Councils and Iraqi Security Forces. If CF can find a way to turn the Awakening Councils into a neighborhood watch program, where people observe situations but allow the police to respond, it could go a long way

to preventing the Awakening Councils from turning on CF. The Awakening Councils have the potential to become a long term partner in the stabilization of Iraq; however, it will take work to keep them on track.

Awakening Councils helped to solve a major problem for CF in Iraq. The influence of the Awakening Councils has led to a drop in the level of violence within Iraq, and, just as important, people feel that their neighborhoods are becoming less violent. However if CF are not careful, this short term solution will have long term implications and may precipitate a rise in violence in Iraq. CF have the ability to prevent or limit any potential problems that may arise as a result of the use of Awakening Councils. Continued cooperation and support for the Awakening Councils can help prevent any problems with the Awakening Councils. To maintain the effectiveness of the Councils, coalition involvement needs to maintain a low profile to prevent the Councils from being viewed as an American run organization.

The best way for the CF to maintain influence with the Councils while minimizing perceived U.S. involvement is to assign liaisons to the councils. These liaisons would be responsible for cooperation between CF and the Councils. In order to minimize perceived CF involvement, the liaisons would meet with Council leaders no more than once or twice a week.

There are three types of liaisons that would be very valuable in gaining the assistance of the Awakening Councils. These are a chaplain, an intelligence liaison, and a military liaison. These liaisons will be the primary method of support to the councils coming from CF. It is important that the liaisons do not become an overbearing force on the councils, in order to prevent the appearance that the CF are running or manipulating the Councils.

The chaplain is perhaps the most important of these three individuals. The Awakening Councils are largely religious in nature. Being a religious scholar, the Iraqi religious leaders view the chaplain as a peer. As a result of the inherent trust that the Iraqis place in the chaplain, the chaplain is in a perfect position to understand and influence important members of the Awakening Councils. The freedoms with which the Iraqis may communicate with the chaplain allow him to spot future concerns or issues. This will allow CF to head off or divert any problems before they arise.¹

The intelligence liaison would be responsible for correlating information that CF need to combat the insurgency. Additionally, the intelligence liaison would pass information to the Awakening Councils that they could use. Finally, the most important information the intelligence liaison can collect is intelligence about the structure and organization of the Awakening Councils. This is useful in the event that a Council becomes corrupted and it would give CF a big head start to already have information collected.

Adding a military liaison to the Awakening Councils would provide the Councils with an individual that could help them operate in a more efficient and safe manner. The liaison would also inform the Councils of some military operations of which they may need to be aware. The key to these liaisons is the two way flow of information. If the CF are not willing to share information with the Awakening Councils, then they will be less willing to share information with CF.

¹ CH(COL) Michael Hoyt, Command Chaplain for the MNF-I, Interview with Defense Bloggers Roundtable. 21 June 2007. <www.defenselink.mil/home/blog/docs/Hoyt_Transcript.pdf>

The CF have several means of ensuring that the Awakening Councils are willing to cooperate. The U.S. is currently paying 65,000 Council members. Making funds dependent upon cooperation will place great pressure on leaders to ensure that they are fulfilling their portion of the requirement.

Awakening Councils have served a great purpose in assisting to eliminate AQI. They have the potential to continue to assist CF in Iraq as the U.S. seeks stabilization it. In order to maintain the effectiveness of the Awakening Councils, the U.S. needs to assist them in maintaining their focus. Additionally, the U.S. has to be aware that the Councils will eventually be disbanded and prepare to mitigate any negative effects disbanding may have. Finally, the U.S. must continue to communicate with them, and learn if and where problems may be arising in order to head off undesirable situations.

Personal Bio:

Second Lieutenant Brandon Eliason grew up in Eugene, Oregon. Shortly after graduation from high school he spent two years in Taiwan. Upon returning from Taiwan, he began school at Oregon State University in Corvallis Oregon. Brandon then decided to transfer to the University of Wyoming, where he joined the National Guard and ROTC. Upon graduation from the University of Wyoming, he was commissioned into the United States army in the Military Intelligence Corps. He is currently serving as the AS2 for the 54th EN BN.