

Sahwa's role in protecting IDPs and returnees in Iraq

Cherie Taraghi

The creation of the Sahwa forces, an unofficial armed group outside the control of the Iraqi government and state, was a convenient product of US military policy.

The factors leading to the improvement of the security situation in Iraq in recent years have been the subject of considerable political controversy; it is universally acknowledged, however, that the establishment of the Sahwa Council and Sahwa forces¹ was a crucial factor in the reduction of violence. Sahwa represents the remarkable change in the position of Sunni tribal elements from supporting the jihadi insurgents to cooperating with the US troops in fighting against al-Qa'eda and Shi'a militias. The decision was aided by enhanced military pressure on the jihadi movement and by the US military's decision to arm and pay members of the unofficially armed Sahwa forces – which eventually came to number over 100,000 militiamen. Sahwa remained overwhelmingly, though not entirely, Sunni Arab, tribal and local neighbourhood-based.

Iraqi IDPs are displaced for varied reasons. Most claim to have left their homes because of direct threats to their lives, although lack of security, fear and generalised violence are also often given as reasons. Given that lack of security is one of the primary push factors resulting in displacement, improved security in the place of origin is the reason most often offered by individuals and families who return. Other reasons are the availability of shelter or ability to return to abandoned property and access to services like food, healthcare and potable water.

The role of Sahwa

The role of the Sahwa forces was to cooperate with US forces in reducing violence in the areas where they were located. They helped take over neighbourhoods under the control of al-Qa'eda or the Mahdi Army² in order to ensure the safety and security of the local citizens. They set up road-blocks to

control passing cars and traffic, and patrolled the streets together with the US troops, arresting 'criminals', kidnappers and identified members of al-Qa'eda. They also guided US troops to road-side bombs and IEDs (improvised explosive devices).

Within months after the establishment of Sahwa forces there started to be a return of a sense of normality, particularly in the Baghdad neighbourhoods where Sahwa forces were based. Explosions and violence were considerably reduced, markets and shops re-opened, children could be seen playing on the streets, roads and street lamps were repaired.

The Sahwa forces were made up of local men who agreed to band together and fight against elements which threatened the security of their local neighbourhood, their families and friends. The same is true for members of the Mahdi Army and other local armed groups which sprang up in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Members of each of the militias felt loyal to their local neighbourhood, as well as sharing sectarian, tribal and other forms of loyalty. The local population in the same manner felt close to their local 'brothers' and 'sons', and cared for and supported them.

Much like the extremist militias, Sahwa's goals were to consolidate their territory and impose their authority on particular areas. In many ways they usurped and even replaced the government. Local government and the Iraqi army or police were either not present in these Baghdad neighbourhoods, or were not able to control (or in some cases supported or turned a blind eye to) extremist Shi'a militias who committed crimes against Sunnis. As a result the local people came to depend and rely on the Sahwa forces

for protection. At the same time the tribal leaders heading the Sahwa Council and forces furthered their own sectarian political interests by forming political parties and tried to maximise Sunni power and position.

Sahwa and IDPs/returnees

Sahwa forces were not as a rule directly involved in offering aid or social welfare to Iraqi citizens or IDPs. Their role was in the field of security. This is an important distinction between Sahwa forces and other armed militias, which filled, not always for altruistic reasons, the lacuna left by the inability of the Iraqi government, the UN and other humanitarian organisations to meet the humanitarian needs of Iraqi citizens, let alone of IDPs. At the height of the crisis in Iraq in 2006-07, only the ICRC and the Iraqi Red Crescent were able to effectively continue offering humanitarian assistance.³

The presence of the Sahwa forces helped restore relative calm and security to neighbourhoods where they were stationed, a precondition for the re-establishment of a normal life. They were hired by the US forces to fight and remove al-Qa'eda, the Mahdi Army and other militant armed groups. Sahwa forces were able to extract various neighborhoods from the stranglehold of militant armed groups, thus removing the source of threat and fear for sectarian, ethnic or religious minorities in those neighborhoods.

The process of sectarian segregation which was already underway was clearly encouraged and aided by Sahwa forces, together with the US forces. Sahwa forces, being mostly Sunni, offered passage and safety to fellow Sunnis fleeing harassment, threats and persecution.

In Baghdad, the security and calm created by the presence, road blocks, control and patrolling of Sahwa forces provided opportunities for humanitarian agencies to physically

enter and help some of the most dangerous neighbourhoods they were previously denied access to. Some Sahwa groups are known to have shared their local knowledge and information with the Iraqi Red Crescent, for example identifying IDPs or returnee households who needed assistance.

Membership in the Sahwa forces also provided a chance for IDPs to gain meaningful employment. What mattered for the US forces during 'the surge'⁴ was that locals, militant or otherwise, should stop insurgent acts against the US and instead join the US and Multi-National Force in fighting against al-Qa'eda and other armed militias. By 2006 US commanders acknowledged that a lack of jobs was a key factor in driving the insurgency – the biggest single cause of that being the early

and protection of IDPs' property and have been also been involved both in extracting or removing individuals or militants who have occupied houses abandoned by IDPs, and in ensuring that these properties are not rented or sold without the prior knowledge and consent of the original owners; they have even required proof of identity from the original owners prior to permitting them to resettle in their property.

Interestingly, surveys conducted with local people about the role and effectiveness of Sahwa forces repeatedly mention protection offered to women and children, particularly widows, households led by women and households of female-led returnee families. Sahwa forces are known to specifically patrol, control and protect households and areas with female-led households.

and find civil employment for the remainder of its members, action has been slow and the government does not hide its reluctance. The government finds it very difficult to disregard the fact that many of the members of Sahwa were active insurgents, engaged in fighting against the current Iraqi regime.

Both Shi'a and extremist Sunni insurgent groups have been equally vocal in their denunciations of Sahwa forces, depicting them as US stooges. These pressures and problems faced by the Sahwa forces, particularly the impression that they themselves have become the targeted victims of the sectarian conflict in the country, open the possibility that some may in fact rejoin the insurgency or turn against the current Iraqi regime. These defenders of security and civilian interests may become a threat to security once more, resulting in a reversal of the positive conditions established by Sahwa's presence for Sunni civilians, IDPs or returnees.

Sahwa tapped into different aspects of Iraqi society: continued respect for tribal leaders (especially in rural areas), exhaustion with the brutal violence and disturbance to daily life, and the community's acceptance of their local sons' attempts to protect them. Regardless of their former identity as thugs, insurgents or members of Iraqi al-Qa'eda, between 2006 and 2009 members of the Sahwa forces played an important role in the re-establishment of relative calm and security in Anbar province, in Diyala and in the neighbourhoods of Baghdad where they were stationed. They also played an especially important role in providing both physical and material protection to Sunni IDPs and returnees in the areas where they operated.

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1. *Sahwa* is the Arabic word for 'awakening'.
2. Iraqi paramilitary force created by the Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in June 2003.
3. A number of other organisations were also present and active in different capacities. See FMR Iraq Special Issue <http://www.fmreview.org/iraq.htm>
4. 2007 increase in the number of American troops in order to provide security to Baghdad and Al Anbar Province.



UNHCR/K Brooks

Displaced in Iraq, this woman fled her home town after a mortar attack that killed several children.

US decision to disband the old Iraqi army, providing thousands of potential recruits overnight.

Sahwa also provided the impetus for many to return home. Many Sunni returnees mention Sahwa's contribution to the neighbourhood as one of the reasons why they decided to return. Local citizens in neighbourhoods patrolled and controlled by Sahwa forces praised Sahwa forces for bringing the area back to life and for doing their utmost to ensure their safety and protection.

Potential returnees say that they got word from family members or tribal affiliates in the Sahwa forces about the status of the homes they left behind. Sahwa forces have been directly engaged in identification

The future of Sahwa

Responsibility for Sahwa forces was gradually handed over by the US forces to the Iraqi government and the transfer of responsibility was completed in 2009. As such the Sahwa forces can no longer be considered a 'non-state' armed group. The government of Iraq was sceptical about them from the outset, fearing they would serve as a refuge for unreformed insurgents or that they might challenge the dominant parties' hold on power. Although the government has acknowledged the importance and value of the role played by Sahwa, the sense of mistrust and concern remains. Consequently, although the Iraqi government has promised to incorporate 20% of the Sahwa forces in the national security forces