



TRIBE AND STATE RELATIONS IN IRAQ

01

The Case of Anbar Province

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"The tribe was a community which went on forever, because it was based on family relationship, not on the ups and downs of politics."

— General John Bagot Glubb⁰¹

Tribal affiliation is a central element of Middle Eastern society and varies considerably depending upon the level of a country's modernity (e.g. education, development, urbanization, etc.), ethnic/religious diversity (e.g. Houthi, Kurd, Sunni, Shia, etc), physical terrain (e.g. desert, mountain, forest, etc.), and political system (e.g. authoritarian, totalitarian, democratic, monarchy, etc.) among other factors. Tribes also play varying roles in the politics of the countries they reside in and indigenous governments frequently use a mixture of approaches to deal with them. These efforts vary from tribes being ignored, suppressed, managed, or co-opted to even, at the other end of the spectrum, tribal capture of the state. Many political leaders view tribes and tribal leaders as potential challengers for power, as impediments to progress, or even corrupt and anachronistic. In governments where tribes control the state or are willing partners in governing, a blending of tribal and state institutions often takes place with the state frequently adopting some characteristics of tribes and tribes adopting more formal practices. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Coalition's views on tribes evolved from a policy of deliberately not engaging with them as separate entities to an active embrace of them as vital social institutions in Iraqi

society. Most notably, this took place during the Anbar Awakening in western Iraq in an effort to combat the Sunni Arab insurgency there. Engagements also took place in Shia areas although to a lesser degree (in many Shiite areas, Shia religious leaders played a more prominent role in community mobilization).⁰² Tribes are once again assuming a central place in a strategy to pacify those areas held by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces and so it is important to understand the nature of tribes in order to achieve greater operational effects. It is also essential to appreciate how a changed political environment within Iraq is influencing the broader outlines of tribal outreach efforts.

TRIBAL RELATIONS UNDER THE HUSSEIN REGIME

As a member of the Albu Nasir tribe, Saddam Hussein was friendly toward, and sensitive to, tribal interests when he led Iraq but also recognized that a potential threat to his regime, as well as a guarantor of its stability, would most likely come from within the Sunni Arab community. To this end, he adopted a strategy of an inclusive patronage system which allowed him to both control and manage the

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Al-Anbar sheiks and Iraqi Policemen dance during a conference in Ramadi. ARSOF Soldiers must understand how the blending of tribal and state institutions in Iraq effect operational strategy. U.S. ARMY PHOTO COURTESY OF 3RD SFG(A) PAO

Sunni Arab tribes in Iraq. He used robust state sector employment (e.g. civil service, military/security forces, state-run industry) as well as other benefits (e.g. political representation, exclusive contracts, access to higher education, trips overseas, etc.) to ensure that Sunni Arabs were aligned with the interests of the state. His regime then used these benefits to shape tribal behavior by denying access to state benefits to punish a tribe or its leaders, to divide tribes by favoring some factions over others, or to favor a tribe to such a degree that it also caused discord within a community. This patronage system facilitated the development of a robust Sunni Arab middle class and a significant portion of its members benefited immensely from this largesse. However, the principal goal of this patronage approach was control of the Sunni Arab tribes using "golden handcuffs" so that political opposition would be so costly as to prevent it completely. The Hussein regime also used force and military power to protect its interests and this carrot and stick approach maintained stability, protected the regime, and built a base of political support for it within Iraq. The regime also emphasized the development of a technocratic elite of engineers, doctors, architects, lawyers, and others as part of a national strategy of development. Thus, the importance of tribal affiliation was understood by the regime but tribes were not allowed to develop their power and influence fully as it also relied upon technocrats to run the country. During this time, the Sunni Arab tribal community had political representation of its interests through the leadership of Saddam Hussein and his regime, access to state resources through government largesse, but no real ability to affect political change in the country outside of fairly narrow limits set by the government.

THE ANBAR AWAKENING - RISE OF THE TRIBES

The invasion of Iraq by Coalition Forces in 2003 significantly undermined the inclusive patronage system from which Sunni Arab tribes had long benefited. Initial policies adopted by the Coalition Provisional Authority such as the disbanding of Iraqi security forces, the privatization of state industry, and de-Baathification dismantled central elements of the largesse and political representational structures from which the tribes had benefited. Additionally, the political empowerment of new segments

of the population including the Shiites and the Kurds set up alternative patronage systems which directly competed for resources. However, the political constraints which had long kept tribal power checked were also removed while the patronage system was simultaneously dismantled. As other Sunni Arab political actors began to participate in the new Iraq and political parties proliferated, new opportunities arose. Once the Sunni Arab tribal community decided to turn against al-Qaeda due to the terrorist group's brutality, competing political vision, and threat to tribal economic interests, tribal power finally began to reach its natural fruition. The Anbar Awakening process not only reestablished security in the province after which it was named but it also empowered tribes politically and economically through U.S. diplomatic, military, and political efforts. In many respects, the United States became the new political advocates of the Sunni Arab community within the Shiite-led central government. Additionally, Coalition financial support in the province through reconstruction contracts (e.g. Civil Affairs/U.S. Agency for International Development, salaries for tribal fighters (e.g. Commander's Emergency Response Program/Ministry of Interior), employment on and logistical support to forward operating bases, and Coalition political advocacy on their behalf in Baghdad created a new patronage system, albeit not as robust as under the Hussein regime. While Coalition Forces were in Iraq, the Sunni Arab community and tribal groups in particular regained a modicum of political representation, greater access to state largesse and other resources, and the full realization of their power through security and political mobilization.

THE ANBAR AWAKENING - ENLISTING THE POPULATION

The Anbar Awakening process wherein Coalition Forces collaborated with tribal leaders to recruit, train, and deploy their members as security forces worked through traditional tribal leadership structures to establish enduring local security by empowering legitimate leaders. This allowed them to reestablish social control over their members and preside over a process of tribal reconciliation, consolidation, and mobilization. In this respect, the U.S. acted as a "super-tribe" mitigating tribal friction points within and between tribes, facilitated tribal

reconciliation through development contracts and access to employment as security forces, and enhanced the status of tribal leaders through political support, attention, and inclusion in planning efforts. Additionally, military operations against insurgent members also served to pressure tribal members to reconcile with their home tribe. Tribal engagement was usually conducted through a paramount sheik who through a process of consultation with the tribe's sub-sheiks and tribal members presided over a process of tribal reconciliation. This entailed using patronage and influence to convince, cajole, and pressure tribal members to rejoin the fold.

This process required tribal members who had been aligned with al-Qaeda in Iraq to provide intelligence on the terrorist group and participate in operations against it. By turning against their former colleagues this process facilitated the inclusion of the formerly ostracized tribal member back into the tribe by establishing a blood-debt between the former AQI tribal member and his past terror associates. It was also a demonstration of his loyalty to the tribe. Another aspect of the Anbar Awakening was that the terms of the conflict differed from the subsequent struggle with ISIS forces. Tribal members who participated in the insurgency, both the nationalist and Islamist aspects of it, focused most of their efforts against Coalition Forces and the Iraqi Security Forces. While opportunists within tribes sometimes used violence to seize more power, these efforts were relatively modest. Once the insurgency split, tribal leaders focused their efforts on killing foreign jihadists and overseeing a process of adjudicating local collaborators. Individual revenge-seeking took place as tribes internally policed their members but no quarter was given to foreign jihadists by the tribe. Paramount sheiks also participated in the selection of tribal members to be trained as security forces and frequently sought to ensure tribal balance in order to maintain their position and to reconcile different family groups.

TRIBAL RELATIONS BEFORE ISIS

Following the departure of U.S. military forces from Iraq in 2011, the government of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki adopted a policy of Sunni Arab marginalization and persecution.⁰³ Tribal groups which had risen in power during the U.S. presence now witnessed the systematic dismantlement of their

heretofore modest inclusion in Iraqi political affairs. National Sunni Arab political leaders were removed from office through arrest, persecution, or threats and many tribal leaders also suffered similar fates. With political marginalization came economic adversity as salaries were cut or abolished for many Anbar security forces, including tribal groups, and state security forces attempted to intimidate Sunni Arabs to prevent them from expressing political objections to the national government's policies.

Attempts by the tribes to organize politically were beset with difficulties as some tribal leaders refused to be led by members of the Albu Risha tribe that led the Anbar Awakening while others attempted to build their own political followings. Divided politically, Anbar tribes struggled to present a unified voice, leadership, and political program to the central government. Forces allied with al-Qaeda in Iraq began to take political advantage of this growing resentment toward the central government within the Sunni Arab community.

Using the collapse of government control and stability in Syria during the Arab Spring as a safe haven to reorganize, ISIS forces began a program of political outreach to disaffected Sunni Arab communities looking for support. Additionally, they also conducted military planning to seize the Sunni Arab heartland and identified potential tribal

allies, assembled a target list of Anbar tribal leaders for assassination, and established a political program to impose on the population. In many respects, they sought to create a competing state within Iraq that incorporated the lessons the Islamist group had learned from its prior experiences in Iraq. The ISIS political program took advantage of Sunni Arab grievances to present itself as the protector of Sunni Arabs while simultaneously imposing a system of control based upon Sharia law. Unlike its previous incarnation as al-Qaeda in Iraq when it operated as an insurgent group, ISIS now sought to function as a government. It had conventional-sized military forces, judicial, policing, and other state services ready to be implemented, and a system of population control ready to impose on the tribes. Knowing that the tribes were its greatest threat, ISIS sought to control them through fear and intimidation while splitting them through the selective empowerment of key factions or leaders. Many tribes were unable or unwilling to resist the ISIS forces, especially as conventional Iraqi Army units fled, were captured, or disbanded altogether. Additionally, since many tribal groups were organized to fight a modestly sized insurgency they were unable to resist conventional-sized military attacks as isolated checkpoints were quickly overrun. In some cases, tribes invited ISIS forces into their

communities in an effort to remove the Maliki Government and the Iraqi Army, which operated at his behest, from power. With the disappearance of state largesse, the halting of economic activity in ISIS controlled areas, and the population control measures imposed on Sunni Arabs, tribal groups were increasingly forced to rely upon their own resources.

TRIBAL RELATIONS DURING ISIS

When ISIS forces arrived in Anbar Province in 2014-2015, it was the culmination of a multi-year campaign to reconstitute their forces in Syria, reach out to the disaffected Sunni Arab community within Iraq, and learn the lessons of its prior defeat during the Awakening period. Their strategy initially began by systematically weakening the Anbar Awakening leadership. It started with the targeted assassination of influential leaders in the Awakening movement and then the scattering of remaining leaders once ISIS forces seized the province. Prominent assassinations included (1) Albu Issa Sheik Aifan Saddun (Fallujah), the a member of parliament, who was killed by a suicide vest attacker on January 15, 2013, (2) Jughayfi Paramount Sheik Said Flayyih Uthman al Jughayfi (Haditha) who was killed by a suicide car bomb at his guesthouse on Feb. 28, 2014, and (3) Aniza Paramount Sheik Lawrence Mutib Mahruth al-Hathal, the mayor of

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 Iraqi tribal fighters
 conduct training. Tribes
 play a vital role in
 providing stability in Iraq.

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Nukaybah, who was killed by a car bomb on January 31, 2015, among other leaders. The swiftness and success of the ISIS attacks and their overall brutality led to many Awakening leaders being killed, displaced, discredited, or demoralized. With relations having deteriorated between tribal groups and the central government and with most tribal security forces having now been defunded, Anbar residents were only protected by the Iraqi Army and local police forces. As the Iraqi Army withdrew or was defeated by ISIS forces, Anbar communities came to rely solely upon local police forces which were largely overrun or scattered robbing tribes of some of their best military leaders. Having seized the province, ISIS then sought to expand its influence within the tribes by favoring some factions over others and using intimidation to force compliance with their rule. Most notably, they killed upwards of 500 members of the Abu Nimr tribe in November 2014 and approximately seventy Nimr tribesmen on October 4, 2015 in the Khanizir village. Additionally, due to the size of ISIS forces and their willingness to use violence to impose their rule, they were able to control many tribes and impose a superstructure of political rule upon them. The terrorist group also sought to replace tribal affiliation with a radicalized conception of identity through reeducating and indoctrinating young people and de-emphasizing tribal identity. Significant numbers of Anbar residents fled to Erbil, the country of Jordan, or to Baghdad to escape the violence, further complicating tribal mobilization efforts.

The Government of Iraq appears to have adopted a program of partial tribal mobilization and the selective empowerment of certain tribal leaders, many of whom had not been active in the Anbar Awakening movement. Some Awakening leaders are still leading their respective tribal forces, albeit substantially smaller than before, and are playing prominent roles in local police forces and in elected positions. The overall approach of the central government seems to be shaped by budgetary constraints, an unwillingness to mobilize tribal forces to Awakening levels due to a concern over possible threats to the central government, a sense that they do not know who to support, and a view that the tribes were complicit in the rise of ISIS and must be controlled by formal state security forces. This mixture of security approaches to controlling the tribes has also extended to Govern-


TRIBES ARE AN IMPORTANT SOCIAL INSTITUTION IN IRAQI SOCIETY AND ARE ESSENTIAL IN ANY SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY TO DEFEAT ISIS FORCES.

ment of Iraq political engagements as they engage with certain tribal leaders over others in order to prevent a unified tribal effort. Additionally, it appears as if a struggle exists between tribal and more technocratic leaders in the Sunni Arab community which further limits a program of overall tribal empowerment. Finally, a more robust U.S. military and diplomatic presence in Baghdad has also facilitated Sunni Arab tribal empowerment and prompted the central government to be more inclusive of tribal forces in government deliberations. However, many tribes have begun to rely upon their own financial means or have established relationships with outside patrons to meet tribal security needs to fund local protective forces. Lacking sufficient support from the central government, many tribes are pursuing some elements of a "go-it-alone" approach and have even opened an office in Washington, D.C. to directly advocate their interests before members of the U.S. Government. Additionally, displaced tribal leaders have also taken advantage of their locations in Jordan, Erbil, and Baghdad to organize politically which has allowed some cohering of a unified political approach to their collective problems. In many respects, the tribes are increasingly self-sufficient politically, militarily, and economically and are willing to work with the central government but have fostered outside links if this approach does not address their long-term concerns.

CONCLUSION

Tribes are an important social institution in Iraqi society and are essential partners in any successful strategy to defeat ISIS forces. Sunni Arab tribes have seen their relationship to the Iraqi state fluctuate over the decades from managed collusion to marginal-

ized outcasts to governing partners to a suspicious and highly truncated partnership. However tribes are looked upon, they will continue to play a vital role in providing stability in Sunni Arab areas and must be included in any effort to govern their communities.

While competing visions of what sort of partnership with tribes will continue to be debated, they will be nested within a broader conversation of the relationship between the central government and its minority religious and ethnic communities. A highly centralized state presiding over a decentralized population will continue to look for local partners who can bridge the divide between how formal governing institutions are designed and the requirements for local legitimacy and efficacy. Tribes and tribal leaders can often provide these essential connections between local communities and provincial and central government institutions. Additionally, their increasing ability to operate on their own politically, militarily, and economically will provide further opportunities and challenges for them to exercise their newfound influence into the future. The challenge going forward is to make sure they are willing partners in their future and not bystanders to it. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES **01.** General John Bagot Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion*, 1948, pg. 120. **02.** Daniel R. Green and William F. Mullen, III, *Fallujah Redux: The Anbar Awakening and the Struggle with al-Qaeda*, 2014, pgs. 1-158. **03.** Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, 2015, pgs. 1-400; Joel Rayburn, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance*, 2014, pgs. 1-284.