



MILITARY AWAKENING:

Clear, Hold, Build and the Development of Awakening Councils and Iraqi Police

CAPTAIN MATTHEW M. MCCREARY

*At left, a Soldier from the 3rd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment
conducts a patrol in Ramadi, Iraq September 27, 2007.*

Specialist Alan Moos

The war in Iraq entered a new phase in 2006 with the introduction of the clear, hold, build concept and the development of Sahwa, or Awakening Councils, to fight back against Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The Awakening Councils originated when the local populace became disenfranchised with AQI's draconian methods in Anbar province. The success in Ramadi and the surrounding areas has been some of the first real signs of success since the beginning of hostilities in 2003. Moreover, it is the first time the local populace, including Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), have taken a stand against AQI. It is clear the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy is working, and that we are actually winning over the people, as evidenced by the model being applied across Iraq.

The development of an Awakening Council and an Iraqi Police (IP) station occurred in the Thar Thar region of Iraq in late 2007 using the clear, hold, build concept, and while there is no prescribed method for doing so, the following concept served B Company, 3rd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment well during our recent deployment in 2007-2008. We effectively cleared the area, eliminating any remaining enemy presence and established a permanent presence. We subsequently worked with the newly created Awakening Council to conduct reconstruction and development projects to capitalize on the improved security situation. These actions developed trust with the local populace, leading to increased confidence and ultimately to a viable governing body with functional ISF. Keep in mind that what follows is a model for developing an Awakening Council and an IP station using the clear, hold, build framework.

Clear Phase

Clearing an area is the primary task that must be accomplished

first. According to FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, "regaining control of insurgent areas requires HN (host nation) government to expand operations to secure and support the population." The Thar Thar region fit the mold described in the counterinsurgency manual and was one of the few remaining areas in al Anbar still under control of the Sunni insurgency in late 2007. The entire area had remained an insurgent safe haven since the beginning of hostilities in 2003 for a myriad of reasons, including its remote location, lack of overarching tribal authority, and little to no economic opportunity. In short, the residents lived in the hinterlands, outside of population centers, with little to no economic opportunity, save for farming, smuggling, and hijacking. Moreover, the area, located on the border between Anbar and Salah al Din provinces and around the seams of multiple divisions, proved to be a forgotten world for which no one sought to take responsibility. These factors, combined with AQI being driven out of Ramadi and Fallujah in 2007, contributed to the area being a resident safe haven for Al-Qaeda.

A common theme across Iraq is that the enemy often exists and finds safe haven where there is little to no coalition presence. AQI used the remote setting of the Thar Thar region to bed down and the long stretches of open highway to fund their organization. High-level high value individuals (HVIs) moved throughout the area using various safe houses. Thar Thar was a desolate place and encompassed the area north of Ramadi and Fallujah and northwest of Baghdad, all the way to Samarra. The AQI command and control (C2) structure could operate relatively unimpeded, and they circumnavigated the region, never staying in one location for long, in order to evade capture. It was in this desolate, desert location that the leaders of AQI conducted strategic and operational

planning and staged for attacks into Ramadi, Fallujah, Samarra, and even Baghdad. The reason: no persistent presence from coalition forces and a populace that was tacitly supporting the insurgency. In fact, most of the people in the Thar Thar region had family that was part of AQI. Funding occurred through two avenues. First, there was the hijacking of cargo trucks and travelers that braved the isolated highway between Fallujah and Samarra. Tales of masked men brandishing AK-47s establishing checkpoints along the isolated highway were common. They made the driver pay a toll; however, if he was a Shiite or a member of the Iraqi Police, he would be killed on the spot and have his vehicle stolen. The contents were then taken and sold on the black market for 100-percent profit. The other means consisted of smuggling oil and black market fuel. This fuel from the north was then sold on the side of the roads at makeshift gas stations for high profits. The discovery of caches and human remains confirmed all of this and indicated that the area was vital to AQI. Moreover, human intelligence (HUMINT) and other sources reported the significance of the area, both for funding and as a safe haven for operational and strategic level leaders.

Our initial efforts focused on controlling key areas, namely those once used as safe havens by AQI. Applying the clear, hold, build concept, we secured these areas then expanded to others, reinforcing success. This concept, currently being applied across Iraq, has the following objectives:

- * Creating a secure physical and psychological environment;
- * Establishing firm government control of the population and the area; and
- * Gaining the support of the population as manifested by participation in the government programs to counter the insurgency.

Critical to our success was the partnership and development of Iraqi Security Forces, which consisted of Ministry of Interior (MOI) forces, both Iraqi Police (IP) and Provincial Security Forces (PSF) and Iraqi Army (IA). Conducting operations with ISF required patience and a great deal of hubris. It took time to recognize that the Iraqis were much more adept at garnering intelligence from the local populace. Their ability to gather the information resulted in more effective targeting and the ultimate defeat of the enemy.

That said, a successful counterinsurgency requires “the host nation to defeat or render irrelevant the insurgent forces, uphold the rule of law, and provide a basic level of essential services and security for the population,” according to FM 3-24. Putting the Iraqis in the lead built confidence in the security forces and convinced the population to support our efforts.

Clearance operations served two purposes. First, they succeeded in rooting the enemy out of the area and eliminating organized resistance. Second, and especially because of the ISF, we were able to develop extensive HUMINT networks that facilitated future operations. As the security situation slowly improved and attacks decreased, clearances transitioned into census operations which allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the local populace, thus enabling us to easily identify those that did not belong. Aggressive joint clearance operations with ISF set the conditions to establish permanent presence in the Thar Thar region of Iraq.

There is no timeline established for the clearing process — it is METT-C (mission, equipment, troops, time, civilians) dependent and will vary from situation to situation. As mentioned previously, the clear process evolves into census operations once the security situation improves. This proved to be prime time for identifying local leadership and others that would be willing to work with coalition and ISF. The local populace was disenfranchised and had experienced extreme cases of murder and intimidation. For that reason, they were ready to stand up to the oppressive ways of AQI by banding together, establish a Sahwa (Awakening Council), and work with coalition and ISF to rid the area of AQI. The confidence of the people and the situation on the ground set the conditions for the ultimate creation and development of an Awakening Council during the hold and build phases.

Hold Phase

Permanent presence is the key facet of the hold phase. “The success or failure of the effort depends on effectively and continuously securing the populace, and then on the effectiveness of reestablishing a HN government presence (and operational systems) at the local level,” as stated in FM 3-24. The effective management and implementation of ISF during this phase was critical to our success in the tri-cities and

Thar Thar region. Provincial security forces denied enemy freedom of maneuver by establishing checkpoints over a 25-kilometer stretch of road — our main line of communication with the rear. The IA fulfilled a similar role by establishing checkpoints in the immediate area around our forward operating base (FOB), including a critical checkpoint on the main alternate supply route (ASR) between Anbar and Salah al Din provinces. These actions, coupled with the control of other routes, effectively canalized traffic and allowed us to control personnel in the area.

Our operations during the hold phase, while still conducted jointly, focused on separating the population from the insurgency and establishing a government presence in the area. Clearances and ambushes used force on a continuous basis to ensure the protection of the people in the area. Our continued presence and cooperation with ISF lent credence to our cause and continued to cement confidence in the local populace. Because of this, local leaders bravely stepped forward and put forth the following request to the Sahwa al Anbar:

“We the undersigned ask your approval to open a Sahwa office in al Thar Thar for the purpose of chasing and fighting terrorists in the area between Thura Dijla, Saddamiya, and Muthana, whereby, this area became a safe haven for the terrorists, al Qaeda organizations, and the Islamic State. As much as we have capabilities to chase them and confine their activities that took course against innocent people, we are ready for this office and we nominate Mr. Mussa ‘Abid Fayyad Hasan as head of this office with appreciation and respect.”

Their formal request for recognition was honored, and the first task upon conception was to identify members of the council and to set up an introductory meeting. Critical to this event was for all key players to be present: coalition, IA, and MOI. It was important to work as a team from the start in order to synchronize efforts and demonstrate resolve for the cause. The initial meeting was critical because this was an opportunity to set the tone of the organization, outline goals and objectives, and discuss the importance of trust. Enough emphasis cannot be placed on trust — trust in our new Iraqi partners and their trust in us. It is imperative that there is an effective information flow and sense of transparency in order to further develop

confidence and minimize deception. Many of the pitfalls encountered throughout the war in Iraq can be attributed to our lack of trust in Iraqis and their lack of trust in us. Working together to defeat the terrorists mandates that trust remain paramount and that Iraqis choose sides. This was the point that the community and their leaders stepped forward to work with coalition forces.

It is important to begin working together immediately. One way is to establish fixed site security contracts for key pieces of infrastructure with guards coming from the population. This was one of the first contracted projects with the Awakening Council and contributed to overall confidence and the security situation of the area. Moreover, it freed up IA and MOI personnel to focus on other regions and targets provided through HUMINT from the local populace. Personnel for fixed site security were screened through the biometric automated tool set (BATS) and issued identification cards, thus legitimizing their position and establishing a control to track personnel in the area. Another point of discussion was the procurement of weapons for security guards and, in the future, Iraqi Police. One method was to use confiscated weapons from weapons caches and distribute these to the appropriate personnel. Key to any distribution program

is the establishment of accountability from the outset. This instills discipline and reinforces control and legitimacy.

Reconstruction efforts during this phase, besides the aforementioned fixed site security missions, included projects to improve economic, social, cultural, and medical needs. The Awakening Council was the consummate point of contact for all actions relating to the local situation. As stated in FM 3-24, "Actions speak louder than words. Once the insurgent political infrastructure has been destroyed and local leaders begin to establish themselves, any necessary political reforms can be implemented." The populace wants results and the most effective way to do this is through reconstruction projects that have an immediate impact. Humanitarian aid projects, consisting of basic food and quality of life staples, along with basic day labor projects to clean the area are quick and easy projects that have immediate effects. Their impact is readily visible, and they employ young males from the community who may otherwise be involved in illicit activity. In addition, FM 3-24 states that projects that "provide an overt and direct benefit for the population" should be initiated during this fragile period. Simple

things like seed distribution for farmers, digging of wells, trash clean up projects, and road improvements help to reconcile the local populace and boost confidence.

The creation of a governing council requires constant coalition intervention — both to boost confidence and for directional support. The hold phase is the period in which the Awakening Council can truly develop and become a viable governing body for the area. Meetings should have a preestablished agenda and should focus, but not be limited to, the following areas: security situation, current problems that need to be addressed, active project status, pending project status, and future projects. Having a preestablished agenda cannot be stressed enough. It lends professionalism to the organization and demonstrates legitimacy to those present. Reviewing the current security situation allows the Iraqis to reflect on all they've accomplished and to pass the word in an open forum — an opportunity to conduct information operations to defeat the enemy. When council

During a mission near Ramadi, Iraq, a Soldier with the 3rd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment watches a group of Iraqi policemen search an area.

Specialist Alan Moos



members raise issues and discuss current problems through discourse, they are able to reach a consensus by vote, thus operating as a true democratic governing body. Finally, the review of projects, both past, active and pending, allows contractors to have visibility on status (this gets back to transparency) and provides the council situational awareness of development in the area. Critical to the entire council meeting is the inclusion of the battalion and company civil-military operations officer. His knowledge base and focus on civil-military operations is crucial to passing info and starting new projects. As things improve, the natural progression is to have a local IP station to secure the local area.

The development of Iraqi Police station in Thar Thar occurred during the hold phase. It was a smooth transition from fixed-site security guards to IPs. With that said, the conditions must be set, and the local populace and government must be ready to support an IP station in the area. In turn, the IPs can perform duties once fulfilled by coalition and IA forces.

“Combating insurgency requires a police force that is visible day and night. The host nation will not gain legitimacy if the populace believes that insurgents and criminal bands control the city and village streets.”

— FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*

The weight of the entire battalion should be put behind this venture in order to influence the MOI of the necessity of an IP station in a particular area. Often, it requires a persistent lobby to convince provincial authorities of the necessity, especially when there are a finite number of slots for a particular province. The development of an IP station consists of screening, training, and ultimately operating.

The screening process can be facilitated through the Awakening Council. The council provides a venue to pass information throughout the area, as well as a recruiting platform to organize potential volunteers. The recruiting center should be in a safe and well secured area. Conducting a joint recruiting/screening with IA is an effective method that demonstrates cooperation and reinforces confidence. The screening process should include “a clear set of appropriate mental, physical, and moral standards,” according to FM 3-24, and personnel should be registered in the BATS system to cross-reference individuals with prior reports or who are on “alert” status. In addition to basic security checks, personnel should declare non-affiliation with illegal nationalist or insurgent organizations. Also, personnel should be medically screened and be tested for physical fitness. A potential problem is the differing demographics of the recruits. Ensure there is a plan in place to deal with disaffection and angst regarding the tribal affiliation and ethnicity of recruits. IP recruits should reflect all major demographic groups to ensure equality. Of prime importance during the recruiting/screening process is the identification of potential leadership for the station. The best candidates have prior military or police experience, are mature, and eager to combat insurgents in the area. Moreover, leaders from the immediate area who have a vested interest in the overall security situation are the best choices. Once personnel are selected, the training process can begin.

The training process will again be facilitated by the Awakening Council and is aimed at ensuring recruits are capable of basic weapons handling, small unit tactics, special weapons employment,

convoy escort, riot control, traffic control, and prisoner/detainee handling and processing. The Sahwa council continues to be the medium to pass information, especially because the members have a vested interest in the situation in the area. Also, they are accountable to the people they represent, thus they are eager to be part of a successful IP station. Iraqi Army and coalition trainers, working as an interagency operation, were an effective team to train recruits. Security was of primary importance during the screening and training process.

Build Phase

The hold phase will merge into the build phase as IA and IPs are effectively securing the area and ensuring the protection of the people. Contact with the population is critical in order to prevent insurgents from re-infiltrating the social fabric. During the build phase, Iraqis are fully securing themselves, both IA and IP, with coalition in overwatch. FM 3-24 states that “Contact with the population is critical to the success of the local COIN effort. Actions designed to completely eliminate the remaining covert insurgent political infrastructure must be continued, as its presence will continue to threaten and influence people.” In short, the goal of security forces is to root out, using well developed HUMINT networks, and destroy any remnants of insurgents in the area.

Projects during this phase continue to be funded through CERP and should be designed to improve essential services, improve educational facilities, and cultural infrastructure (mosques). The Awakening Council is the primary conduit for projects, ensuring all proposals are vetted through the voting process. One danger is for one contractor to receive all projects. It is good to spread the wealth and disburse contracts across multiple vendors. Projects should transition from small day labors and instead be tailored for a larger audience and be greater in scope. Possibilities include water treatment plants, pump stations, waste disposal, schools, clinics, bridges, and other ventures that benefit the community as a whole. The council should establish priorities and decide which projects they want to pursue. They in turn can work with their coalition partners to propose, contract, and begin the project.

The creation of a governing body and associated security force is no easy task. The development of an Awakening Council and IP station in the Thar Thar region in 2007 was stymied by numerous roadblocks that required creative solutions to overcome. We succeeded in accomplishing our mission and securing the area for myriad reasons – first and foremost was our partnership with ISF and tribal leadership. Second, was our ability to accomplish all tasks within the clear, hold, build framework. We applied the appropriate level of force for the situation and tailored our operations for the circumstances on the ground. When the situation required more draconian methods, we acted and when it required more civil-military operations, we responded accordingly. In short, a successful counterinsurgency campaign can be waged by working with the local populace to establish governing councils and Iraqi police within the clear, hold, build framework.

CPT Matthew M. McCreary is currently serving as commander of B Company, 3-69 Combined Arms Battalion at Fort Stewart, Georgia. In 2002, he served as a platoon leader in Afghanistan and in 2003, as a company executive officer in Fallujah, Iraq, both with 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. He was commissioned in 2001 as an Infantry officer after graduating from Officer Candidate School.
