

The Bush administration's new "model" in Iraq's Anbar province

James Cogan
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An improvement in the security situation facing US troops in the western Iraqi province of Anbar is being hailed by the Bush administration as proof that its "surge" in Iraq is working and provides a "model" for the rest of the country. According to the *New York Times*, "the progress has inspired an optimism in the American command that, among some officials, borders on giddiness".

There has, without question, been a change in the province. In May, only 12 US soldiers lost their lives in Anbar despite 124 deaths across the country—the third highest monthly toll of the war. In most months since the 2003 invasion, a third to a half of US casualties were suffered in Anbar. Over the past four years, guerilla fighters have killed and wounded thousands of American troops in the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah, and in the numerous villages and hamlets that line the Euphrates River as it flows from Iraq's border with Syria.

Even more remarkable than the casualty decline, US troops are now conducting foot patrols in areas of the province they once only entered in armoured vehicles and with fingers on triggers. Popular hatred in Anbar toward the occupation has run deep. US efforts to subjugate the province have proven utterly ruthless.

While there are no exact figures, thousands of Iraqis were killed during the two US assaults on Fallujah in April and again in November 2004. The entire city was virtually reduced to rubble. Ramadi, the provincial capital, is also in ruins after years of constant fighting, artillery bombardments and air strikes. Every aspect of social infrastructure—electricity supply, clean water, sewerage, hospitals, schools—has collapsed. Both cities have been turned into prison camps, with every movement of residents controlled by curfews, checkpoints and barricades.

It is likely that well over 100,000 people, or close to 10 percent of Anbar's 1.3 million pre-war inhabitants, have

been killed under the American occupation. The decrease in attacks on US troops, however, is not because of the years of repression. The modest change is being credited to a decision late last year by Anbar's traditional Sunni Arab sheiks to order their tribes to fight the Al Qaeda-aligned Islamic fundamentalist guerilla groups.

Something of a legend has been built up around Sheik Abdul Sattar al-Rishawi, the 36-year-old leader of the anti-Al Qaeda tribal alliance known as the Anbar Salvation Council. According to various accounts, Abdul Sattar became a US ally and called for the destruction of Al Qaeda in Iraq after his father and three brothers were murdered. Last September, his Risha tribe was joined by 40 other tribes and sub-tribes, some of whom had previously supplied fighters to the anti-occupation insurgency, in what amounts to a blood feud against the *takfiris*, or Islamic fundamentalists.

Abdul Sattar told an Institute for War and Peace Reporting correspondent last December: "We are now fighting the *takfiris*, so either we will survive or they will." Since then, thousands of loyalists have enlisted in the US-trained and funded Iraqi security forces or joined tribal paramilitaries known as Emergency Response Units (ERUs). As a result, the number of police in Anbar soared from a few thousand a year ago to 10,000 by the end of April. The army division in Anbar has enlisted as many as 6,000 new troops. The ERUs—which are reportedly virtually indistinguishable in their dress from Iraqi insurgents—have 2,000 fighters in Ramadi alone.

The transformation in security was described by the *New York Times* on April 29: "For most of the past few years, the government centre in downtown Ramadi, the seat of the provincial government, was under near continual siege by insurgents... Entering meant sprinting from an armoured vehicle to the front door of the building to evade snipers' bullets. Now, however, the building is being renovated... Hotels are being built next door...

“Violence has fallen swiftly throughout Ramadi and its sprawling rural environs, residents and American and Iraqi officials said. Last summer, the American military recorded as many as 25 violent acts a day in the Ramadi region, ranging from shootings and kidnappings to roadside bombs and suicide attacks. In the past several weeks, the average has dropped to four...”

According to US commander General David Petraeus, tribal informers have enabled the American military to find more insurgent weapons caches in the first five months of this year than all of 2006. He boasted that the situation in the once volatile Anbar town of Hit was now so stable he could “walk the streets eating an ice-cream”.

While the US military may be gloating about its short-term success, it is well aware of what type of regime the sheiks are establishing in Anbar. One soldier told the *New York Times*: “It’s like the Mafia.”

The sheiks are not primarily fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq for revenge, but for the material benefits that flow from dominating the province. With US military assistance, they are eliminating their main rival for control over the extensive smuggling rackets that pass through Anbar to Syria and Jordan.

It is also likely that US allies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan have been involved in winning over the tribes. The Bush administration has been prevailing on Saudi Arabia, in particular, to help shore up the occupation. The Saudi monarchy could well have provided the Iraqi sheiks with money, as well as arms and intelligence.

The timing of the formation of the Anbar Salvation Council suggests that some type of deal was done. Last August, an internal US assessment of the situation in Anbar concluded that the province had largely fallen into Al Qaeda’s hands and there was little that the American military could do about it. Some of the recommended solutions, the *Washington Post* reported last November, were the establishment of a “Sunni state in Anbar” and “creating a local paramilitary force”. Abdul Sattar declared his war on Al Qaeda shortly after the assessment was published.

The ambitions of the sheiks have only been heightened by estimates that as many as 100 billion barrels of oil may lie below the deserts of Anbar province. In the event the estimates are correct, the sheiks are positioning themselves to be the primary beneficiaries of the allocation of contracts to transnational oil conglomerates.

The venality of the tribal collaboration with the US military was best summed up by Sattar himself. According to *Stars and Stripes*, when he was asked why

he was cooperating with the US instead of fighting it, he replied: “Vietnam beat the Americans, and what did it get them? Thirty years later, they’re still living in poverty.”

The sheiks are now preparing to take political control of Anbar. In April, more than 200 tribal heads gathered in the Anbar town of Hamdhiyah and formed “Anbar Awakening,” a party that will contest the provincial elections that are supposed to take place by the end of the year. They are predicting they will win by an “overwhelming” majority.

While the developments in Anbar have had some impact on security, they are already creating new problems for the occupation. The promotion of the tribes has inevitably alienated and cut across the interests of Sunni factions that the US has been courting in Baghdad to assist in ending the insurgency elsewhere in Iraq. The governor whom the sheiks are intending to dislodge is a leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), the largest Sunni party whose members have religious sympathies with the fundamentalist insurgents.

The attitude of the Sunni religious establishment toward the US-tribal alliance was expressed by the leader of the Association of Muslim Scholars, Harith al-Dhari, who has been driven into exile. Last month, he denounced the Anbar Salvation Council as “a band of thieves and bandits”.

More fundamentally, the elevation of petty tribal despots into power over an entire province is another demonstration of the neo-colonial agenda behind the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Thousands of American troops are not in Iraq to assist some type of transition to democracy. They are there to erect a pliable puppet regime that will accept long-term US domination over the country and its resources. In the sheiks of Anbar, the Bush administration has found, at least for now, willing collaborators.



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