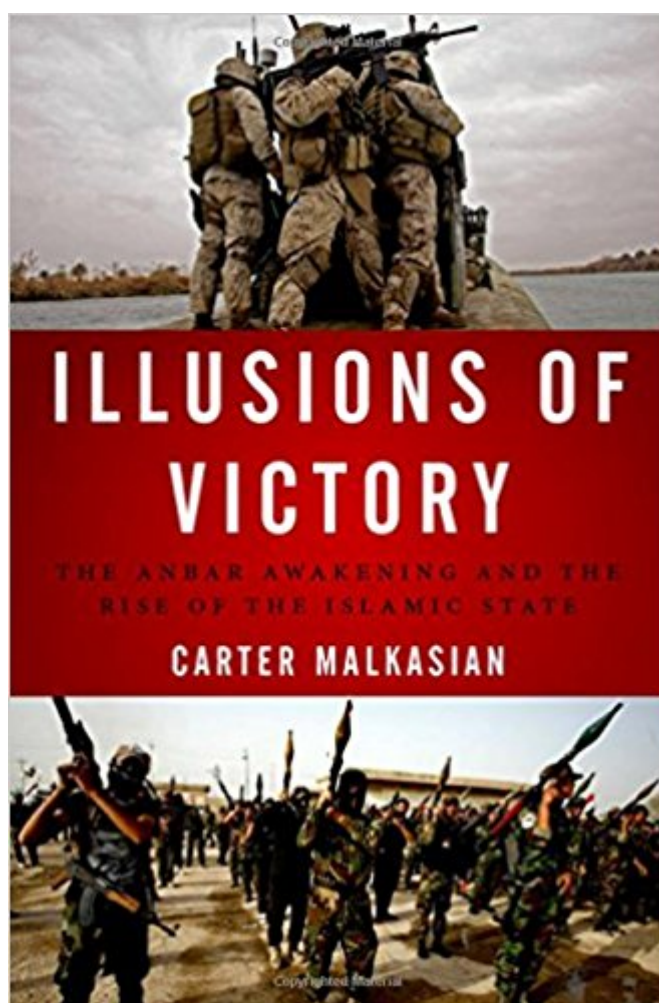




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Illusions Of Victory: The Anbar Awakening And The Rise Of The Islamic State



Synopsis

In the immediate aftermath of the 2007 "Surge" of American troops in Iraq, the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in Anbar Province was widely hailed as one of America's signature victories. US Marines and soldiers fought for years there, in grinding battles such as Fallujah and Ramadi that define the experience of Iraq. Eventually, the fractious tribal sheiks in that province, with the help of American troops, united in an "Awakening" that dealt AQI a stunning defeat. The Awakening's success argued that the United States could intervene in a war-torn country and, with the right strategy, bring stability and peace. It seemed to exemplify snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. A decade later, the situation in Anbar Province is dramatically different. In 2014, much of Anbar fell to the AQI's successor organization, the Islamic State, which swept through the region with shocking ease. In *Illusions of Victory*, Carter Malkasian looks at the wreckage to explain why the Awakening's initial promise proved misleading and why victory was unsustainable. Malkasian begins by tracing the origins of the Awakening, then turns his attention to what happened in its wake. After the United States left, Iraq's Shi'a government sidelined Sunni leaders throughout the country. AQI, brought back to life as the Islamic State, expanded in northern and western Iraq and quickly found a receptive audience among marginalized Sunnis. In short order, the progress that had resulted from the Awakening fell apart. Malkasian draws many lessons from Anbar. Chief among them, the most stunning of victories may not last. The fact that the leading model of success fell apart severely damages the idea that the United States can send the military to a country for a few years and create lasting peace. Even the most successful example was bound to deeper social, sectarian, and religious forces insensitive to temporary boots on the ground. From today's perspective, rather than decisive success, Anbar exemplifies how intervention itself is a costly, long-term project. The most brilliant victory could not escape this wisdom.

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Customer Reviews

Carter Malkasian is the author of *War Comes to Garmser*, an award-winning history of one district in Afghanistan. He spent over five years working as a civilian with the State Department and US military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Whether the words of Tacitus or JFK, Malkasian reminds us - "Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan." For years Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans have watched as a steady-stream of books was published that generally attempted one of three things: 1) Take singular credit for the catastrophic success of the Anbar Awakening and Sunni Awakening; 2) Attempt to provide evidence to support the "it was good when I left argument" so as the author could claim to have had some special understanding of OIF that his followers did not; thus, ruined the chance for operational and strategic success; and, 3) Retold "war stories" from a micro tactical level that while entertaining and motivating, failed to help military professionals gain a better understanding of the campaigns so as to learn "lessons" that may be applied elsewhere. In his thin volume, Malkasian skillfully manages to persuade the reader through the presentation of evidence that not only was the Anbar Awakening not an operational or strategic tipping point, but that no single individual within the US Army or Marine Corps caused it; nor, was it singularly caused by the brutality of AQI and their "over-reach" with the Sunnis of Anbar. Instead, Malkasian provides evidence to demonstrate that self-interest was the primary motivation of the Awakening leaders - a self interest that included political and economic power motivations. While likely to upset some, Malkasian provides evidence to support a conclusion AQI was quite popular in Anbar with many possessing "hidden sympathies," and did not solely rely on brutality and coercion. He does note - "AQI left those who remained neutral alone. The logic was unassailable: oppose violence and be killed or stay quiet and be left alone." Why should this matter to us now? We should ask ourselves - "Is it possible that Sunnis in Iraq under ISIS control were treated better and achieved better outcomes than before under a Shia-dominated government or at the hands of Shia-Militia-Groups once their areas were retaken? Were they subjected to violence for remaining neutral? How will this sow the seeds of future conflict in Iraq? Why would it be in the interest of Sunnis to fight ISIS to the benefit of Iranian-backed militia groups and political

parties?" Malkasian's book reminds us that we did not understand the Iraqis nearly as well as we convinced ourselves we did. He reminds us that self-interest is a powerful tool, and that only those in pursuit of Barbara Tuchman's March of Folly would be dumb enough to push policies contrary to self-interest. Malkasian's conclusions are clear and supported by an entire volume of evidence - the Anbar Awakening was not a tipping point, and the conquest of Anbar by the Islamic State should not have surprised anyone. As he notes - "The larger lesson is that internal cultural, historical, and social dynamics - sectarian divides, age-old tribalism, and the influence of groups claiming Islamic legitimacy - could not be redirected in the span of a few years." This book is a necessary addition to the library of any serious student of operational art or anyone attempting to understand how much we got wrong ten years ago that contributed to the outcomes in 2014 with the Islamic State.

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