



# ILLUSIONS OF VICTORY

THE ANBAR AWAKENING AND THE  
RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

CARTER MALKASIAN



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**OXFORD**  
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*Dedicated to Corporal Salem Bachar, USMC  
April 13, 2006, Karma, Iraq*



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Gerber. Ray and I have been talking about Ramadi since 2006, when he was the intelligence officer of 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, deployed in the middle of the city. Another steadfast colleague has been Pat Carroll—Marine; student of Islam; speaker of Arabic, Pashto, and Farsi. Few know the Islam of Anbar and Helmand better. In this camp of friends belongs J. Kael Weston. He arrived in Anbar in July 2004 and stayed until 2007. Our debates on policy, writing, and exactly what happened have yet to end. All of us have watched Anbar rise and fall, the war we wish had ended long ago.

Hopefully it goes without saying that I am indebted to the Marine generals who always graciously received my research. Their support has inspired me, whether in the writing of this book or in endeavors in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the halls of the Pentagon.

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I apologize to those whom I have not named, especially the Marines and soldiers of the battalions that I visited, from the high desert of al-Qa'im to the haunted streets of Karma.

Anbar was a violent place. To my mind, it was worse than Afghanistan. The Marines and soldiers kept me safe. They faced far greater hardship. If memory dulls with time, their accomplishments seem to grow only sharper. The toil and sacrifice of our Marines and soldiers are good reason to care about what happened in Anbar, Garmser, and other corners of the long war.



Map 1. Iraq

## CHAPTER 1

# A Decade Later

I have long hoped to write a history of America's war in Iraq's al-Anbar province. I spent eighteen months there as a civilian advisor to the I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF), first from February 2004 to February 2005, and then from February to August 2006. These were the times of Fallujah and Ramadi, grinding battles that still define much of America's experience in Iraq, featured in popular books and movies. My job was to carry out research for Marine generals, usually on topics related to strategy, culture, and society. I studied the insurgency, our tactics, and Iraqi politics and tribes. I was lucky enough to get to see Marines and soldiers throughout the province and to speak with plenty of Iraqis. When I left Iraq, I planned to write a full history of the campaign. Alas, in 2009, I went to Afghanistan. The Anbar book fell by the wayside. Two detailed chapters on Ramadi and the Anbar awakening were all that were completed. I have since come to doubt that I will ever have time to return to the project. In an attempt to salvage years of research and writing, I have decided to tell only the story of the battle of Ramadi and the accompanying tribal awakening. Few events have stood out so starkly in America's wars



in Iraq and Afghanistan. Few events offer better insight into what difference our sacrifices ultimately made.

Ramadi was one of America's greatest successes in Iraq. From 2003 to 2006, the United States struggled to defeat the Iraqi insurgency, led by the extremist organization al-Qa'eda in Iraq (AQI). During those years, the United States launched a series of violent offensives against insurgents in the cities of Fallujah, Najaf, al-Qa'im, Tal Afar, and Ramadi. The insurgency nevertheless raged on. By early 2006, fighting wracked Baghdad, Iraq's capital. US leaders began to consider whether defeat was looming. Then, in the autumn of 2006, tribes in Ramadi formed a movement—Sahawa al-Anbar, or the “Anbar awakening.” Over the course of seven months of heavy fighting, the tribes and the United States inflicted a stunning defeat upon AQI in Ramadi. The movement spread to the rest of Anbar and then to vital areas elsewhere in Iraq. Tribes and communities stood up throughout the country. Eventually, AQI was pushed back, insurgent attacks decreased, and Iraq witnessed an uneasy stability. Ramadi was thus a turning point of the Iraq war, the battle from which wider successes originated.

In the years that followed, Anbar became a model for how to defeat insurgents and terrorists. The US officers of the time—astute Colonel Sean MacFarland, fluent Captain Travis Patriquin, down-to-earth Lieutenant Colonel Bill Jurney, General David Petraeus above them all—earned well-deserved acclaim. Abdul Sittar al-Rishawi, charismatic leader of the awakening, was featured in newspaper and magazine articles. President George W. Bush even met him. Candidate Barack Obama visited Anbar a year later. In terms of strategy, officers, analysts, and policymakers hailed surging troops and empowering tribes as a means of countering insurgents.<sup>1</sup> There were widespread calls to attempt an “awakening” with the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan, eventually resulting in the formation of “Afghan local police.”<sup>2</sup> Later still, the idea of

working with tribes influenced US policy debates over how to handle the Syrian civil war.

A decade after the awakening, things looked none so bright. In January 2014, after years of preparation and growth, AQI, re-named the Islamic State, conquered most of Anbar. The tribes that had formed the awakening movement were too divided and isolated to mount an effective resistance. The Islamic State then struck beyond Anbar, capturing Mosul and the rest of Sunni Iraq. For three years, war engulfed Anbar. Almost everything we had fought for from 2003 to 2007 was lost. With Baghdad in danger, the United States was forced to return to war in Iraq. US Marines, soldiers, and special operations forces found themselves back in Anbar trying to help the Iraqi government recapture the province.

This book re-examines the battle of Ramadi and the Anbar awakening from the perspective of a decade later. With almost exactly ten years' distance from the events of 2006 and 2007, we are now better placed to understand the meaning of old successes. The book aims to provide a more rigorous treatment of Anbar than earlier works by using primary source research collected during my time in the province. It tries to determine exactly what we should draw from Anbar and the campaign after its accomplishments have washed away. Is Anbar worth remembering? I think it is. Study of what happened helps explain why the highly regarded successes of 2006 and 2007 ultimately proved fragile. In doing so, the book should help us understand why the successes of military interventions can be so fragile in general. It should help us make more realistic decisions in wars today and in the future.

## OLD DEBATES

In the years following the battle of Ramadi, discourse on the Iraq war was tinted by what then appeared to have been a great victory. The big question was: Why did the United

States succeed, defeating AQI and bringing stability to most of Iraq? Why the awakening prevailed in Anbar, specifically in Ramadi, was a pivotal part of the question.

There were two main schools of thought when it came to Anbar. One was that new troops and innovative US tactics made the difference.<sup>3</sup> Take the following excerpt from an influential article by Colonel Sean MacFarland in *Military Review*:

The “Anbar Awakening” of Sunni tribal leaders and their supporters that began in September 2006 near Ramadi seemed to come out of nowhere. But the change that led to the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Ramadi—what some have called the “Gettysburg of Iraq”—was not a random event. It was the result of a concerted plan executed by U.S. forces in Ramadi.<sup>4</sup>

In this school of thought, additional US Marines and soldiers were deemed to have been necessary to suppress AQI and set the conditions for the tribes to rise up. Equally important were new tactics that US commanders introduced. George W. Bush’s 2007 surge was sometimes credited with the new troops and tactics that made the difference in Anbar, not to mention in Iraq as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

The other school of thought was that the tide turned because Iraqis rose up against AQI’s brutality and cruelty. Bob Woodward, for example, wrote that the decision of the tribes to turn had little to do with US actions:

Al-Qaeda in Iraq had made a strategic mistake in the province, overplaying its hand. Its members had performed forced marriages with women from local tribes, taken over hospitals, used mosques for beheading operations, mortared playgrounds and executed citizens, leaving headless bodies with signs that read, “Don’t remove this body or the same thing will happen to you.” The sheer brutality eroded much of the local support for Al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

These two schools of thought played into US policy debates from 2007 onward. Anbar became a point of contention in the 2008 presidential elections. John McCain held up the surge as evidence of how bold US policies had turned around a failing war. He used it to justify an interventionist foreign policy. The Obama camp countered that the success in Anbar had preceded the surge and was the product of AQI brutality, rather than anything the United States had done. Later, proponents of a US surge into Afghanistan used Anbar as part of their case that US troops could turn the tide in that war. Opponents again argued that US troops had been immaterial to success in Anbar. It is worth reiterating that both schools of thought hailed Anbar as an impressive success. Anbar's role in policy debates was defined through that prism.

This book's take on this old debate is that both American troops and tribal rejection of AQI were necessary for success. Without either, the awakening would have failed. The awakening tribes depended on US Marines and soldiers to do the vast majority of the fighting and prevent AQI from overrunning them outright. US Marines and soldiers depended on the decision of the tribes to deny AQI the shelter and anonymity it needed to survive. The presence of US troops did not guarantee that the tribes would do so. After all, Marines and soldiers, using fairly innovative tactics, had been in Ramadi and most of Anbar for years before the awakening. The tribes had to decide to stand up on their own.

The fashion in which these factors played a role differs slightly from the schools of thought outlined above. In particular, the role of AQI is misunderstood. Too much emphasis has been placed on the notion that AQI brutality and cruelty was so bad that it prompted tribes to rise up en masse. The notion paints AQI as far less popular and the tribal leaders as far more popular than was actually the case. No, this was

more about a few tribal leaders and their followers pursuing power and avenging blood feuds. Brutality and cruelty had something to do with why they stood up, but in the context of other dynamics. Very early in the war in Anbar, competition emerged between the tribes and AQI. As AQI grew, it marginalized tribal leaders and curtailed their influence and livelihoods. Eventually, a few of these tribal leaders decided to stand up and regain their power. In certain cases, AQI's uncompromising position and brutality inflamed the reaction, but the underlying cause lay elsewhere. Indeed, AQI's worst cruelties largely came after, not before, the tribes stood up, in the violent mafia-esque struggle that followed.

Moreover, American troops and the struggle for power with AQI are only two necessary conditions. The role of those Iraqis on the front line ought to be accentuated. An overlooked condition is the esprit de corps and cohesion within the tribes opposing AQI. Until this condition was present, *the tide did not turn, regardless of the presence of US troops or expansion of AQI's power*. The tribesmen at the forefront of the awakening demonstrated resolve and determination, enduring losses that had broken others. Within their individual tribes, they were more cohesive and less prone to infighting. This enabled them to persevere against AQI where others before had failed. Without them, the tide may never have turned. They were the spearhead. The nature of the man on the ground and his social bonds mattered in this civil war, along with American troops and the power struggle with AQI.

I owe something here to John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*. In that classic military history, he wrote: "The behavior of a group of soldiers on any part of the battlefield ought to be understood in terms of their corporate mood, or of the conditions prevailing at the time."<sup>7</sup> If their mood is to run, then the battle may be lost, depending on their location and

other conditions on the battlefield. Social and cultural factors deeply affect that corporate mood. Resilience, cohesion, and willingness to bear loss can derive from kinship, geography, tribal culture, and a variety of other deep factors, often considered anthropological and outside the purview of the study of the war. A wide body of scholarship on the Middle East parallels Keegan and ties such factors directly to military success. The scholarship traces back to fourteenth-century Arab scholar Muhammad ibn Khaldun, who was one of the first to associate group feeling with military capability.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the Anbar awakening—and, I would argue, in others as well—social and cultural factors underlay the outcome. The larger meaning, to which we will return shortly, is that the course of an insurgency, an internal conflict, or a civil war may be determined by unmalleable internal dynamics more than the actions of an outside power such as the United States.

## A SOBER DISTANCE

All this discussion of bygone glory is somewhat out of step with the perspective of 2017. After the rise of the Islamic State and its conquest of Sunni Iraq, the bigger question is: Why did success prove fragile? Root problems can be detected in Ramadi in 2006 and 2007. In fact, many policy-makers, officers, and observers noted them at the time, their writings later overshadowed by the bright success of the awakening. Through new study of the past, we can see fundamental weaknesses that led to breakdown in 2014, when the Islamic State attacked with remarkable force. Three specifically come into relief.

First, between 2009 and 2014, the government marginalized the Sunnis, undermining the cooperation between the tribes and the state that held the Islamic State at bay. The tribal leaders were Sunni and wanted greater Sunni

political power. The government was largely Shi'a and did not. Violence eventually ensued as Anbar Sunnis protested against the government. When the Islamic State attacked in January 2014, the Sunni tribes and the government were fighting with each other instead of standing together to face the onslaught. It is well known that the government's distrust of the Sunnis pre-dated 2011. During the battle for Ramadi, the democratically elected Shi'a majority government was already marginalizing the minority Sunnis. Only the dire threat posed by AQI and American lobbying got the government to help the tribes. Otherwise, the government viewed the Sunnis as the problem. Once AQI receded, the danger of Sunni political consolidation outweighed the security benefit of cooperation.

Second, the tribes could neither sustain themselves nor hold themselves together. Without the United States, they could not generate the resources to field the military forces and deliver goods and services necessary to control the people of Anbar and keep out the Islamic State. The problem was compounded by the tendency of the tribes to compete with each other rather than work toward the common good. When confronted by the Islamic State, the tribes went their own ways. These weaknesses too were apparent in 2006 and 2007. At no point was the awakening movement self-sustaining. The tribe's rise in power was based on US and government funding and military support. Before that, AQI had been able to defeat the tribes quite handily on a number of occasions. Furthermore, Sunni tribes had long suffered from infighting. The cohesion of the families and clans that spearheaded the awakening was largely absent in the rest of the movement. Until months into the actual awakening, Sunni tribes were broken up, with many supporting AQI. In the worst cases, parts of one tribe sided with the awakening while other parts sided with AQI. In

other words, tribal dominance was artificial, not natural. On their own, the tribes lacked the necessary unity and wherewithal to defeat the Islamic State.

Third, the Islamic State held the sympathies of many Sunnis, as had AQI before it. After the awakening, tribal and government control of Anbar rested on the military power of a small elite rather than popular mandate. The tribal leaders and the government could cut AQI supporters out of politics but could not smother some degree of popular sympathy. As government and tribal cooperation wavered, AQI, whose members were vastly Iraqi, was able to return as the Islamic State and regain wide Sunni support. Again, in 2006 and 2007, AQI had already demonstrated a resilience and natural momentum—a sustainability that the tribes lacked. By 2006, AQI was deeply embedded in Anbar society and enjoyed popular support, partly because of its espousal of Islam and stand against occupation. AQI's message was clear and simple, and resonated among many people at least as much as tribalism, nationalism, or democracy. After the awakening was declared, AQI carried on a grinding seven-month battle in Ramadi against the full force of the US military and increasing numbers of tribes, a strong indication of the depths of its support.

We missed these signposts. Success over-wrote them. The tribal movement's success was so militarily impressive that we mistook it as irreversible, rather than as a momentary break in tribal infighting. AQI looked so badly beaten and was cast as so brutal that we discounted earlier evidence of popular support. In this regard, the overemphasis placed on the role of AQI's brutality is more than academic curiosity. By understating AQI's popularity, we may have lost sight of the chance they could return. Within months of US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the situation was badly



regressing. Natural dynamics reasserted themselves. Without US funding and presence, the changes wrought by the awakening and years of US effort slipped away.

## REINTERPRETING THE AWAKENING

What happened in Anbar should influence how we think about war. After 2001, the United States fought against insurgents and terrorists in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen, the Philippines, and many other countries. The wars dominated our foreign policy. Fundamental questions arose as to whether wars in weakly governed or broken countries serve our interests and how we should go about them: Can military intervention bring any stability to the country at hand? How many troops should the United States send and how long should they stay? Can improvements last after the United States departs?

From 2003 to 2011, great effort was put into the idea that the United States could go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, get out within a few years, and leave lasting stability behind. In his speech that announced the 2007 surge, President George W. Bush set forth:

Victory in Iraq will bring . . . a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people . . . it will be a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them . . . If we increase our support at this crucial moment, and help the Iraqis break the current cycle of violence, we can hasten the day our troops begin coming home.<sup>9</sup>

Over time, as Iraq appeared to calm and Afghanistan dragged on, enthusiasm for intervention waned. Secretary of Defense Bob Gates famously quipped: “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or

Africa should have his head examined.”<sup>10</sup> After the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011, conventional wisdom was that the United States should get out of the intervention business.<sup>11</sup> Before that could happen, renewed conflict in Iraq and the rise of the Islamic State brought war in broken countries back to the center of US foreign policy. The old questions remained, as potent as ever.

For seven years after 2006, Anbar was the foremost example of how US intervention could succeed. It became a model for how to conduct operations. In his September 2007 testimony to Congress on the success of the Iraq surge, General David Petraeus stated that Anbar “is a model of what happens when local leaders and citizens decide to oppose al Qaeda and reject its Taliban-like ideology. While Anbar is unique and the model it provides cannot be replicated everywhere in Iraq, it does demonstrate the dramatic change in security that is possible with the support and participation of local citizens.”<sup>12</sup> Along this line of thought, various policymakers, military officers, and commentators suggested Anbar might show how the right numbers and methods could defeat an insurgency in a few years.<sup>13</sup> I myself examined its potential intently.

Today, Anbar is an example of the opposite. The collapse of the leading model of success discredits the idea that the United States can send the military to a country for a few years and create lasting peace. Even the leading model was bound to deeper social, sectarian, and religious forces insensitive to a temporary US presence. Rather than decisive success, Anbar exemplifies how intervention itself is a costly, long-term project. The most brilliant achievement did not escape this wisdom. This reinterpretation endows Anbar with an even greater meaning. If the most successful case of intervention and counterinsurgency was trapped by these forces, why should we expect anything different elsewhere?

The view of Anbar from a distance questions the fundamentals of American foreign policy thinking. Chief among them is the idea that intervention can strengthen stability and bring good. Few Americans doubt that invading Iraq was a bad idea, regardless of Saddam's oppressive dictatorship and atrocities. Toppling over order and letting sectarian, tribal, and religious dynamics run their course harmed the people of Iraq and raised the terrorist threat to the United States. But the problems of intervention run deeper than the initial ill-advised invasion. The pursuit of democracy after Saddam's downfall certainly brought no stability and may have worsened things by empowering vengeful Shi'a before Sunnis could be convinced to join the political process. The military forces that we built fared little better, falling apart after US departure. There is a serious question of whether democracy and nationally configured militaries are sustainable against an Islamic movement without outside assistance. If they are not sustainable on their own, does real change require a military and political presence that verges on colonialism? A study on Anbar alone cannot answer all these questions. They are the troubling heritage of over a decade in Iraq.

What is clear is that the idea the United States can intervene in a country for a few years and enable a government to stand on its own is wrong. The United States can certainly effect tremendous political change and quash violence, but there is a good chance it will be temporary. Political, social, and cultural dynamics are too powerful. Once the United States departs, those dynamics can reassert themselves. Instead of quick departure, the United States probably needs to countenance a long commitment, with boots on the ground. Tens of thousands of boots may not be necessary. Thousands is probably a good guess, staying for decades. Even then change might still reverse itself once the United States departs. Any sober discussion of intervention must recognize the possibility of a long commitment and

the uncertainty of any kind of sustainable change. This is the biggest strategic lesson of Anbar.

The lesson should give generals and presidents pause when thinking about future intervention. Expectation of a long commitment should raise the expected cost of any endeavor. If Iraq and Afghanistan are any example, the American people and politicians with domestic priorities may have little interest in carrying that burden for years. The cost should discourage intervention itself. Living with instability may be more bearable than the financial and human expenses of addressing it. Where the risk of terrorism is too dangerous and intervention unavoidable, strategies should be designed that are affordable enough to be executed for decades. On its own, the host nation is unlikely to maintain what we accomplish. Though only one case, Anbar forces us to consider the unproductiveness of intervention writ large.

For students of US strategy, the Iraq war, and Anbar, four texts are essential reading. A good starting point is *The Strongest Tribe* by Bing West. It is based on West's repeated visits to Iraq and observation of front-line combat. He details the tactical prowess of US Marines and soldiers and their bottom-up partnerships with Iraqis.<sup>14</sup> A deeply erudite explanation of the role of tribal customs and AQI's brutality is David Kilcullen's *The Accidental Guerrilla*.<sup>15</sup> For a piece specifically on Anbar, Austin Long's "The Anbar Awakening" is useful.<sup>16</sup> Long warns against putting too much emphasis on the role of the United States versus dynamics between the tribes and AQI. The most quantitative study is "Testing the Surge," an article by Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro. Through analysis of data on insurgent attacks, they assess that the surge and the willingness of tribes to rise up were both essential to success; if the two had not been present together at nearly the same moment, violence would not have declined in Iraq.<sup>17</sup>

There is also a growing literature on the perspective of the Iraqis. Anthony Shadid published his classic *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* in 2005. More recent is Mark Kukis's *Voices from Iraq*. It features stories about the war from over fifty Iraqis. For Anbar, Kael Weston's *The Mirror Test* offers good insight. Widely cited is the Marine Corps' wonderful set of original-source interviews with the Iraqi leaders of the awakening, *Al-Anbar Awakening: Iraqi Perspectives*.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Sterling Jensen, an Arabic-speaking American who was in Ramadi from 2006 to 2008, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Iraqi narratives of the awakening. Once published, it will surely be an essential text on both the Iraq war and the Anbar campaign.<sup>19</sup> Appreciating what has been written to date, whether on the Iraq war as a whole or Anbar in particular, the causal role of Iraqis in the outcome of war warrants still greater study. It will hopefully span beyond this slim book.

The book is organized into seven chapters. The first is this introduction. The second describes al-Anbar province and the US war there from 2003 to 2006. The chapter is meant to provide an understanding of the role of the tribal system and religion in Anbar and then the US campaign up to the battle of Ramadi. During this time, the Marines arrived in Anbar, the insurgency broke out, the two battles of Fallujah occurred, and elections were held. The third and fourth chapters look at the fighting in Ramadi from late 2005 to mid-2006. Ramadi was then the hub of the insurgency. The US command reinforced the city in a bid for success. This was a dire time, too often neglected by writers and journalists, when AQI was expanding, the tribes were losing power, and the United States was struggling to gain the upper hand. The beginning of the awakening movement lies here. The fifth chapter examines the awakening and how the tide turned in Anbar. The battle raged from