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The New York Times

Sunnis in Iraq Allied With U.S. Quitting to Rejoin Rebels

By TIMOTHY WILLIAMS and DURAIID ADNAN

10/16/201

Members of United States-allied [Awakening Councils](#) have quit or been dismissed from their positions in significant numbers in recent months, prey to an intensive recruitment campaign by the Sunni insurgency, according to government officials, current and former members of the Awakening and insurgents.

Although there are no firm figures, security and political officials say hundreds of the well-disciplined fighters — many of whom have gained extensive knowledge about the American military — appear to have rejoined [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#). Beyond that, officials say that even many of the Awakening fighters still on the Iraqi government payroll, possibly thousands of them, covertly aid the insurgency.

The defections have been driven in part by frustration with the Shiite-led government, which Awakening members say is intent on destroying them, as well as by pressure from [Al Qaeda](#). The exodus has accelerated since Iraq's inconclusive parliamentary elections in March, which have left Sunnis uncertain of retaining what little political influence they have and which appear to have provided Al Qaeda new opportunities to lure back fighters.

The Awakening members' switch in loyalties poses a new threat to Iraq's tenuous social and political balance during the country's ongoing political crisis and as the United States military prepares to withdraw next year.

“The Awakening doesn’t know what the future holds because it is not clear what the government intends for them,” said Nathum al-Jubouri, a former Awakening Council leader in Salahuddin Province who recently quit the organization.

“At this point, Awakening members have two options: Stay with the government, which would be a threat to their lives, or help Al Qaeda by being a double agent,” he said. “The Awakening is like a database for Al Qaeda that can be used to target places that had been out of reach before.”

The Awakening began in 2006, when Sunni insurgents and tribal leaders began turning against Al Qaeda and other extremists — a change that played a major role in pulling Iraq back from deadly sectarian warfare. The former insurgents were initially paid by the American military, with promises that they would eventually get jobs with the government.

But Awakening leaders and security officials say that since the spring, as many as several thousand Awakening fighters have quit, been fired, stopped showing up for duty, or ceased picking up paychecks.

During the past four months, the atmosphere has become particularly charged as the Awakening members find themselves squeezed between Iraqi security forces, who have arrested hundreds of current and former members accused of acts of recent terrorism, and Al Qaeda’s brutal recruitment techniques.

As part of the militants’ unusual, though often convincing strategy, Awakening members that Al Qaeda fails to kill are then sought out to rejoin the insurgency. They are offered larger paychecks than their \$300 a month government pay and told that they would be far safer.

The government, which says it is trying to integrate the Awakening into broader Iraqi society, has further angered the group recently by confiscating its weapons, saying Awakening fighters lack proper permits, and stripping some fighters of their ranks, which the government says were not properly earned. The pay of some Awakening leaders has also been reduced.

Iraqi officials in Baghdad say they are aware of only a handful of Awakening members who have quit recently, and they are unapologetic about the government’s treatment of the fighters.

“Fighting the Al Qaeda organization does not mean you are giving service to the government or to the people, and that you deserve gifts, rank, presents or benefits,” said Zuhair al-Chalabi, head of the National Reconciliation Committee, set up to heal the country’s sectarian divides. “It is a national duty.”

The Awakening has long complained about Iraq's reluctance to hire more of its members into the army and the police, and about receiving salaries late. Those problems persist, members say.

As of July, less than half — 41,000 of 94,000 — of the Awakening's fighters had been offered jobs by the government, according to the [United States Defense Department](#). Much of the employment has been temporary and involved menial labor. The government has hired only about 9,000 Awakening members for the security forces, with officials blaming budget constraints.

Leaders of the Awakening, who so far do not appear to be among those leaving, say they are not surprised about the defections given what they call the group's marginalization by the government and its abandonment by the American military.

United States forces had overseen the Awakening in some areas of the country as recently as last year, including in Diyala Province, the violent area northeast of Baghdad that is one of Al Qaeda's remaining strongholds. The United States relinquished control of the group as it began ceding more oversight of security to the Iraqi government. The American military declined to comment on the Awakening's troubles.

One Awakening leader in Diyala, Bakr Karkhi, said during an interview that nearly two dozen of his fighters had rejoined Al Qaeda during the past few weeks, a process he said had been occurring throughout Sunni areas of Iraq. Other fighters, he said, had abruptly stopped reporting for duty. "I became suspicious when some of them started making questionable comments, so I expelled them," he said. "Others left the Awakening on their own and then disappeared from their villages. We found out they were conducting illegal operations and cooperating with armed groups, including Al Qaeda."

Awakening fighters say recent entreaties by Al Qaeda — messages that have been passed along by relatives or posted on Internet Web sites — have included pledges not to disrupt tribal traditions, one of the issues that drove a wedge between the majority of Sunni tribes and the insurgency.

A man who identified himself as a member of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia said recently that the recruitment of disaffected Awakening members had been successful in Baquba, the capital of Diyala.

"Many of those who called themselves the Awakening felt remorse," said the man, who used the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Daeni. "They believed they were making a mistake by helping the occupiers and have now returned to Al Qaeda. I can say that the number is increasing every day."

Diyala has also witnessed a number of events in which police say Awakening fighters have helped Al Qaeda detonate bombs and commit other violent acts.

“The Awakening is not helping the police,” said Lt. Gen. Tariq al-Assawi, the province’s security forces commander. “They are not telling us if Al Qaeda is in the area. They are not warning us about car bombs that go off in places they are responsible for securing. A lot of them are definitely helping the insurgents.”

Muthana al-Tamimi, head of the provincial council’s security committee, said Awakening members were clearly returning to the insurgency, but that Baghdad should share the blame.

“The Awakening needs government support,” he said. “They’re not getting it, so they’re an easy bite for terrorists.”

Since January, more than 90 Awakening fighters in Diyala have been arrested on suspicion of terrorism, the authorities said. During that same period, about 100 Awakening members have been killed or wounded by Al Qaeda, according to the Awakening. The police acknowledge that almost half of those arrested were later released for lack of evidence, bolstering the Awakening’s claims of harassment.

Al Qaeda’s carrot-or-stick strategy with the Awakening was on display during a recent phone call received by Hussam al-Majmaei, the Awakening leader in Diyala Province.

The caller was Jihad Ibrahim Halim, who had been a Qaeda commander before his arrest last year. He was calling from prison.

Mr. Halim, who is Mr. Majmaei’s cousin, told him that for his own good he should rejoin the insurgency because Al Qaeda would slaughter those who had opposed them, Mr. Majmaei included. Mr. Majmaei, 27, chuckled and made his own threats before hanging up. The call, he said, was part of an ongoing “seduction.”

So far, Mr. Majmaei said he had not been swayed by Al Qaeda’s promises of money and power.

“I would never join them,” he said. “But they have no doubts. They believe in what they are saying and I see how others might bend.”