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## Hurdles Stall Plan For Iraqi Recruits

Shiite Leadership Wary of Bringing Fighters Into Ranks

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BAGHDAD -- The U.S. effort to organize nearly 70,000 local fighters to solidify security gains in [Iraq](#) is facing severe political and logistical challenges as U.S.-led forces struggle to manage the recruits and the central government resists incorporating them into the [Iraqi police](#) and army, according to senior military officials.

[Gen. David H. Petraeus](#) and other top commanders have hailed the initiative to enlist Iraqi tribes and former insurgents in the battle against extremist groups, but leaders of Iraq's Shiite-dominated government have feared that the local fighters known as "volunteers" -- more than 80 percent of whom are Sunni -- could eventually mount an armed opposition, Iraqi and U.S. officials said.

In some cases, the government has confined the fighters to their headquarters or local mosques. Nevertheless, the volunteers pour in by the hundreds every week, forming a massive but cumbersome force lacking common guidelines, status, pay or uniforms. The effort represents an opportunity to shore up local police and eventually relieve U.S. troops, but one that could prove fleeting or backfire if the volunteers are not organized quickly, officials said.

"To give you a sense of the bureaucratic challenge here, the entire British army is just under 100,000," said Maj. Gen. Paul Newton, the British counterinsurgency expert tapped by Petraeus to lead the effort. "What we've seen in this campaign is already therefore three-quarters of the size of the British army, without any kind of human resource management structure to recruit it, train it, vet it," Newton, 51, said in an interview.

Since taking the job in early June, Newton has met with tribal sheiks, Sunni insurgents, Shiite militia leaders and Iraqi politicians in an attempt to "glue together" the local armed groups with the Iraqi government. But as the local initiatives proliferate, Newton said, the effort is like "trying to sprint while putting your socks on."

More than 67,000 people across 12 of Iraq's 18 provinces are registered under the military designation Concerned Local Citizens, and 51,000 of those have been screened and had their names, fingerprints and other biometric data recorded by the [U.S. military](#), Newton said. Such information is entered into a vast database that soldiers can use to help identify past criminal behavior, such as by matching fingerprints on a roadside bomb component. Eighty-two percent of the volunteers are Sunni and 18 percent are Shiite, he said. About 37,000 are being paid about \$300 a month through contracts funded by the U.S.-led military coalition.

Although U.S. commanders stress that the coalition is not forming a Sunni militia, Iraqi leaders complain that paying the fighters is tantamount to arming them. The Iraqi government so far has balked at permanently hiring large numbers of the volunteers, resisting pressure from U.S. commanders to lift caps on the number of police in Anbar and [Diyala](#) provinces. Only about 1,600 of the volunteers have been trained and sworn in to

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the Iraqi security forces, primarily with the police.

"It's admittedly slow progress," said Rear Adm. Gregory Smith, a military spokesman in [Baghdad](#), who said the goal now is to have 17,000 hired as police officers.

Last month, the Shiite political alliance of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki called on the U.S. military to halt its recruitment of Sunnis. Referring to Sunni fighters, Iraqi national security adviser Mowaffak al-Rubaie told [Washington Post](#) reporters, "The more they depend on the coalition, it is seen as undermining the Iraqi government."

Iraqi officials are concerned about the past behavior of many of the men now working with the Americans, citing problems arising from the infiltration of the police by Shiite militias. "We ended up with a police force that is not loyal to the government and to the country," said Sami al-Askiri, a Shiite legislator and [Maliki](#) adviser. "If we copy this and do it with Sunnis, we will just create another problem."

"We have to take the Sunnis inside the police and the army. They are part of the Iraqi society, but we have to check them, we have to check all their backgrounds," Askiri said. "If we do this the wrong way, we will end up with another militia inside the police force, but a Sunni one, not a Shiite one."

In Sadiyah, a southwestern Baghdad neighborhood where fighting between militias and insurgents has forced thousands of families to leave, the Iraqi government's wariness about the U.S. partnership with Sunni residents prompted a public condemnation: an Oct. 2 statement by the ruling Shiite coalition saying that the residents were involved in "kidnapping, killing and extortion."

Many expected the initiative would be more difficult to implement in Baghdad, where Sunnis and Shiites live in closer proximity than in Anbar, a predominantly Sunni province where volunteer forces had proved successful. Instead of fighting just the Sunni insurgent group [al-Qaeda in Iraq](#), the volunteers in Baghdad are facing Shiite militias, other Sunni insurgents and at times corrupt Iraqi security forces.

"Sadiyah, in particular, we've got to be very careful, frankly," Petraeus said. "That's a case of absolutely making sure that the concerned local citizens do not become agents of sectarian violence."

U.S. soldiers in Sadiyah said that soon after the recruits stood up as an organized force on Sept. 12, violence dropped and intelligence about militant activity improved. Shuttered shops along the main commercial street began slowly to open -- 10, 50, then more than 100, soldiers said.

The Iraqi government's accusations of criminal behavior by the volunteers are exaggerated, said Lt. Col. George A. Glaze, the battalion commander in Sadiyah. "There are people skewing this equation in a way that is not helpful," he said.

Some of Glaze's soldiers saw their new partners, whom they call the Iraqi Security Volunteers or ISV, as irking the government. This was because of their work against the [Mahdi Army](#), a powerful Shiite militia known in Arabic as Jaish al-Mahdi or JAM, that had collaborated with the Iraqi National Police earlier in the year. "The reality is, in my guess, that the ISV was interfering too much in JAM's operations," said Lt. Brian Bifulco, 23, a platoon leader. "And a directive came down from the prime minister."

Sadiyah residents say the local volunteers maintain divided loyalties. Ali Abdel Hussein al-Asadi, 41, an employee with Iraq's Commission on Public Integrity, said his father, a Shiite, was kidnapped from his Sadiyah home in July by men who claimed to be from the Islamic Army, a Sunni insurgent group. Some of them later joined the neighborhood's Baghdad Brigade, a local force of a few hundred men. Residents call these men "Sahawa," or the Awakening, after the Awakening Council of Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar. Asadi said his father had to tell his kidnappers he was a Sunni to avoid execution.

Asadi's parents fled the neighborhood on the day the Baghdad Brigade began its official duties. "Two days later, we heard from a friend that some people who live in my district broke into the house at night, stole what we had left and were protected by the Sahawa forces," he said. "Before they left they set the house on fire."

"The big problem is that the Americans are backing them -- no one can talk about them," Asadi said. "And if you tell the Americans about them, they will not believe you."

Maj. Khudair Abbas Hassan, police chief in the nearby al-Amil neighborhood, was also critical of the volunteers. "If you are a displaced family and you return, you would find the same people who drove you out of your home in the first place," he said, "but now they have legitimate titles and are carrying weapons."

On Oct. 1, Maliki ordered the Baghdad Brigade off the streets of Sadiyah, according to U.S. soldiers, and confined to its headquarters and mosques.

"The government has frozen us," said Assad Jadou, a 34-year-old electrician and volunteer. "We as the Baghdad Brigade, unlike other volunteers, are not able to confront and fight [al-Qaeda](#) and drive them out of our neighborhoods. . . . Now our position is weak."

Newton, a veteran of two tours in Iraq and eight as a commander in [Northern Ireland](#), said he understands that for U.S. troops and Iraq's Shiite leaders it can be agonizing to deal with former Sunni insurgents. "The British army has had to go through some of the painful and rather distasteful things that you have to do in order to reach accommodations with people who until very recently were actually killing your soldiers," he said.

U.S. forces also hold some reservations about the volunteer forces. In a meeting with the Baghdad Brigade, American soldiers expressed concern that brigade members were partly responsible for a recent spike in violence in an attempt to encourage the central government to allow them back on the street. "If it continues, it's going to have the opposite effect," Maj. Eric Timmerman, operations officer for the battalion in Sadiyah, told the leader of the group, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Hassan.

"When they started out, they appeared pretty legitimate, I think," Bifulco said. "There is collaboration now going on, at least on a small level," between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the volunteers.

Jadou, of the brigade, agreed that some of members work with al-Qaeda in Iraq. "All of the factions, even al-Qaeda, have intelligence elements over here, who will see how the brigade is going to work, and whether it would be for the benefit of the Sunnis," he said.

Nevertheless, U.S. military officials argue that the benefits of the program far outweigh the risks. [Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno](#), the No. 2 U.S. commander in Iraq, said that over a recent 15-day period, volunteers had provided tips that allowed the recovery of a "staggering" amount of munitions: 37,000 pounds of explosives, 2,000 artillery rounds, 500 rockets, nearly 500 armor-piercing projectiles and components, and hundreds of rifles, grenades and suicide vests.

In Diyala alone, the U.S. military is working with 4,000 men, some of them former Sunni insurgents, who have discovered several hundred weapons caches and nearly 100 houses rigged with bombs, and helped bring about a decrease in attacks in what had been some of the deadliest territory in Iraq, said Col. David W. Sutherland, the U.S. commander in the province. But his goal to formalize these men into the police force has stalled as he has negotiated with officials in Baghdad.

"I'm frustrated with the Ministry of Interior," Sutherland said of the government agency that oversees the police force. "They're slow rolling, by trying to control things in Baghdad."

Under the latest plan, the Iraqi government would hire a limited number of the volunteers as police officers or soldiers and assume the temporary contracts for the rest, who would work as guards at fixed locations or in reconstruction work. "Then after six months or a year we will give them a stipend, recruit them somewhere else or send them for occupational training. I don't know, let's cross that bridge when we come to it," said Rubaie, the national security adviser.

For now, Jadou said Baghdad Brigade members train inside their headquarters, relying on donations for funding and weapons. Their commander, Hassan, pressed Timmerman in the meeting about when the Iraqi government would allow them back on the streets.

"I don't know when that's going to be," Timmerman replied. "I don't make that decision."

*Tyson reported from the Pentagon.*

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