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## **U.S. Military Expresses Concern About Perception of an Iraqi Crackdown on Sunnis**

By [ALISSA J. RUBIN](#) and ROD NORDLAND

BAGHDAD — The American military said Wednesday that it was closely following the arrests of 15 leaders of the [Awakening Councils](#), plus the threatened arrests of five others, but insisted that the detentions were not part of a deliberate Iraqi government campaign against these groups, which are mostly Sunni and include many former insurgents.

Military officials say their fear is that the [arrests](#), while relatively few so far, have created a public perception that the government is cracking down on the groups, which could undermine the Awakening program, widely credited with helping to end the insurgency in much of [Iraq](#).

“We don’t think it’s a systemic problem,” said Col. Jeffrey Kulmayer, chief of reconciliation and engagement for the American forces in Iraq, and the military’s top liaison with the Sons of Iraq, as it calls the Awakening Councils. “But with each individual arrest the perception is there that it’s an assault on the entire program.” In addition to the 15 Awakening leaders arrested in recent weeks, the military is tracking the cases of five others who are the subjects of arrest warrants.

American generals are so concerned about Awakening Councils that Colonel Kulmayer says he reports to them daily on problems the groups are having, including delayed salary payments. The late payrolls have been cleared up in most areas, he said, the one exception being Diyala Province.

“We’re going to track very carefully that the right thing is being done, that the good guy is not being arrested but that the bad ones are,” he said.

The military is determined to intervene if necessary, Colonel Kulmayer said, and has already in the case of a prominent council leader in Baghdad, Col. Raad Ali of the Ghazaliya neighborhood, a one-time stronghold of [Al Qaeda](#). “It turns out the charges were trumped up,” Colonel Kulmayer said. Officials persuaded a judge to dismiss the case and release him, the colonel said.

the colonel said.

The number of arrests is small relative to the total number of Awakening leaders, he said. Of the 323 leaders in Baghdad, eight have been detained; of the 275 leaders in Diyala and Salahuddin, seven have been detained, he said. In addition to the leaders, at least 164 rank-and-file Awakening members, and as many as 200, have been arrested, he said.

In addition to the delays in paying salaries, a budget crisis brought on by the plunge in oil prices has made it hard for the government to make good on its promise of jobs for Awakening members. These developments have [shaken Awakening members' faith](#) in the government's intentions, which they said could send some in the movement back to the insurgency.

"I think all these things happened at the same time and made it look bad," Colonel Kulmayer said. But he insisted that Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#) and top levels of the Iraqi government remained committed to financing the program and integrating its members into permanent ministry jobs, which pay substantially more than the roughly \$300-a-month stipend earned by Awakening members.

The problem lies mainly with the process of issuing arrest warrants. Under Iraqi law, a warrant requires only two witnesses, and records are not centralized, Colonel Kulmayer said, so charges can easily be fabricated. Those doing so, he said, are "factions in the country that are trying to undermine the reconciliation."

He identified those factions as Shiite extremists and [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#), which American intelligence has found to be a homegrown Sunni militant group with some foreign leadership.

The American military initially sponsored most of the Awakening Councils but has been handing responsibility for managing and paying them to the Iraqi government with the promise that members will be hired into permanent government jobs. However, with the exception of 4,291 police officers, none of the 94,000 Awakening members have been given government positions.

American generals held discussions with senior Iraqi government officials in recent days and won a renewed commitment to hire the Awakening members in government jobs, said Colonel Kulmayer, citing a resolution issued Tuesday by the Council of Ministers, the Iraqi cabinet.

"That's new and that's important, because before it was just concept, and now we've moved from concept to implementation," Colonel Kulmayer said. He added, however, that he had not yet seen the text of the resolution.

The secretary of the Council of Ministers, Ali al-Allaq, said it had "decided to employ the Awakening members in the ministries" but still needed to discuss the details

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Other military officials who work on Awakening issues say they have yet to be convinced that the Shiite-led government is any more likely now than in the past to produce jobs for the largely Sunni Awakening members. Even if the men are transferred to ministries, they say, that does not guarantee they will keep their jobs after money for the Awakening program runs out later this year.

“In the end, maybe it will work out, but there are difficulties we are not dealing with yet,” said one military official, who was not authorized to speak to the news media.

The recent surge in violence continued Wednesday when a parked car full of explosives blew up in Kirkuk, killing 13 people and wounding 22, according to the Kirkuk police operations commander, Yazgar Shakoor. The victims were mostly security guards at an oil installation.

*Riyadh Mohammed contributed reporting.*

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