

In Iraq, a Perilous Alliance With Former Enemies

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE ISKAN, [Iraq](#) -- Inside a brightly lit room, the walls adorned with memorials to 23 dead American soldiers, Lt. Col. Robert Balcavage stared at the three Sunni tribal leaders he wanted to recruit.

Their fighters had battled U.S. troops. Balcavage suspected they might have attacked some of his own men. The trio accused another sheik of having links to the Sunni insurgent group al-Qaeda in Iraq. That sheik, four days earlier, had promised the U.S. military to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq and protect a strategic road.

"Who do you trust? Who do you not trust?" said Balcavage, commander of the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 25th Infantry Division, his voice dipping out of earshot.

An hour later, he signed up some of America's newest allies.

U.S. commanders are offering large sums to enlist, at breakneck pace, their former enemies, handing them broad security powers in a risky effort to tame this fractious area south of Baghdad in Babil province and, literally, buy time for national reconciliation.

American generals insist they are not creating militias. In contracts with the U.S. military, the sheiks are referred to as "security contractors." Each of their "guards" will receive 70 percent of an Iraqi policeman's salary. U.S. commanders call them "concerned citizens," evoking suburban neighborhood watch groups.

But interviews with ground commanders and tribal leaders offer a window into how the United States is financing a new constellation of mostly Sunni armed groups with murky allegiances and shady pasts.

The two-week-old initiative, inspired by similar efforts underway in Baghdad, Anbar and Diyala provinces, has more than halved attacks here against American troops, from 19 a day to seven, U.S. commanders said. But in a land of sectarian fault lines and shifting tribal loyalties, the strategy raises concerns about the long-term implications of empowering groups that steadfastly oppose the Shiite-led government.

Shiite leaders fear that the United States is financing highly trained and well-armed militias that could undermine the government after American troops withdraw. Shiites worry such groups

could weaken central authority and challenge democratic institutions that many would like to see take root.

U.S. generals said they vet the backgrounds of every recruit, but ground commanders here said that is all but an impossible task.

"Officially, we will not deal with those who have American blood on their hands," said Balcavage, 42. "But how do you know? You don't. There's a degree of risk involved. A lot of it is gut instinct. That's what I'm going on. They didn't teach me how to do this at West Point."

'It's Like Rent-a-Cop'

In this fertile region, divided by the Euphrates River and torn by violence, U.S. soldiers are overstretched and Iraqi troops are in short supply. Isolated Sunni tribal lands have provided extremists with havens that are off-limits to U.S. patrols and Iraq's mostly Shiite security forces.

"We've done nothing in this area, because we could not get in there," said Col. Michael Garrett, commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, adding that the tribal strategy will "buy time and access."

The sheiks are promised reconstruction projects in their strongholds and jobs for their fighters in Iraq's security forces. In return, they pledge to patrol their lands, battle al-Qaeda in Iraq and dismantle roadside bombs, the main killer of U.S. soldiers.

The sheiks commit to securing oil pipelines and U.S. military supply routes, taking over some of the duties of Iraq's army and police. The fighters are provided with badges, yellow reflective belts and arrest powers.

"It's like rent-a-cop," said Maj. Rick Williams, a Tulsa native who is a liaison to tribal leaders in the region.

The goal is to mimic the successes unfolding in the Sunni heartland of Anbar, where U.S.-backed sheiks have fought al-Qaeda in Iraq for months. There, insurgent attacks have dropped dramatically.

But in this patch of north Babil province, colored in green hues and crisscrossed with irrigation canals, marshes and fish farms, the tribal and sectarian landscape is more complex than in Anbar, which is homogenously Sunni. Babil's battle lines blur easily.

Hundreds of local Sunni tribesmen have aligned themselves with al-Qaeda in Iraq or other Sunni insurgent groups, such as the Islamic Army. Shiite tribes are weak because loyalties to clerics are stronger than allegiances to sheiks.

'They Took Everything'

Most of the new recruits hail from the Jenabi, the largest and most influential tribe. Under Saddam Hussein, the Jenabi were considered a "golden tribe," filling the ranks of his elite Republican Guard and army. After the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the Jenabi, like so many other Sunni tribes, joined the insurgency.

Ahmed Rasheed Khadr, 38, was among them. He and his fighters fought U.S. forces with a vengeance, he said. But by 2005, Khadr was facing a new threat. Extremists linked to al-Qaeda in Iraq overran Howija, where his family owned 700 acres, and imposed strict interpretations of Islamic laws. And like [Afghanistan's](#) Taliban, they banned smoking, television, even cellphones with video cameras, Khadr said.

The Jenabi splintered. Some sided with the al-Qaeda in Iraq fighters out of fear. Others joined because they wanted to isolate themselves from the region's Shiites and their militias. Those who refused to align were targeted, often by their own tribesmen.

"The Jenabi tribe, the problem they're having is that the al-Qaeda is them," Balcavage said.

Galib Youssef Fahad, Khadr's cousin, can't forget Nov. 12, 2005.

"Al-Qaeda attacked our area of Howija. They slaughtered 15 of our men, some our sons, uncles and brothers," said Fahad, his eyes dull with sorrow. "After the massacre, they burned our houses and stole our cars. They took everything."

He and his tribesmen fled to Hay al-Askari, where they live today.

Sensing an opportunity, both Fahad and Khadr say they now want to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq. After years of feeling disenfranchised, they seek legitimacy. They want their lands back and money that will strengthen their control over their tribe. They hope for political empowerment and a stronger position after an American withdrawal.

But the main reason they visited the U.S. military base last week was this: They had heard that another Jenabi leader, known as Sheik Sabah, was working with the Americans.

An Offer to the Sheiks

It was 5.20 p.m. one day last week. First Sgt. James McGann told Balcavage that some sheiks from Howija were at the gate of the base. They wanted to see him.

"Maybe they're al-Qaeda," Balcavage quipped. His face turned serious.

"Are they enemy?" he asked, recalling attacks on Americans in Howija. McGann shrugged.

A half-hour later, after the visitors had been frisked and relieved of their weapons, they were taken to the Bastogne Room, named for the town in Belgium where a previous generation of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment fought during World War II.

Outside the conference room are four photos, in elegant wooden frames, of comrades killed in this war. Nearby is a wall covered with photos of armaments, bombs and other reminders of the perils outside.

Balcavage stared around the room. Fahad, Khadr and a third Jenabi leader, Falah Khadr Muhammad, sat on one side along with three other tribesmen. Farther down the table was a thick-bearded American civilian and former Special Forces soldier.

And next to Balcavage: Fadhil Youssef, a former Sunni insurgent who had spent six months in a U.S. military detention center. He was Balcavage's conduit into the arcane world of Iraq's tribes. Balcavage said he trusted him.

Speaking through an interpreter, the commander made his offer to the sheiks. Each of their men would receive about \$350 a month. That pay would create an incentive to join the Iraqi police, whose salary is roughly \$500, when it was possible, he said. The military would also pay the sheiks \$100 for every bomb plucked off the roadside.

They would need to sign an interim contract, and if they properly secured the area they would be paid in 30 days. The money, he said, would be paid to the sheiks, and they could divide it up any way they chose.

He urged them to stay united.

"If we are going to work with Jenabis, we're going to work with all the Jenabi tribes," Balcavage said.

'We Will Support You'

It was the sheiks' turn to speak.

They immediately accused Sheik Sabah of having links to al-Qaeda in Iraq and of playing a role in driving them off their lands.

"Sheik Sabah represents the leaders of al-Qaeda who did the killing," Fahad said.

Balcavage asked Fahad whether Sabah belonged to the Islamic Army, which is fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq, or to al-Qaeda in Iraq itself.

"Al-Qaeda," Fahad replied. Sabah, he alleged, claimed to have switched allegiances to the Islamic Army as a way to make himself more attractive to the Americans.

Perplexed, Balcavage looked at Youssef. It had been less than two weeks, but two rival factions already had arisen within the "concerned citizens." Sabah had formed a group called the VIP Council. Youssef's was called the Iraq Rescue Council.

Later, Youssef told Balcavage that Sabah had been trying to force other sheiks to join his faction. "They take their guns and wave the American flag in the air," Youssef said. "No one can say no."

Meanwhile, Fahad was speaking with the former Special Forces soldier, known as JR. For security reasons, U.S. commanders here declined to provide JR's name or affiliation.

"We have a lot of men. We want to fight and chase al-Qaeda out of the area," Fahad said. "We are ready."

"They want to go home, and they want to control the area," JR said. "So with our help, you'll bring your people back into this area?"

Fahad and the other sheiks nodded. They told him they have about 90 fighters.

JR, asserting control, pored over a map of the area.

"It will be an honor to retake the lands al-Qaeda has taken from you, and we will support you," he said.

Balcavage asked Youssef to start preparing a contract for the sheiks, who then had their photos and fingerprints taken in the conference room. Their retinas were scanned and their weapons registered.

'I Can Do a Better Job'

Khadr said he planned to use the U.S. money to buy more arms on the black market. "We have some personal protection arms, but if we want to really fight al-Qaeda and destroy them, we need more weapons," said Khadr, with a faint smile.

But he's not holding out hope that his tribesmen will be allowed to join Iraq's Shiite-dominated army and police. So far, he and other tribal leaders have dispatched their men to three separate military recruiting drives. At each, the government refused to let them join the army, U.S. commanders and tribal leaders said.

The government, Khadr said, is inefficient. Officials "have failed to pull the people towards them. They have failed to fight militias and insurgents. They have failed in running the whole country," he said.

Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, the top U.S. commander in Babil and other areas south of Baghdad, said last month: "If these 'concerned citizens' don't get a sense that the government of Iraq is going to embrace them and allow them to be legitimate, this is all for nothing."

But in some cases, the sheiks are signing up to replace the Iraqi government in their areas. Williams, the tribal liaison, recalled how a man named Sheik Abdullah approached him one day and told him that Sunni tribal leaders didn't want the Iraqi army to control a pipeline that ran through their land.

"I can do a better job protecting the pipeline," he told Williams, promising to use his 300 fighters if the Americans called off Iraqi soldiers and awarded him a security contract.

Williams said Abdullah would soon get his contract.

'I Could Be Horribly Wrong'

After the meeting, Balcavage discussed with another commander whether they should give a cache of weapons to help the sheiks retake their lands in Howija from al-Qaeda in Iraq. They quickly decided against it.

Balcavage said he didn't know whether Youssef and other sheiks were trying to poison the military's relationship with Sabah. On July 23, Sabah signed an initial contract to provide 300 men and guard a key supply route to Fallujah and Baghdad.

"The only thing I know is my experience with Fadhil," said Balcavage, referring to Youssef. "I'm trusting my gut. I could be horribly wrong in this situation."

And what about Sabah? Was Balcavage worried about the al-Qaeda in Iraq allegations?

"I'm going to reel him in," Balcavage said. "To keep your enemy close type of thing. Feel him out. I'm going to see how many contacts, how much information I can find out from him. I'll bring his tribe in, if nothing else, and make sure all the agreements get signed."

On Thursday, a group of senior-ranking sheiks made contact with U.S. commanders to become "concerned citizens."

Sabah is their representative.