

Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State

Carter Malkasian

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In late 2006 and then 2007 the Sunni Arab tribes in the Anbar province, located in western Iraq, came together with the United States armed forces positioned in the same province and conducted a grueling fight against Al-Qaeda in Iraq, also known at the time as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI, as it shall be referred to hereafter). Their victory in this struggle has since been held up as a shining example of counterinsurgency tactics, even if, as author Carter Malkasian points out, the specific reasons that the movement succeeded have been oversimplified and misidentified in accounts rendered since the Awakening. After the brutal advance of the Islamic State in Iraq a few years ago, however, the image of Anbar as a counterinsurgency example has been the target of no small amount of doubt. Malkasian argues that Anbar should be remembered not as an example of a successful counterinsurgency strategy but instead as a warning to not engage in military interventions without a better understanding of the local dynamics and politics of a given country or wider region, nor without the willingness to commit one's forces for a much longer period than the US initially did in Iraq.

Malkasian centers his book around US operations in Anbar, from 2003 until the US drawdown in 2008, after which he gives a much broader description of the events which took place in Iraq—in Anbar in particular—through 2016, including IS' return from the desert and the Syrian civil war to conquer territory in Iraq and the fighting which thereafter ensued between US-backed Iraqi forces and the group itself. The bulk of the book examines the Awakening and the circumstances leading up to it, focusing on the city of Ramadi. Malkasian does also, when relevant, step outside the scope of Anbar during the first part of the book to examine the conflict in that province within a broader context, usually on the scale of national Iraqi politics, though occasionally he even draws in the effects on Iraq of domestic dynamics within the United States. This is effectively done, as it allows him to explain the motivations and thought processes of those Iraqi and American actors whom he treats as something sometimes resembling protagonists in the context of the events he chronicles. His evocative renderings of those persons involved in the leadership of the Awakening in particular make for pleasant, if short, breaks from reading about incessant violence.

Malkasian was a civilian advisor to the various forces positioned in Anbar from early 2004 until August 2006, actually residing in the country for eighteen months within that span of time. He notes early on that he does not speak Arabic, and laments that fact, although it does not prevent him from occasionally including an Arabic word throughout the book. His experiences makes themselves evident in his work, as he consistently relates detailed accounts of the specific military units stationed in Anbar at a given time, their specific location in the province, and the identity of their leaders. At times, and due too to Malkasian's proximity to the American forces, it seems that the narrative of the other side is sparser than it could be. The biographical details given for early IS leaders, like Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, are few. The book also asks why AQI and later ISI refuse to negotiate with the tribesmen of the Awakening; while there is not a definitive answer to this question from the leaders themselves, there are several prominent reasons which those who have studied the group might immediately suggest if asked about the topic. These are not adequately addressed in *Illusions of Victory*, including the group's leaders' documented apocalyptic worldview. While the book is upfront about its focus being on the Awakening, it seems that the movement's enemy is at times as mysterious to the reader as it must have been to the forces confronting it a decade ago.

While the work suffers a little on that front, its treatment of the tribesmen and Iraqi politicians involved in the Awakening movement, alongside American military leaders, is superb. Malkasian effectively picks apart and details the motivations of the various tribal leaders who engage themselves and those members of their tribes whose loyalty they still retain; he concludes that the Awakening was not a grand struggle on the part of the tribes to throw off the yoke of the evil jihadists but instead a conflict driven by blood feuds and a fierce desire to regain lost prestige and income flows. This is not to say that Malkasian undersells the contributions of the tribes. He notes that there are two general schools of thought on the Awakening: the first being, as noted above, the idea that Iraqis rose up against the brutality of the Islamic State's precursor, and the second that it was the surge of American troops in 2007 which allowed for the pushing back of the terrorists. Malkasian of course rejects, by and large, the first idea, but he also dismisses the second one, noting both that the surge did not occur until after the tide began to turn against ISI and that it was the fortitude of the Iraqis themselves which did finally break the extremists. He also lays much of the credit for success against ISI at the feet of the police force which was built in Ramadi, and thereafter wider Anbar, as part of the Awakening effort. His account of the events leading up to the Awakening and the battles fought during the event itself is an honest one, unafraid to call out the failings of Iraqis or their American counterparts, including his frequent mentioning of the fact that the local populace was particularly disapproving of the latter and that this had detrimental effects on intelligence gathering efforts conducted by American forces.

In the broader scope of the literature to which this book belongs it occupies an interesting niche. It is a well-researched and in-depth account of the goings-on in Anbar during the mid-2000s; Malkasian's effective chronicling of the American strategies and the internal Iraqi and tribal politics makes the book a must-read for anyone studying counterinsurgency or the region during the time the book covers, as well as anyone advocating intervention by the American military. As far as accounts of the genesis of IS go, however, the book is less detailed than others which have been published in recent years. For those unfamiliar with IS' origins and 2014 capture of Iraqi territory it would serve as an excellent starting point, but those already familiar with the group and its genesis will not learn much more about that topic from this work, excepting the significant and specific insights into the events which pushed it into the western deserts during the late 2000s. Within the bounds of counterinsurgency literature, however, the work is

something which ought to be recommended to anyone interested in the topic.

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