



# From Peddlers to Sheiks A Contracting Case Study in Southern Baghdad

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**C**ULTURAL ADVISORS in Iraq today act as modern-day Greeks among Romans, providing scholarly advice to the warrior. As a Middle East expert assigned to Forward Operating Base Falcon in Baghdad, I embedded with a brigade combat team (BCT) to explore the social phenomena of Iraqis as regards to local customs, conflict resolution, economics, and political and kinship organization. This assignment required working directly with operational commanders to offer opinions and to make suggestions based on my field observations, extensive experience in the Middle East, and prior military service. The goal was to provide an “insiders view” through the lens of social anthropology, analyzing data from a two-fold cultural perspective: U.S. military and Iraqi. The BCT’s priority was reconciliation, so this research focuses on tribal behavior within this context, and it highlights the potentially unintended outcomes of contracting decisions made during “reconciliation” and an apparent economic upturn.

The word “reconciliation” has no single definition for Iraqis. Americans in Iraq recognize reconciliation as a measured reduction in violence achieved through “peaceful means” whereby security, political processes, humanitarian efforts, and infrastructure improvements can be transitioned to the Iraqis. Reconciliation occurs when hostilities diminish and the political process begins. However, there is a causal relationship between reconciliation contracting and violence: good contracting decisions reduce violence and promote reconciliation; bad contracting decisions can have the opposite effect. While in the field, I asked the following questions:

- What impacts do coalition contracting decisions have on Iraqi traditional power structures?
- Are we challenging long-standing tribal power structures by contracting with the “wrong” tribe, brother, or cousin?
- Are our contracting decisions based on Western values that can cause long-term damage to the fragile elements of reconciliation?
- With whom do we form alliances to build a sustainable future?

The following analysis is meant to provide insight into the difficult question: Will my contracting decision promote reconciliation?

## An Arabic Idiom Reveals the Dilemma

It is not difficult to imagine that empowering new local “warlords” through reconciliation contracts can cause dissension among the tribes in

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PHOTO: A U.S. Army company commander meets with reconciliation leaders in Radwanayah to ensure equitable distribution of contracts among the local tribes, October 2007.

*All photos courtesy of author*

Iraq's Sunni-dominated areas. Many are familiar with the Arabic idiom, "My brother and I against our cousin, but my cousin and I against a stranger." A corollary to this adage is: eliminate the stranger through reconciliation, then cousins fight against one another when power, strongly connected to the values of honor and shame, is challenged.

Reconciliation security programs are designed to deny entry of an outside foe. Eliminating one threat may bring about another, which may jeopardize U.S. alliances with the sheiks. If this occurs, a competitor or conspirator may vie for support from the tribes. The cooperation we share with the tribes should never be assumed absolute. To maintain strong relationships, it is vital that U.S. military commanders understand the cultural, political, and economic contexts that influence Iraqi tribal behaviors.

### **Tribal Economics and Corruption**

Iraq's oil wealth and the authoritarian rule of Saddam Hussein managed to keep the country's economy from being overly dependent on its allies and neighboring countries despite the 1990 United Nations economic sanctions imposed after its invasion of Kuwait. However, Iraq relied heavily on its oil sector, which made up approximately 60 percent of its GNP. Although Baghdad and other urban areas are relatively modernized, about 25 percent of Iraq's population is rural and mainly tribal. Saddam supported and rewarded the tribes who were loyal to him, and diminished the power of those who were not. He recognized the benefits of empowering tribal leaders and sheiks with control of local projects because he knew that, in return, the tribes would rally nationalist support in time of war.

In Al Anbar Province, the U.S. military has experienced the degree to which tribal support contributes to mission success in Iraq. As stability is achieved through successful reconciliation, reconstruction projects can be planned and executed with confidence that Iraqis can adequately provide local security. As coalition forces fund more projects, they become increasingly familiar with the informality and the oftentimes undisclosed business conduct in Iraq. The supposition that Iraqis are corrupt—especially the tribes—has influenced coalition force contracting decisions. Tribal leaders tend to skim off up to 30 percent of the money paid for contracts, and they do not always follow through

with their contract obligations. To ensure equal distribution among the tribes and rapid completion of projects, coalition forces have turned to awarding contracts to non-sheiks, which triggers tribal conflict as sheiks struggle to maintain their power and prestige, especially within their own tribes.

**Corruption and competition.** Corruption in the Middle East is analogous to competition in our society; therefore, Iraqis do not necessarily regard what we call "corruption" as an indication of poor character.<sup>1</sup> In Iraq, corruption is the norm, and the method by which leaders secure their power. Tribal leaders use force to maintain their positions over those they govern. They resort to bribes and preferential treatment as they work up the hierarchical chain or become hostile towards an inferior challenger. When coalition forces directly award lesser tribesmen contracts, sheiks react swiftly to stop any challenge to their authority.

The coalition should handle the tribal leaders and sheiks gingerly, and carefully consider to whom contracts are awarded so as to avoid any disruption to the tribal balances of power. Sheiks see bribes and other favors as simply a cost of doing business. This cost of business is translated into the patriarchal behavior of a sheik to his tribe. Such apparent corruption is challenging for Westerners who have worked in contracting positions. Competition is the cornerstone of the Federal Acquisition Regulation.<sup>2</sup> The West has grown used to a fair and ostensibly transparent free-market economy. Contracting agents who see the sheiks as corrupt individuals would prefer to deal with the more straightforward approach of a non-sheik. But often in tribal cultures, the more straightforward and transparent person engaging the coalition one-on-one is often a person with less power and influence in his community. Sheiks, who generally include fellow tribesmen when meeting with coalition forces, see such a

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person as a renegade upstart who is undermining their existing local power structure.

**Reconciliation for hire in southern Baghdad.**

In 2007, a U.S. task force commander obtained a letter that criticized one of its Iraqi reconciliation contractors—a cousin of one of the prominent Sunni sheiks in the area—for “corruption and conspiracy” against the Sunni. Evidently, the contractor’s tribe generated this letter in retaliation for the reconciliation economic activities awarded the cousin. Coalition forces also received a warning regarding local security that may have been the lesser cousin’s reaction to the propaganda letter. Irrespective of who did what, the fact is that coalition forces, relying on “bargained” stability, found themselves caught precariously in the middle of a family feud. Intertribal tensions would now test the efficacy of the new local security program intended to reduce violence.

An Iraqi security volunteer program, inspired by the Sons of Iraq in Al Anbar, is an agreement between coalition forces and local Sunnis to forcefully remove Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from Sunni tribal areas, and then prevent future infiltration of insurgents by establishing local militias at chosen checkpoints and conducting mounted patrols. The development of a volunteer program, initially funded by coalition forces, brought immediate success as attacks against Soldiers decreased significantly in areas where such agreements were made.

However, with security now in place to keep the foreign foe out of southern Baghdad, an unexpected intertribal dispute surfaced, which began when the BCT chose to pay the sheik’s cousin directly as a security volunteer group commander. Prior to this, the sheik was the primary contractor for checkpoints, and he was responsible for paying his cousin as a supervisor of checkpoints. The cousin’s success in getting a prime contract, coupled with his projects to empower and support local Shi’ites—a goal of reconciliation—threatened the authority of the sheik. As this lesser cousin of the sheik, now referred to as the “challenger,” leveraged his relationship with coalition forces, his tribal leaders became more hostile towards him.

**Threat to the sheiks.** Tribal leaders protect the foundations of their power as manifested through influence, “*wastah*,” and reputation, “*wasl*.” While many sheiks have tapped into the financial rewards of a lucrative security program, they also feel they

are entitled to control the contracts awarded to members of their tribes. Controlling such resources secures the sheik’s *wasl* and gives the sheik power; sheiks maintain their dominance by leveraging their *wastah* to diminish the threat of an opponent.

**Threat to coalition forces.** The extent to which the sheiks protect their power includes use of force. The sheiks, with the support of coalition forces, effectively terminated AQI in Baghdad after realizing that Islamist ideology ultimately depreciates tribal power. The retaliatory letter stated that anyone who opposes the challenger or works against him “will be targeted by Americans for working with AQI.” This insinuates that the challenger receives protection from the Americans as he engages in his “wrongdoings.” Undoubtedly, the authors avoid overtly blaming Americans because of a patron-client relationship, so they instead paradoxically condemn the challenger for gaining coalition forces support. Such an assertion called for due consideration.

**Bargained alliances.** *They [Arabs] are always ready to flatter the mighty: sweet as lambs when faced with armed might.*<sup>3</sup> —Andrew J. A. Mango

While the sheiks enjoy the company of Americans, often referring to them as new entrants to their tribes, the two sides were formidable enemies not long before this newfound “friendship.” Since Saddam empowered these sheiks in return for their loyalty, the U.S. invasion of Saddam’s Iraq was initially viewed as an act of aggression against the tribes. The Sunnis are also wary of the Shi’ites, whom they view as pro-Iranian, controlling their government. Shortly after the invasion, the Sunni tribes enlisted armed support from AQI, a decision that would prove fatal.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq eventually imposed strict “Islamic” rules of behavior on the tribes. Soon after, the sheiks’ alliance with AQI disintegrated as many

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who opposed the hegemony of Islamic fundamentalism were assassinated. The sheiks sought coalition forces support because AQI’s objectives superseded the tribe’s way of life, including the sheiks’ power. An Al-Jabour sheik shared pictures of decapitated relatives whose heads had been placed ceremoniously on their torsos by AQI thugs. He presented these as evidence against AQI. Because of such terror tactics, reconciliation with Sunnis in Iraq continued to spread across the sheikdoms.

The meaning of “reconciliation” in Iraqi sheikdoms differs from the U.S. military’s understanding of the term. Sheiks are powerful in the lands they govern. One southern Baghdad sheik felt honored protecting local farmers who accompanied him to a reconciliation conference in Al Anbar; but he was

displeased when Iraqi National Police, unaware of his local status, took over as “protector” upon their arrival. Sheiks and tribesmen want to remain in their areas where people recognize, appreciate, and protect their authority. Disrupted power relationships pose a challenge to the U.S.-led reconciliation goal to integrate Iraqi security volunteers into the regular Iraqi forces. The volunteers fear being far from their sheik’s protection, while the sheiks are reluctant to lose the armed support of tribesmen they have traditionally relied on. But the sheiks may petition their tribesmen to join the Iraqi forces once Sunnis secure political influence in their new government.

### **Reconciliation Reciprocity**

What do the sheiks want in return for offering full cooperation with coalition forces? The sheiks want to maintain power and honor above all things, and they want to continue governing in a stable and prosperous environment. Standing outside of his safe house, or “*modeef*,” a prominent sheik gazed over his barren land reminiscing when his property was well-cultivated farmland. He listed every vegetable, fruit, and flower that once grew



**Sheiks’ Modeef “safe house”:** Tribal leaders and local farmers meet with coalition forces to discuss contract plan for restoring agricultural production in their area, November 2007.

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from his soil as his eyes scanned the area within his field of vision. He blamed the coalition for drying up the canals by building roads over them. Although Arabs do not forget injustices, forgiveness is possible through compensation, or *fasl*. The sheik noted, “Most people here are simple and just want to farm.” In this context, the sheik wants the contract to clean up the canals so that water may flow to the farms—the “*fasl*” settlement. Receiving this contract, thereby improving the quality of life of his people, allows the sheik to validate his *wasl* by demonstrating his *wastah* with the coalition. The sheik would view awarding the contract to someone else as humiliation.

When sheiks negotiate with the coalition, they reveal the way in which a truce—intended to restore honor—is traditionally settled among tribes. The sheiks are indeed vested in stabilizing Iraq, and they expect compensation for any loss incurred from the war, even loss of power. They want to be venerated as “true sheiks” and to officiate in a manner to which they are accustomed.

**The “sheik” defined.** A sheik’s legacy, as defined by those I interviewed in the field, depends on where he resides, how he becomes a sheik, how much respect he has from his people, and how decisive and dependable he is. One sheik said, “Our area has real sheiks because we live in villages, not cities. When I was young, my father took me around to meet all the real sheiks. My father talked to me about the sheiks, and taught me how to be a true sheik. Many sheiks, especially the Shi’ites, are not real; Jaish Al-Mahdi (JAM) gives them money and then they call themselves sheiks.”

In private, the sheiks repeatedly stress the detriment of dealing with non-sheiks. One sheik explained, “I am telling you this so you know who you are dealing with—real sheiks and those who are not. They do not respect the invitations we offer

because they do not always show up. They cannot control their people like we can.” He added, “I prefer only to sit among sheiks. I cannot sit with non-sheiks; this is not good for us.” Here the sheiks urge the coalition to acknowledge their “noble” positions as they compromisingly sit among “fake” sheiks during reconciliation meetings. Sheiks prefer to handle matters as they have always done, so they want Coalition forces to deal with them within their tribal cultural boundaries.

**Legal landscape of the Arabian tribes.** Referring to an incident involving the disappearance of a local Shi’ite, one Sunni sheik complimented coalition forces for allowing sheiks to handle the matter according to local customs. “It is best to allow tribes to settle problems,” commented one sheik, who then added: “It is better that you allowed us to go on the patrol to seek the truth.” Iraqis under Saddam have always been tribal. If someone committed a crime, Saddam’s security forces would put him in jail, but the government would always resort to tribal law when seeking justice. The victim’s tribe would determine the blood price (*fasl*). This is an eye-for-an-eye culture, especially in my [rural] area. When there are conflicts with locals, the sheiks get together to discuss good things about each other.” “However,” he sharply added, “many sheiks at your reconciliation meetings are not real. I know many of the new Shi’ite sheiks; they were peddlers who used to sell me cigarettes and tomatoes . . . Bring us a street cleaner and make him a sheik, and we will sign a reconciliation agreement with him, too.”

Striking a balance between the mores of coalition forces and of Iraqi tribes is necessary. Sheiks generally prefer to resolve issues amongst themselves through consensus and by an informal “gentlemen’s agreement.” The “blood price” is reparation that equals the value of a kinsman killed or offended, or of property damaged. “An agreement to handle problems tribally is good. We have a smart and quiet way to fix our problems. There is more going on behind the scenes with sheiks. Had you come to the sheiks in the beginning, you would not have lost so many Soldiers,” noted one sheik.

Unlike the “fake” sheiks, a true sheik influences the way in which his people feel and react to perceived threats. One sheik commented, “Americans don’t understand something: all people respect the sheiks and will follow him no matter what he says

and regardless of where he resides.” The sheiks of the lesser cousin could not accept that their challenger had successfully established “*wastah*” with coalition forces and “*wasl*” among the local people, the opportunity he captured through reconciliation.

**The challenger’s *wasl* tested.** The challenger managed to gain influence outside his immediate community, and he was oftentimes present at the Shi’ite-dominated Rashid District Council, even while the council leadership was reluctant to accept six locally- and democratically-elected Sunni Saydiyah council members. The sheiks tested the challenger’s ability to retain his new status. The challenger said with assurance, “I am a straight guy. I don’t care what people say behind my back.” However, when he realized his *wasl*, or reputation, was in jeopardy, he said, “Losing my reputation is far worse than you losing your son.” During an earlier interview, the challenger’s sheik alleged that his cousin was untrustworthy and greedy—similar criticisms as those exposed in the letter obtained by the task force commander. The sheik apparently began a character assassination campaign to destroy the challenger’s reputation among his people, which ultimately put the challenger and coalition forces at risk. The challenger was assassinated in July 2008.

## Power-Challenge Nexus

The case study of southern Baghdad is one example of the complex relations in a tribal society

and the fallout of a well-intended reconciliation contract. The BCT chose to deal with the challenger directly because he delivered immediate reconciliation success. From a Western standpoint, the challenger was action oriented, fact-based, and transparent when compared to the mysterious ways of the sheiks. However, the challenger did not have the tribal power or the blessings of the sheiks. Sooner or later, the sheiks take action to save their honor and deal with the situation in their customary ways. This is where intertribal violence begins.

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One ought not interpret Iraqi behaviors at face value. The society has always been based on a power-challenge nexus where the sheiks and their subordinates skillfully scheme to gain more power and prestige through flattery, conspiracy, and shifting alliances. It is critical to maintain the support of the sheiks and deal directly with them. When there is conflict, tribal leaders will first attempt to resolve matters face-to-face to determine a sober solution.<sup>4</sup> If that fails, they resort to violence or show of force. The sheiks expect any humiliation they may be feeling resolved directly by the offender. In south-



Reconciliation meeting in Rashid District, Baghdad: Sunni and Shi’ite sheiks, government, security forces and religious leaders discuss a unified district Reconciliation plan, 30 October 2007.

ern Baghdad, the ultimate offense was awarding a lesser cousin a contract that excluded the sheik. The murder of the challenger was investigated, but to date it has not been solved.

## Local Contracting and Strategic Effects

Given the volatile and politically charged nature of most stability operations, individual and small-unit actions can have consequences disproportionate to the level of command. In some cases, tactical operations and individual actions can have strategic effects.<sup>5</sup> At the tactical level in Iraq, good contracting decisions help guarantee security by providing an equitable distribution of contracts among the tribal leaders, such as was done by a business-savvy commander working in southern Baghdad. However, a bad contracting decision obstructs stability at the microtribal level. To ensure all contracts are successfully awarded and implemented—and overall security is maintained—the newly formed provisional Army Contracting Command that oversees the Expeditionary Contracting Command could emulate the process used by the American defense acquisition community, thereby modeling the fairness and transparency of our own contracting policy for the Iraqis as we transition governance and security to them.

A contracting framework to employ a sheik as “prime contractor” or “lead system integrator” could be developed, whereby the guarantee that reconciliation contract obligations will be fulfilled relies on a sheik’s *wasl*. Any non-sheik could be chosen as a subcontractor to the sheik, but this determination is based on an “equal opportunity” clause to guarantee non-discriminatory access for all Iraqis, including Shi’ites. A maximum percentage of the award, as agreed upon by the sheiks and the U.S., can be authorized for the participants. In this case, the sheiks’ cost of doing business is equivalent to the overhead applied by a prime for “program management.”

An acquisition plan would allow for consideration of competitive sheiks or a balanced award of contracting. Operational commanders and their contracting experts can review such a plan to

determine the best practice in achieving the goal of reconciliation. An elected Iraqi contracting official from either the neighborhood council or a tribal council can work closely with the sheiks and coalition forces to ensure fairness and transparency of contracting procedures.

## Conclusion

Reconciliation is a guest of the sheik. The challenge for the coalition is to find the right tents in which to rest. If there was one line of reasoning the Greeks would impress upon the Romans, it would be that sociocultural understanding is the crucial ingredient to reconciling and repairing a war-torn Iraq. Whether a military unit has an embedded cultural expert or not, commanders can heed the words of the sheiks, for they teach us how Arabian tribal culture has survived since the dawn of civilization. **MR**

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### NOTES

1. David Pryce-Jones, *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
2. Accessed at <<http://www.arnet.gov/far/>>.
3. Andrew J. A. Mango, “Turkey and the Middle East,” *The Political Quarterly* 28, no. 2, 149, April 1957.
4. Standing near his palace that was hit during the 1986 U.S. air strike, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi spoke to the Honorable Curt Weldon, A Republican from Pennsylvania who led the first, bi-partisan Congressional delegation to Libya in 2004, “I am so glad to see you. Why has it taken your country so long to speak with me? You (America) should have talked to me first. If you disagreed with me, then you could have bombed me.”
5. Field Manual, 3-0; *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 9-53.

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