TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT LESSONS LEARNED

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ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES—overt interactions between coalition military and foreign civilian personnel for the purpose of obtaining information, influencing behavior, or building an indigenous base of support for coalition objectives—have played a central role in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). They have involved efforts to reach out to village headmen (mukhtars), tribal sheikhs, Muslim clerics, elected officials and representatives, urban professionals, businessmen, retired military officers, and women.

Tribal engagement has played a particularly prominent role in OIF. This reflects the enduring strength of the tribes in many of Iraq’s rural areas and some of its urban neighborhoods. And tribal engagement has been key to recent efforts to drive a wedge between tribally based Sunni Arab insurgents and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in Anbar province and elsewhere, as well as efforts to undermine popular support for the Mahdi Army in largely Shi’ite neighborhoods and regions of the country.

Because of the growing importance of tribal engagement for coalition strategy in Iraq, its potential role in future contingency operations, and its potential contribution to future phases of the War on Terrorism, it is vitally important for army leaders at all levels to understand what history and the social sciences suggest, and what coalition forces in Iraq have learned, about how to engage and leverage tribes and tribal networks.

Anthropology 101 for Soldiers: What is a Tribe?

A tribe is a form of political identity based on common claimed descent. It is not necessarily a lineage group, as tribal subunits (sections or subsections) may manufacture fictive kinship ties or alter their tribal identity or affiliations for political, economic, or security-related reasons. Tribes may also be of mixed sectarian or ethnic composition. Thus, Iraq’s Shammar and Jubur tribes have Sunni and Shi’ite branches, while Qashqa’i tribesmen in Iran are of Turkish, Persian, Arab, Kurdish, Lak, Luri, and Gypsy origin.

There is no such thing as a “typical” tribe. Tribes may embody diverse kinship rules, structures, types of political authority, and lifestyles (sedentary, semi-nomadic, nomadic), which may be influenced by security and economic conditions and government policies. Thus, for instance, the Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, Levant, and North Africa tended, at least traditionally, to be relatively egalitarian and non-hierarchical organizations lacking a well-developed leadership structure, while the Turkic tribes of the Central Asian steppes tended to be hierarchical, highly centralized organizations ruled by powerful chieftains.
Although Arab tribal ideology is relatively egalitarian, in reality, major disparities in status, power, and wealth exist within and between tribes. Among settled tribes, sheikly families and clans tend to form dominant lineages that are better off and more influential than other families and clans in the tribe. Bedouin tribes of “common” origin are looked down on by those of “noble” origin, while smaller (“weak”) settled tribes are often looked down on by larger (“strong”) settled tribes.

### Tribal Values, Processes, and Organization

Tribal values remain deeply ingrained in Iraqi society and have had a profound influence on Iraqi social mores and political culture. (This observation holds for much of the rest of the Arab world as well.) These values include the high premium put on in-group solidarity (‘asabiyya), which finds expression in loyalty to the family, clan, and tribe, coupled with a powerful desire to preserve the autonomy of the tribe vis-à-vis other tribes, non-tribal groups, and the authorities; personal and group honor (sharaf); sexual honor (‘ird), which pertains to the chastity of the family’s female members; manliness (muruwwa), which finds expression in personal traits such as courage, loyalty, generosity, and hospitality; and pride in ancestry (nasb).

Tribal processes include traditional forms of interpersonal and group conflict such as the blood feud, as well as mechanisms for regulating and resolving such conflicts: the cease-fire (atwa), blood money (fasl), and peace agreement (sulha). These processes are conducted in accordance with tribal law (‘urf), as opposed to Sharia (Islamic) or civil law, and are applied mainly in rural towns and villages and some urban areas, though the precise extent to which tribal law is applied in Iraq today is not clear.

Organizationally, the tribes of Iraq consist of nested (vice hierarchically organized) kinship groups (see Table 1). There are thousands of clans, hundreds of tribes, and about two dozen tribal federations in Iraq today, each with its own sheikh. (Saddam Hussein’s regime officially recognized some 7,380 tribal sheikhs.) The terms used to describe these kinship groups and the meanings ascribed to them may differ by tribe or region, however, and tribesmen frequently disagree about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Segment</th>
<th>Number of Adult Males</th>
<th>Residence Patterns</th>
<th>Kinship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asha’ir/Qabila/Sillif</td>
<td>Thousands–hundreds of thousands</td>
<td>Local areas, provinces, or large regions, sometimes crossing international boundaries</td>
<td>No traceable kinship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Tribal Confederation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashira (Tribe)</td>
<td>Several hundred–many thousands</td>
<td>Neighboring villages or local areas</td>
<td>Descent from a common claimed ancestor, or an ancestor who came to be associated with the tribe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabba/Hamula (Clan/Tribal Section)</td>
<td>Several score–several hundred</td>
<td>Same or nearby villages</td>
<td>Descent from common ancestor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fakhdhdh (Lineage/Tribal Subsection)</td>
<td>Several tens–several hundred</td>
<td>Same village</td>
<td>Three-five generations or more; may be coterminous with or encompass the khams, the five-generation group that acts as a unit for purposes of avenging blood and honor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayt (Family/Household)</td>
<td>One or more</td>
<td>Same house</td>
<td>Nuclear/extended family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTES: 1) The terms fasila and hamula are sometimes used in Iraq to refer to a subsection of a fakhdhdh, consisting of an extended family of several adult males, often living in the same housing cluster or compound; 2) Alternative designations for a hamula include lahama or kishba; 3) Other terms used in Iraq to refer to various types of tribal sections or subsections include batn, fenda, irqa, ‘imara, sadr, sha’b, and ‘unuq.

Table 1. The Arab tribal system in Iraq.
tribal lineages, relationships, and nomenclature. This complicates efforts by outsiders to understand tribal relationships, dynamics, and politics.

The collapse of central-government authority and the rise in political and sectarian violence in the wake of OIF has caused many Iraqis to fall back on the family, tribe, sect, or ethnic group for support in confronting the daily challenges of living in post-Saddam Iraq. As a result, tribal identities have assumed greater salience in Iraq in recent years. It would, however, be a mistake to overemphasize the role of the tribes or to regard the tribe as the central organizing principle of Iraqi society today. Large parts of Iraq are inhabited by detribalized or non-tribal populations, and tribal identity often competes with and is overshadowed by other forms of identity (sect, ethnicity, class, or ideological orientation). Moreover, the demise of the old regime has led to the rise of new social forces and actors in Iraq—particularly Islamist movements, militias, and parties, which are playing an increasingly important role in Iraqi politics. Recent events in Anbar province, however, demonstrate that under certain conditions, the tribes can still be decisive actors.

A detailed, up-to-date picture of the tribal system in Iraq does not exist—at least in the open literature. Much of what is known about it is based on a very
small number of studies done more than half a century ago, and information gaps frequently have to be filled by inferences drawn from more recent studies undertaken in neighboring Arab states. While there are a number of useful compendiums on the tribes of Iraq done by Iraqi scholars, these are largely catalogs of tribes, tribal sections, and their sheikhs that are in much need of updating.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, there has been no systematic effort to assess the impact of violence and coalition and Iraqi Government policies on the tribes and the state of relations between tribal and non-tribal groups in Iraqi society.\textsuperscript{20} This article will hopefully constitute a modest first step in this direction.

The Cultural Logic of Tribes and Tribalism

How do tribal values express themselves in the conduct of Iraqi tribesmen and tribes? Tribesmen are intensely jealous of their honor and status vis-à-vis others—\textsuperscript{21}to the extent that honor has been described as the “tribal center of gravity.” The culture of honor and the implicit threat of sanction or violence if one’s honor is impugned may be a vestige of the Arabs’ Bedouin past—a means of ensuring individual and group survival when there is no higher authority around to keep the peace.

As a result, social relations between individuals and groups are characterized by a high degree of competition and conflict (usually nonviolent) over honor, status, and access to resources.\textsuperscript{22} A well-known Bedouin Arab proverb expresses this tendency: “Me and my brothers against my cousins; me, my brothers, and my cousins against the stranger.” Some see the extraordinary politeness, generosity, and hospitality that characterize social relations in Arab society as a means of curbing this propensity for competition and conflict.\textsuperscript{24}

What accounts for this tendency? One explanation is that it is a consequence of endogamy (marriage within the lineage group), which may have started as a functional adaptation to desert life, but which remains a powerful factor in Arab society today. (In the desert, endogamy reinforced group cohesion, enabling the group to better counter external threats.)\textsuperscript{25} Another explanation is that it is a characteristic feature of segmentary lineage groups, which tend to divide into fractious, competing lineages (families, households, and clans).\textsuperscript{26}

In tribal society, family, clan, and tribal affiliations define one’s identity and status. Consequently, all personal interactions potentially have a collective dimension. Marriage is not a personal choice, but a family affair, with implications for the status and standing of the entire family. Conflicts between individuals always have the potential to become conflicts between groups.

Relationships are central to tribal life. In an environment marked by competition and potential conflict, building and maintaining relationships is a way to reduce the circle of potential adversaries or enemies. This is why feuds, when not resolved by the payment of blood money, were traditionally resolved by the gifting of brides—to create ties that bind between formerly aggrieved parties.\textsuperscript{27}

In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Arab world, tribes rarely provide the basis for sustained collective action. Tribal solidarity has been undermined by the dramatic socioeconomic changes of the past century. (The last tribal rebellion in Iraq was in 1936.) And even in the distant past, when inter-tribal wars occurred, it was unusual for all sections of a tribe to participate; subsections of warring tribes often remained on friendly terms or opted to sit the war out.\textsuperscript{28}

The household (bayt) is the fundamental unit of social, economic, and political action in tribal society, while the tribal subsection (the fakhdh or its equivalent)—the lowest level of tribal organization at which individuals are still bound by blood and marriage—is normally the highest level at which sustained social action occurs, usually as a result of a blood feud.\textsuperscript{29} On the rare occasion when tribe-wide cooperation does occur, it is generally in response to an extraordinary event, such as an outside threat or attack.\textsuperscript{30}

Thus, normally contentious tribesmen will band together to fend off an external threat, then return to a state of competition and conflict once the threat subsides.\textsuperscript{31} This may be the dynamic driving the “Anbar Awakening,” wherein disparate tribes have coalesced to confront the growing influence and strength of AQI.

Another pattern that has repeated itself throughout Arab and Muslim history is that of the marginal man or transplanted outsider who unites otherwise fractious tribesmen under the banner of religion.\textsuperscript{32} Examples include the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the 7th century; the Sanusis in Libya and the Sudanese Mahdi in the 19th century; and the Hashemites in the Hejaz, Jordan, and Iraq and
the Saudis in Arabia in the 20th century. Today, this pattern is repeating itself in parts of Iraq with the emergence of religiously based movements and parties led by formerly obscure charismatic clerics (Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army), former exiles (Abd al-‘Aziz al-Hakim and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council), or foreigners (the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and AQI). However, many of the rank and file of these groups are neither of tribal origin nor particularly religious, consisting, to some extent, of opportunistic and criminal elements.\(^{34}\)

Tribal identity has a territorial dimension as well.\(^{35}\) Tribes are often identified with specific localities or regions: pastoral nomads with particular grazing areas, settled tribesmen with lands located near a particular village or town or in a particular region.\(^{36}\) Thus, a description of tribal affiliation generally conveys information about both an individual’s family and his geographic origins.\(^{37}\)

For settled tribesmen, the tribal domain usually consists of a compact territory owned exclusively by members of the tribe. It is divided into plots owned by the various sections of the tribe, and surrounded by a belt of land partly owned by neighboring tribes or townsmen.\(^{38}\) It is not clear how the tribal relocation and resettlement policies selectively pursued by Saddam Hussein’s regime affected traditional tribal residential patterns.\(^{39}\)

Among settled tribesmen, there is strong pressure not to alienate ancestral lands by marrying outside the tribe (lest land pass to another tribe through inheritance) or by selling land to a “foreigner” (i.e., a non-tribesman).\(^{40}\) Infringement of a tribe’s territorial domain by outsiders is often a cause for conflict. This has led to inter-tribal strife in post-Saddam Iraq, when the coalition has paid some tribes to secure oil pipelines in territory traditionally claimed by other tribes.\(^{41}\)

Some tribes take the form of geographically dispersed networks. Tribes belonging to a large confederation may be spread over a vast area, even across international boundaries. Tribal ties are sometimes reinforced by marriage alliances and personal or business relationships, and may be mobilized in the pursuit of shared interests. Saddam Hussein’s regime was particularly adept at mobilizing tribal networks and forging tribal alliances, which accounted in part for its durability.\(^{42}\)

Sheikhs, Tribes, and Power

Historically, states and empires have dealt with sheikhs as local power brokers to help rule or administer their territories or overseas possessions, and they have often attempted to co-opt tribes as part of a strategy of “divide and rule.” Coalition forces have likewise attempted to engage the sheikhs and their tribes as part of their effort to stabilize Iraq and defeat AQI. It is therefore important to understand the sources—and limits—of sheikhly authority and tribal influence.

Sheikhly authority. The sheikh traditionally performs a number of functions related to the inner life of the tribe and its relations with the non-tribal world and the authorities. The role of the sheikh has not changed all that much over the last century and a half, and sheikhs still fulfill a number of important functions. These may include—

- Ensuring security throughout the tribe’s domain.
- Mediating and resolving internal disputes.
- Trying cases and imposing punishments in accordance with tribal law.
- Representing the tribe to the non-tribal world and the ruling authorities.
- Extending hospitality to guests of the tribe.
- Providing conscripts or tribal levies for the security forces.
- Preserving the autonomy of the tribe vis-à-vis other tribes and the authorities.
- Organizing and regulating smuggling, to the extent that the tribe engages in such activities.\(^{43}\)

An individual may become a tribal sheikh in several ways. Sheikly status may be bestowed on the basis of an individual’s character traits (e.g., generosity, wisdom, courage); inherited within “sheikhly families” (usually by the most capable son); wrested from others by force of personality, subterfuge, or even force of arms; and conferred by the state or the ruling authorities. Today, most sheikhs in Iraq belong to sheikhly families and have inherited their position.\(^{44}\)

Among Bedouins, sheikhs traditionally led by consensus, functioning as a first among equals; their exercise of authority was generally based on their reading of popular sentiment in their tribe.\(^{45}\) This is probably because Bedouin tribesmen could simply pick up and leave (taking all their worldly possessions with them) and join another section or tribe if they were unhappy with their sheikh.\(^{46}\)
Among settled tribesmen, matters are more complicated. Various Iraqi governments (including Saddam Hussein’s) cultivated the sheikhs as allies, contributing to their emergence as a privileged stratum of landowners and businessmen, whose fortunes have waxed and waned, depending on government policies and general economic conditions. This development, however, often transformed the relationship between sheikh and tribesman from one of formal equality to one marked by tension and resentment over the sheikh’s status as a landowner, employer, or agent of the state. Nevertheless, elements of the traditional leadership model still apply: sheikhs cannot impose their will on their tribe and generally are constrained to act within the bounds of popular opinion. Conversely, their standing in the eyes of their tribesmen depends on their ability to secure the tribe’s interests.

**Tribal influence.** In the distant past, tribal influence was reckoned in terms of the number of tribesmen under arms. Size mattered. Small (“weak”) tribes were considered less powerful than large (“strong”) tribes. Reputation also mattered. Some tribes were considered more warlike than others. Moreover, the influence of the tribes generally varied inversely with that of the state: the tribes were strong when the state was weak, and vice versa.

Today, as mentioned above, the tribal subsection is generally the highest level at which sustained social action occurs; tribes are no longer effective units of action. And the influence of a tribe is generally measured in terms of its sheikh’s prestige among his own and other tribesmen, his ability to secure the interests of his tribe, and the willingness of a clan or tribe to exact retribution for slights to its honor or for harm visited upon its members.47

**The tribal system today.** The authority of Iraq’s sheikhs and the influence of Iraq’s tribes have varied greatly from place to place and over time, during the past century and a half.48 Despite occasionally supportive government policies (e.g., during the Mandate, under the Monarchy, and during Saddam Hussein’s rule), the impact of certain long-term socioeconomic trends such as urbanization, the decline of agriculture, the rise of the modern economy, and the emergence of alternative non-tribal forms of identity, have undermined sheikly authority and tribal cohesion and influence. This is part of a broader trend also evident in other tribal societies (e.g., Somalia, Afghanistan) where socioeconomic change, war, and resurgent Islamist movements have undermined tribal influence.49

The tribes experienced something of a comeback under Saddam Hussein. To strengthen central-government control, Hussein bought the loyalty and bolstered the authority of the sheikhs with cars, land, money, and arms, and he replaced sheikhs whose loyalties were suspect with more compliant ones.50 (Because of this latter policy, identifying “authentic” sheikhs who enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of their tribesmen has been a challenge for coalition forces in post-Saddam Iraq.)51

Today, like most Iraqis, the sheikhs are consumed by the daily struggle to survive and to preserve what remains of their status and privileges. In some rural areas, they remain the dominant force. In this regard, former Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) official Rory Stewart’s assessment of the sheikhs of Maysan province in southeastern Iraq, where he served from 2003-2004, is worth quoting at length.

Most urban Iraqis perceived the sheikhs as illiterate, embarrassing, criminal, powerless anachronisms who should be given no official recognition. The sheikhs could no longer, despite their claims, raise ten thousand armed men—perhaps they never could. I never observed them raise more than a couple hundred. Their daily visits to our office to request building contracts, clinics, and the chance to form militias proved how short they were of money and patronage power . . . . They were [however] still the most powerful men in the rural areas, where about half the population remained; they owned much of the land, and agriculture was the only half-functioning element of the shattered economy. Almost every crime in the villages was tried and settled by the sheikhs . . . .”52

In other areas, the sheikhs find themselves jostling for power with the various Islamist militias and parties that are playing a growing role in the life of the country, and many are hard pressed to compete in an arena in which local political power increasingly comes from the barrel of a gun. Anthony Shadid of The Washington Post described this dynamic in a 2006 article about a visit with Sheikh Adnan Aidani in the village of Yusufan, near Basra. According to Shadid—

There is a saying in southern Iraq today, “No one pays respect to the saint who won’t mete out punishment.” Violence is the cadence of the
country. To navigate the chaos, Aidani tries to draw on century-old traditions honed by Bedouins in the desert, rules built on honor, respect, and reciprocity. He relies on the intimacy of a village where every neighbor knows the other. But in the end, the threat of punishment secures respect for Aidani. That same threat gives power to militias, gangs, and criminals who now hold sway even in the streets of a village like Yusufan.

The sheikh has his authority, backed by what he says are the hundreds of armed men he can cull from the tribe’s 12,000 members. But in a sign of his curtailed reach, he twice failed to get elected to parliament, and villagers sometimes treat him as just another player. When trouble arises, villagers say, they try to settle it themselves, then go to the sheikh, representatives of the Islamic parties or the town’s part-time cleric. Usually, they keep to themselves. With violence endemic, it is often heard that if it’s not your neighbor, friend or family killed, you keep quiet. Still, other sheikhs have adjusted well to the new rules of the game, participating in Iraq’s conflict economy and transforming themselves, for all practical purposes, into local warlords. Perhaps the best example of this new type of leader is Sheikh ‘Abd al-Sattar Biza’i al-Rishawi of the Albu Risha tribe, leader of the Anbar Awakening. According to published reports, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Sattar led a band of highwaymen who operated near Ramadi and worked as a facilitator for AQI on the side, providing its operatives with cars, safe houses, and local guides. But when the AQI operatives he was helping started working as highwaymen too—encroaching on his ‘turf,’ cutting into his profits, and then killing his father and several brothers—the relationship soured, prompting the sheikh to turn on AQI and to ally himself with coalition forces.

Based on these few examples, the most that can be said with confidence is that sheikhy authority and tribal influence in Iraq today vary in accordance with local circumstances and conditions, and that sheikhs and tribesmen are increasingly subject to conflicting pressures. There are strong incentives for people to seek refuge in tribal identities as protection against pervasive violence and economic insecurity, and for sheikhs and tribesmen to hang together for purposes of survival.

At the same time, the sons of Iraq’s tribes are well-represented in the many insurgent groups and sectarian militias that are driving the violence that is tearing Iraqi society apart; consequently, sheikhs who are not involved with insurgent groups or militias must tread lightly vis-à-vis their tribesmen who are, lest they run afoul of the masked armed men who wield ultimate authority in Iraq today.

The Unfulfilled Promise of Tribal Alliances in Iraq

Some analysts and practitioners have argued that tribal alliances are key to defeating the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq. While efforts to engage and leverage Iraq’s tribes have yielded some successes, particularly in Anbar province, the overall effort has fallen short of expectations. It is not clear whether this is due to flaws in the coalition’s tribal engagement policy, the security environment—which often makes engagement difficult and dangerous—or unrealistic assumptions about the influence of the sheikhs and the tribes.
Clearly, at various times the coalition has harbored unrealistic expectations regarding the influence of the sheikhs and the tribes. Early coalition engagement activities reflected this misconception—for instance, in the run-up to the battle for Fallujah, when coalition military officers met with sheikhs in the expectation that they would be able to tamp down insurgent violence raking the town. In No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah, Bing West describes a number of such episodes:

General Abizaid...met with the sheikhs, demanding that they show leadership and stop the violence. There were as many attacks on the outskirts of Fallujah, where the sheikhs had power, as inside the city, where the clerics dominated...In a separate meeting with the sheikhs, Major General Charles H. Swannack, commander of the 82nd [Airborne Division], was equally forceful. “I am not going to tolerate these attacks anymore,” he said. “I know the sheikhs have the ability to control their tribes.” The sheikhs protested that the 82nd didn’t appreciate the limits of their power. Threatening them would do no good. Improvement projects made no difference to the men with the guns. In the eyes of the sheikhs, power had shifted from them to the young clerics in Fallujah preaching that America was waging a war against Islam and was bringing in Jews to rule Iraq.56

This tension between tribal elements and Islamists was also evident in largely Shi’ite areas, where newly empowered SadristS challenged the established power of the tribes. According to Mark Etherington, a former CPA official who served in Wasit Province in south-central Iraq in 2003-2004:

As the threat from Moqtada al-Sadr’s followers increased and the death threats were made against CPA employees, the tribes increasingly instructed “their” interpreters to leave our employ, which many of them did immediately. This might seem a curious moral retreat, given the tribes’ muchvaunted resistance to external interference in their affairs; actually it merely shows the power that Sadr’s followers were able to wield over ordinary Iraqis in combining Islam with nationalism. If one concluded from this phenomenon that the tribes were actually weaker than they appeared, a recent CPA poll appeared to buttress the idea; of 1,531 people in five Iraqi cities only 1 per cent of respondents said that they would vote for a tribal party; 4.8 per cent that they would vote for a party of the same tribe but 95.2 per cent that they would not; and 98.6 per cent that they would not comply if ordered to vote in a particular manner by a tribal chief. Conversely, one might as well say that the cities were not the best of places to canvass tribal loyalty given their overwhelmingly rural roots.57

Nevertheless, the coalition’s engagement efforts have yielded a number of modest but important benefits. Because the sheikhs are generally well connected and plugged into various tribal and nontribal networks (essential if they are to look after the interests of their tribe), they have generally proven useful as sources of information and advice and as vectors of influence among their tribesmen. Sheikhs have assisted, too, in the pursuit and apprehension of insurgents and former regime officials, the screening of detainees for insurgent ties, and the recovery of kidnapping victims (such as journalist Jill Carroll).58 Moreover, efforts to work with tribal sheikhs to reduce insurgent activity in their tribal areas of influence, in return for various quid pro quos (e.g., construction contracts, reconstruction projects, the freeing of detainees), have often yielded impressive results—most notably a significant reduction in the lethality and number of attacks on coalition forces (frequently by 50 percent or more).

On the down side, tribal engagement has not brought about a total halt in attacks in tribal areas of influence.59 It is not clear whether this is due to the sheikhs’ inability to influence younger fighters—who are heavily represented in the ranks of the insurgents, or certain sections or subsections of their tribe.60

Furthermore, efforts to employ tribes to protect strategic infrastructure such as oil pipelines and electrical power lines have failed. (See inset, “Freakonomics on the Tigris.”) And until recently, sheikhs have rarely delivered on promises to provide tribal levies for anti-AQI militias such as the “Desert Protectors” in Husaybah and the Albu Nimr police force in al-Furat or to provide large numbers of conscripts for the Iraqi Security Forces.61 This is particularly telling, given the high rates of unemployment in Iraq today.

The success of the tribally based Anbar Awakening, which has reportedly recruited some 12,000 volunteers for local police forces this year, represents a sea change in coalition engagement efforts.62 It has revived hopes that tribal engagement can turn the tide against the Sunni Arab insurgency and
Freakonomics on the Tigris: 
The Hidden (Tribal) Dimension of Infrastructure Protection

In their best-selling book *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Investigates the Hidden Side of Everything*, Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner argue that understanding the role of incentives “is the key to solving just about any riddle” pertaining to human behavior and to understanding that very often “things aren’t quite what they seem.” Might Freakonomics help answer why the coalition has been unsuccessful at using Iraqi tribes to secure oil pipelines and electrical power lines running through their tribal domains?

Some background: due to the CPA’s decision to dissolve the Iraqi Army and the subsequent lack of trained Iraqi security personnel, the coalition has on a number of occasions paid tribes to secure strategic infrastructure in parts of Iraq, particularly oil pipelines and electrical power lines. However, attacks on the pipelines and power lines have continued, to the point that the vital Baiji-Kirkuk oil pipeline and sections of the national electrical grid have been shut down for extended periods. What is going on?

U.S. government assessments have tended to focus on flaws in the incentive structure—an answer that could have been lifted straight from the pages of *Freakonomics*. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), “the Ministry of Electricity contracts with tribal chiefs, paying them about $60-$100 per kilometer to protect transmission lines running through their areas. However, IRMO [Iraq Reconstruction Management Office] officials reported that the protection system is flawed and encourages corruption. According to U.S. and UN Development Program officials, some tribes that are paid to protect transmission lines are also selling materials from downed lines and extracting tariffs for access to repair the lines. IRMO officials stated that they want the Ministry of Electricity to change the system so that tribes are only paid when the lines remain operational for a reasonable period of time.”

The congressionally mandated Iraq Study Group (ISG) report echoed these findings, recommending that coalition forces improve pipeline security “by paying local tribes solely on the basis of throughput (rather than fixed amounts).” One problem with the GAO and ISG model for incentivizing the tribes is that it fails to explain how to prevent the tribes from maximizing their profits by taking money from both the insurgents and the coalition (tolerating a certain level of violence against the pipelines or power lines, though not enough to greatly reduce throughput). Clearly, a more complex model is called for here, one that recognizes that the tribes stand to make money by playing both sides of the game, and that they might not be the only relevant actors.

Moreover, the GAO/ISG solution fails to account for intra- and inter-tribal dynamics and politics and relations between tribal and non-tribal groups. There is good reason to believe that some, if not many, of the attacks on oil pipelines and electrical power lines have been undertaken by the same groups being paid to protect them. Why would they do this? Perhaps to—

- Justify their jobs.
- Extort more money from the coalition.
- Maximize profits and hedge their bets by working with both the insurgents and the coalition.
- Protest possible inequities in the distribution of funds within the tribe by their sheikh.

It is also possible that tribes not on the payroll are involved in some attacks, either to drum up business for themselves by creating a security problem that they then offer to solve, or to protest infringement of their traditional tribal domains by tribes on the coalition payroll.

In fact, it is likely that all of these factors have been in play at one time or another, and that a variety of actors—smugglers, insurgents, criminal gangs, and corrupt security officials—have also been involved. Interestingly, those Iraqis and coalition personnel who deal with this issue on a daily basis understand the complexity of the problem, even if some in Washington do not. The solution to the challenge of employing tribes for infrastructure protection is not simply a matter of proper incentives; it is also a matter of understanding tribal dynamics and politics in the areas of concern. Indeed, things are not always what they seem.
perhaps undermine popular support for the Mahdi Army. As part of this effort, the coalition has brokered a number of informal cease-fire agreements with local Sunni insurgent groups, freed detainees after extracting good-conduct pledges from tribal sheikhs, and hired tribal militias and their sheikhs as “security contractors.”68

Several factors likely account for the Anbar Awakening, including popular revulsion against the ideology and methods of AQI, the threat that AQI poses to the autonomy of the tribes and their way of life, and the damage that AQI has done to the local economy. As General David Petraeus recently noted—perhaps half facetiously—the sheikhs in Anbar province “all have a truck company, they all have a construction company and they all have an import-export business,” and the havoc that AQI has wreaked was bad for business.69

It remains to be seen, however, whether the Anbar Awakening can hold together, whether it will continue to work with coalition forces or eventually turn on them, whether successes in Anbar can be replicated elsewhere, or whether coalition efforts to work with the tribes and arm tribal militias are in fact paving the way for an even more violent civil war.70

Lessons Learned

A recent study of 1st Cavalry Division operations in Baghdad during its OIF II rotation (April 2004-February 2005) concluded that—

● Nonlethal means were the most effective method to defeat the enemy.
● Spending time with local leaders and conducting information operations and civil-military operations were the most effective ways to influence the battle.
● Successful commanders used military operations to shape the environment, but engaged the civilian population to achieve success.71

Despite such acknowledgements of the importance of engagement and the fact that engagement activities in Iraq frequently consume between 20 to 50 percent of a commander’s time, it is remarkable how little attention has been devoted to this subject in the military professional literature.72 Hopefully, this article will spur greater interest in what is probably the most important coalition line of operation in Iraq today.

The following engagement lessons learned—with particular emphasis on the special challenges of tribal engagement—are drawn from a review of the military professional literature, journalistic dispatches, individual and group interviews with civilian and military personnel who have served in Iraq, and the author’s own experiences.73

Cultural sensitivity, “hearts and minds,” and shared interests. Because of the complexity of the operational environment in Iraq, particularly in tribal areas, missteps are inevitable—even by experienced individuals.74 The local population will usually forgive such missteps if they have a vital interest in cooperating with the coalition and believe coalition personnel have fundamentally good intentions. Moreover, while winning “hearts and minds” may not be achievable in much of Iraq, neither is it necessary for success. What is important is for coalition forces to convince Iraqis that they have a shared interest in working together to achieve common goals.75

Building relationships. In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Arab world, persons are more trusted than institutions.76 Personal relationships are the basis of effective professional partnerships, and a sine qua non for effective counterinsurgency operations.77 These relationships, however, can only be established and maintained by engaging the civilian population.

Relationships take time to build and need constant tending.78 “Face time” with locals is critical, even if nothing tangible comes of some meetings, since time together is an investment in a relationship whose benefits may not be immediately evident. In addition, such meetings might discourage fence sitters from going over to the insurgents.

A little knowledge of Arabic and Islam pays huge dividends, for it demonstrates the kind of respect for the local population and their traditions that helps establish rapport and build relationships. And contrary to the conventional wisdom, discussions about politics and religion need not be off-limits, although judgment and discretion are advised when dealing with such matters.79

Credibility is priceless; once destroyed, it is very hard to reestablish. Accordingly, it is vital to make good on promises and to avoid making commitments that cannot be kept. Broken promises undermine efforts to establish rapport and build the relationships that are essential to success.80

For these reasons, coalition forces should, to the extent possible, avoid practices that disrupt relationships with the local population, such as mid-tour realignments of unit boundaries or areas of operation.
While a detailed discussion of how land is owned and inherited among tribal groups in rural Iraq is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recognize the military value of such cultural knowledge. This point was driven home in a recent email from 1st Lieutenant Brendan Hagan of the 82nd Airborne Division to an Army buddy, in which he described how, after stumbling across a weapons cache, his unit used knowledge of tribal land ownership patterns to discover additional weapons caches:

One way we’ve used simple info to get great results was with a [weapons] cache we found in an unused orchard. We stumbled onto the largest cache ever found in our division’s history, by accident. But we used simple reasoning to lead us to another of equal size. When we found the first one we grabbed the local sub-sheik and showed him what was within his area of influence, then used him to tell us who owned every piece of land from the river to a major road in the region. It turned out that the land the cache was on and numerous other tracks [sic] of land were owned by a father and series of brothers. We used this info to search other orchards owned by the brothers and found a second large cache. Seems simple, but most people would not have asked who owned all the adjacent land and put the family connections together. This allowed us to refine our searches to specific fields and orchards.

The details of this account are consistent with what is known about land ownership in lineage-based (clan- or tribe-based) communities in Iraq and the Levant. Among the practical consequences of Islamic inheritance rules is that individuals frequently own multiple parcels of land scattered throughout the tribal domain. Moreover, land is often owned jointly by siblings (usually brothers), paternal cousins, or entire tribal subsections, to prevent the division of heritable land holdings into ever smaller, economically non-viable parcels among an ever-growing number of heirs.

Another feature of the Iraqi rural landscape that may be militarily significant concerns the relationship between patterns of field cultivation and social relations among cultivators. Agricultural land in many parts of Iraq is divided into strip parcels (parallel strips of land worked by different cultivators). This is a widespread practice in the developing world. A “virtual tour” of Iraq using Google Earth reveals that strip parcels are found in many villages around the country.

Research of field patterns in iron-age Northern Europe and in contemporary East Africa has shown that strip parcels are generally associated with lineage-based communities. In such communities, the allocation of the strips often mirrors the family tree of the land-owning group and reflects the genealogical ranking of its members: older sons own strips of land (or sections of the family’s strip of land) that are closer to the family dwelling than those owned by younger sons, while owners of strips on the right, when viewed from the dwelling, are senior to owners of strips on the left. Adjacent strips of land are generally owned by brothers, and adjacent plots of land are often owned by cousins (unless sold to an outsider). Further investigation is required to determine whether such practices are followed in Iraq. If so, it may prove to be yet another bit of cultural knowledge that can help coalition forces locate insurgent weapons caches, and aid coalition military operations in Iraq.
and gaps during unit rotations that preclude incumbent coalition personnel from introducing their successors to their Iraqi partners.

**Engagement as a military activity.** Engagement planning at the lower tactical echelons—which are the echelons that interact most intensively with the civilian population—is often ad hoc, highly informal, and done “on the fly” by the commander with little if any formal staff input. Engagement, however, is too important to be done in such a manner, and should be approached like any other essential military activity.

There should be a formal engagement planning process, with input from all relevant staff elements, to identify engagement targets, assess their motivations and interests, determine engagement goals, schedule meetings, and set agendas. Commanders and staff should hold after-action reviews to evaluate the outcomes of meetings and plan for and prepare follow-on activities.

Engagement planning would probably benefit from the creation of small, dedicated engagement cells at the battalion and brigade combat team levels, to organize and oversee the aforementioned activities. The Army’s new human terrain teams and the Department of State’s new embedded provincial reconstruction teams will likely bring additional assets to bear on the problem as well.

**Cultivating “native informants.”** Very few non-natives have the knowledge and expertise needed to navigate Iraqi tribal politics. While book knowledge is extremely valuable, it only goes so far. Thus, it is essential to cultivate a cadre of “native informants” who are intimately familiar with local history, personalities, and tribal politics. Translators generally serve in this role, although it is important to know how the local population perceives these individuals. A translator whom the locals look upon with suspicion because of his family or tribal background can be more of a hindrance than a help.

A top-down, interagency-led process. Because tribes often span unit boundaries and international borders, and because tribal leaders may interact with tactical as well as operational-level commanders, coalition military and civilian organizations could inadvertently find themselves working at cross-purposes. Accordingly, tribal engagement should be a top-down, interagency-led process. Such an approach would help to—

- Develop a single, synchronized tribal engagement strategy that spans unit boundaries, military echelons, and international borders.
- Deconflict, and ensure synergies among, multiple engagement efforts.
- Develop a unified IO message for engagement inside and outside of Iraq.
- Coordinate kinetic targeting of high-value individuals and planned or ongoing tribal engagement efforts to ensure that former efforts do not hinder or harm the latter.

A top-down approach would also ensure that tribal engagement receives the attention and emphasis it merits, and that tactical units receive the support required to succeed in this important mission.

**Understanding limitations in sheikhly authority and tribal influence.** Power relationships are in flux in post-Saddam Iraq, and sheikhly authority and tribal influence may vary from place to place, depending on local conditions. Coalition forces have sometimes had unrealistic expectations concerning the authority of the sheikhs and the influence of the tribes. Nonetheless, tribal engagement has yielded important successes in places such as Anbar province, and it remains a key part of coalition strategy in Iraq.

Because of their connections, sheikhs are useful sources of information, insight, and advice. They can also influence their tribesmen, although their ability to do so often depends on their ability to dispense patronage (i.e., money, jobs, and contracts), and to otherwise secure the interests of their tribe. They generally have the greatest influence among members of their own subsection or section and their own generational cohort; thus, while they may be able to influence many of their tribesmen, they usually cannot influence them all, nor do they “control” their tribe. Additionally, just as a sheikh who agrees to work with the coalition may not be able to bring around all his tribesmen, the presence of insurgents among his tribe does not necessarily mean that he surreptitiously supports the insurgent cause—although he may hedge his bets by turning a blind eye toward insurgent activities he is aware of.

Given these limitations, while it is not unreasonable to demand 100-percent effort from the sheikhs in return for patronage and assistance, it is unrealistic to expect 100-percent results. Most sheikhs are just as vulnerable to intimidation and terror as any other Iraqi; scores, if not hundreds of sheikhs have been killed by insurgents and terrorists.
**Tailored engagement strategies.** Tribal engagement strategies should account for local variations in sheikly authority and tribal influence. And because there are thousands of clans, hundreds of tribes, and about two dozen tribal confederations in Iraq, each with its own sheikh, tribal engagement is a potentially time-consuming activity. Mass meetings and “sheikhfests” may help, but these are not always appropriate—the more prominent sheikhs at these meetings will often overshadow lower- and mid-level sheikhs, who may feel slighted. On the other hand, it might not be realistic to engage all the sheikhs in a particular area of operations; here, the commander’s engagement plan will determine who gets special attention.88

Because all tribal power is local, there is no substitute for engaging lower- and mid-level sheikhs who head tribal subsections and sections. However, engaging more prominent tribal or paramount sheikhs (of tribal confederations) may sometimes aid this effort, and may be useful for both symbolic and substantive reasons. Each tribe will require a different approach based on a detailed understanding of local conditions and the tribe’s history and politics. And that kind of knowledge can only be obtained by spending time on the ground with Iraqis.

**Avoiding the pitfalls of tribal politics.** Working with tribes poses special challenges. Tribesmen are intensely status conscious and competitive, and rivalry and intrigue often characterize tribal politics. Thus, tribal engagement often requires a careful balancing act among sheikhs, tribes, and non-tribal groups to avoid creating or aggravating rivalries or conflicts.

There are a number of specific pitfalls associated with tribal politics:

- **Errors of ignorance.** It is easy to err due to a lack of knowledge of local and tribal history and politics. Coalition forces initially dealt with a number of sheikhs who had been appointed to their positions by the former regime and therefore lacked legitimacy in the eyes of their tribesmen. Likewise, the coalition initially appointed an unpopular sheikh as governor of Basra, a large city with a largely non-tribal population. These actions created resentment and undermined coalition credibility.89 It is therefore essential to become intimately familiar with the history and politics of the tribes in one’s area of operations and their relationships with other tribes, non-tribal elements, and the authorities, in order to avoid such missteps.

- **Rivalries and feuds.** Establishing a close relationship with a particular sheikh or tribe may often be necessary, but it may entail the risk of entanglement in their rivalries and feuds.90 While it is usually best to stay above such frays, such situations can offer coalition personnel the opportunity to mediate local conflicts, thereby enhancing local security and the coalition’s standing in the eyes of the local population.91 Furthermore, in some circumstances it may be possible to use a relationship with one sheikh or tribe to entice a rival sheikh or tribe to work more closely with coalition forces or the local government.

- **Corruption and nepotism.** Funneling money to tribes through their sheikhs is one way to leverage tribal networks, but it can sometimes cause as many problems as it solves. Sheikhs may not disseminate funds among their tribesmen in an equitable manner, thus engendering resentment against the sheikh and the coalition. Intervening to ensure a more equitable distribution of funds—if the issue has become a problem—is risky, and requires an intimate knowledge of the politics of the tribe and a deft diplomatic touch. But if done right, intervention can help coalition commanders deepen their base of support among the tribesmen.92

- **Tribal vendettas.** Humiliating, injuring, or killing a tribesman can embroil the coalition in a vendetta with his family or relatives, thereby widening the circle of violence. There are many anecdotal reports about former fence sitters in Iraq opting to join the insurgency because of incidents involving coalition forces and family members or relatives. This only underscores the especially high cost of not strictly adhering to the rules of engagement in tribal areas or in societies founded on tribal values.

**Tribal engagement and long-term U.S. interests.** For a time after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, there was an ongoing debate among coalition officials about the desirability of working with the tribes. Some argued that wherever possible, the tribes should be leveraged to defeat the insurgency and create stability. Others argued that the tribes are an anachronism and an obstacle to the long-term goal of building democracy in Iraq.93

With the coalition now engaging the tribes as a matter of necessity, the debate has been overtaken by events. The concerns that drove the original debate, however, remain salient. The coalition cannot afford to forego the potential benefits of tribal engagement:
a modicum of stability and the weakening of AQI in large parts of Iraq. But neither can it afford to ignore the possible long-term costs of this policy: the strengthening of the tribes and tribal militias (many of which include former insurgents) at the expense of the eventual development of broad-based civil society and governmental institutions.

The challenge is to strike a balance between these two competing objectives. Tribal engagement should be part of a broader effort to engage multiple sectors of Iraqi society in order to support and strengthen not just the tribes, but civil society and governmental institutions that bring Iraqis of varied backgrounds together to work toward common goals.

Conclusions

Engagement is probably the most important coalition line of operation in Iraq today. If coalition forces eventually achieve some degree of success in stabilizing Iraq, it will be in large part because they succeeded in engaging the civilian population and leveraging Iraq’s tribes and tribal networks.

Tribal engagement, however, poses unique challenges deriving from the special demands of interacting with tribal communities whose norms, values, and forms of social organization diverge, in many ways, from those of non-tribal society. To succeed in this environment, it helps to have more than just a passing familiarity with the historical and social sciences literature on tribes and tribalism in Iraq and the Arab world. But ultimately there is no substitute for time on the ground with Iraqis, learning through dialog and observation about the history, inner life, and politics of the tribes of Iraq, and establishing through trial and error what engagement techniques do and do not work.

Finally, while tribal engagement lessons learned in Iraq may apply elsewhere, this should not be assumed to be the case. Every tribal society is unique in its history, its internal dynamics and politics, and its relations with the outside world. Further research is required in Iraq and elsewhere in order to better understand the nature of this human diversity and its implications for future tribal engagement efforts. MR

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE: “A Greater Security Than Firearms”

Czech explorer and Orientalist Alois Musil (1868-1944) is famous for his books about his travels in the Arabian Peninsula during the first decades of the 20th century. Musil faced many dangers on his journeys, not least from Bedouin raiders bent on booty and plunder who would not have thought twice about taking the life of a foreigner in the vast, empty expanses of the desert.

To defend against this threat, Musil made sure to ingratiate himself with the sheikhs of key tribes along his route of travel, and to procure from them the services of a local guide and a written pledge of safe passage through their tribal domains, which he could invoke when threatened.94

The guides were often able to distinguish “friendly” from hostile raiding parties at a distance through their knowledge of local personalities and customs, enabling Musil to quickly determine what kind of approach was appropriate for dealing with the raiders.95

When attacked by a raiding party from a “friendly” tribe (that of a sheikh who had promised him safe passage or of an allied tribe), Musil would invoke the local sheikh’s name and remind the raiders that violation of a sheikh’s pledge of safe passage would dishonor the sheikh and could lead to the violator’s expulsion from the tribe.96 If this did not work or if the raiding party was from a hostile tribe, Musil would warn them that his sponsor would be honor-bound to seek revenge if any members of his party were harmed, or stolen property was not returned.97

Nonetheless, travel in the desert remained dangerous, even for as savvy a traveler as Musil, for as he was once warned by a friendly sheikh, there were always brigands and outlaw tribes that would not honor a pledge of safe passage.98

Musil’s experience demonstrates the importance of knowing the cultural “rules of the road,” of seeking out knowledgeable and dependable locals as guides, and of surviving by one’s wits rather than by force of arms.

Musil’s ability to talk his way out of many difficult situations led the anthropologist Louise Sweet to observe that, when confronted with a Bedouin raiding party, Musil’s “shrewd use of the rules of intertribal relations was a greater security than firearms.”99 Or to put it in the modern Soldier’s vernacular: cultural knowledge is the ultimate in force protection.


3. In late 18th- and early 19th-century Iraq, townspeople often joined the nearest tribe for purposes of protection. Hanna Batata, The Old Social Classes and the Revolutions in Iraq (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1920), 72-73. Likewise, a study of the Beri Isad tribe in the early 1950s found that many lineages and clans were of “foreign” origin (i.e., they were not original members of the tribe). The author would like to thank Montgomery McFate for this insight.

4. Michael M. Ripinsky, “Middle Eastern Kinship as an Expression of a Culture-Environment System,” The Muslim World 58 (1968), 225-241. The Arabs—and Iraqis in particular—have among the highest rates of endogamy in the world (though rates vary by country, socioeconomic class, and religion). While reliable data is hard to come by, rates of endogamy for the entire region are believed to be between 10 to 15 percent, while in some tribal groups, they may exceed 70 percent. Eickelman, 175-178; Fernea, 181-182; Salim, 48-49; A. H. Bittles, “A Background Summary of Consanguineous Marriage,” <http://consang.net/images/d/dd/01aHBweb3.pdf>.

5. McFate, Memory of War, forthcoming.


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during his time in Iraq, that “the most effective [unit] was always the ones with close ties to the local community.” “Dealing with the Iraqi Populace: An Arab-American Soldier’s Reflections,” Military Review (June-July 2007): 111-114.

72. This estimate is based on the author’s interviews with several dozen Soldiers and Marines who have served in Iraq.

73. The author was responsible for an engagement in a Kurdish refugee camp along the border of Turkey and Iraq during Operation Provide Comfort (1991), and it was this experience that prompted his interest in tribal engagement.

74. See, for instance, late CP a senior advisor ambassador Hume Horan’s assessment during a meeting with the president of the group of sheiks in 2003 that U.S. forces came to Iraq as “occupiers,” which provoked an angry response from the audience. King, 108-109. Horan was one of the U.S. foreign service’s most knowledgeable analysts in the Middle East and while his statement is accurate characterization of the status of coalition forces under international law, he probably should have known better than to have used a term so fraught with negative associations in the Arab world.


76. ibid., 275.


78. Elkhanti, 111.

79. King, 82-83, 90-91, 121-123; Rodriguez, et al., 5.


83. ibid., 95-101.


88. ibid., 95-101.


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93. ibid., 275.

94. alois Musil, Der Sturmer (New York, vintage Books: 2006), 84.


96. ibid., 84.

97. ibid., 84.

98. ibid., 84.

99. ibid., 84.

100. ibid., 84.

101. ibid., 84.

102. ibid., 84.