How Diplomat Won Allies in the Heart of Iraqi Resistance

Under Mr. Silverman's Plan, Groups Feeding Insurgency Got Voice in Government

A Change of Mood for Sunnis

By Yaroslav Trofimov

TIKRIT, Iraq – On a late January morning, Robert Silverman snapped on a deep-blue armored vest, color-matched to his blazer, and drove across the Tigris River for lunch with Sheikh Naji al Jabara.

Mr. Silverman was the top U.S. administrator for the province that Saddam Hussein calls home. Sheikh Naji's clan was one of very few that cooperated when U.S. soldiers arrived in April, and the military rewarded them with top jobs. The sheikh headed a council set up by the U.S. to help govern the province. His cousin, Gen. Hussein Jassim al Jabara, was made provincial governor.

But this day Mr. Silverman had a stern message for the Jabaras: It was time for them to share power. The lunch, in a house where the sheikh used to entertain Saddam, marked the beginning of what occupation authorities here called Operation Political Refreshment – a little-noticed effort that could prove critical to the future of Iraq and larger U.S. aspirations in the Middle East.

The Salahuddin province, dominated by Iraq's Sunni Arab minority, is the former regime's power base and is now the heart of the insurgency. Mr. Silverman's task was to give clans that were feeding the resistance a stake in the rebuilding effort – and in the new government institutions that the U.S. is trying to create. A success here in Saddam's stronghold would bolster America's standing among the Iraqis and in the predominately Sunni Arab world.

"If the Arab Sunnis are doing well, it tells the region that this is a success. It's the homeboys up here being part of the system that really seals it," says Mr. Silverman, who has returned to Washington for a senior job in the State Department's Iraq and Iran office.

In the weeks after his meeting with the sheikh, Mr. Silverman engineered a revolution in the province. Through a mix of cajolery, persuasion and edicts backed by U.S. military force, Mr. Silverman managed to pull leaders of several major tribes into the U.S.-crafted political structure – without turning Sheikh Naji's powerful clan into foes.

He began by easing the sheikh out of his prominent position – but kept him happy by ensuring that his brother rose in provincial politics. Then he promoted a native of Samarra, the province's biggest city and a hotbed of insurgency, as a new governor, and gave a prominent job to a former general from Mr. Hussein's own tribe. Along the way, Mr. Silverman dodged rockets, escaped a car bomb and helped discover an insurgent spy on his staff. Occasionally he used what he calls "dictatorial" means to nurture democracy in a society corroded by decades of totalitarian rule and rent by sectarian and tribal strife.

Underlying Mr. Silverman's efforts was a big change among Sunni Arabs. The Sunni Arabs, who make up less than 20% of Iraq's population, have dominated the country's politics for most of the past century. But the December capture of Mr. Hussein near Tikrit dashed any lingering hopes that the former regime, and the privileges it bestowed, could be restored. U.S. determination to create a new Iraqi government by July jolted many Sunni leaders into realizing that their interests could be ignored if they didn't jump on board.

"There is a new understanding now that we shouldn't just let our country lie destroyed," says Dhamen Hussein al-Ubaidi, the dean of Tikrit University's Law College. "It's now obvious that those who join governing bodies do it to help our people. They are not traitors. Their participation will help end the occupation faster."

Bob Silverman

The 46-year-old Mr. Silverman, an Arabic-speaking foreign-service officer who has served in Sunni-dominated Egypt and Turkey and in Shiite-dominated Azerbaijan, noticed the change in Iraq's Sunni heartland late last year. He quickly recognized the wider stakes for the U.S. in the Arab world.

Mr. Silverman needed the cooperation of two groups that he felt were fueling the insurgency: Mr. Hussein's own tribe, the al Bu-Nasr; and the inhabitants of Samarra, an ancient city neglected in favor of Tikrit by both Mr. Hussein and the U.S. occupiers. To bring them into the fold, Mr. Silverman would have to get the Jabaras to share power.

Opening Move

Lunch with Sheikh Naji was Mr. Silverman's opening move. Mr. Silverman asked the sheikh to step down from the provincial council. He told him that his previous prominence in Mr. Hussein's Baath Party made it impossible for him to play such a role. At the same time, Mr. Silverman offered to support the sheikh's brother, Abdullah, a former general who played a far less prominent role in the former regime, for an important position in the new order. That would set up Abdullah to carry the clan's fortunes forward.

The sheikh agreed, as long as he could save face. Soon, he was appointed head of a new informal tribal council that started to meet every Monday with U.S. Army commanders on such issues as the fate of tribe members detained by the military.

But at the lunchtime meeting, Mr. Silverman was careful not to mention the real target of his campaign: Sheikh Naji's cousin, Gen. Hussein al Jabara. The general had been a division commander in the Iraqi Republican Guard, and served as commander of Iraq's Border Guard during the U.S.-led invasion. He switched loyalties when American forces appeared near Tikrit a few days after the fall of Baghdad.

The U.S. Army appointed Gen. Jabara governor of Salahuddin Province, which stretches from the outskirts of Baghdad to Kurdistan in the north and straddles regions dominated by Shiites and Kurds. Sheikh Naji was made head of the Salahuddin provincial council, while other close relatives took jobs as chief of police, chief of intelligence and head of communications.

U.S. military commanders appreciated how effectively the governor, who sported a Saddam mustache and wore the safari suits favored by Baath party mandarins, rooted out insurgents.

But Mr. Silverman worried that the general may have played a prominent role in Saddam's vicious campaigns against internal foes. Back in May, the U.S. military didn't thoroughly check Gen. Jabara's record. Mr. Silverman says his own inquiries turned up evidence that troops under Gen. Jabara's command massacred Shiites during the 1991 uprising. In an interview last year, Gen. Jabara said he didn't commit any crimes, and that he had secretly opposed Saddam Hussein's regime – but added that Saddam had been "an excellent leader" up until 1991.

Mr. Silverman's evidence persuaded the U.S. military that it was time for the general to go. So, after easing the sheikh out of power, Mr. Silverman worked on getting his favored candidate into the governor's seat: Falah Nakib, a scion of one of Samarra's most prominent families. Mr. Nakib, a Swedish-trained engineer, was the son of an Iraqi hero of wars against Israel and was already serving as deputy governor. But unlike the governor, he had avoided openly disparaging the Shiites and the Kurds, and was willing to go out of his way to woo them.

Meanwhile, to bring Saddam's al Bu-Nasr clan into the fold, Mr. Silverman wanted to help prominent clan member Maj. Gen. Thamer Sultan become a senior official, in Tikrit or even Baghdad. Gen. Sultan was a former Iraqi Army division commander, jailed by Saddam in 1991 on suspicion of plotting a coup. He was released in 2002.

Working Gen. Sultan into a prominent position was especially important. No tribe in Iraq was more privileged than al Bu-Nasr under the old regime, and many of its members are

widely believed to support the insurgency. An al Bu-Nasr tribesman who served on Mr. Silverman's small staff as a translator was recently arrested by the military for spying on behalf of the guerrillas.

'A Bit Spent'

Mr. Silverman trekked to Gen. Sultan's farm and sweet-talked him in Egyptian-accented Arabic. But after the trip, he worried about the effects of long imprisonment on the general. "He looks a bit spent," Mr. Silverman said. "But we'll get him unspent, real quick."

On Jan. 27, Mr. Silverman took his next step: getting Gen. Sultan and the sheikh's brother, Abdullah, elected to the provincial council, which would likely launch national political careers for the two men. While U.S. authorities have the power to appoint any Iraqi official, elections would give the men a veneer of legitimacy.

In a smoke-filled back room at the Tikrit City Hall, two dozen councilmen, half of them representatives of prominent tribes, sat on white plastic chairs around Mr. Silverman and the city's U.S.-appointed mayor. In conversations with some council members beforehand, Mr. Silverman talked up the two candidates he needed to win.

He was tense. Just three days earlier, a powerful car bomb had exploded near the city hall in Samarra at the scheduled time of a similar election, killing three people and wounding dozens. Mr. Silverman and the Samarra councilmen escaped injury only because he had postponed that meeting at the last moment.

Ten candidates in Tikrit got up one by one and made short statements, mostly strained professions of opposition to Mr. Hussein and boasts that they helped bring security to the city after the war. One of Mr. Silverman's candidates, Gen. Abdullah al Jabara, said little. "If you don't think I'm the right man, don't vote for me," he told the councilmen after briefly recounting his military career.

Mr. Silverman urged the members to ignore tribal sympathies and vote for the best man. The mayor fished ballot slips out of an orange shopping bag and counted votes, and then announced that Gen. Abdullah al Jabara was the winner.

Mr. Silverman's plan then hit a snag: Gen. Sultan of the al Bu-Nasr, his other candidate, tied with a candidate related to the Jabaras. Mr. Silverman addressed the council again: "Please, let's make sure we have a good balance of the tribes here," he said, a clear plug for Gen. Sultan. After another round of voting, Gen. Sultan got the nod and thanked Mr. Silverman and the councilmen for "our first taste of democracy."

Like other experiments with elections in Iraq, this ballot was controlled by the U.S., which can veto participants, designs the procedures and has the last word on the outcome. Yet, in a country with no recent memory of open debate, even such a piloted process was an important step. While the elections "weren't completely unmanipulated," Mr. Silverman says, they built up confidence among the new Iraqi political class.

After the City Hall meeting, Mr. Silverman had only to replace Gen. Jabara as governor. The governor had been away in Saudi Arabia during the council elections, on the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. The showdown came on a sunny Friday in early February, the day the governor was scheduled to return from the hajj. Mr. Silverman and Col. James Hickey, commander of the First Brigade of the Fourth Infantry Division that oversaw the province, once again crossed the Tigris to the Jabara compound. The governor was nowhere in sight.

The Jabaras, according to people who were present, warned that firing the governor would have dire security repercussions – and that it would be unacceptable for the job to go to someone from Samarra rather than Tikrit.

But Col. Hickey's presence made clear to the Jabaras that U.S. military support for the governor had evaporated. It was agreed that the governor – who never did show up for the meeting – would step down rather being fired. The following morning, he arrived at Col. Hickey's office, signed on the dotted line and turned over government property, including a green Mercedes-Benz.

The next day, several U.S. Army Bradley Fighting Vehicles moved into downtown Tikrit and blocked off much of the city around the governorate building. The provincial council convened with Mr. Silverman, Col. Hickey and Richard Jones, chief of policy and deputy head of the occupation authority, in attendance.

The two new members whom Mr. Silverman had supported were sworn in, alongside several other new legislators from other parts of the province. Mr. Nakib, the deputy governor, sat on the podium. American soldiers, M-16s at the ready, stood guard be-

hind the delegates. A council member read out the governor's resignation letter, which accused the U.S. of failing to support the provincial administration.

Events then took an unexpected turn: Mr. Silverman's two new councilmen – Gen. Sultan and Gen. Abdullah al Jabara – both stood up and challenged Mr. Nakib for the governorship. The hall fell silent as every vote was read out and marked on a board with the three candidates' names. Up until the very last moment it looked as though Mr. Nakib would not get the 15 votes out of 29 present council members he needed to win. Only the support of council members from the Shiite town of Balad and the Turcoman-Kurdish town of Tuz Khurmatu put him over the top.

"Phew," Mr. Silverman breathed out after the last ballot was cast. The council's temporary chairman, Ali Ghanem, looked at Mr. Silverman and motioned him to approach the podium. "Mr. Bob, your fingerprints will be all over our history," he said.

After the election, Gen. Abdullah al Jabara wouldn't complain about how his clan had been treated, even though he thought that he would have beaten Mr. Nakib if the elections were held after the return of all council members from the hajj. "What happened today – we have to accept democracy," he said.

Gen. Sultan was also cheerful. Invested with new prominence as a viable candidate for senior office, the following day he would travel with Mr. Silverman to his tribe's stronghold of Beiji, a flashpoint of recent attacks, to make a joint call for calm.

Mr. Silverman, too, was optimistic after the council meeting. At dinnertime that night, he gathered his staff to celebrate in his headquarters: Saddam Hussein's former palace on a cliff overlooking the Tigris. Pouring Turkish white wine into coffee mugs, Mr. Silverman beamed, saying, "This went quite well. We've kept on board those whom we wanted to keep, and it all turned out to be peaceful."

A few minutes later, a thud sounded across the Tigris. Hearing an ominous whooshing sound a second later, one of the staff members screamed, "Incoming, incoming," and everyone scrambled to the marble floor. As Mr. Silverman and his aides rushed to switch off all lights, the rocket exploded nearby in the huge palace compound.

A few weeks later, Sheikh Naji and his brother crossed the Tigris – to attend Mr. Silverman's going-away party. Gen. Abdullah al Jabara asked, half-joking, whether Mr. Silverman could manipulate elections in Washington as he had done in Tikrit. Mr. Silverman says he answered no. ■