

**REVOLUTIONARY IMPACT: THE RISE OF SUNNI RESISTANCE TO AL QAEDA
AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO DEFEATING THE INSURGENCY IN WESTERN
DIYALA**

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Introduction:

Crisscrossed by canals and inhabited by all of Iraq's major ethnic groups, Diyala Province is a highly populated agricultural center in Iraq. Its ethnic makeup and geographical position have presented unique challenges and opportunities for both Coalition and Iraqi security forces tasked with quelling the insurgency and establishing the rule of law during Operation Iraqi Freedom. These forces were faced with a large insular and traditional Sunni population sympathetic to the old regime and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam as well as a Shia-led government indifferent to the political goals of its Sunni and Kurdish population. This complicated human terrain is combined with an unenviable geographic situation. Diyala is bordered by Iran to the east, the restive Sunni province of Salah Al Din to the west, the ethnic battleground of Kirkuk to the north, and the Jaish Al Mahdi stronghold of Sadr City in Baghdad to the south. Its terrain is, for the most part, a mixture of dense urban centers, small agricultural villages, canal lined roads, and large palm groves.

From August 2007 thru May 2008, 1st Battalion 38th Infantry Regiment "TF Rock", a Stryker Infantry Battalion was assigned to Western Baqubah and later to a large swath of Western Diyala. It too faced the diverse challenges of its predecessors in Diyala. However, unique undercurrents of change within Sunni Iraqi society successfully exploited by Coalition Forces (CF) altered the landscape of the battle space.

Inspired by the Sunni revolt against the foreign-led Al Qaeda insurgents in Al Anbar province to the west; a diverse and questionable collection of Sunni groups in Diyala, known collectively by Coalition Forces as the Sons of Iraq (SoIz), decided to follow suit. Emanating from eastern Baqubah and a vanguard of smaller rural tribes, this phenomenon grew throughout 2007 and 2008 to deny the human terrain from the insurgents and aid security forces in the identification and reduction of Al Qaeda forces (AQIz). These groups were not without their issues. Most were former insurgents, with little appreciation or practice of legal norms and behavior. Close former ties with Al Qaeda provided invaluable intelligence but also led to numerous breaches in security and questions of loyalty. Finally, Shia government officials at the

provincial and national level remained cold to the integration of these Sunni groups into the state security apparatus.¹

An analysis of this frame breaking phenomenon is essential in understanding the nature of the insurgency in Diyala province and the future of security and stability in Iraq. A case study of the tribal resistance groups within the 1-38 battle space in Western Diyala allows an in-depth analysis of these groups' successes and failures. What caused large segments of the Sunni population to reject Al Qaeda's brand of extremism? Why and how did these resistance groups develop in Diyala province? How, and to what extent, did they affect the overall security situation and complement the Coalition and Iraqi Security Force campaign plans? Such an analysis of the Sunni revolt against Al Qaeda in western Diyala will clearly highlight its importance in reducing Al Qaeda's strength and capability in Western Diyala.

Thesis: The Sunni Tribal and Urban revolt against Al Qaeda in Western Diyala province, while imperfect in nature, was essential in defeating the AQI threat in the area.

Background:

Diyala Province:

Diyala Province has an agriculturally based economy derived from the Diyala River, a Tigris river tributary that gives the province its name. The province's capital, Baqubah is situated northeast of Baghdad, dissected by the Diyala River. Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the province was well known for its orange production and date farms. Over 75% of the province's population lives in the cities of Baqubah, Muqadiyah, and Khanaqin.² A majority of the province's estimated population of 1,224,000 are Sunnis. However, large Shia populations exist in Khan Bani Saad, Khalis, and along the northern edge of the Diyala River Valley.³ To the

¹ Jack Keane, Frederick W. Kagan and Kimberly Kagan, "The Endgame in Iraq" The Weekly Standard Monday, 22 September 2008.

² *Diyala Province*. Retrieved November 15, 2008 from Operation Iraqi Freedom: Official Website Multi-National Force- Iraq. Website: http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1472.

³ *Diyala Governorate*. Retrieved October 20, 2008 from Wikipeda. Website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diyala_Province .

north of the province stretch the Hamrin Mountains and the large water reservoir of Hamrin Lake. Kurds, who make up 20 percent of the province stretch from the border of Kurdistan through the city of Khanaqin in the North eastern fringes of the province.

1-38 IN's "TF Rock" Battle Space:

1-38 IN's area of responsibility in Western Diyala included the western half of the strategically important city of Baqubah as well as elements of the ethnically diverse Khalis Qada (district.) Khalis itself is primarily Shia but its surrounding sub-districts are largely Sunni agricultural communities. Northwestern Diyala, administratively overseen by Khalis, is bordered by the Tigris and Udaim Rivers and largely consists of arid, sparsely populated villages that stretch northwards, the largest of which is the city of Udaim, strategically located on the Kirkuk –Baghdad highway.⁴

Operation Iraqi Freedom in Diyala Overview:

Following the initial phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Diyala province remained relatively calm with sporadic and intermittent insurgent attacks. Insurgents grew to include an assortment of Sunni groups that varied from secular nationalist organizations led by former Baathist Army officers to Islamist groups nominally under the command of global jihadists such as Al Qaeda.

Insurgent attacks in Diyala increased after Coalition forces cleared Fallujah, and Al Anbar province. Analysts noted the movement of senior Al Qaeda in Iraq leaders into Diyala in late 2005. In April 2006, Abu Musab Zarqawi located his headquarters in Hib Hib, a village in the Khalis Qada, and was killed there in June of the same year.⁵ The Sunni boycott of national elections in 2005 ensured that Shia leaders and parties controlled most major leadership positions including the governorship, under Ra'ad al Tamimi. Disenfranchised and excluded from power, the Sunni population became a sympathetic base from which Al Qaeda could conduct

⁴ CPT James Sarf: 1-38 IN Battle Captain, Interview with the author December 5, 2008.

⁵ Eric H. Hamilton, "Expanding Security in Diyala" The Institute for the Study of War, December 2007-May 2008, p. 7.

destabilizing operations. By late 2006, the Islamic State of Iraq, the governing council established by AQI, claimed Baqubah as its capital.⁶

The Birth of Sunni Resistance to AQIZ in Diyala:

Nationalist Sunni insurgent groups such as the 1920s Revolutionary Brigades, Jaish Islami, and Salah Al Din were increasingly marginalized by Al Qaeda's growing dominance in the province. Lacking the outside financing of Al Qaeda and unwilling to conduct the most atrocious acts favored by AQIZ, they began to view Al Qaeda as a more immediate threat than Coalition Forces.

Significant Sunni resistance to Islamic extremists in Iraq began in Al Anbar province. In April of 2007 this movement began to emerge in Diyala. Al Qaeda had established control of Diyala province and maintained it through excessive brutality. It established Sharia law and punished smoking, drinking, and other practices deemed un-Islamic with draconian punishments. For the largely moderate secular Sunni society, this extreme Islamic interpretation was increasingly disillusioning.⁷

Al Qaeda's strategy of disruption focused on inflicting overwhelming civilian casualties. Large bombings, collateral damage from IED attacks on Coalition Forces, targeted assassinations of political leaders, and other tactics invariably led to instability and significant Sunni civilian casualties. This lack of security further alienated Sunni Iraqis.

The rural villages of Diyala were organized in traditional tribal structures under the auspices of large extended families. These families followed time-honored hierarchies which were increasingly challenged and mitigated by AQIZ. As young and more ruthless members of the tribe joined AQIZ, they grew and emerged within the organization's leadership and ignored or threatened tribal elders.

⁶ Ibid, p.3.

⁷ Aswat al-Iraq, "Baqubah blast kills Cop, Wounds 7," Translated from Arabic, December 18, 2007.

Reports from local nationals recall April 8, 2007 as a seminal date of transformation. Inspired by religious leaders who denounced the excesses of Al Qaeda in the East Baqubah neighborhoods of Tahrir and Buhriz and bolstered by the increased presence of Stryker infantrymen from 5-20 IN, 3-2 SBCT, local people began to aide Coalition Forces and openly fight AQI. This urban resistance was led by a motley assortment of the more secular insurgent groups.⁸ These groups included the 1920s Revolutionary BDEs, Hamas, Jaish Al Muhajideen, and Salah Al Din. With the help of Coalition Forces they began securing East Baqubah.⁹

Al Obeidy tribes in allegiance with the Al Hamdani tribe in Northwest Diyala began a similar struggle within days of East Baqubah's uprising. These tribes met in the village of Dojima and sealed a pact of resistance against Al Qaeda on April 10, 2007.¹⁰ All such tribes had strong allegiances to former insurgent groups and initially decided to fight Al Qaeda without Coalition Force support.

Prior to 1-38 IN's arrival in Diyala, Coalition Forces varied in their support for these embryonic local defense forces. 5-20 IN had been the most aggressive in leveraging the groups.¹¹ Originally designated by CF as Baqubah Guardians, they were subsequently described as Concerned Local Nationals (CLNs), Concerned Local Citizens (CLCs), and ultimately Sons of Iraq (SoIz).

SoIz Groups in 1-38 IN's AO:

⁸ Abu Talab: Hamas SoIz leader, Interview with the author, April 15, 2007.

⁹ Kimberly Kagan, "Securing Diyala" The Institute for the Study of War, June 2007-November 2007, p. 8.

¹⁰ Sheik Khalid Al Hamdani: Northwestern Tribal leader, Interview with the author, December 20, 2007.

¹¹ Former Captain Aaron Tiffany: 1st Platoon B-14 CAV, 5-20 IN, Interview with the author, December 7, 2008.

However they were named, they reflected a wide cross section of Diyala's society. Their main shared similarity was the fact that they were Sunnis professed to fight against Al Qaeda. As Al Qaeda's influence waned following CF and ISF combat operations, an increasingly diverse kaleidoscope of Sunni Iraqi citizens took up arms against the Jihadists. The terrain which these groups sprung up to defend gave them similar characteristics.

Urban Networks (West Baqubah):

In the urban zones of West Baqubah controlled by 1-38 IN, the SoIz were primarily comprised of former insurgent groups with local citizen participation. Within in the city, the tribal networks had been largely superseded by neighborhood loyalties. Following Operation Arrowhead Ripper, different ex- insurgent groups established themselves in the former Al Qaeda stronghold. In the neighborhoods of Mufrek, Mujema, Khatoon, and elsewhere these men established themselves under the direction and strict control of landowning Coalition Forces. In New Baqubah and Sebat Nissan, the most prosperous and wealthy neighborhoods of West Baqubah, the 1920s Revolutionary Brigades under the charismatic leadership of Haji Uday held sway. In Khatoon, competing groups under the command of Hamas, and Salah Al Din controlled respective areas. They had a chain of command that reached back to the SoIz nucleus in East Baqubah and, in some cases, were purportedly under the control of larger national level insurgent organizations. As former insurgents they invariably had the best intelligence on AQIZ. In many cases they continued to infiltrate and be infiltrated by unrepentant Jihadist groups.

Transition Zone/Suburban Networks (Khalis Qada):

Amongst the transition zones to the north and south of west Baqubah, an assortment of independent groups sprang up with either nominal or no allegiance to national insurgent groups. Led, in many cases, by former Baathist Army officers and charismatic local dignitaries they were perhaps the purest reflection of local defense forces. As reflected by the terrain from which they operated, a mix of suburbs, manufacturing zones and farmland, these groups included a cross section of the Sunni tribal groups.

These SoIz were only able to openly operate after TF Rock had conducted clearing operations and had established a significant presence in the area. Underneath this security

umbrella, local citizens would gather increasing confidence and stand up rudimentary local defense forces. Such groups are best represented by SoIz in Hadid to the north and the independent strike forces of Abu Abdullah south of West Baqubah.

Rural/Tribal Networks (Khalis Qada):

In the rural zones of Western Diyala, SoIz groups reflected the tribal societies that held sway in the small villages and farmland of the Diyala River Canal Zone and arid land to the east of the Udaim River. Almost purely tribal structures, they followed the dictates of tribal sheiks who had chosen to support or oppose AQIz. Noteworthy was the whole-hearted enlistment of segments of the Al Obeidy tribe in the Sunni resistance to Al Qaeda. The Gwalba in Dojima and Nye, and later the Al Quebeshat in the Canal Zone are two noteworthy examples of such tight knit Al Obeidy sub tribes.

Shared Traits of SoIz in 1-38 IN AO:

Regardless of their makeup or location all Sunni local defense networks shared a few common characteristics. By and large these men had not suffered directly under the rule of Saddam Hussein, and were generally nostalgic about the level of security that had existed under the former regime. They disdained the brutal tactics, strict fundamentalist rules, and global struggle of Al Qaeda, but many shared a fervent Islamic faith in the Sunni tradition. Furthermore, they also had a shared visceral hatred for Iran and Iranian influence in the new Iraq. As a result, they lacked trust in the new Shia-led government, were wary of its excesses, and cynical about its promises.¹²

Operations and SoIz evolution w/ 1-38 IN in OIF 6-8

1-38 IN faced a daunting task when it assumed responsibility for sections of Western Diyala in late August 2007. The area had humbled many previous CF units with its deep rooted insurgency. In almost all of 1-38 IN's operations, Sunni local defense forces played a key role.

Initially, 1-38 was given the responsibility of solely securing West Baqubah. This area had been cleared by 1-23 IN during Operation Arrowhead Ripper in June of 2007. As a result,

¹²Authors notes: 1-38 IN S5 Civil Military Affairs Officer November 2007-June 2008.

AQIZ no longer overtly controlled the area. However numerous terrorist cells remained embedded in the population. This allowed AQIZ to conduct targeted assassinations of local government leaders as well as house born Improvised Explosive Devices (HBIED) and suicide vest attacks (SVEST.) 1-23 IN had worked with, and established embryonic SoIZ groups in the neighborhoods of New Baqubah, Khatoon, and southern Mujema. Thus, 1-38 IN fell in on these SoIZ groups and further expanded as well as reorganized them. These urban SoIZ groups were essential in providing intelligence on continued Al Qaeda operations. In addition, they were stationed in safe houses in strategic locations throughout the various neighborhoods ensuring a broad and constant security presence that augmented Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces. However, these urban SoIZ, with opaque links to national insurgent groups, were not without issues. In many cases they feuded amongst themselves for control and were distrustful and confrontational with the Shia dominated police force.¹³ Furthermore, CF were wary that SoIZ groups would use their new found legitimacy to intimidate and take advantage of the local population.

1-38 IN was able to control these mitigating factors through funding and close supervision of these SoIZ groups. At all hours, platoons from 1-38 would patrol their assigned sectors in the city and visit SoIZ safe houses ensuring proper behavior, personnel accountability and asserting the control of both CF and the Iraqi government over these paramilitary groups. In addition, the Army was the single point of contact for monthly pay of vetted and authorized groups. As a result, 1-38IN was able to greatly influence the behavior of these groups by requiring each member to submit biometric data, as well as commit to a code of conduct and oath upon entering a Son's of Iraq group.¹⁴ Finally, 1-38 IN initiated a twice monthly West Baqubah Joint Security Meeting held on a rotating basis at the headquarters of the varied Iraqi Security Force in the area. This was intended to allow SoIZ, ISF, and CF to coordinate security efforts, discuss grievances between the groups, and assert Iraqi government control.

¹³ CPT Alex Garcias: 1-38 IN A/S2 Intelligence Officer in an interview with the author, December 5 2008.

¹⁴ Major Jarett Broemmel: 1-38 IN S3 Operations Officer February 2008- May 2009.

Starting in November of 2007, 1-38 IN was increasingly tasked with securing ever larger sections of Western Diyala. These areas had not been cleared and AQIZ was using them as sanctuaries following Operation Arrowhead Ripper.¹⁵ Furthermore, no SoIz groups had been officially organized or supported in these areas. However, Sunni local defense forces once again proved invaluable in the fight against Al Qaeda. Along the Tigris River, bordering Salah Al Din province, elements of the Gwalba and Hamdani tribes in Northwestern Diyala had been fighting Al Qaeda since April without coalition support. In the Iron Triangle, an AQIZ stronghold, no overt Sunni resistance to AQIZ existed. However, sympathetic village leaders in both areas studied AQIZ behavior and provided intelligence to CF on suspected enemy locations and defenses in AQIZ controlled villages before major combat operations. In addition, they acted as guides during combat and secured the terrain after CF left. In fact, SoIz groups in the rural areas of Western Diyala may have been more essential than those in West Baqubah. With the incredible extent of terrain 1-38 IN and ISF were responsible for in Western Diyala, CF would have been powerless in stopping AQIZ from re infiltrating these areas after major clearing operations. Only through the continual presence of SoIz groups were the gains that CF made, secured.

Without constant CF over-watch, these SoIz groups were vulnerable to concentrated AQIZ counterattacks. Significantly, this occurred in Northwestern Diyala in late December 2007. As a result, 1-38 IN made a concerted effort to improve SoIz force protection through the provision of resources such as concertina wire, sand bags and concrete barriers. With these additional resources, tactical guidance to local Sons of Iraq groups focused on control of key terrain that provided the best observation and early warning.¹⁶

The impact that the Sunni resistance to Al Qaeda had on the security situation in Diyala province is evident by the significant drop in the numbers of violent acts and the support from American commanders for the continued growth of the program. Violence in Diyala dropped

¹⁵ Eric H. Hamilton, p.6.

¹⁶ Major Jarett Broemmel: 1-38 IN S3 Operations Officer February 2008-May 2009.

70% between June 2007 and May 2008.¹⁷ Between December 2007 and May of 2008, SoIz strength in Diyala grew by 10,000.¹⁸ The dynamic provided by the Sons of Iraq program was essential to altering the security situation in Diyala.

Conclusion:

Thus, it is clear that a complex interplay of diverse factors revolutionized the counterinsurgency fight in Western Diyala. Inspired by an initial Sunni rejection in Al Anbar province of Al Qaeda led insurgents, Sunni groups in Diyala became increasingly disillusioned with Al Qaeda's heavy handed tactics and control. With the support provided by growing and aggressive CF and ISF troop presence during surge operations in 2007-2008 these SoIz groups finally had the security umbrella necessary to allow them to wrest control of the population away from a militarily superior Al Qaeda.

The Sunni local defense forces in Diyala were a motley collection of groups with varying military ability and political goals. They ran the gamut from traditional tribes to former urban guerillas. All held widespread Sunni grievances with the current political environment following Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, they had decided that the hubris and excessive brutality exhibited by Al Qaeda in Iraq, combined with financial incentive of US security contracts, had superseded their other varied grievances.

This sea change was essential to changing the dynamic of the insurgency in western Diyala. The insurgents required access to and influence over the population in 1-38IN's AO in order to continue widespread destabilizing attacks. SoIz groups were essential in identifying AQI techniques, tactics, and procedures and targeting continued insurgent leadership. In addition, the local make up of these forces combined with their continual presence denied the human terrain from the enemy.

¹⁷ Eric H. Hamilton, p.26.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 28.

These local defense forces were not without their own issues. Some SoIz leaders were found to have used their position to enrich themselves, both by hoarding CF Contract funds and managing lucrative side businesses. In many cases, SoIz groups had at one time been insurgents and consequently they had little concept of legal niceties and were occasionally infiltrated by AQIz.

These drawbacks did not surpass the revolutionary effect SoIz had on the security situation in Western Diyala during 1-38 IN's time in Iraq. Such forces augmented security in their own communities both with local knowledge and numbers that could never be matched by either Coalition or Iraqi Security Forces.