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### Explaining the Awakening: Engagement, Publicity, and the Transformation of Iraqi Sunni Political Attitudes

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## **Explaining the Awakening: Engagement, Publicity, and the Transformation of Iraqi Sunni Political Attitudes**

MARC LYNCH

*This article explores the reasons for the dramatic change in Sunni Arab Iraqi attitudes toward the United States from 2004 to 2007, which made possible the “Awakenings,” local groups of mostly Sunni tribes and former insurgents that decided to cooperate with the United States against al Qaeda in Iraq. While there have been many studies of the military strategy, there has been little attention paid to the reasons for the underlying attitude change. This article argues that the dramatic changes in the information environment and in the nature of direct contacts across a range of Sunni society played a crucial role. It draws on a wide range of Arabic language primary sources that have generally been neglected in U.S. military-centric accounts. No single dialogue flipped the Sunnis, and the change would not likely have happened without the material changes underpinning their interests. But years of ongoing, intensive dialogues across a wide range of interlocutors reshaped the foundations of the relationship and to convince those involved individuals of the possibility of a strategic shift. American counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine and the surge helped by proliferating the points of contact with Iraqis and by transforming the relations at the individual level. This has broad implications for key debates in contemporary U.S. foreign policy, as well as for counterinsurgency and international relations (IR) theory.*

Between 2005 and 2007, the strategic situation in Iraq transformed dramatically as significant portions of the Sunni Arab community turned against

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al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and began cooperating with U.S. forces.<sup>1</sup> “The attitudinal shift among certain elements of the Iraqi population,” according to Gen. David Petraeus in his April 2008 report to Congress, was one of the most important factors in the turnaround in Iraqi security.<sup>2</sup> Most analysts agree that the decision of important sectors of the Iraqi Sunni community to turn against al Qaeda in Iraq and align with the United States was perhaps the most decisive development in transforming that war. Abd al-Sattar Abu Risha, the charismatic symbol of the Anbar Awakening, “didn’t believe a surge in American forces would achieve a thing until Sunni attitudes changed.”<sup>3</sup> But what explains this attitude shift in the Iraqi Sunni population? Despite the clear importance of this change, both for Iraq and for the counterinsurgency doctrine, which has emerged from the Iraqi experience, no clear explanation has yet emerged. This article argues that the shift in Iraqi Sunni attitudes and behavior cannot be fully understood without attention to the role of information and engagement, which shaped the context within which Iraqi Sunni Arabs interpreted military, political, and economic changes. Engagement and information operations were crucial, and not a marginal, soft component distracting from the real work done by hard power.

The beginning of the Sunni turnaround is often dated to September 2006, when minor tribal leader Abd al-Sattar Abu Risha declared the establishment of the Anbar Salvation Council in the Ramadi area.<sup>4</sup> Where earlier such episodes had faltered, the Anbar Awakening (with significant support from Coalition Forces) quickly put al Qaeda in Iraq on the defensive, in large part because of its intimate knowledge of the human terrain, which allowed it to quickly identify and terminate or expel outsiders. A variety of “Awakenings Councils” then swept the Sunni parts of Iraq over the course of 2007,

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use “Sunni” as shorthand for the Sunni Arab community of Iraq, even though Iraqi Kurds are also primarily Sunni in their religious affiliation; I also use “al Qaeda in Iraq/AQI” as a shorthand for the jihadist organization al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, which evolved out of the Monotheism and Jihad Movement, and became the core of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. David H. Petraeus, Commander, Multi-National Force–Iraq, Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq, 8–9 April 2008, 110th Cong., 2nd sess., at [http://www.defense.gov/pdf/General\\_Petraeus\\_Testimony\\_to\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pdf/General_Petraeus_Testimony_to_Congress.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe* (New York: Random House 2008), 212.

<sup>4</sup> A growing literature describes the military dimension of this period, though little of it considers the events from an Iraqi perspective. See Maj. Neil Smith and Col. Sean MacFarland, “Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point,” *Military Review* (March/April 2008): 41–52; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Maj. Andrew W. Koloski and Lt. Colonel John S. Kolasheski, “Thickening the Lines: Sons of Iraq as a Combat Multiplier,” *Military Review* (January/February 2009): 41–53; Lt. Col. James R. Crider, “A View From Inside the Surge,” *Military Review* (March–April 2009): 81–88; John A. McCary, “The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives,” *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): 43–59; Austin Long, “The Anbar Awakening,” *Survival* 50, no. 2 (April/May 2008): 67–94; Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Colin H. Kahl, “Bridge on the River Euphrates,” *The National Interest* 97 (September/October 2008): 87–97; Peter Mansoor, *Baghdad at Sunrise: A Brigade Commander’s War in Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); and Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008).

taking two main forms: (1) tribal councils in predominantly Sunni regions; and (2) neighborhood guard forces, recruited from insurgency factions in mixed areas such as Baghdad and partnered with MNF-I forces. By 2007, an estimated one hundred thousand Concerned Local Citizens/Sons of Iraq were on the American payroll, while al Qaeda in Iraq had suffered a severe setback.

Understanding the reasons for the change in Sunni attitudes is extremely important both for explaining what happened in Iraq and for evaluating future applications of COIN doctrine, but this change remains poorly understood. American soldiers present during the Awakening often express bewilderment over the dramatic changes that unfolded before their eyes.<sup>5</sup> Nor do AQI or Iraqi perspectives offer clarity. While many Americans attribute the change to the George W. Bush administration's surge of troops into Iraq, developments in 2006 obviously cannot be explained by something that only began in 2007 (although the military changes did matter to later developments, especially in Baghdad). Other common explanations include al Qaeda's (AQ) extremism, the decisions of individual tribal sheikhs, American counterinsurgency practices, the shifting perception of the inter-sectarian balance of power, and American financial incentives. While each of these explanations captures an important piece of the puzzle, none is fully persuasive. This is complicated by a disciplinary divide: most of the explanations have come from those primarily focused on military affairs, with little expertise in the dynamics of attitude change, while political scientists who have devoted great theoretical attention to the questions of attitude change have not to this point examined this crucial case. Getting the causes of the Sunni shift correct matters enormously, both for drawing the right military and strategic conclusions from the Iraqi experience and for shaping future policy decisions.

I argue that the dominant existing explanations for the change in Sunni attitudes between 2005 and 2007—such as the U.S. surge, the shifting sectarian balance of power, al Qaeda in Iraq's overreach, and financial incentives—all matter but are radically incomplete. I do not pose a mono-causal explanation, or discount the importance of the kinetic war-fighting aspects of the war in Iraq. Rather, I argue that several key factors related to information had an important effect on how material and political trends were interpreted and understood. A significant change in the amount and nature of direct contact (engagement) between Americans and Sunnis at all levels, from tribal leaders to local elites to insurgency representatives, picked up in early 2005 and evolved into a thick web of overlapping dialogues and engagements,

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Lt. Col. Dan Kuehl, who dealt with the Ameriyah Awakening, admits that "I am still not sure why Abu Abed and his men came forward when they did." Dan Kuehl, "Testing Galula in Ameriyah: The People Are the Key," *Military Review* (March–April 2009): 72–80, at 77.

which multiplied the points of contact between Americans and local Iraqis.<sup>6</sup> The publicizing of these contacts shifted wider perceptions of the nature of the conflict and over time triggered broader shifts in public opinion. The Arab media environment also changed dramatically between 2004 and 2006, with the rise of credible competitors to *al Jazeera*, shifting U.S. strategic communication practices, and the active participation of Saudi-backed media in the campaign against al Qaeda.

Together, these led to a dramatic shift in the distribution of information available to Iraqi Sunnis, and to a reformulation of the conception of collective identity and interests underlying their strategic decisions. The shifting information environment and changing background beliefs and identities then shaped how they interpreted the shifts in the perceived balance of power, economic incentives, and political opportunities and threats. Changes in attitudes that began through specific points of direct contact could travel through social networks (such as tribes) and were embedded within a public information environment shaped by the Arabic mass media.<sup>7</sup> The importance of engagement and information variables in shaping the attitudes and behavior of Iraqi Sunni Arabs at the height of a raging insurgency and spiraling civil war has wide-ranging significance both for theoretical accounts of civil wars, insurgency, and public opinion, and for policy discussions about counterinsurgency strategy, strategic communications, and the value of engagement.

This article incorporates both American and Arabic sources that have been neglected in much of the literature to date, with particular attention to Iraqi perspectives that tend to be neglected in U.S. military-centric accounts.<sup>8</sup> It draws on a wide range of my own and published interviews with key American and Iraqi participants, as well as with Arab journalists and analysts with direct knowledge of the events; public opinion survey research; published and unpublished memoirs and analyses by U.S. military and civilian personnel involved in the area; Arab media sources, which have often covered these issues in far greater texture than their Western counterparts; and a large volume of materials found on Iraqi insurgency-related internet

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel Byman, "Talking to Insurgents: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (April 2009): 125–37; and Mark Perry, *Talking to Terrorists* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). For the new counterinsurgency doctrine see *U.S. Army Field Manual 3–24, Counterinsurgency* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and Colin Kahl, "COIN of the Realm," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The transmission of changed attitudes through social networks was one of the key insights of Capt. Travis Patriquin in Anbar, whose famous PowerPoint presentation influenced the evolving new U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine; see Maj. Neil Smith and Col. Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review, Counterinsurgency Reader II* (August 2008): 65–76.

<sup>8</sup> For an important exception, see Col. Gary Montgomery and Chief Warrant Officer-4 Timothy S. McWilliams, eds., *The Anbar Awakening, Vol. 2: Iraqi Perspectives* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2009); for an Iraqi perspective, see Ra'id al-Hamed's ten part 2008 examination, "Ten Lights on the Armed Factions in Iraq," at <http://raedalhamed.jeeran.com/>; and Mufakkarat al-Fallujah (pseudonym), *A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Situation of the Islamic State of Iraq*, published to the jihadist forums, 16 March 2010, at <http://www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=158433>.

forums. The final source requires a few words of explanation. The uniquely networked structure of the Iraqi insurgency and its high priority on information warfare has had the unintended side effect of creating historically unprecedented publicly available archives of statements, internal argument, and intergroup argument.<sup>9</sup> Key online forums provide invaluable research materials on everything from doctrinal disputes to intergroup rivalries to open debates about an uncertain course of events—though, to date, they are largely unexploited, ephemeral, and prone to disappear from the internet. They must be approached with some caution, but they nevertheless offer an unparalleled window into the thinking of the insurgency and at key points offer a useful corrective to prevalent U.S.-centric narratives.

### EXPLAINING THE SHIFT IN IRAQ SUNNI ATTITUDES

“The information environment is a critical dimension of such internal wars.”

—U.S. Army Field Manual 3–24, Counterinsurgency<sup>10</sup>

The sudden change in Iraqi Sunni Arab attitudes and behavior presents a puzzle on par with the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Iranian revolution.<sup>11</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Saddam, many Sunnis harbored deep fears of American intentions and of their future. Many Sunnis who were initially on the fence were outraged by the dissolution of the Iraqi Army, de-Baathification, and, especially, aggressive American military tactics that gained notoriety for their disrespect for Iraqi customs. As former Minister of Defense Ali Allawi memorably put it, “the searching of homes without the presence of a male head of household, body searches of women, the use of sniffer dogs, degrading treatment of prisoners, public humiliation of the elderly and notables, all contributed to the view that Americans had only disdain and contempt for Iraq’s traditions.”<sup>12</sup> Iraqis experienced these offenses personally and saw their experiences magnified and contextualized in Arab television coverage. The first battle of Falluja in April 2004 had developed into a public relations fiasco, with televised images of devastation infuriating Iraqis across the country—and then, there was Abu Ghraib. Through 2005 the Sunni insurgency’s war with the United States escalated significantly,

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, *Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War of Image and Ideas* (Washington, DC: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Army Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Han L. Van Der Maas, Rogier Kolstein, and Joop Van Der Pligt, “Sudden Transitions in Attitudes,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 32, no. 2 (November 2003): 125–52; Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Susanne Lohmann, “The Dynamics of Informational Cascades,” *World Politics* 47, no. 1 (October 1994): 42–101; and Timur Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (October 1991): 7–48.

<sup>12</sup> Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 186.

with American and Iraqi casualties skyrocketing, AQI's position seeming ascendant, and attitudes seemingly polarizing. Nevertheless, by the middle of 2007 significant portions of the Sunni community had shifted to a strategy of cooperation with the United States and AQI found itself under great pressure and increasingly marginalized in many of its former strongholds.

Existing explanations remain incomplete. I argue that conventional explanations each mattered in important ways, and that the search for a single cause is misguided. Information dynamics operated at a higher level, structuring the way Sunnis interpreted each of these factors and thus their response. The belief that al Qaeda had overreached was shaped by how their actions were interpreted by political competitors and the media. The idea that the United States could be a useful ally in the face of Shia power required some degree of faith in American sincerity that did not exist in prior years. Only after the intensity of the stigma (within the community) against working with Americans had declined could financial incentives be accepted. The U.S. military has increasingly recognized the importance of strategic communications and information operations to COIN and to the Iraqi experience. AQI strategists themselves highlighted the role of hostile media campaigns that they believed had distorted their image and turned Iraqis against them.<sup>13</sup> Evaluating the relative significance of each of these factors is an exercise in fitting together the multiple pieces into a coherent picture—while taking the perspectives of the Iraqis whose attitudes changed more fully into account than has generally been done in the U.S. military-centric literature.

## The Surge

American public debate about the rise of the Awakenings and the turnaround in Iraq has largely focused on the impact of the surge of U.S. military forces. With regard to the change in Iraqi Sunni attitudes, this can be quickly dismissed. Sunni attitudes and behavior began to shift in 2005 and 2006. The surge was conceived only toward the end of 2006, and not announced until early 2007, half a year after the announcement of the Anbar Salvation Council.<sup>14</sup> Some argue that the surge affected perceptions by convincing the Sunnis that the United States would stay until victory, making the switch worthwhile, but in fact the key switch (at least in Anbar) took place around the time when U.S. withdrawal appeared most likely (with the release of the Iraq Study Group report and the Democratic takeover of Congress). Local commanders in Ramadi did change their tactics and offered close support

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Fallujah (pseudonym), *Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq*.

<sup>14</sup> On the Bush administration's deliberations about the surge, see Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); and Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006–2008* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

to the Anbar Awakening in the fall of 2006, but this did not at that stage involve a significant increase in troop numbers. The surge likely mattered more in the second phase of the Sunni shift (the spring 2007 spread into urban areas such as Baghdad), providing extra troops to protect these new militia forces and putting more troops into areas where insurgents hoping to switch sides could easily initiate contacts, leading to direct contact with a wide assortment of local leaders.<sup>15</sup> But this mattered primarily later in the process.

More broadly, the U.S.-centric argument argues that American military perseverance led “the tribes [to choose] to align with our soldiers because [they came to believe that] the Marines are the strongest tribe.”<sup>16</sup> Col. Sean MacFarland, architect of the Ramadi Awakening, argues that the United States needed to change its message from “we’re leaving” to “we’re staying” which was “the message they had been waiting to hear.”<sup>17</sup> One problem with the argument about perceptions of U.S. power is that the insurgency factions that aligned with the United States have consistently maintained that they succeeded militarily against the American forces. There is very little evidence on the Iraqi forums, in interviews, or in public discourse that Sunnis sided with the United States as the strongest power. Quite the contrary. Ali Hatem, one of the leaders of the Anbar Awakening, routinely bragged that the council accomplished in three months what the United States could not do in three years and that before the Awakening “the ISI [Islamic State of Iraq] flew its banner 500 meters away from US troops in Ramadi and [the United States] couldn’t do anything.”<sup>18</sup> The Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance, an umbrella group attempting to become the political arm of the insurgency factions cooperating with the Awakening, explained its new strategy as “an entry into the political realm which follows from armed success.”<sup>19</sup> There is little evidence that the insurgency was physically exhausted. The supply of manpower, weapons, and funds did not appear to have materially declined in the period prior to the Sunni switch. Indeed, one of the key indicators of the success of the Awakenings was that they provided information leading the U.S. forces to the location of vast stockpiles of weapons—which hardly suggests exhaustion.

John McCary notes that at the time of the switch, “Sunni tribal leaders deemed al Qaeda’s influence as more of a threat to their continued rule, while

<sup>15</sup> Pete Mansoor, “Misreading the History of the Iraq War,” *Small Wars Journal*, 10 March 2008, at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/03/misreading-the-history-of-the/>.

<sup>16</sup> Bing West, “COIN Theory and Securing Iraq,” *Small Wars Journal*, 26 December 2007, at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/12/coin-theory-and-securing-iraq/>.

<sup>17</sup> MacFarlane and Smith, “The Anbar Awakening.”

<sup>18</sup> Ali Hatem, interview on *al Arabiya*, 6 May 2007, at <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2007/05/06/34185.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Manifesto of the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance, announced on *al Jazeera*, 12 October 2007, and published in the Iraqi jihadist magazine *al-Furqan*, Issue #15, accessed on al-Faloja forum, 12 October 2007; also see interview with Ali al-Jabouri, Secretary-General of the PCIR, on *al Jazeera*, *No Limits*, 15 July 2009, at <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/C1561271-9BEB-470F-AA08-A88929A6C83C.htm>.



U.S. forces were considered to be less and less of a determining factor in the region.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the belief that the United States would leave may have been what made it an attractive partner, by reducing the fear that it would be a permanent occupation force. Crucially, the shift in strategy took place during the period in which the Iraq Study Group report and the Democratic takeover of Congress led many to believe that an American withdrawal was imminent. Sunni insurgency representatives generally argued that their defeat of the United States meant that they could then align with them honorably against the greater threats, AQI, and Iran. The explanation offered by Sheikh Zaidan al-Awad is rather far from the view of the United States as the “strongest tribe”: “We’ve already taken our revenge [on the United States] . . . We’re the ones who’ve made them crawl on their stomachs, and now we’re the ones to pick them up.”<sup>21</sup>

### Al Qaeda Overreach

A 2009 Marine Corps study concluded in its deeply documented analysis of Anbar that al Qaeda “overplayed its hand and wore out its welcome by forcing an extreme Islamic agenda on a generally secular and tribal culture.”<sup>22</sup> Such overreach could be primarily cultural (that is, the imposition of strict religious norms) or political (that is, the imposition of political and military control over other insurgency factions and tribes).

The argument for the impact of cultural overreach focuses upon culturally offensive actions of al Qaeda that alienated local populations such as banning smoking, enforcing women’s dress codes, attacking insufficiently radical imams, and demanding forced marriages. Others complained about al Qaeda practices of *takfir* (that is, declaring others to not be a true Muslim), and the closure of the mosques of Falluja and Mosul because of al Qaeda attacks on the local imams.<sup>23</sup> A particularly potent formulation of this complaint focused on good Muslims allegedly killed at the hands of AQI. Such complaints were often repeated by ordinary Anbaris and by their leaders in the months leading up to the Sunni turn against AQI, and began to escalate in the summer of 2005.<sup>24</sup> Anbar leaders willingly expressed these complaints to American journalists by February 2006. For instance, Sheikh Osama al-Jadaan grumbled that “We realized that these foreign terrorists were hiding behind the veil of the noble Iraqi resistance. They claim to be striking at the US occupation, but the reality is they are killing innocent Iraqis in the markets,

<sup>20</sup> McCary, “The Anbar Awakening,” 44

<sup>21</sup> Jon Lee Anderson, “Inside the Surge,” *New Yorker*, 19 November 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Montgomery and McWilliams, *The Anbar Awakening*, viii.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Sayf al-din Mahmoud, spokesperson for the Iraqi Islamic Resistance Front (Jami), *Ikwan Online*, 20 May 2008, at <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/print.asp?ArtID=37376&SecID=270>.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White, “Assessing Iraq’s Sunni Arab Insurgency,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus #50, December 2005.

in mosques, in churches, in our schools.”<sup>25</sup> Other insurgency factions complained that “al-Qaeda tarnished the image of jihad in the land of Iraq . . . al-Qaeda killed more leaders of the resistance than did the occupation.”

While the cultural overreach may well have irritated locals, the groups that turned against al Qaeda would not in fact likely have taken such great offense at its extremism. Such groups had previously shared an equally radical doctrine and had carried out their own fair share of barbarous activities including kidnappings and brutal insurgent attacks. As Austin Long argues, “the tribes did not change sides in response to violence towards civilians or their Anbar kinsmen, as press accounts have suggested . . . some began fighting al-Qaeda at least as early as the beginning of 2005, well before most of the violence towards civilians and tribesmen in Anbar had occurred. The primary motive was not moral; it was self-interested.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Long argues, much of al Qaeda’s violence was intended to intimidate tribal leaders who had already shifted their allegiance—it was a response, not a cause. AQI analysts themselves acknowledge that mistakes were made by some of their members at the local level, but more often blame hostile media campaigns for exaggerating these alleged violations than taking this at face value.<sup>27</sup>

A second version of the overreach argument focuses on AQI’s political overreach as the key to the flipping of the nationalist-jihadist insurgency factions such as the Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI) and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. By this argument, the attempts by AQI to consolidate its political control over the multifaceted Iraqi insurgency, first with the Mujahideen Shura Council in January 2006 and then with the announcement of the ISI in October 2006, is what pushed the major competing insurgency factions to the other side. AQI’s attempt to grab control over the insurgency, as defenders of the ISI appealed for “soldiers of the Islamic Army to come to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi,”<sup>28</sup> was a step too far for these factions.

Crucially for both of these arguments—and in contrast to the argument about Sunnis deciding to align with America as the stronger power in light of the surge, as noted above—the shift came at a time of perceived al Qaeda strength, not weakness.<sup>29</sup> Al Qaeda in Iraq was not initially impressed with what they called *Majles al-Kuffar* (the infidels council), and frequently issued scathing commentary or denials of claims that the tribes had turned against them.<sup>30</sup> Shortly afterward, almost exactly one month after the announcement

<sup>25</sup> Charles Levinson, “Sunnī Tribes Turn Against Jihadis,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 February 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Long, “Anbar Awakening,” 77

<sup>27</sup> For instance, see Abu Omar al-Sayf, “A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq” (Mufakkara al-Fallujah, December 2009).

<sup>28</sup> “Abu Hadeel,” posting on al-Faloja, 6 April 2007. Many of the forum postings to which I refer in this article are no longer available online, as jihadist websites are closed under pressure or disappear on a regular basis. PDF copies of all postings are available from the author by request.

<sup>29</sup> Abu Omar al-Sayf, “A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq.”

<sup>30</sup> For instance, on 3 October 2006, the Mujahideen Shura Council issued a statement denying claims by the Iraqi government that the tribes had expelled the leader of AQI.

of the Awakening, al Qaeda in Iraq announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and called on all jihadist factions to unite under its flag. Over time, this evolved into demands that the other insurgency factions publicly declare their position on the Awakenings.<sup>31</sup> Had al Qaeda in Iraq not chosen this moment to overreach, the Awakenings may not have spread in the way they did. Seeing the United States as a potential solution to this overreach required something more. Col. Martin Stanton, chief of reconciliation and engagement for MNF-I, offered this explanation:

These weren't people who were struck by a lightning bolt or saw a burning bush and came over to this side of the Lord. These were people who last year were being hammered from two different directions: by Al Qaeda and by us. It was probably a distasteful choice to make back then because, after all, they viewed us as invaders, and they probably still do, but it was a survival choice and they made it.<sup>32</sup>

### Shifting Sectarian Balance of Power

A third popular theory is that perceptions of the sectarian balance of power changed, leading to changes in Sunni behavior. In this account, after the bloody Battle of Baghdad, the Sunnis realized they had lost to the Shia, and turned to the United States for help after the sectarian war unleashed by the bombing of the Askari Mosque in February 2006 transformed Sunni perceptions of the balance of power with the Shia. The argument begins from the premise that the leadership of the Sunni insurgency originally believed that they would triumph in a direct conflict with the Shia once the American forces departed. The brutal, rapid sectarian cleansing of Baghdad demonstrated the reality of superior Shia power, forcing them to shift their strategies rapidly. As Stephen Biddle puts it:

the Sunni military defeat in the sectarian Battle of Baghdad that followed the Askariya mosque bombing of February 2006 [was] the critical enabler of a later wave of ceasefires by changing fundamentally the Sunni strategic calculus in Iraq. Before the Mosque bombing, Sunnis could believe that they were the stronger side and would win an eventual all-out war. The Battle of Baghdad, however, provided a window into what such a war would mean for Sunnis and they did not like what they saw. To Sunni surprise and dismay, the battle produced a decisive Sunni defeat.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "Abu al-Ayman al-Iraqi" posting on al-Hanein forum, 10 September 2007; and "From Supporters of the Islamic State, Advice to the Islamic Army" posting on al-Faloja, 6 April 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Alissa Rubin and Damien Cave, "In a Force for Iraqi Calm, Seeds of Future Conflict," *New York Times*, 23 December 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Biddle, *Stabilizing Iraq from the Bottom Up*, testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2 April 2008, 110th Cong., 2nd sess.

This hypothesis gains support from the fact that in late 2006 through early 2007 a notable change did indeed take place in the rhetoric of the Islamic Army of Iraq and other *muqawima* factions. Whereas to that point the primary emphasis in its propaganda had always been the American occupation, the IAI at that point began to argue that “Iraq faces a dual occupation, American and Iranian, and the Iranian is worse.”<sup>34</sup> The dramatic increase in the use of this language (“dual occupation, American and Iranian”)<sup>35</sup> suggests that the Shia political and military domination revealed in this time frame weighed heavily on their strategic calculations. Many Awakenings members and leaders even claimed that Iran backed al Qaeda in Iraq, uniting their two concerns in a convenient (if ill-supported) narrative.<sup>36</sup>

Once again, however, the turn to the United States as a possible solution to this problem is not obvious. While Iraqi Sunnis needed little encouragement to believe the worst of Iran and the Shia, their growing fear may well have been mediated through these dialogues and engagements. U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad always told his Sunni interlocutors that they must be working for Iran because their insurgency only forced the United States to concentrate its forces in the West.<sup>37</sup> Fear of the Shia militias could just as easily have been interpreted as requiring the various Sunni insurgency factions to set aside their differences and unite rather than as requiring an alliance with the United States—an argument often advanced by supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq and AQI. American engagement and information operations needed to shape the response in the other direction.

### Financial Incentives

Another popular theory focuses on American financial inducements, whether in the form of “rent-a-sheikhs” or reconstruction assistance.<sup>38</sup> A year after the Anbar Awakening, it had become commonplace that “US commanders [were] unashamedly buying the loyalty of Iraqi tribal leaders and junior officials.”<sup>39</sup> The payments to the Awakenings, and the funding of an array of public works projects, gave a positive incentive for those being engaged and conveying power over resources to cooperative leaders. Over time, “it became glaringly obvious to [tribal sheikhs] that it was in their personal interests, and the interests of their tribes, to put a stop to the war.”<sup>40</sup> Gian Gentile, for instance, argues that the key reason for the decline in violence

<sup>34</sup> Emir of the Islamic State of Iraq, posted to al-Faloja, 25 February 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Posting on al-Faloja, 27 April 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Ali Hatem, interviewed on *al Arabiya*, 28 March 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Khalilzad, interview by Marc Lynch, 15 August 2008.

<sup>38</sup> For an overview of these expenditures, see Dana Hedgpeth and Sarah Cohen, “Money as a Weapon,” *Washington Post*, 11 August 2008.

<sup>39</sup> “U.S. Buys ‘Concerned Citizens’ in Iraq, but at What Price?” *Agence France Press*, 16 October 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Gen. John Kelly, in Montgomery and McWilliams, *The Anbar Awakening*, ix.

in Anbar was “the 2006 decision by senior American officers to pay large sums of money to our former enemies to ally themselves with us in the fight against al-Qaeda.”<sup>41</sup>

But it is unlikely that money alone was decisive in the initial turn. Capt. Niel Smith, one of the architects of the Ramadi Awakening, complained that “those who allege the Anbar sheiks were simply ‘bought off’ are guilty of the worst form of oversimplification and lazy analysis.”<sup>42</sup> The first few years of the American experience in Iraq were littered with failed efforts to parlay economic assistance into political support. The successful use of “money as a weapon” was always accompanied by engagement, the building of trust, and the offering of tangible rewards for cooperation and punishment for defection.<sup>43</sup> Absent such political engagements, spreading money around was not alone sufficient to “buy off” the insurgency: “attempts to stimulate the local economy did not noticeably decrease the level of violence.”<sup>44</sup> Cash was only effective as part of a wider strategy of engagement, as a positive incentive, but also to build up the prestige and influence of supportive leaders and to undermine more recalcitrant ones. Material financial incentives helped cement the Awakenings strategy by providing positive incentives, as well as “walking about” money to build up the local influence of supportive sheiks and factional leaders. But in the past, such money may well have been refused as not worth the political trouble, the nationalist shame, or the personal insecurity which came with it. Changes in the social environment—shaped by engagement and by the media—profoundly affected these calculations, making the financial incentives consistent with the new social environment rather than something shameful to be hidden from public view.

## AN “INFORMATIONAL” ACCOUNT OF THE IRAQI AWAKENINGS

Col. Peter Mansoor, a key assistant to Gen. Petraeus in Baghdad, argues that “since counterinsurgency warfare is fought among the people, it is ultimately won or lost through human interaction and perceptions.”<sup>45</sup> In this section, I develop an informational argument about attitude change, and argue that changes in attitudes demand an explanation drawn at least in part from the ideational realm. As James Fearon and Alexander Wendt put it, “material factors matter at the limit, but *how* they matter depends on

<sup>41</sup> Gian Gentile, “A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and its Defects,” *World Affairs* (Summer 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Capt. Niel Smith (“Cavguy”), “How the West Was Won,” 28 February 2008, post on *Small Wars Journal*, at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/02/how-the-west-was-won/>.

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Crider, “A View From Inside the Surge.”

<sup>44</sup> Lt. Craig Collier, “Observations from a Year in the Sunni Triangle,” *Small Wars Journal*, 14 April 2008, at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/04/latest-swj-online-magazine-add/>.

<sup>45</sup> Mansoor, *Baghdad at Sunrise*, 346

ideas.”<sup>46</sup> Material pressures do not operate independently of how they are perceived, understood, and interpreted. Shifts in the balance of power require interpretation—and such collective interpretation is shaped by a range of informational factors including the media, direct contact, and the dissemination of ideas through social networks.

For example, take the claim discussed above that Anbaris rebelled against al Qaeda’s religious extremism and barbarous practices. The appearance of such outrage at al Qaeda excesses is a social process that needs to be explained rather than simply invoked as an exogenous factor. Attitudes did not change mechanically. Such actions may have been barbarous, but they were carried out by people and groups who had until recently been valued allies in the battle against the U.S. occupation. This mismatch between prevailing ideas and observed behavior needed to be interpreted through a social process determining its legitimacy and appropriateness. This involved the conscious reflection and both public and private discussions by a wide range of Iraqi Sunnis—elites and ordinary citizens alike—who struggled to make sense of a rapidly shifting situation. Turning against al Qaeda involved not just a recalibration of interests, but also a rethinking of identity that defined AQI out of the collective Sunni identity.

The first component of my argument for the ideational causes of ideational change focuses on direct and indirect engagement and dialogues between Americans and Iraqi Sunnis. The theory behind the shift to a population-centric COIN strategy was that protecting the population from insurgent violence would create the space to build popular support from below through intense ongoing contact with Iraqis in their homes and neighborhoods. The support of the population was posited as the key battlefield, and ongoing engagement aimed at courting the support of an active minority as a core part of the war effort.<sup>47</sup> In practice, this meant that U.S. soldiers placed a great deal of emphasis on talking to the local population and seeking to gain their trust rather than attempting military pacification from afar: less kicking down of doors and more invitations to tea.

These discussions took place against a backdrop of ongoing asymmetric violence, anger, and fear on all sides. Guns were never far from the surface of the discussions, no matter how civil they might be at any given moment. What is more, the intense hostility toward the American occupation felt by most Sunnis as well as the furious incomprehension of most Americans at the outset means that no presumption of goodwill could be assumed on either side. As the Americans began to appreciate the importance of building trust and relationships in order to conduct counterinsurgency operations, and as

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<sup>46</sup> James D. Fearon and Alexander Wendt, “Rationalism vs. Constructivism: A Skeptical View,” in *Handbook of International Relations*, eds., Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons (New York: Sage 2002), 58 (emphasis in original).

<sup>47</sup> Kuehl, “Testing Galula in Ameriyah,” 74

Sunnis began to rethink their interests, both needed to find ways to overcome these obstacles.

Publicity and the mass media then offer a crucial link between engagement and broad social change. The general perception of the social and political environment, beliefs about the beliefs of others in one's community, can play an important role in shaping individual expectations and behavior.<sup>48</sup> Where individual behavior is tailored to meet social expectations rather than expressing authentic beliefs, then the sudden emergence of exemplary individuals or groups expressing different beliefs may trigger a cascade. Such a cascade would set in when a tipping point is reached, so that the new beliefs are now seen as the more socially appropriate ones and embraced in public.<sup>49</sup> This model has proven attractive to those seeking to explain sudden, dramatic change when it seems implausible that mass publics could have all transformed their opinions simultaneously, such as the collapse of East European communism or the Iranian revolution. The Iraqi Sunni community seems to fit this model.

The timing and nature of the Sunni change strongly suggest that it came from the top down, not from the bottom up, with a rapid cascade of changes in mass attitudes lagging rather than preceding the change in military-political behavior. It seems implausible that Sunnis more widely would so quickly forget the experience of years of aggressive American treatment (from house searches and body searches of women to Abu Ghraib). Public opinion surveys, while problematic in such a war-torn area, suggest that they did not. In April 2006, a few months before the Awakenings formally launched and half a year after its first manifestations began, 97.9 percent of Sunnis opposed the U.S. presence (with 97.2 percent strongly opposed), while 87 percent of Anbaris said that things would improve significantly if the U.S. forces left.<sup>50</sup> In September 2006—the very moment of the public launch of the Awakening—more than 95 percent of Sunnis said that the United States had a negative influence on the situation in Iraq, provoking more conflict than it prevented, while 92 percent expressed approval for attacks on coalition

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<sup>48</sup> Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Diane Mutz, *Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> Note that this does not require that their "real" beliefs have changed, only that their public behavior and rhetoric comes in line with the new social norms. Consider unembedded journalist Nir Rosen's colorful experience: "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, 'F\*\*\* you.' The myth of the surge," *Rolling Stone*, 6 March 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Survey carried out by University of Michigan as part of World Values Survey, conducted in April 2006 and reported on 14 June 2006, at <http://www.umich.edu/news/index.html?Releases/2006/Jun06/r061406a>.

forces.<sup>51</sup> In March 2007—half a year into the Awakenings—97 percent of Sunnis expressed a lack of confidence in U.S. forces, and 95 percent of Sunnis reported avoiding Coalition Forces to avoid violence.<sup>52</sup> In August 2007—a year into the Awakenings—93 percent of Sunnis supported attacks on U.S. forces, and 76 percent of Anbaris called for immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops. Only in March 2008 could some dramatic changes be detected: Sunni support for attacks on American forces dropped to 62 percent, while support for the immediate withdrawal of American troops in Anbar dropped to 34 percent.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, there is considerable evidence that the attitudes of the leaders of the shift did change in 2005–06, and that this manifested in striking new behavior. American soldiers offer copious anecdotal evidence of a transformed relationship at the individual level, and the evidence of behavioral change—most notably the decision by a wide range of local insurgency groups and tribes to realign with the United States against AQI—is compelling.

Engagement and dialogue could only have affected those directly involved, and contacts limited to a small percentage of the population cannot explain changes in mass attitudes. I argue that these intense, ongoing discussions did begin to change the basic assumptions of those involved in them, as many Americans and Sunnis involved in these intensive interactions grew to respect one another genuinely. Publicity and the mass media, along with transmission of ideas through social networks, then drove the cascade of the new ideas into the mass public. As in Col. Travis Patriquin's much-cited conception, attitudinal change spreads through societal networks from these initial points of contact, building trust and progressively marginalizing insurgents.<sup>54</sup> This led them to interpret other important factors (the balance of power, Shia intentions, U.S. intentions) in dramatically new ways. Change among this relatively small group only then began to affect wider, mass attitudes as these leaders and the media began to promote the new ideas and to demonstrate their value with material payoffs (the distribution of money, declining violence, access to political leadership positions).

In the following sections, I explore the experience of engagement, publicity, and media in the Iraqi context to substantiate the argument that these informational factors were vital for shaping the Sunni response to the shifting balance of power and strategic environment.

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<sup>51</sup> Project on International Policy Attitudes, survey of Iraqi public opinion, released 27 September 2006, at <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/250.php?lb=brme&pnt=250&nid=&id=>.

<sup>52</sup> ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK, Survey of Iraqi Public Opinion, released 17 March 2007, at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/6451841.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6451841.stm); see Anthony Cordesman, "Iraqi Perceptions of the War," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2 May 2007.

<sup>53</sup> ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK, Survey of Iraqi Public Opinion, released 17 March 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7299569.stm>.

<sup>54</sup> Smith and MacFarlane, "Anbar Awakens," 47



## Engagement

The first clue as to the importance of engagement is simply the remarkable amount of engagement carried out at all levels. A year after the invasion of Iraq, 78 percent of Iraqis reported never having had a personal encounter with Coalition Forces—and those who had most likely had extremely negative experiences.<sup>55</sup> But over time, a remarkable variety of engagement tracks opened up, from local engagement between U.S. officers and tribal sheikhs, to reconciliation conferences hosted by NGOs, to direct outreach by American and Iraqi officials to representatives of the reconcilable insurgency. These went on even during the period now derided as one of the Americans sitting in their bases away from the population. Many describe these dialogues as of “critical importance” in the turning of the Sunnis.<sup>56</sup> Their Sunni counterparts similarly talk of how such meetings changed their views of the Americans, at least as individuals. Several years of intense, direct engagement with American interlocutors, particularly after early 2005, helped convince a small but influential portion of the Sunni leadership that their interests could be met through nonviolent means without paying too great a social cost with other Iraqi Sunnis (through the delegitimation of al Qaeda discussed above). While those contacts were often deeply frustrating to both sides, since they did not immediately deliver change, their cumulative effect was profound.

The point of these dialogues was rarely directly bargaining, simply to reach a deal quickly and be done with it. Gen. George Casey explained that “they are discussions, discussions primarily aimed at bringing these leaders and the people they represent into the political process . . . but to characterize them as negotiations with the insurgency aimed at stopping the insurgency, we’re not quite there yet.”<sup>57</sup> Unlike bargaining, dialogues aim “at establishing common interpretations and mutual expectations governing both cooperative and competitive behavior.”<sup>58</sup> As Thomas Risse puts it, this allows “actors to develop a common knowledge concerning both a definition of the situation and an agreement about the underlying ‘rules of the game.’”<sup>59</sup> This matters analytically because little common knowledge about the game, or about each other, existed between the United States and the Sunni population circa 2004. In such an environment, ongoing dialogues could bridge

<sup>55</sup> Oxford Research International, survey of Iraqi public opinion, 19 March 2004, at [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/goodmorningamerica/iraq\\_anniversary\\_poll\\_040314.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/goodmorningamerica/iraq_anniversary_poll_040314.html).

<sup>56</sup> See Michael Eisenstadt, “Iraq: Tribal Engagement Lessons Learned,” *Military Review* (September–October 2007): 16–31. On engagement with religious authorities, see Master Sergeant John Proctor, “A Short History of Religious Leader Engagement Operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom,” *Information Operations Journal* (December 2009): 23–27.

<sup>57</sup> Josh White, “Insurgency Talks Said to Yield Little,” *Washington Post*, 28 June 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Marc Lynch, “Why Engage? The Logic of Communicative Engagement,” *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 2 (2002): 187–230, quote at 190; and James Johnson, “Is Talk Really Cheap? Prompting Conversation Between Critical Theory and Rational Choice,” *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 1 (March 1993): 74–85.

<sup>59</sup> Risse, “Let’s Argue,” 2.

a cultural gap over the nature of the relationship, what counts as costs and benefits, and help “each side to more accurately understand the intentions, interpretations and expectations of the other.”<sup>60</sup> Americans learned, for instance, that opposition to the occupation was far more widespread than they had anticipated: “it became clear to us that we were all alone.”<sup>61</sup> Such ongoing dialogue and investment in personal relationships also fit much better Iraqi cultural norms than did the American preference for rapid, direct transactional bargaining. According to Maj. Morgan Mann, “we must be willing to talk over lunch with tribal leaders whom we know tacitly support enemy activity. . . . Talking and negotiating are not signs of weakness provided the enemy knows we will continue to use all the power at our disposal to achieve our aims.”<sup>62</sup>

Much of the engagement aimed at the background conditions identified by dialogue theorists as crucial: building trust, conveying information about interests and perceptions, establishing the expectation of further interactions, and ultimately allowing each side to gauge the other’s real bottom line needs and red lines.<sup>63</sup> Lt. Col. James Crider assessed the benefits of these ongoing discussions as such: “We found that it was a tremendous source of intelligence that gave us an in-depth understanding of how people felt. . . . We discovered issues around which we could build an alliance based on a relationship of trust and respect. We could shape our talking points, information operations, and psychological operations to have the effect we wanted because we know our target audience well.”<sup>64</sup> Or, from an Iraqi perspective, Ayad Sammara’ie of the Iraqi Islamic Party explained that “if you are looking for tangible results then you will not find them whether . . . in improving the mutual understanding of points of view or diminishing the escalation . . . but the dialogues have contributed somewhat in that the atmosphere is not deteriorating as it was before.”<sup>65</sup>

Efforts to reach out to tribes began even before the war, and proceeded with varying degrees of intensity and seriousness after the fall of Saddam Hussein. U.S. Special Forces sought to identify marginalized tribes likely to be more willing to cooperate with a new regime, and more broadly to identify influential potential interlocutors. In the early years, more effort

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<sup>60</sup> Harald Muller, “Arguing, Bargaining and All That: Communicative Action, Rationalist Theory, and the Logic of Appropriateness in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 10, no. 3 (September 2004): 395–435, quote at 398.

<sup>61</sup> Crider, “A View From Inside the Surge,” 83.

<sup>62</sup> Maj. Morgan Mann, “The Power Equation: Using Tribal Politics in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (May–June 2007): 196

<sup>63</sup> On insurgency perceptions, see Carter Malkasian, “The Role of Perceptions and Political Reform in Counterinsurgency: The Case of Western Iraq, 2004–05,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17, no. 3 (September 2006): 367–94; and Carter Malkasian, “Signaling Resolve, Democratization, and the First Battle of Fallujah,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 3 (June 2006): 423–52.

<sup>64</sup> Crider, “A View From Inside the Surge,” 84.

<sup>65</sup> Interviewed by al-Said al-Abbadī in al-Quds al-Arabi, 5 November 2007.

went into tribes than into an insurgency still categorized as former regime dead-enders.<sup>66</sup> U.S. Special Forces offered financial incentives to lower level sheikhs in order to build their prestige and to create material incentives for cooperation and to build a network to gain information about local leadership and issues.<sup>67</sup> These efforts faltered as the insurgency gathered steam and Sunni attitudes hardened in the face of the Falluja campaign and the revelations of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib. After the second battle of Falluja (November 2004), tribal engagement revived, until the breakthrough in Ramadi in September 2006 led to the formation of the Anbar Salvation Council. These engagement efforts involved frequent, intense interactions between U.S. military officers and local sheikhs, including the distribution of cash for local projects, local dispute resolution, and demands to guarantee local security.

Iraqi government officials sought out conversations with a range of moderate Sunni leaders in the region, including some with ties to the evolving insurgency, with an eye toward splitting off the nationalist insurgency from the jihadists and bring Sunnis into the political process. These efforts languished as the focus moved toward the central government, however, as the “objective conditions were not there” to allow dialogues to succeed.<sup>68</sup> Prime Minister Ayad Allawi began his tenure in May 2004 pledging amnesty for insurgents, worked to reverse the worst excesses of de-Baathification, reached out to former army officers, and began meeting with Sunnis working with the insurgency to attempt to separate nationalists from jihadists and tempt the former into the political process.<sup>69</sup> In the intensely problematic city of Falluja, between May and September 2004 U.S. and Iraqi military commanders met with a wide range of Sunni figures, including the charismatic “Emir” of the Falluja resistance, Abdullah al-Janabi, and Maj. Gen. Mohammed Latif, appointed to head the brigade.<sup>70</sup> These engagements came to be seen as a failure as the insurgency consolidated its hold on Falluja, and the project fell apart by the end of June.<sup>71</sup> Repeatedly, attempts to move directly to bargaining in an unsupportive environment failed.

In the second battle of Falluja in November 2004, the city was destroyed and thoroughly occupied. Many American officers today argue that the show of force impressed the Sunnis and created the conditions for the later change

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas Searle, “Tribal Engagement in Anbar Province: The Critical Role of Special Operations Forces,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2008): 62–66.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>68</sup> Long, “Anbar Awakening,” 77.

<sup>69</sup> Ayad Allawi, interview by Marc Lynch, 22 July 2008; Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 290–91; also see David Ignatius, “Allawi’s Bold Bid for Stability in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 14 July 2004.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews by Marc Lynch with anonymous U.S. military officials and advisors involved in the operation; Malkasian, “Signaling Resolve,” 446; and Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 278–79.

<sup>71</sup> Interviews by Marc Lynch with anonymous U.S. military officials and advisors involved in the operation; and Malkasian, “Signaling Resolve,” 424.

in attitudes.<sup>72</sup> But at the time, the far greater trend was toward massive outrage over the destruction of the city. This drove even more Sunnis away from the political process, as most political trends decided to boycott the upcoming elections. The realization that the boycott of the January 2005 parliamentary elections had led to the marginalization of the Sunni community likely had an effect on their rethinking of their strategy. Finally, the growing presence of al Qaeda in Iraq, aggressively led in this period by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, posed a challenge to the tribal leadership and to traditional and ambitious power brokers, while the move to form a unified Mujahidin Shura Council to formalize AQI domination of the insurgency threatened other factions.<sup>73</sup>

This sparked the first significant move toward what would become the “Awakening” in early 2005 in the Qaim area, when the Albu Mahal and Albu Nimr tribes formed the Hamza Forces to fight AQI and asked for coalition help.<sup>74</sup> The first wave of the “tribal turn” in Anbar came as early as March 2005, when a group of some fifty sheikhs in Anbar offered to police their own territory in exchange for arms and ammunition (the United States refused the offer).<sup>75</sup> In January 2006, Ramadi sheikhs formed the leadership engagement council promising to drive out al Qaeda, almost exactly as Sattar Abu Risha would nine months later. But they were devastated by a suicide attack on one of their founding meetings, and after a campaign of assassination and intimidations the effort collapsed.

From mid-2004 onward, Iraqi governments and the U.S. military pursued direct or indirect talks with high-ranking leaders and local leaders attempted to split the moderate resistance away from jihadists and former regime elements. American officers met frequently inside and outside of Iraq, with Sunnis claiming to represent the insurgency; many turned out to be false leads, without the influence they claimed, but over time a great number of contacts were made and information was gained.<sup>76</sup> Serious dialogues with both tribes and insurgents also began in this period. American efforts to reach out to Iraqi Sunnis accelerated with the arrival of a new ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, in June 2005.<sup>77</sup> Khalilzad began by reaching out to known Sunni leaders and sought out insurgency representatives to try to persuade them to join the political process in their own self-interest. Khalilzad and an array of military officers, as well as Arab League representatives and other officials, ultimately held hundreds of meetings with Sunni leaders, inside and outside

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<sup>72</sup> Interviews by Marc Lynch with anonymous U.S. military officials and advisors involved in the operation; and Bing West, *No True Glory* (New York: Random House, 2005).

<sup>73</sup> Long, “Anbar Awakening,” 77.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>75</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*, 75.

<sup>76</sup> This section is based on personal interviews with the coordinators of the meetings; also see Mark Perry, *Talking to Terrorists* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

<sup>77</sup> Khalilzad, interview by Marc Lynch, 15 August 2008; and West, *The Strongest Tribe*, 88.

of Iraq.<sup>78</sup> Little was achieved in the short term, but this was as expected from contacts conceived of as discussion rather than bargaining. While he ultimately grew frustrated with the reliability and actual influence of his contacts and evidently failed to make direct contact with the real leaders of the insurgency factions, these extensive contacts arguably laid the foundation for the success of later efforts.

A variety of Track Two initiatives focused on dialogue with Sunni figures proliferated after 2005. These initiatives did not usually produce direct agreements, but provided important venues for interaction and discussion about background beliefs and fears. The Arab League sponsored a series of meetings in Sharm al-Shaykh and Cairo in 2005, which included former Baathists and other Sunni insurgency representatives. Other meetings that included Sunni insurgency representatives of various sorts were held in the Dead Sea, Istanbul, Beirut, Rome, and Morocco.<sup>79</sup> In September 2007, Finland hosted a semisecret reconciliation initiative (the “Helsinki Agreement and the Future of Kirkuk” conference held in Baghdad, Iraq), which after several more meetings went public in July 2008 with a “Helsinki Declaration” signed by thirty-three Iraqi politicians.<sup>80</sup> Another initiative was overseen by the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue and the Italian organization Ipalmo.<sup>81</sup> This was conceived of as a forum for dialogue outside the formal reconciliation process overseen by the Maliki government, where ideas could be explored away from public scrutiny—building common ground rather than necessarily negotiating specific agreements. The dialogue initiative launched in 2006 in Istanbul as a nonofficial process outside of the public eye with twenty-four Iraqis representing almost all political trends (some refused to participate despite repeated outreach efforts). It then moved to Beirut in 2007, followed by four more—all outside of Iraq for the sake of secrecy, and all with the same participants working on the same agenda in a genuinely sustained dialogue. The first two meetings included members of the opposition outside the political process, but they dropped out after news of the meetings leaked to the media and they received death threats from within their own organizations. In these meetings they produced a six part road

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<sup>78</sup> Interviews by Marc Lynch with Khalilzad; Mokhtar Lamani, Arab League representative to Iraq; and a senior UN representative with personal involvement in the outreach effort to the insurgency leaders, 15 August 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Interviews with Mokhtar Lamani, the Arab League’s Representative, by Marc Lynch; and *Al-Hayat*, 17 March 2008, 18 July 2008, and March 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Campbell Robertson, “Iraqi Parties, After Meetings in Finland, Agree on Principles to Guide Further Talks,” *New York Times*, 6 July 2008; for more information on the conference, see <http://iraqhelsinki.org/> and [http://www.mccormack.umb.edu/chair/the\\_iraq\\_project.php](http://www.mccormack.umb.edu/chair/the_iraq_project.php); and for more information on the July 2008 public event, see <http://www.usip.org/events/new-avenues-national-reconciliation-iraq>.

<sup>81</sup> United States Institute for Peace, 12 June 2008, at <http://www.usip.org/building/index.html>; this section also draws on personal interviews with key participants between December 2007 and July 2009; for more information on the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue and Ipalmo, see <http://www.italyforiraq.it/en/programmi/programma.php?p=92>.

map for political reconciliation, which they presented as evidence that such a consensus across political and sectarian lines is possible—even if there is little chance of its being implemented.

The Iraqi government also sponsored official reconciliation and dialogue tracks, though these often proved problematic. In December 2005, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani said he was ready to speak to any Iraqis, even those bearing arms.<sup>82</sup> In June 2006, after a six-month political stalemate over the selection of a new Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki began his term with an impassioned reconciliation initiative. His reconciliation conferences generally took the form of public conferences long on speeches but with little actual progress. They made little progress, however, since by this point his government was widely viewed by Sunnis as complicit in the brutal campaign of sectarian cleansing that had been sweeping through Baghdad since the February Askariya mosque bombing. There was little hope for intersectarian reconciliation in those bloody days, and little chance that the Shia-dominated government could be the key interlocutor. The execution of Saddam in December 2006 inflamed sectarian tensions even further, which made it impossible to schedule a third follow-up meeting of the reconciliation initiative.<sup>83</sup>

Another track of engagement, in its way, began in May 2007, when Gen. Douglas Stone began a systematic effort at rehabilitation through prisoner engagement and education. With a prison population which peaked at twenty-six thousand in October 2007 (over 80 percent Sunni), Gen. Stone came to view the prisons as “the battlefield of the mind.”<sup>84</sup> Along with literacy and job training, Stone implemented a regimen of religious engagement with moderate imams (modeled in part after a similar Saudi deradicalization program) and a systematic campaign of interactions aimed at dividing irreconcilables from reconcilable and persuading the latter.<sup>85</sup> Stone conceptualized these dialogues as counterinsurgency operations “inside the wire” and as an active strategic communications operation to a (literally) captive audience.<sup>86</sup> Many Iraqi Sunnis reportedly preferred to be incarcerated in these prisons rather than in Iraqi government facilities where they would

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<sup>82</sup> “Iraq’s Insurgency: Are Any of Them Ready to Talk?” *Economist*, 1 December 2005, at <http://rss.economist.com/node/5249479>.

<sup>83</sup> Al-Quds al-Arabi, 8 November 2006, 1

<sup>84</sup> Col. James B. Brown, Lt. Col. Erik W. Geopner, and Capt. James M. Clark, “Detention Operations, Behavior Modification, and Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (May-June 2009): 40–48. Transcript of Blogger Roundtable with Gen. Douglas Stone, *Washington Post*, 18 September 2007, at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/18/AR2007091801969\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/18/AR2007091801969_pf.html).

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in John Kruzl, “Moderate Detainees Help to Identify Extremists in Iraq,” *Armed Forces Press Service*, 4 December 2007.

<sup>86</sup> *Task Force 134 Strategic Communication Plan*, April 2008, at <http://publicintelligence.net/iraq-detainee-operations-strategic-communication-plan/>.

be at the mercy of Shia sectarian rivals. It is difficult to judge the effectiveness of these programs, or their relationship to the other engagement tracks described here, but the number of individuals affected was quite significant.

These different engagement tracks could be mutually supportive, but could also begin from radically different premises. Track two meetings, for instance, were not necessarily coordinated with the American military effort, but added another layer of interactions with many of the same individuals, who had the chance to be heard and to hear others in a variety of informal and formal settings. Such meetings usually began from the premise that the participants each had legitimate interests and valid complaints, and that understanding would come from putting the different parties into regular interaction so that they would better understand one another's concerns and fears. Detainee operations, on the other hand, began from the premise that insurgency was fueled by bad ideas, by incorrect understandings of the Quran or from a virus of extremist ideas that needed to be stamped out and corrected. Rather than seeking an accommodation among parties with equally legitimate interests and ideas, these operations assumed the superiority of one set of ideas and set out to teach their audience these better ideas. Tribal engagement and insurgency dialogues likely fell at various points along the spectrum between these two extremes.

These developments were clearly disorienting for all sides, as the growing Sunni cooperation with the U.S. military challenged virtually all expectations, and jihadist commentary oscillated between denunciations of the collaborators and denials that it was really happening.<sup>87</sup> The major insurgency factions took months to decide on an appropriate response to the engagement initiatives and the Awakenings, with influential figures such as Hareth al-Dhari of the Association of Muslim Scholars of Iraq and leaders of large factions publicly defending al Qaeda in Iraq through early 2007. Indirect and direct dialogues played an important role in persuading these factions to authorize participation in the Awakenings. Such dialogues were taking place both at the local level (between U.S. commanders on the ground and local insurgent faction leaders) and at the strategic level (with the leadership of the factions at very high levels) in the first few months of 2007.<sup>88</sup> This included direct engagements between American commanders and insurgency faction leaders, including reports of a meeting with Baathist officers in Amman, and many more.<sup>89</sup> Direct contacts between American officers and local insurgent leaders in a wide variety of neighborhoods in the mixed areas of Baghdad expanded rapidly in the spring of 2007, often for reasons

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<sup>87</sup> For an example of the confusion, see the 10 September 2006 commentary by Mohamed Yahya posted on al-Faloja.

<sup>88</sup> Saad Yousif al-Muttalibi of the Ministry of National Dialogue and Reconciliation claimed that these talks had gone on for months; "Iraq Government, Insurgents Reportedly Deadlocked Over Withdrawal of Troops," *Associated Press*, 22 March 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Posting to al-Faloja forum, 15 April 2007.

that remained mysterious to the Americans involved. The declaration of the ISI, and the subsequent targeting of a number of key leaders of competing insurgency factions, clearly played a major role in the decisions of those factions to rethink their strategy—which in turn was most likely the key to the spread of the Awakenings model from Anbar into Baghdad and mixed areas.

American hawks swallowed their usual hatred of negotiations with enemies to support the Bush administration, which gave important political cover to a politically risky gambit.<sup>90</sup> But AQI was less tolerant of such rumors, “warning the people of the faith against American deceptions.” They argued that the insurgency’s success had

brought the American administration to propose to the *mujabideen* sitting down at the negotiating table . . . the hateful *kafir* deception of ‘negotiation with the Sunni tribes’ . . . [is] that American forces will withdraw from Sunni tribal areas to their bases on our stolen land in exchange for giving the Sunni tribes a “guard” role in the name of preserving security and convincing the sons of the *abl al-sunna* to join this guard and the infidel police to combat the mujahidin . . . joining the infidel police or guard is *kafir* and *shirk* . . . don’t fall for the deception.<sup>91</sup>

The forums were full of warnings against participating in these dialogues:

After its failure to defeat the jihad . . . the Maliki government has turned to reaching out to the former Iraqi army officers from *abl al-sunna* to come work for the agent of apostasy . . . we warn the honest against these false appeals on the argument of protecting their cities or for dollars . . . he who sells his religion and his mother for a price, we have for him only a sword . . . we will not let such traitors stand in the face of the mujahidin and block their project.<sup>92</sup>

## Publicity

Publicity and the public normative environment becomes crucial for explaining how such changes moved from the individuals involved in direct contact to mass attitudes. Private engagements may well be the best location for complex learning and the building of trust. But the mass media and public sphere is the arena where a change in public cues can send new signals to the population and to encourage a bandwagon to the side of the policy

<sup>90</sup> *National Review*, editorial, 17 June 2005, at <http://old.nationalreview.com/editorial/editors200506171225.asp>.

<sup>91</sup> Posting to al-Ekhlaas, 28 February 2005.

<sup>92</sup> Posting to al-Faloja forum, 5 March 2007 and 7 March 2007, on Maliki meeting with former officers in the Iraqi army.



entrepreneur. For the private contacts detailed above to tip mass attitudes, they needed to enter into the public sphere in order to create the impression of shifting social and political norms.

Publicizing stories about AQI atrocities and violations of Iraqi norms was key to the strategy. Awakenings leaders appearing on Arabic TV stations often invoked complaints such as “al-Qaeda was committing massacres and violating cultural norms and tribal norms and Islamic values”<sup>93</sup> and “killing innocent Iraqi civilians and children . . . driving people from their homes.”<sup>94</sup> These complaints were no doubt real, but were also given a full airing by media sympathetic to the coalition or hostile to AQI, feeding the shift in the information environment. Anbaris did not need outsiders to tell them of their experiences with AQI, of course. But the increased publicity given to AQI behavior and active information operations likely contributed to the public, collective interpretation of these activities as more than local infractions. The United States and its local and regional allies worked hard to exacerbate differences between al Qaeda and what they often called the “reconcilable” 80 percent of the Iraqi insurgency along with local tribes. The aggressive propaganda efforts of AQI itself, especially under Zarqawi, likely contributed unintentionally to these campaigns by substantiating propaganda about its barbarity and extremism. Similarly, the view of AQ as “foreign” and not “Iraqi” played on themes of Iraqi nationalism quite effectively. The jihadist groups were keenly sensitive to the media campaigns against them. For instance, when the Sunni-insurgency linked TV station al-Zawra ran news accusing AQ of blowing up a car at a mosque because the imam criticized AQ, one commenter wrote anxiously: “I hope that AQ will immediately issue a denial of this operation and respond to this Baathist agent . . . we know that there are many in Anbar sowing division and *fitna*.”<sup>95</sup>

Recognition of the importance of publicity for sending public signals to mass audiences and for shifting the normative environment helps to explain why Khalilzad was so keen to publicize his meetings with Sunnis, or why the Anbar Salvation Council took an extremely high public profile in September 2006 despite the huge risk given the history of intimidation and assassination of those participating in such activities in even the very recent past. The dilemma here was stark: “to enlist tribes, the tribal engagement program needed to be well-publicized. However any publicity immediately made the tribes that joined and the sheikhs who led them high priority targets [for al

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<sup>93</sup> Ali Hatem, interviewed on *al Arabiya*, 3 February 2008, at <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2008/02/03/45115.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Ali Hatem, interviewed on *al Arabiya*, 6 May 2007, at <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2007/05/06/34185.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Quote from posting to al-Faloja forum, 26 February 2007; for other examples, posting to al-Ekhlaas on 15 April 2007 described such reports as “a wide campaign which aims to divide and ignite the flames of division between the Islamic Army and the Islamic State.”

Qaeda in Iraq].”<sup>96</sup> Rivals frequently assassinated and intimidated those Sunnis known to be working with the United States. Indeed, Abu Risha himself was murdered shortly after his highly publicized meeting with President Bush in Anbar.

Where the Anbar Salvation Council sought publicity, insurgency faction leaders strove for secrecy due not only to their security concerns but also out of fears of the political repercussions. For insurgency representatives, any publicity about their participation threatened their political standing (or even their lives) and made them look like hypocrites. But contacts did occasionally make their way into the media—especially since the United States had a political incentive to highlight such talks since they showed that many Sunnis wanted to join in the political process.<sup>97</sup> Khalilzad viewed publicity as a positive thing, since he wanted to demonstrate to Sunnis that the United States was serious about its outreach.<sup>98</sup> Such stories of “US officials in face to face talks with high-level Sunni insurgents at US military bases in Anbar province” increasingly percolated through the American and Arab press.<sup>99</sup> The insurgency factions involved in these meetings routinely denied their existence, out of fear of retaliation by others and because at this early stage such contacts would have had a major negative effect on their prestige in Sunni communities.<sup>100</sup> The frequency of these meetings led to open discussion on the insurgency’s internet forums of “the conspiracy of the Amman hotels” and the “wide relationships and secret talks and all of it unofficial.”<sup>101</sup> A common question was “[how] can [IAI spokesman Ibrahim] Shammari sit in a hotel in Amman under the noses of American and Jordanian intelligence?”<sup>102</sup> “They move freely between these countries as if they enjoy total security protection, and the strange thing is that their identities are not hidden when they meet even with journalists who protect them when they appear in the media, and they call by phone into Iraq while pretending they are wanted by their enemies,” complained influential forum contributor Akram Hijazi. “Is it logical that Shammari, the official spokesman, talks in the media

<sup>96</sup> Searle, “Tribal Engagement in Anbar Province,” 65–66.

<sup>97</sup> “Iraq Government, Insurgents Reportedly Deadlocked Over Withdrawal of Troops,” *Associated Press*, 22 March 2007; and Edward Wong, “U.S. Envoy Says He Had Meetings with Iraq Rebels,” *New York Times*, 26 March 2007.

<sup>98</sup> “A Conversation with Iraq Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad,” NPR, 8 June 2005, at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5370966>; Fareed Zakaria, “Exploit Rifts in the Insurgency,” *Newsweek*, 17 October 2005; and Rory Carroll, “US in Talks with Iraqi Insurgents,” *Guardian*, 10 June 2005, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jun/10/iraq.usa>.

<sup>99</sup> Scott Johnson, “Direct Talks: US Officials and Iraqi Insurgents,” *Newsweek*, 6 February 2006; and Dexter Filkins and Sabrina Tavernise, “Americans Said to Meet Rebels, Exploiting Rift,” *New York Times*, 7 January 2006, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/07/international/middleeast/07insurgents.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Posting to Al-Ekhlaas, 6 February 2006 and 2 May 2006.

<sup>101</sup> Akram Hijazi, “Secrets of the Conflict Between the Islamic Army and Al-Qaeda” posted to al-Ekhlaas, 22 May 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Hanbali, posted to al-Ekhlaas, 15 October 2007.

about his readiness to carry out negotiations with the Americans . . . and then denies the meetings took place?”

Reports frequently circulated on the forums and on the streets of specific acts of treachery involving attempted cooperation between insurgency factions and “the occupation forces and Safavid government.”<sup>103</sup> Most insurgency factions therefore continued to deny their participation in the talks. Even the 1920 Revolutionary Brigade, which would become a pillar of the Awakenings, released a statement at the end of March: “we hear of invitations to dialogue with what is called the government of Iraq which thinks that the jihadist factions will respond to these invitations and violate their principles and norms on which they were founded . . . our jihadist principles do not permit establishing such governments in our land and selling at the cheapest price the land to the occupiers.”<sup>104</sup> Other factions issued similar denials: “after four years the occupation has no path other than propaganda and deception and spies and agents . . . don’t help them . . . don’t join the political process under *kafir* occupation.”<sup>105</sup>

The importance of social public cues is also rooted in the centrality of identity and norms to this issue. It is important to see how deeply the Awakening violated the prevailing Arab normative consensus, the insurgency’s discourse, and Iraqi tradition. An alignment with the U.S. occupation forces, in the minds of many Arabs, potentially transformed the “honorable resistance” into another version of the Lebanese Forces (who collaborated with Israel’s occupation of South Lebanon). That is an awkward place for proud, nationalist fighters. The willingness of Iraqi Sunnis to ignore Arab normative sanctions might be explained by the legacies of the 1990s, in which many Iraqis came to deeply resent the Arab public sphere for its seeming indifference to Saddam’s tyranny.<sup>106</sup> That ambivalent relationship to Arab public opinion may explain why the tribes felt comfortable ignoring the normative sanctions of an Arab public sphere, which viewed them with barely concealed contempt. Still, in their early appearances in the pan-Arab media the Awakenings leaders were at pains to emphasize their tribal identity and to downplay any military or financial support from the coalition.<sup>107</sup>

The publicity seeking of Awakenings leaders was a conscious choice, and an explicit break with past, failed efforts to rally the Sunnis against al Qaeda. Abd al-Sattar Abu Risha, the charismatic head of the Anbar Salvation Council, pursued a media-centric policy from the start and “didn’t

<sup>103</sup> For example, al-Faloja forum, 28 January 2007.

<sup>104</sup> For example, al-Faloja forum, 26 March 2007, 1920 Revolution Brigade statement on invitation to dialogue with Iraqi government; Jaysh al-Rashidayn issued a similar denial on al-Faloja, 1 April 2007.

<sup>105</sup> Ansar al-Sunna, posting on al-Faloja, 20 March 2007; and posting to al-Faloja by the 1920 Revolution Brigade denying reports that it is negotiating with the occupation, 9 February 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>107</sup> For instance, Abd al-Sattar Abu Risha on *al Arabiya*, 6 May 2007; and Ali Hatem on *al Arabiya*, 17 September 2007 and 6 May 2007.

believe a surge in American forces would change a thing until Sunni attitudes changed.”<sup>108</sup> The very choice of names was a branding strategy aimed at reframing the problem away from collaboration to something more positive. They used the terms “Awakening” and “Salvation,” but “Awakening” and “Salvation” from what? Indeed, jihadist forums zeroed in on this immediately: why did they not form a council of salvation from the occupation, or from the *Safavids*, challenged one early comment. They frequently mocked the “Anbar Treachery Council,” attributing to them liberal views likely to alienate Iraqis (“I am very liberal and dream of nightclubs and banning the hijab,” said one posting.<sup>109</sup>) From the moment of the launch under the name Anbar Salvation Council, the movement presented a new narrative of tribes rising up against their al Qaeda oppressors—inverting the narrative of the resistance to the American occupation and seeking to capture the same normative benefits of resistance and authenticity.

The highly public nature of the Awakenings contrasted sharply with the intensely secret nature of the engagement with the insurgency factions (keeping in mind that the distinctions between the two are quite blurred). The insurgency factions who took part in the second wave of the Awakening (in 2007) tried to hide their participation, denying it to the end on their own media and in their public statements. The reason is obvious: each side stood to lose politically from the revelation of private talks and negotiations, and did what it could to keep them away from the public eye. The Bush administration for years blanched at the idea of negotiating with insurgents with American blood on their hands, only coming around to the need for negotiation as the military situation deteriorated and new approaches were desperately needed. The insurgency factions, with their discourse of jihad and resistance, had great difficulty reconciling the pragmatically useful engagement with their public normative commitments. Even when the insurgency began cooperating with the United States, via the Sons of Iraq program, it carefully maintained public deniability with a continuing demonstration of resistance activities on internet sites and carefully modulated violence in areas outside the specific local ceasefire. With the rapid growth of the Awakenings, the tension between public and private became too great to bear—but even then, the factions chose to ignore rather than to defend their cooperation with the United States.

The key moment came in early April with the decisive public political-military split between the Islamic State of Iraq (AQI) and a variety of nationalist-jihadist factions clustered around the Islamic Army of Iraq. On April 4, the 1920 Revolution Brigade splintered into two factions, with one taking the name Hamas Iraq with the explicit focus on national resistance rather than global jihad. The next day, the Islamic Army of Iraq released

<sup>108</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*, 212.

<sup>109</sup> Posting on al-Faloja, 17 May 2007.

what immediately came to be called “the most dangerous document” on the insurgency’s forums.<sup>110</sup> The document came in direct and explicit response to the demand that all jihadist factions united under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq. After favorably comparing its four years of armed resistance to the occupation to what al Qaeda had managed, the demarche blasted the ISI for dividing Muslims and the jihad. It then complained about al Qaeda’s practice of declaring *takfir* on all those who disagree with it, and of killing people it declares kafir (unbeliever) who are actually practicing Muslims. It called for pragmatism and a level of moderation, criticizing the demands that all Sunni women wear the niqab by pointing out that women wearing the niqab come under greater scrutiny from the American and Iraqi armies and that this imposes unnecessary burdens on them. It complained about al Qaeda members killing good Muslims, attacking other jihadists, ransacking their homes, and of doctrinal and physical intimidation. It blasted al Qaeda for seeking to impose its control over organizations that have acted independently and successfully for years, and for accusing all who refuse to submit to al Qaeda of being American agents. It denied having negotiated with the Americans, but kept the door open: does al Qaeda understand the difference, it asked, between negotiating to secure the fruits of victory and a surrender?

This political break escalated on the forums into a major doctrinal and ideological divide, between supporters of global jihad and national resistance (a single forum post by the influential jihadist pundit Hamed al-Ali, criticizing the ISI, generated dozens of pages of commentary). Commentators on the forums demanded “[Who are you with] Allah or the Nation? Religion or blood? Doctrine or innovation (*bida’a*)? Do you place your Arabness above your Islam?”<sup>111</sup> But this defense on the forums was increasingly out of touch with Iraqi public opinion. Hareth al-Dhari, who in January 2007 had spoken out in support of the Islamic State of Iraq, in March opined that the declaration of the ISI had only served the interests of the occupation.<sup>112</sup>

The insurgency soon split into two main groupings, and later formed the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance, with a focus on finding a point of entry into the political process. This division of the insurgency worried AQI more than the Anbar Salvation Council, because the political strategy of those factions threatened AQI’s very reason for existence. The Islamic Army of Iraq could not easily be tagged as collaborators and commanded a significantly superior fighting force on the ground. As one contributor to the al-Ekhlaas forum put it in April 2007, the IAI’s shift threatened the jihad because the United States

<sup>110</sup> Posting on al-Faloja forum, 5 April 2007.

<sup>111</sup> Posting on al-Faloja, 18 February 2007.

<sup>112</sup> For Hareth al-Dhari’s January comments, see <http://www.muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?t=199725>; for Dhari’s change of mind, see al-Faloja, 30 March 2007; and “Al-Qaeda Loses an Iraqi Friend,” *Time*, 14 May 2007, at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1620607,00.html>.

needs stronger partners to . . . pass judgment on the jihad and form a balance against Iran . . . [they] must be Sunni at least superficially . . . and must have the support of the largest possible number of Sunni ulema around the Islamic world . . . these factions must have credibility based on past actions and rhetoric . . . they must get financial support from Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf.<sup>113</sup>

Following the public break between the Islamic Army and al Qaeda, a trickle of local deals between insurgency fighters and the U.S. military (such as the one in Abu Ghraib) became a cascade. These local deals were culminated through engagement and dialogues at the local level, usually between local commanders and local neighborhood toughs with ties to insurgency factions. The flood of some two hundred such arrangements, all at roughly the same time suggest some top-down directive underlying the seemingly bottom-up process.<sup>114</sup> The initial approach, then, took place in the context of the broader strategic decision by Islamic Army leaders following months, if not years, of direct and indirect dialogues, as well as the sectarian cleansing of Baghdad and fierce struggles with the local al Qaeda affiliates. By mid-2007, a cascade appeared to have dramatically transformed public opinion about al Qaeda; when Harith al-Dhari called for dialogue with al Qaeda in October 2007 using terms that would have been commonplace a year earlier, he suffered a sharp public backlash and saw his influence decline dramatically.<sup>115</sup>

Only after the break did sharp ideological divides suddenly present themselves—and here, the internet forums and media played a vital role in driving ideological wedges between the two groupings. “Hanbali,” a prominent if pseudonymous contributor to jihadist forums, clearly saw the power struggles underpinning the conflict:

Some think there were no problems until the announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq . . . this is a clear mistake. The problems were there even during the time of Zarqawi . . . the flames burned under the surface if not in the open . . . the reason they did not come into the open is that AQ at the time was not one of the biggest factions . . . [the Islamic Army of Iraq] refused unification under any banner other than his own,

<sup>113</sup> “Moattaz Bitawhidi,” Supporters of the Islamic Army, postings to al-Faloja, 7 April 2007.

<sup>114</sup> Jawdat Kazem, “Leader of Sawha Fursan al-Rafidayn from Officer in Iraqi Army to Islamic Mujahid to Ally of American Forces,” *Al-Hayat*, 22 November 2007, at [http://www.daralhayat.com/arab\\_news/levant\\_news/11-2007/Item-20071121-63ddea5d-c0a8-10ed-00c1-a41ebfd6209/story.html](http://www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/levant_news/11-2007/Item-20071121-63ddea5d-c0a8-10ed-00c1-a41ebfd6209/story.html); Ned Parker, “Abu Abed: Ruthless, Shadowy, and US Ally Against al-Qaeda,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 2007; “The Rise and Fall of a Sons of Iraq Warrior,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 2008; and Ghaith Abdul Ahad, “Meet Abu Abed,” *Guardian*, 10 November 2007.

<sup>115</sup> “Top Cleric Asks Iraqis Not to Join Anti-Qaeda Fight,” *Reuters*, 5 October 2007.

certainly not under AQ . . . so the conflict between IAI and ISI is not the child of the moment or of the declaration of ISI.<sup>116</sup>

But these differences going public made a very real difference, transforming both the strategic and the normative environment for the various insurgency factions and for Sunnis trying to decide whether to change sides.

## Media

Finally, all of these developments took place in a rapidly changing media environment that was taken seriously as a primary target for political struggle by all sides. By any standard, Arabic language television had an important role in shaping the information environment for Sunni Iraqis.<sup>117</sup> It is generally estimated that television is the primary source of information for 80 percent of Iraqis. The Arab media were considered a vital arena for information operations on all sides (from U.S. strategic communications and psyop to insurgency leveraging of video clips and the Arab media).<sup>118</sup> Information about al Qaeda overreach or the sectarian cleansing of Baghdad certainly spread by word of mouth or direct experience, but they were also carefully cultivated and driven by American and Arab information operations campaigns. U.S.-funded or Iraqi government media had little purchase on Sunni attitudes, as they were easily dismissed as propaganda.

The changes which took place in the Iraqi and Arab televised media between 2004 and 2007 profoundly affected the information and opinion to which Iraqi Sunnis were exposed.<sup>119</sup> Where *al Jazeera* had enjoyed a near-monopoly on Arab political discourse through 2003, by 2004 a wide range of competitors were emerging. A number of local Iraqi stations appeared, often targeting specific sectarian or communal constituencies. Iran's al-Alam TV performed well in Iraq, though not with the Sunni community. While the government-backed al-Iraqiya was widely viewed as a government mouthpiece, it still attracted a sizable audience. America's al-Hurra TV did better in Iraq than in other markets because of its terrestrial signal and because it effectively substituted for the weak Iraqi official media, but overall U.S. communications efforts were quite weak and ineffective for much of this period. At any rate, for Sunni Arabs deeply skeptical of the new Iraqi state and of U.S.-backed media, pan-Arab TV had far more credibility and influence.

<sup>116</sup> Posting to al-Ekhlaas, 15 October 2007.

<sup>117</sup> See Marc Lynch, "The Political Effects of the Arab Media," in *Arab Media: Power and Weakness*, ed. Kai Hafez (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> Steve Tatham, *Losing Hearts and Minds* (London: Hurst, 2006); and Cora Goldstein, "A Strategic Failure: American Information Control Policy in Occupied Iraq," *Military Review* (March/April 2008): 58–65.

<sup>119</sup> Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*.

The Saudi-backed *al Arabiya*, which launched in 2003 to compete with *al Jazeera*, evolved into a serious competitor in the Iraqi market. It used this position in part to advance the Awakenings as credible Iraqi actors, and to undermine al Qaeda as part of Saudi Arabia's own struggle with al Qaeda violence after 2003. The political agenda can be seen in the striking shift in its choices of which Sunni politicians to feature on its major political programs. In 2006, eighteen out of nineteen Sunnis featured on these programs were members of Parliament. But beginning in 2007, Awakenings leaders became *al Arabiya*'s designated spokesmen for the Iraqi Sunni community. Leaders of the Awakenings appeared on more than fifteen different programs that year, with leaders such as Ahmed Abu Risha and Ali Hatem featured on programs usually reserved for major international leaders such as George W. Bush. The heavy coverage of the Awakenings led many other Sunni figures to complain about the exaggeration in the media about the Awakenings.<sup>120</sup> The program *Death Makers* offered up an endless series of exposés featuring hitherto unknown AQI defectors, stories about their extremism and brutality, allegations about their sources of funding, and much more.

*Al Jazeera*'s played a unique and potent role due to its problematic position in Iraqi politics. While overwhelming the top choice for most Arab audiences, in Iraq *al Jazeera* was viewed as a "Sunni" station by many Kurds and Shia, and deep resentments lingered from what many Iraqis believed was its role in supporting Saddam Hussein in the years before the American invasion.<sup>121</sup> In the period after the U.S. invasion, *al Jazeera* served as a powerful magnifying force for the emerging resistance by virtue of its close and often emotional coverage. For instance, it is often credited with turning the tide of the first battle of Falluja (April 2004), with its graphic coverage of the campaign galvanizing outrage around the Arab world, inside of Iraq, and even in the Sunni members of the Iraqi Governing Council.<sup>122</sup> But when conflict emerged between the nationalist insurgency and the jihadists of al Qaeda, *al Jazeera* tended to side with the former. It then played a key role in stoking that controversy for the Arab public and in legitimating the turn against al Qaeda from within an Arab nationalist frame.<sup>123</sup> Between February 2006 and April 2008, Ibrahim Shammari (spokesperson of the Islamic Army of Iraq) appeared no fewer than five times for lengthy interviews. There were many other appearances by factional spokespeople, and by Hareth al-Dhari and other representatives of the Association of Muslim Scholars. Only a handful of Awakenings figures were featured on *al Jazeera*, and those usually came from an insurgency background rather than a tribal background (such

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<sup>120</sup> For example, Mohammed al-Fidhi, AMSI, interviewed on *al Arabiya*, 5 June 2007, at <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2007/06/05/35186.html>.

<sup>121</sup> For details, see Lynch, *Voices of a New Arab Public*.

<sup>122</sup> Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*; and Ahmed Mansour, *The Battle of Fallujah*.

<sup>123</sup> Yasir Abu Hilala, *al Jazeera's* Jordan correspondent, interview by Marc Lynch, 9 May 2008.



as Abu Azzam al-Tamimi). Members of Parliament did appear occasionally, but not nearly as often as on *al Arabiya*.

Al Qaeda, perhaps surprisingly to some, fared worst of all. *Al Arabiya's* coverage was hostile from the start, while Zarqawi and *al Jazeera* became mutually disenchanted, with the latter refusing to air his brutal beheading videos and often hosting discussions critical of the Iraqi jihadist (including several influential denunciations of Zarqawi's tactics by its Muslim Brotherhood-associated Islamist superstar Yusuf al-Qaradawi). This crystallized in *al Jazeera's* airing of excerpts from a 2007 bin Laden tape, which the station presented as calling for the Islamic State of Iraq to reconcile with its adversaries when in fact it had been a call for the "nationalist-jihadist" factions to repent of their ways. For the jihadists of the ISI, *al Jazeera* was clearly marked as part of the "Zionist-Crusader media" and was not to be relied upon. As one complained, "clearly there is a coordinated media campaign through *al-Jazeera* . . . they all say the same thing, attacking the global Islamic jihad project."<sup>124</sup> The jihadist forums were full of venom over the attempts of *al Jazeera* "to pull the carpet out from under the heroes of Iraq."<sup>125</sup> *Al Jazeera* (which they call al Khanzeera, a pun that implies that it is "the pig station") was particularly threatening to al Qaeda because it enjoyed such credibility with Sunni audiences inside and outside of Iraq.<sup>126</sup> In May 2007, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi declared a new "media war" in response to these challenges.<sup>127</sup>

Another example of the threat posed by "authentic" Arabic tv is the curious case of Mishan Jabouri's al Zawra tv. Al Zawra launched in 2005 as an explicitly Sunni station and in 2006 shifted to harder-line content openly supportive of the Sunni insurgency.<sup>128</sup> It was banned by the Iraqi government in November 2006 for inciting sectarian conflict, forced off Egypt's NileSat in February 2007 by American pressure, and blacklisted by the U.S. Treasury department for supporting terrorism in January 2008. Nevertheless, the jihadists of al Qaeda came to view al Zawra as an enemy over the course of 2006–07 as its reports of internal dissension and of insurgency contacts with the United States were widely believed among crucial Sunni audiences.<sup>129</sup> In mid-February 2007 (shortly before the open split in the insurgency), an al Zawra broadcast about alleged al Qaeda atrocities drew dozens of responses on the forums, and Jabouri became the target of a jihadist internet campaign

<sup>124</sup> Posting to al-Faloja, 6 May 2007. For other examples, see Abu Hajir Al-Muqrin, "al-Jazeera is an American Product," posting to al-Ekhlaas, 4 April 2008.

<sup>125</sup> Posting to al-Ekhlaas, 12 October 2007.

<sup>126</sup> Abu Abd al-Malik, "Al-Jazeera and Its Hated Methods," posting to al-Ekhlaas, 28 August 2007. Al-Malik complains that *al Arabiya's* status as an agent of the occupation was well-known to all but *al Jazeera's* concealed agency posed a greater threat.

<sup>127</sup> Posting to al-Faloja, 7 May 2007.

<sup>128</sup> Marc Santora and Damien Cave, "On the Air, the Voice of Sunni Rebels in Iraq," *New York Times*, 21 January 2007, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/21/world/middleeast/21sunni.html>.

<sup>129</sup> Daveed Garenstein-Ross and Nick Ross, "Al Qaeda tv," *Weekly Standard*, 3 January 2007.

as a “traitor agent Baathist.” When al Zawra was forced off of Egypt’s NileSat, jihadist forums celebrated boisterously.

This new media environment meant that instead of being presented with a relatively monolithic set of messages, Iraqi Sunnis increasingly were exposed to diverse messages.<sup>130</sup> The growth of media sources actively hostile to AQI and actively supportive of the Awakening movement did not mean that the typical Iraqi Sunni viewers were necessarily persuaded by the new frames—causality in media effects rarely works so neatly—but the proliferation of competing frames did create an opening through which new political formations could emerge and be interpreted.

This new media environment played a crucial role in shaping Sunni perceptions, particularly in fueling the perception of a wide gap between AQI and the mainstream Sunni resistance. This partially reflected a more effective American approach to the media, shifting from attempts to shun and silence a perceived hostile media to efforts at outreach and engagement. With the arrival of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Gen. Petraeus in early 2007, even greater emphasis was placed on strategic communications and information operations in support of counterinsurgency objectives. Aggressive psychological operations and strategic communications operations worked to drive a wedge between AQI and the Sunni population and to build support for the Coalition. Highlighting AQI atrocities, the foreign leadership of AQI and its fictitious leader, and the benign intentions of the United States and the government of Iraq were all key messages.<sup>131</sup>

AQI and its partisans came to see the Arab media and these propaganda campaigns as a primary weapon against them, with one influential jihadist pundit declaring in November 2006 that al Qaeda was rising on the ground but losing in the media.<sup>132</sup> AQI struggled intensely with the media’s campaign to drive a wedge between them and the rest of the Sunni community.<sup>133</sup> Jihadist internet forums filled with complaints against what they considered to be a concerted media propaganda campaign.<sup>134</sup> The “crimes” of the mujahideen, they complained, were in fact the product of American propaganda, pushed out by *al Jazeera* in the service of the nationalist-jihadist factions and of the Safavid-Crusader alliance. In November 2007, one contributor described “How the enemy is trying to defeat jihad: conscripting agents, money blockade, media blockade, spread divisions among

<sup>130</sup> On the importance of diverse messages for attitude change, see Mutz, *Impersonal Influence*.

<sup>131</sup> Lt. Col. Frank DeCarvalho, Maj. Spring Kivett, and Capt. Matthew Lindsey, “Reaching Out: Partnering with Iraq Media,” *Military Review* (July-August 2008).

<sup>132</sup> Akram al-Hijazi, posting to al-Faloja, 14 November 2006.

<sup>133</sup> *The Media War Against the People of Islam*, distributed on al-Ekhlaas, 8 May 2008; for one of many examples of their efforts to push back, see the posting to al-Faloja on 14 December 2006 rebutting claims about tribes turning against al Qaeda.

<sup>134</sup> Hussein bin Mahmoud, “The Media Campaign Against the Jihad and the Mujahidin,” posting to al-Boraq, 5 May 2006; and Hazim al-Salban, “Media Propaganda is a Satanic Policy to Influence Public Opinion,” pts. 1–3, posting to al-Ekhlaas, 16 February 2008.

mujahidin—through spreading rumors, polarizing factions, penetrating factions, dialogue with factions, using islamic trend.”<sup>135</sup> When the Reform and Jihad Front was announced, forum contributors dismissed it as “part of the media war in *al-Jazeera*.”<sup>136</sup> Hamed al-Ali warned that “the enemy is using lies and propaganda to divide and conquer.”<sup>137</sup> In late February, the administrator of the al-Hesba forum issued a statement “on the media attack . . . which takes many forms .. [such as] enlisting satellite tv stations . . . paid for newspapers . . . pens for hire.”<sup>138</sup> An April 2007 history of the conflict between al Qaeda and the resistance factions gave top billing to the “rising media campaign against the Islamic State” as a cause.<sup>139</sup> Another complained of “the harshest media campaign aimed at harming our relations with the people of Iraq.”<sup>140</sup> One frequent contributor to the al-Ekhlaas forum was reduced to asking, “What is the reality of the conflict between al-Qaeda and the tribes, which the Pentagon media beats on the drum daily” before concluding that all the media attention “is a tempest in a teapot, not perceptible on the ground but strong in the media under direction of the Pentagon and aided by Gulf states and Jordan and Egypt.”<sup>141</sup>

The jihadist media tried valiantly to maintain an online reality of tribes united with the insurgency increasingly at odds with the realities on the ground—which ultimately hurt the credibility of those outlets and contributed to the confusion in the wider jihadist community outside of Iraq at the developments emerging on the ground.<sup>142</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS

The shift in Sunni attitudes required not only a shift in the objective conditions but the reframing of the conflict and creation of a new public social environment through a new media ecosystem and extensive, direct engagement between coalition and Iraqi officials and Sunni Arab opinion leaders. This required the collective processing of new information, often through private and public discussions and debates. In this regard, I view three arenas as being of great importance for shaping Sunni Iraqi views: intra-Sunni arguments (whether in person or online); dialogues between Sunnis and Coalition/Iraqi

<sup>135</sup> Posting to al-Ekhlaas, 3 November 2007.

<sup>136</sup> Posting to al-Faloja, 14 May 2007; and Ansar al-Sunna, posting to al-Faloja, 29 March 2007.

<sup>137</sup> Hamed al-Ali, posting to al-Faloja, 18 January 2007.

<sup>138</sup> Posting to al-Ekhlaas, 27 February 2007, statement #10 from al-Hesbah.

<sup>139</sup> Posting to al-Faloja, 8 April 2007.

<sup>140</sup> Posting to al-Faloja, 24 April 2007.

<sup>141</sup> Posting to al-Ekhlaas, 17 October 2007.

<sup>142</sup> For one of many examples of the forums portraying the tribes as steadfastly with the insurgency, see al-Faloja, 26 March 2007.

government interlocutors in proliferating points of contact; and the Arab media, which was a primary source of news and opinion for most Iraqis. Again, this does not mean that the other factors—al Qaeda's overreach, shifts in the balance of power, financial incentives, war weariness—did not matter. Instead, the argument is that each required interpretation to produce the observed changes in behavior.

Direct engagement and changes in the distribution of information played a crucial role in shaping Sunni Arab attitudes in Iraq, which ultimately made possible the decisive turn against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sunni realignment with the United States. Engagement and information did not have this effect independently, but helped shape the context within which material and political developments such as the sectarian cleansing of Baghdad, al Qaeda's cultural and political overreach, and shifting American strategy were interpreted. This has broad implications for key debates in contemporary U.S. foreign policy, as well as for counterinsurgency and international relations theory. It suggests that when President George W. Bush complained that "some seem to believe that we should negotiate with the terrorists and radicals, as if some ingenious argument will persuade them they have been wrong all along," he had failed to understand his own administration's policy.<sup>143</sup> Neither the information variables emphasized here nor the material factors would have alone produced the outcome in question—which should raise important questions about the ability of the United States to replicate the Iraqi experience in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

The dynamics of U.S. and Iraqi government engagement with the Sunni community suggest the importance of a sustained, broadly based dialogue well in advance of any move toward direct bargaining. Such engagement should be viewed as a long-term exercise, not as a magic bullet to rapidly change the strategic terrain. No single dialogue moment flipped the Iraqi Sunnis, and the change would not likely have happened without the material changes underpinning their interests. But years of ongoing, intensive dialogues across a wide range of interlocutors—the "endless cups of tea" for which U.S. counterinsurgent forces are now trained—did help to reshape the foundations of the relationship and to convince those involved individuals of the possibility of a strategic shift.

The engagements and dialogues also should not be divorced from the military context or other material factors. At key points, the United States needed to promise military support in order to win over their Sunni interlocutors and then to deliver military muscle or financial incentives in order to validate the choice. This was needed to protect the Awakenings from AQI retaliation and intimidation, and also to affirm the leadership of the newly

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<sup>143</sup> Bush remarks to Israeli Knesset, 15 May 2008. Text at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121083798995894943.html>.

empowered elites. The surge of U.S. troops through Baghdad helped later by proliferating the points of contact with Iraqis and by at least partly transforming the relations at the individual level. But neither U.S. military support nor the financial incentives would have carried the same positive normative or political valence without the preceding shift in public attitudes.

The media and a wide range of information operations also played a crucial role in the shift in Sunni attitudes. Overall, the dynamics of the Sunni attitude change therefore seem to follow a complex mixture of bottom-up and top-down change. Engagement at the leadership and elite level helped to create a critical mass of influential leaders willing to switch sides. The changing information environment reshaped the normative and social public context in ways that made cooperation with the Awakenings appear meritorious and the activities of al Qaeda unacceptable. The rapid shift in the public discourse about AQI, from a valued partner in the resistance to a foreign, brutal adversary, transformed social and political incentives. Whatever the reality of al Qaeda's overreach, the wide public airing of its atrocities allowed the Awakenings to attach normative value to what would otherwise have been seen as an outrageous alignment with the American occupation.

The new media environment facilitated this information dynamic. The rise of *al Arabiya* and the shift in *al Jazeera*, along with the rapid proliferation of competing Arabic TV stations, created a much more diverse set of messages and information. The internet may have also played an unexpected role in delegitimizing al Qaeda in Iraq. In the first years of the insurgency, the internet proved to be a powerful instrument for the insurgency allowing for the dissemination of video and audio messages and for an intense, vibrant online community to discuss matters of doctrine and strategy. But over time, the discussion on those forums tended to favor the most doctrinally pure and the most radical, distancing its participants even more from the pragmatic interests of most ordinary Iraqi Sunnis. It also magnified the impact of the doctrinal and political dissents in 2007, as partisans of each side engaged in overheated argument and denunciation, which burned bridges and inflamed passions. Finally, the internet created a false image of reality for many participants from outside of Iraq, portraying an ever-escalating jihad at a time when events on the ground were rapidly moving in the other direction. The spectacle of Iraqi insurgency factions openly patrolling with the United States on the ground in Baghdad while their websites continued to trumpet the jihad and air videos of attacks on U.S. troops introduced extreme dissonance and ultimately badly tarnished their credibility.

This argument also points to the centrality of strategic communications for counterinsurgency. This is hardly news to the U.S. military, which in recent years has tended to exaggerate the impact of strategic communications to the point where the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen

recently published an exasperated essay denouncing its fetishization.<sup>144</sup> The United States devotes a tremendous amount of resources in war zones to information operations and strategic communications. This analysis suggests that this can play a decisive role when combined with engagement and other means, particularly the dissemination of messages disrupting the adversary's positive image and the magnification of real events and actions through the media. But it should not be understood as a magic bullet by which attitudes can magically be transformed. Indeed, efforts to control the narrative or to dominate the information environment will likely prove counterproductive. Long-term dialogues and engagement rest on building networks and relationships of trust, which often require the airing of unpleasant opinions and uncomfortable information.

The lessons of engagement should not be overlearned. Without the underlying strategic changes, dialogue and engagement would have had only limited effects. They rarely bring about immediate results, and the moment or even possibility of a tipping point can be frustratingly difficult to predict. But they should not be underappreciated. The situation in Sunni Iraq may have shifted in large part by cutting deals with insurgency factions and tribes, but the shifting information environment helps to explain why those deals were there to be cut.

Finally, the importance of attitudes and the tipping point model helps to explain why the Sunni leadership and population has remained broadly committed to the political process in the years following the Awakenings and has refrained from a return to insurgency despite considerable provocation and disappointment. Promises of the integration of the Awakenings into the military and state institutions have gone largely unfilled, while periodic arrests of or campaigns against prominent Sunnis have triggered dismay. Despite episodic acts of violence, attitudes at the time of this writing have not tipped back in the other direction. But this should not offer too great a comfort. Sunni opinion shifted once, profoundly and rapidly and without a great deal of advance warning, and inattention to the reasons why could allow it to happen again with profound implications for Iraq's future.

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<sup>144</sup> Adm. Michael Mullen, "Strategic Communication: Getting Back to the Basics," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (September 2009): 2-4.