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Blowback in Iraq

The Petraeus Legacy Comes Home

BY KELLEY VLAHOS
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Colin Kahl probably didn't realize he was playing oracle when he looked at the Sunni fighters once on the American's payroll and how they were being left out to dry in Iraq at the end of the so-called Surge in 2008 and mused, "it doesn't take 100,000 of these guys to revert to insurgents to cause big trouble."

Above that August 2008 *Wired* story was a photograph of a Sunni "Son of Iraq" getting his retinas scanned by a U.S. soldier. Before he left his post as commander of the multinational forces in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus's troops oversaw an elaborate program of gathering biometric information including retinal scans and fingerprints from known insurgents, as well as the "Sons" or Sunni "**Awakening**" fighters the military were arming and paying \$300 a day per month to drive al Qaeda from the Sunni cities. In fact, it was a requirement of their service.

Kahl, then an Obama campaign aide, wryly noted – as did others at the time, to be sure – that the growing databank of Sunni men provided “a useful enemies list to the Government of Iraq, if they chose to use it.” Even more pointedly, U.S. Army Lt. Col. John Velliquette called the information, “a hit list if it gets in the wrong hands.”

Well, it likely got into Shiite Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki’s hands, because after the U.S. withdrew, he broke every promise to incorporate those unemployed, **pretty much forsaken**, Sunnis into his government, and not only that, individual “Sons” were soon snatched off the streets, tortured in jail, persecuted and run out of their homes. This has been **well-documented**.

Recent punditry has blamed these and other anti-Sunni policies for fueling the Sunni anger that has driven so many Iraqis into the service of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – and rightly so. They have blamed the Obama Administration for not riding herd on Maliki and letting things get as bad as they did. No defense there. But yet the military, specifically Petraeus, and his role in setting up not only the vulnerability and eventual disenfranchisement of some 90,000 Sunni men, empowering Maliki’s ability to persecute them, is never questioned.

That a number of these men have taken up arms, and are now likely killing alongside ISIS insurgents, is not even warranted a footnote.

Not in everyone’s mind, of course. “Absolutely accurate that Petraeus played a key role in setting the stage for this crisis. The Awakening groups, set up along strictly sectarian lines obviously, were seen as a threat by Maliki and thus targeted and disenfranchised by his regime,” said Dahr Jamail, **an independent journalist** who spent time in Fallujah during the war and has visited since, in an email.

Like others, Jamail has documented the deplorable economic conditions, the detention and torture of Sunnis, as well as the **rising protests**, which began in places like Mosul and Fallujah around the Arab Spring in 2011. Maliki eventually cracked down on them with force, but they never fully dissipated, and the situation was easily exploited by ISIS radicals, who most recently ran Maliki’s government out of several key Sunni strongholds, including Mosul.

“Given the enormous amounts of U.S. cash that Petraeus used to buy off those we could not kill with airstrikes or ground attacks it’s certain that at least half of the Sunni fighters with ISIL are former Sons of Iraq,” guessed (Ret) Col. Doug Macgregor, an **author and war critic**, in a recent exchange.

“Certainly (their) abandonment did result in further isolation of Sunni tribes and certainly was a lead up to what is happening now,” added Donna Mulhearn, an Australian peace activist and writer **who’s trekked to Iraq**, including Fallujah, several times since 2003 and covered the protests last year.

But when it comes to the mainstream media – which is most influential in shaping how Americans view complicated national security stories like Iraq – Petraeus continues to be an authority, not a focus of examination. After Iraq, he left the faltering war in Afghanistan to head the CIA. He was later disgraced when the FBI discovered and exposed **a romantic affair** with his married biographer and once-subordinate Paula Broadwell. He resigned his post at the CIA, a

tenure in which he was known for little more than escalating the drone war and **transforming the spy agency** into a paramilitary force.

But as soon as ISIS began taking over the same Sunni cities Petraeus once declared won through his “Sons,” news organizations rushed for his sage opinion.

Meanwhile, the war hawks, who all but canonized Petraeus during the Bush years, continue to see him as a savior whose masterwork was undone by the Democratic defeatist in the White House. “Petraeus had won the war” and Obama lost it, **declared** Charles Krauthammer, when ISIS began its drive through Sunni Iraq in June. “**Johnny Rotten Judgment**” Senator John McCain went one better, proposing back in January to send Petraeus *back into Iraq*. “(Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri) Al-Maliki trusts (him),” he told CNN’s Candy Crowley in January (though unlike McCain, Petraeus, to his credit, **does not think bombing the country** now will do any good).

Yes, the media savvy ex-general is like a bizzarro Scarlet Pimpernel when it comes to the shifting sands of Iraq War history: he’s hiding in plain sight during these critical moments of national reflection: *was the war worth it? Did we do enough to stabilize it before we left? How did this happen?* Excellent questions for sure. To answer them there are plenty of commentaries about sectarian strife, Maliki’s part in exacerbating ethnic tensions, and the refusal of regular Sunnis to take up arms against ISIS.

But if we are going to blame Obama for supporting the authoritarian regime run amok in Baghdad, we should also point the finger at President Bush and Petraeus, who in his time all but served as a de-facto diplomatic chief in Iraq (the State Department was so very weak in that war). How much did he really do to ensure Maliki wouldn’t turn on his “Sons” when the U.S. left? Or did he merely enable what has taken place out of expedience?

Moreover, there is very little attention given to the **abuse** of Sunni detainees in **U.S custody**, the blind eye we turned to **Iraq’s torture of its prisoners**, and the Shiite death squads which were formed and facilitated under U.S auspices while Petraeus was running the show in the mid-2000’s. From Dexter Filkin’s otherwise gentle assessment of Petraeus for *The New Yorker* in 2012:

“Where did the death squads come from? Many of them were members of the Iraqi Army and the police, which had been trained largely by the Americans. And what American oversaw this training, in the crucial pre-civil-war years of 2004 and 2005? David Petraeus, as the head of Multinational Security Transition Command, during his second tour in Iraq. In that time, the Americans ran a crash program, drawing in tens of thousands of recruits—mostly young Shiites. Some American officials raised concerns, suggesting that the recruits be vetted, but they were rebuffed. On Petraeus’s watch, the Americans armed the Iraqis for civil war. Neither (Fred) Kaplan nor (Tom) Ricks (and certainly not Broadwell) explored this aspect of Petraeus’s time in Iraq; it’s the one part of Petraeus’s career that he doesn’t talk much about.

This was also well documented in a **Guardian expose** last year. Where did that all go? To the gloom of history? There is so much to untangle in the current crisis, and as said before, there is enough blame to go around. Petraeus was known to have managed a tight and successful public relations machinery for which his image and that of his command were priorities. It’s still

working. But that doesn't mean we have to stop trying to gum up the works. And after all, current events in Iraq may just end up doing the job for us.

“Now the truth is out,” said Macgregor, who believes the turmoil in Iraq has exposed the Surge as the “temporary illusion” it was. Sadly, he noted, “the sacrifice of more than a thousand American lives by Petraeus and his Neocon sponsors during the Surge begat a bloodier and more destructive civil war as I and others predicted.”