

Query response a-7368 of 6 September 2010

Iraq: 1) Information on the activities of the Iraqi Awakening Councils between 2007 and 2009; 2) Information on crimes committed by members of the Awakening Councils in the same period

This response was commissioned by the UNHCR Protection Information Unit, Division of International Protection. Views expressed in the response are not necessarily those of UNHCR.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI)*.

This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection.

Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is comprehensively summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference.

1) Information on the activities of the Iraqi Awakening Councils between 2007 and 2009

In an elaborate paper on the Awakening forces published by the Institute for the Study of War in 2008 it is stated that the movement has been known under different names, such as "Concerned Local Citizens" (CLC) and later under "Sons of Iraq" (Sol). The movement has consisted of various different groups with regard to composition and size and has acted as neighbourhood watch, has established checkpoints and provided tips on suspected insurgents and locations of interest. Their operational area has mainly comprised Baghdad and northern Iraq:

"Broadly, the leaders of these groups are considered members of the Iraqi Awakening ('Sahwa') political movement, which began in the previously-restive al-Anbar province in western Iraq. The members of these groups were known as 'Concerned Local Citizens' (CLC), later renamed 'Sons of Iraq' (Sol). Though the size and composition of the groups vary throughout the country, they generally function as neighborhood watches. These groups augment the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces by establishing checkpoints and providing tips on suspected insurgents as well as locations of improvised explosive device (IED) and weapons caches. In addition to al-Anbar province, Sons of Iraq groups currently exist in and around Baghdad as well as in Northern Iraq." (Institute for the Study of War, 21 February 2008, S. 1)

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The article further mentions that the Sol were self-armed and have launched what resembles a neighbourhood-watch programme in their operational areas:

"By spring 2008, security forces associated with local Awakening groups had reached nearly two-thirds of the country's provinces. The Sunni-dominated forces established a presence in Nineveh, Diyala, Babil, Salahuddin, Baghdad, and beyond. In nearly every case, local security forces were created from the ground up, with sheikhs, tribal leaders, and other power brokers entering into security contracts with coalition forces. Lists of potential recruits were then vetted by U.S. and Iraqi officials. These groups, which were self-armed, have formed a kind of neighborhood-watch program, coordinating operations with U.S. and Iraqi combat commanders in their particular regions." (COFR, 9 January 2009)

In an article published on the website of the Council on Foreign Relations (COFR) in January 2009 it is stated that the Sol are the associated security forces of the Awakening movement:

Yet the future of the Awakening movement--and its associated security forces, the so-called Sons of Iraq (SOI) volunteers--continues to test Iraq's fractious political climate. (COFR, 9 January 2009)

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Eligibility Guidelines for assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers from April 2009 describe that the Awakening Councils turned against Al-Qa'eda in Iraq (AQI) in 2006. They are alternatively known under the name of "Sons of Iraq" (Sol) or "sahwat" in Arabic:

"Tribal councils (Awakening Councils or, in Arabic, sahwat) and former insurgents that turned against AQI as of late 2006 are collectively known as 'Sons of Iraq' (Sol)." (UNHCR, April 2009, S. 12 – FN 5)

The aforementioned UNHCR guidelines dedicate a separate chapter in section VI to the role of the Sol. In 2006, the group was formed of Sunni tribes and former insurgent groups. They had received military training from the Americans and had been encouraged by the US-forces to spread to several areas, where the security situation was significantly compromised. The article describes their activities as mainly security-related. The Awakening councils are fragmented and are largely composed of former insurgents:

"D. Role of the 'Sons of Iraq'

In late 2006, Sunni tribes and former insurgent groups in Al-Anbar Governorate began to turn against AQI, which had its stronghold there. In early 2007, the US military started to support and train these groups and encouraged the 'Awakening' movements to spread into other Governorates, including Baghdad, Diyala, Salah Al-Din, Babel, Ninewa and Kirkuk, where the Sunni insurgency led a violent campaign against the MNF-I/ISF [Multi-National Forces in Iraq/Iraqi Security Forces; annotation ACCORD] and Iraqi civilians. Members of the Sol fight along MNF-I/SIF, man checkpoints, conduct patrols and provide the MNF-I/ISF with intelligence on insurgent activities, using their local knowledge and contacts.

The Sol, which largely enjoys control of Sunni-dominated areas of the Central Governorates, including Sunni-dominated neighbourhoods in Baghdad, is credited with helping to calm down formerly particularly violent and inaccessible areas of Iraq. In Baghdad (as opposed to more rural areas of Al-Anbar Governorate), the councils are less tribe-based as the population is not from one tribe and tribal bonds in general are weaker, but are largely composed of former insurgents. The various councils are fragmented and disconnected, exercising only local control in their neighborhoods. For example, Baghdad, where more than half of the Sol are based, reportedly accounts for 35 different groups." (UNHCR, April 2009, S. 86-87)

The International Herald Tribune mentions in an article from January 2008, published on the website of the U.S. military and veteran membership organization Military.com, that the Awakening movement has provided valuable intelligence and has supported the rebuilding efforts in Iraq. Furthermore, it is stated that the groups had improved security in their areas of operation:

"Despite the successes of the movement, including the members' ability to provide valuable intelligence and give rebuilding efforts a new chance in war-shattered communities, the U.S. military acknowledges that it is also a high-risk proposition. It is an experiment in counterinsurgency warfare that could contain the seeds of a civil war - in which, if the worst fears come true, the United States would have helped organize some of the Sunni forces arrayed against the central government on which so many American lives and dollars have been spent. In interviews with Awakening groups in 10 locations - four interviewed during a week in Anbar, and six groups in and around Baghdad interviewed over several days - it was evident that the groups were improving security in their areas. But it was also clear that there was little loyalty, in either direction, between the Sunni groups and the Shiites running the government." (International Herald Tribune, 4 January 2008)

In an article published by the Christian Science Monitor in July 2010 it is mentioned that the Awakening councils have been aligned with the Unity Alliance of Iraq:

"Politically, the Awakening councils are aligned with the Unity Alliance of Iraq, a 'non-sectarian grouping of parties and individuals who portray themselves as secular nationalists,' according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace." (Christian Science Monitor, 19 July 2010)

In an article in The Guardian from August 2010 the emergence of the Awakening Councils in the year 2006 is mentioned briefly:

"The Sons of Iraq grew out of a series of mini-rebellions against militants associated with al-Qaida that started in late 2006. They soon grew into a success story in Iraq, which was capitalised on by the then commanding US general, David Petraeus, who agreed to pay each member a \$300 monthly salary and used the rebels as a tool to quell the boiling insurgency." (The Guardian, August 10, 2010)

According to an article from the New York Times (NYT) from July 2010 the Sunni Awakening movement was established in Anbar province in 2006. Since then the movement cooperated with the American forces in the region:

“The Sunni Awakening movement began in western Anbar Province in 2006 as the violence in Iraq peaked and Sunni tribal leaders began feeling pressure from all sides. The tribal leaders there decided to stop fighting the American forces in their region and instead cooperate with them in taking on Al Qaeda in Iraq, a largely homegrown group that is believed to have foreign leadership. The movement then spread around the country as a means of Sunni self-preservation.” (NYT, 19 July 2010)

Further reading on the Awakening Councils:

- CSIS – Center for Strategic & International Studies: How soon is safe?, Chapter XI: The Sons of Iraq (Awakening or Sahwa Councils), p. 139-149
<http://csis.org/publication/how-soon-safe>
- The Washington Quarterly: The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives, January 2009
www.twq.com/09winter/docs/09jan_McCary.pdf
- U.S. Marine Corps University: Al-Anbar Awakening – Volume II – Iraqi Perspective
<http://www.al-sharq.com/pdfs/download.php?id=308>

2) Information on crimes committed by members of the Awakening Councils in the same period (2007-2009)

In a list published in the aforementioned UNHCR guidelines members of the Awakening Councils are associated with abductions, torture, extra-judicial killings and extortion of civilians after the fall of the former regime:

“b. After the fall of the former regime

– Arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention, torture, disappearances and summary or extrajudicial executions of civilians reportedly committed by parts of the ISF, and in particular the Police, Special Police Commandoes/Iraqi National Police and the FPS;

– Abductions, extortion and intimidation, torture, summary or extra-judicial killings and forced displacement of civilians by militias, at times in collaboration with the ISF, and insurgency groups;

– Abductions, torture, extra-judicial killings and extortion of civilians by members of the Awakening Councils;

– Forced displacement of Arab settlers in Kirkuk, as well as arbitrary arrests, abductions, incommunicado detention and torture attributed to the Kurdish Peshmerga, security and intelligence agencies;

– Abductions, extortion, rape, murder and torture by criminal gangs, at times in cooperation with or on behalf of militias or insurgents.” (UNHCR, April 2009, S. 31)

USA Today reports in an article from June 2008 of demonstrations in Baghdad against the Sol. The demonstrators had implicated the Sol with their alleged role in preventing them to return to their homes in a Sunni-dominated neighborhood:

"In June 2008, hundreds of Shi'ite IDPs demonstrated in Baghdad to protest against the Sol in the Sunni-dominated neighbourhood of Adil, saying that they were preventing them from returning to their homes in the neighbourhood." (USA Today, 29 June 2008)

A report published in 2008 by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, a coalition consisting of various international NGOs and IGOs, mentions allegations connecting the Awakening Councils with the recruitment of children:

"Especially troubling are reports of use of children, including mentally handicapped children, by AQI and associated groups as suicide bombers. Other groups that have allegedly recruited children are the Awakening Councils and JAM." (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 20 May 2008)

In March 2009 several media and news agencies, such as BBC, Reuters and The Seattle Times, as well as a report on the website of the US forces in Iraq give account of criminal activities allegedly committed by a member of the Awakening Councils. An arrest had been based on accusations of links to bomb-making-cells, kidnappings, extortion and al-Qaeda:

"U.S. forces said on Friday they opened fire on a group of fighters who could belong to a Sunni Arab patrol unit, days after the arrest of members of another unit by Iraqi forces triggered a gun battle. [...] The arrest of Adil al-Mashhadani, a Baghdad Sunni Arab force leader, last week started clashes between his supporters and Shi'ite-led government forces. The U.S. military on Friday said its planes had fired on four armed men seen planting a roadside bomb late on Thursday in the north Baghdad district of Taji, killing one of the men and wounding two others. Initial investigations showed that at least one of the men was listed among the U.S.-backed Sunni fighters, who call themselves Awakening Councils – 'Majalis al-Sahwa' in Arabic -- but which the U.S. military calls 'Sons of Iraq'. [...] Mashhadani was arrested on suspicion of links to bomb making-cells, kidnappings, extortion and al Qaeda." (Reuters, 3 April 2009)

- BBC World News: Arrest tests loyalty of Iraq Awakening, 30 March 2009
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7972784.stm
- The Seattle Times: US in Iraq kills Sunni paramilitary planting bomb, 3 April 2010
http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2008933807_apmliraq.html
- Reuters: Iraqi forces arrest more U.S.-allied Sunni guards, 4 April 2009
<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL453568320090404>
- Reuters: Iraq Sunni guard wanted for grave crimes: U.S., 30 April
<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE52T5X920090330>
- US Forces Iraq: ISF Arrest al-Mashadani for Suspected Crimes (Baghdad), 29 March 2009
http://www.usf-iraq.com/?option=com_content&task=view&id=25945&Itemid=21

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<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0719/Iraq-suicide-attacks-target-Sunni-Awakening-militias-dozens-killed>
- COFR - Council on Foreign Relations: Finding a Place for the 'Sons of Iraq', 9 January 2009
<http://www.cfr.org/publication/16088/>
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<http://www.understandingwar.org/files/reports/Backgrounder%2023%20Sons%20of%20Iraq%20and%20Awakening%20Forces.pdf>
- International Herald Tribune: A Dark Side to Iraq 'Awakening' Groups, 4 January 2008 (available at Military.com)
<http://www.military.com/NewsContent/0,13319,159357,00.html>
- NYT - New York Times: Awakening Movement in Iraq, 19 July 2010
http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iraq/awakening_movement/index.html
- RFE/RL – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: Incorporating The Sons Of Iraq, 15 December 2008
http://www.rferl.org/content/Incorporating_The_Sons_Of_Iraq/1359808.html
- The Guardian: Fears of al-Qaida return in Iraq as US-backed fighters defect, 10 August 2010
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/10/al-qaida-sons-of-iraq>
- The Washington Quarterly: The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives, January 2009
www.twq.com/09winter/docs/09jan_McCary.pdf
- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers, April 2009 (available at Reliefweb)
[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7RYS5A-full_report.pdf/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7RYS5A-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf)
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http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7972784.stm
- Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers: Child Soldiers Global Report 2008 – Iraq, 20 May 2008
<http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/content/iraq>

- Reuters: Iraq Sunni guard wanted for grave crimes: U.S., 30 April
<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE52T5X920090330>
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