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Sons of Iraq made Iraq safer. What's their mission now?

The US military is trying to transition 103,000 Iraqi neighborhood guards into steady work.

By [Tom A. Peter](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*
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Baghdad - In a month of patrolling Baghdad, US Army Capt. Ryan Williams has seen the best and the worst of the Sons of Iraq (SOI) – the community policing group instrumental in restoring calm here.

When a child went missing, SOI members identified and helped detain his kidnappers. But another SOI group also reportedly took over a gas station "for security reasons" and sold the fuel on the black market.

Other problems include infighting among SOI units, with the homegrown Iraqi lawmen giving US forces bogus tips about their rivals' supposed criminal activity. "We learned pretty quick that they were just trying to get us to fight their battles," says Captain Williams, a Newport Beach, Calif., native.

These issues indicate that the shelf life of SOI groups is finite. US and Iraqi officials are now figuring out what to do next with the 103,000 SOI members in Iraq. Many officials worry that if the SOI units are dissolved without transitioning members into steady employment, Baghdad's security will pay the price.

"[The SOI] is not perfect, but I think they've done a stand-up job of providing security," says Lt. Col.

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Dan Barnett, commander of 1-2 Striker Cavalry Regiment and a native of Willard, Ohio.

The key to maintaining that security, says Lieutenant Colonel Barnett, is finding them new jobs. "If they have long-term employment, then they don't have to turn to the insurgents for money to live on."

In Adhamiya, a neighborhood in north Baghdad where Barnett's regiment patrols along with some 2,000 SOI members, attacks have plummeted to less than a tenth of pre-SOI levels.

SOI members receive \$300 a month from the US, a small amount even by Iraqi standards (low level Iraqi Army soldiers make roughly double). As of June, the US government has spent a total of \$216 million on the program. The Iraqi government has committed \$163 million to gradually assume Sons of Iraq contracts.

US commanders would like to transition 100 percent of SOI into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as soon as possible. But the final decision about incorporating SOI into the police or military will come from the Iraqi government – which is giving mixed signals on the plan.

As of May 31, only 17,000 (about 15 percent) of the SOI had joined the ISF.

Although there has been discussion about creating an additional Iraqi Army brigade here in Adhamiya composed mostly of local SOI members, sectarian politics could impede SOI integration. The SOI consist predominately of Sunnis. The Iraqi military consists of mostly Shiite and Kurdish soldiers.

"The national government is ... a Shiite dominated government," says Lt. Col. Pete Pierce, team leader of a Human Terrain Team in Baghdad who hails from Yorba Linda, Calif. "There are people within the government who are reluctant to incorporate what is seen as a majority Sunni armed force into the police or into the Army, but I don't think they have any choice."

It's rumored that many Iraqis who worked with Al Qaeda only switched allegiances when the SOI came to being. "In this type of environment ... a lot of people revert to what makes them the most money, and insurgency groups offer \$200, \$300, \$400 just to go do some random act [of violence]," says Lieutenant Greene.

To avoid SOI defection to insurgent groups, the US Army is taking several approaches to provide lasting employment. First, it's giving the Iraqi government a list of local SOI members interested in joining the Iraqi Army or police.

The US is also trying to push SOIs into the commercial sector with the Joint Technical Education Reintegration Program (JTERP), a fledgling initiative that will provide paid vocational training in fields like carpentry and plumbing. And the US has created the Adhamiya Civil Service Corps, a collective of workers that can be hired by local contractors.

But, if initial interest is any indication, the Army may have a difficult time. Only about 10 percent of SOI in Adhamiya have applied for the JTERP program, says Capt. Gus Giacomani, ISF coordinator for 1-2 SCR and from Spring Lake, North Carolina. He says the jobs lack prestige.

"It's the Arab honor," says Captain. Giacomani. "Now, they have that honor of 'I guard the

neighborhood' ... and you've got to find ways to let them keep it."

The Sons of Iraq

The Sons of Iraq are the estimated 103,000 Iraqi auxiliary police, some former insurgents, who are paid an average salary of \$300 per month by the US military to provide neighborhood security.

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As of May 31, 17,000 Sons of Iraq have transferred to full-time employment with the Iraq Security Forces.

Sources: Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq April 2008, Report to Congress, Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq June 2008, Associated Press.

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