



Illusions of Victory: the Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State by Carter Malkasian.

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Trying to understanding the Anbar (or “Sunni”) Awakening (2006–7) is complicated by a lack of primary sources and historical perspective. Even fine books by participants concerning the role of the US-led Coalition’s military involvement¹ have been limited by the complexities and recency of the Awakening. In *Illusions of Victory*, historian Carter Malkasian (PhD, Oxon.) makes a salutary, though not completely successful, effort to broaden the scope of the discussion of the US troop surge and the Anbar Awakening in the context of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Malkasian was a civilian advisor to the Marines in 2004–6 and political advisor to Gen. Joseph Dunford in 2013–14, when he was commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. He was not in Iraq during the Awakening, but he often returned to Anbar in order to learn more about the province, the successes of the tribal awakening, and the reasons for its permanence.

The author identifies two main schools of thought concerning the Anbar Awakening. One contends that the US troop surge, plus new counterinsurgency tactics, induced the tribal turn from Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to cooperation with Coalition forces. The second identifies AQI brutality as the reason for the Sunni tribes’ realignment. In short, the combination of Coalition troops and the alienation of Iraqis in Anbar by AQI spawned the Awakening. But this very combination also precluded its long-term success.

The Awakening, Malkasian argues, was born of the self-interest of the Sunni tribes. Al Qaeda’s incursion into Anbar province threatened the local tribal shaykhs² control of lucrative smuggling routes, as well as their traditional role in provincial society. The shaykhs had needed the economic resources and state assistance of Saddam Hussein’s government to provide their tribe members with jobs and reward their loyalty. However, this funding disappeared with the Hussein regime, thereby making the smuggling routes between Iraq and Syria even more vital both to the Anbar tribes and to AQI. But, according to Malkasian, the members of the Awakening initially started working against AQI not because of its vicious methods, but as a means to protect their tribes’ economic resources and enable the shaykhs to use money and goods to secure the allegiance of their tribes.

Illusions of Victory blends Iraqi and Coalition perspectives in a discerning analysis of tribal structure. The author demonstrates that, while the shaykhs were senior members of their tribes, it was more junior tribesmen who initiated the Awakening. When senior tribal leaders went to Syria as the insurgent activity turned to targeting tribal centers of power, their absence allowed younger shaykhs, specifically, Abdul Sittar, to gain greater prominence. Working with Coalition forces,

1. E.g., Peter Mansoor, *The Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2013).

2. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Sons of Iraq.”

Sittar increased his tribe's access to jobs through the addition of more police forces and funding made available by the Commander's Emergency Response Program.³ The Coalition welcomed the tribes' cooperation and worked to protect and support them.

The Awakening did reduce violence in Anbar province, but not for long. The central Iraqi government, led by Nouri al-Maliki, distrusted the Sunni tribes. Though he supported the Awakening forces, as Malkasian notes, this was more from fear of AQI than any hope to integrate Sunni tribal members into the fabric of Iraqi security or police forces. When the US forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011, Maliki's government in Baghdad cut off support for Awakening forces.

The success of the Awakening also raised challenges for tribal cooperation. Al Qaeda's threat to the participating tribes' prosperity was a unifying force among disparate Sunni tribes. However, as that threat diminished, relations among the tribes shifted. Most were less willing to cooperate and sought to maximize their own potential gains. This led to more infighting, exacerbated by the Arab Spring. Tribal leaders needed the support of Iraq's central government, but were not keen to make common cause with it. When the Syrian civil war created a large uncontrolled territory on the borders of Anbar province, it enabled the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to destroy any advances the Awakening had made against terrorist organizations. Sittar died at the hands of ISIS, and his brother, Ahmed al-Rishawi, failed to rally support for another tribal resistance group.

The remnants of the tribal movement fought on after the battles of January 2014, diminishing over the course of the year. In al-Qa'im, on the border with Syria, the Albu Mahal and their thousands of fighters resisted the Islamic State for months. In the end, exhausted, Shaykh Sabah and the Albu Mahal tribal leaders stood aside. Between June 21 and 23, 2014, they surrendered al-Qa'im to the Islamic State. Next, in October, the Islamic State captured Hit and the nearby home villages of the Albu Nimr. The Islamic State massacred approximately 350 Albu Nimr tribesmen, many in public executions, often burying them in mass graves. The tribe's lead shaykhs escaped to Jordan. Pockets of tribal resistance in the western desert—including smaller groups of Albu Nimr—survived near al-Asad airbase. A core of the 7th Iraqi Division defended the airbase and surrounding villages. (187)

Illusions of Victory is an informative addition to the literature on its subject. In a relatively short, narrowly focused study, it clarifies the motives behind the actions of Iraqi tribes and their calculation of the benefits and risks of collaborating with Coalition forces. Carter Malkasian is to be congratulated for his more holistic assessment of the surge and the potentials and disappointments of the Anbar Awakening.

3. On the specific sources of CERP funding, see Harry W. Kopp and Charles A. Gillespie, *Career Diplomacy: Life and Work in the US Foreign Service* (Washington: Georgetown U Pr, 2008) 99.