The Iraqi Tribal Structure
Background and Influence on Counter-Terrorism

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Introduction

The tribal structure is one of the oldest establishments of Iraqi civilization. The origin of the Iraqi tribal structure dates from the time of Mesopotamia and has endured centuries of subjugation to empires, monarchies, foreign occupations, and national governments. This longevity has been attributed to fluctuations in governing powers throughout time, which have required tribes to concentrate their allegiance and political force on maintaining long-term networks rather than to support changing regimes to sustain their tribes. [1] Throughout the turmoil, the tribe has remained the most important entity in Iraqi society. In the absence of strong central authority, tribes functioned as miniature quasi-polities where tribal leaders (known as *sheikhs)* would administer resource and conflict management and law enforcement. [2]

While tribes have endured as the primary mechanism of societal organization, the tribal system as the overarching political order has experienced periods of relative strength and weakness. The traditional tribal system was weakened beginning in the mid-1800's under the direct rule of colonial powers, and later again in the early 1970's under Saddam Hussein's Baathist party. The Ottoman Empire's settlement and land reform policies undermined the tribe's customary source of authority by shifting their dependence on subsistence farming, which determined status in the hierarchy of tribes, to the agricultural market economy. [3]

The tribal system was strengthened after World War I due to the British Empire's use of indirect rule, which delegated municipal tasks of water distribution, control of land, and law enforcement to tribal sheikhs. [4] However, such functions were only permitted prior to the establishment of Iraq's first monarchy by the British. The tribal system endured another blow during the rise to power of Saddam's Baathist party. In efforts to consolidate his power and unite the Iraqi republic, Saddam attempted to abolish the tribal system's influence through forced migration and the killing and imprisonment of sheikhs.[5] Forced migration from the countryside to the cities weakened tribal ties, because tribes thrived on semi-control over their lands to determine status and to maintain close familial bonds.

Following the Baath party's plummeting popularity and support base in the aftermath of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and its defeat in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, Saddam sought tribal support to bolster his power. In the wake of a severely weakened central authority, many Iraqis quickly returned to relying on the tribal structure to provide social services. [6] Saddam recognized that without the support of tribes, the sheikhs could have ordered tribal revolts and possibly have toppled his regime. [7] In the process of garnering tribal support, Saddam restored tribal councils to administer economic

activities, resolve conflicts, and maintain law enforcement elements. [8] He provided Sunni sheikhs with money and granted them autonomy over the areas they controlled in exchange for their commitment to maintain order in the countryside, monitor the borders with Iran, prevent tribe members from joining anti-Baathist elements, and recruit tribe members for the Iraqi army. [9] Saddam rewarded the villages of reliable tribes by constructing roads and providing water and electricity. [10] Additionally, Saddam selected Loyal sheikhs to serve in his government, as well as arming their tribal militias. Thus, the Sunni tribal structure largely regained its former semi-independent status.

Tribal Dynamics

Since the tribal structure in Iraq predates the advent of Islam, the precise boundaries between tribal loyalties and religious affiliation are in many instances not well defined. Indeed, some tribes have both Sunni and Shiite members. The largest being the Shammar and Jubur tribal confederations. Generally speaking, the country has Sunni tribes in central and western Iraq, Shiite tribes in the south, and Kurdish tribes in the north. A small tribe is considered to have a population range in the hundreds to thousands of members, whereas larger tribes can have tens of thousands of members that are arranged into sub-clans. [11] Although the practice of referring to tribal affiliation to distinguish one's identity is less prevalent in today's society, particularly in the larger cities, an estimated 75% of the population today belongs to one of the country's 150 tribes, or at least maintains kinship ties with a tribe. [12]

The Hierarchy of the Tribal Structure:

The foundation of the tribe is referred to as the *khams*, which is the greater extended family. The family is linked by all male offspring who share the same great-great grandfather. [13] The lowest level of the structure is the *bayt*, which consists of a single extended family with members numbering in the hundreds. [14] A group of *bayts* form a clan, known as the *fakdh*. Each *fakdh* maintains its own chief, family name, and land that is relative to a specific village or town. [15] A cluster of clans constitute a tribal organization or *'ashira*. The *'ashira* enjoys a high level of unity primarily due to the relative power that its *sheikh* or the sheikh's *bayt* holds and due to the geographic proximity of the clans of which it is comprised. [16] A confederacy of tribes is classified as a *qabila*. Although the *qabila* is an alliance of several tribes, it is still regarded as a tribe.[17]

Modern tribal social and justice codes exhibit continuing adherence to traditional cultural tribal customs, such as strong loyalty to one's clan or tribe, which includes the tradition of blood feuds (*al-tha'r*), protecting family honor (*'ird*), and exhibiting one's masculinity and valor in fighting (*al-mirowa*). [18] The concept of blood feuds and vengeance is most important in the *khams* structure, where male members are obliged to avenge the death of another member. [19] This could be carried out by killing a member of the *khams* that murdered the family member or more commonly through managing financial compensation for the death (*al-diya*).[20]

Many of Iraq's tribes can track their ancestry to one of nine tribal confederations: the Rubia, Zubayd, Dulaym, al-Muntafiq, Ubayd, al-Khaza'il, Bani Lam, Albu Mohammed, and the Ka'b. [21] The largest Arab tribal confederations in Iraq are the Zubayd, Tayy, Rubia, Dulaym, Shammar, Jubur, Ubayd, Anniza, al-Dhufair, al-Muntafiq, Bani Rikab, Bani Hachim, al-Soudan, Albu Mohammed, al-Qarraghul, al-Tikriti, al-Hassan, Yazzid, Ka'b, Shammar Touga, al-Ghalal, al-Sumaida, Bani Lam, al-Azza, al-Umtayr, Zoba, Midan, al-Duriyeen, al-Khaza'il, al-Suwarma, and al-Sumaida. [22]

The Shammar tribe is composed of both Sunnis and Shiites and is allegedly the largest confederation in Iraq spanning central Iraq and the south of Baghdad to the Syrian border in the northwest. [23] The Jubur tribe, which also includes Sunnis and Shiites, is primarily centered along the Tigris River as far north as Mosul and Khabur. [24] The Dulaym tribe largely inhabits the al-Anbar governorate, and the Zubayd confederation is scattered throughout Iraq. [25]

"Anbar Awakening"

Al-Anbar is the largest of the 18 governorates in Iraq; most of al-Anbar's population of 2.5 million people are Sunnis from the Dulaym Tribal Confederation.[26] Because of this homogeneity, the sectarian strife currently plaguing other parts of Iraq is rare in al-Anbar. [27] Al-Anbar is regarded as the epicenter of the Iraqi insurgency, containing nationalist forces from the former regime's military, intelligence, and political structures; Iraqi militias; and al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda poses the greatest threat to al-Anbar's population and U.S. coalition forces and its influence has waxed and waned among many Sunni tribes throughout the country.

Al-Anbar previously served as a haven for al-Qaeda in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003, where many tribal leaders provided the terrorist organization with logistical support, safe-houses, and recruits. [28] This safehaven was created largely due to Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) lack of cultural awareness at the time. The CPA initially rebuffed a proposition from U.S. intelligence officers to form an alliance with certain tribes to counter al-Qaeda, citing that tribes were part of the past and an impediment to democracy. [29] The U.S. further alienated tribes in al-Anbar when they broke up the Iraqi army, which employed many Anbari locals.[30]

However, residents soon developed an aversion to al-Qaeda when the group enforced a strict, extremist form of Islamic law, instated its own religious clerics, and set up an Islamic court. [31] Sunnis also began to fear that al-Qaeda's excessive use of violence against Iraq's Shiite population would incur a backlash of Shiite violence in their direction. Al-Qaeda fighters kidnapped local residents for ransom, evicted people from their homes in order to take up residence for themselves, and raided highways to raise funds. [32] Perhaps the most significant occurrence was when al-Qaeda members initiated a blood feud (*al-tha'r*) by wantonly killing people and assassinating tribal and religious leaders. Al-Qaeda fighters employed suicide bombers, car bombs, and chlorine bombs to kill the targeted leaders under the assumption that eliminating tribal leadership would facilitate the absorption of the tribe into the insurgency. [33]

In separate events, al-Qaeda militants killed the chief of the Naim tribe and his son, the leader of the Jubur tribe, and a top tribal sheikh who was the head of the Fallujah city council. [34] This mocked the sacred tribal value of loyalty to one's tribal members demonstrated by commitment to avenge the deaths of tribal members. In most cases, the tribes could not carry out the customary vengeance required to restore their honor, nor could they extract *al-diya* from al-Qaeda. The tribes began the process of turning against the foreign entity that they had initially harbored.

In 2005, the late Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Rishah (also known as Sheikh Abdul Sattar al-Rishawi), who was the leader of the Abu Rishah Tribe of the Dulaym confederation, and a number of other tribal leaders endeavored to construct a local coalition of nationalist insurgents that would be exclusive of al-Qaeda. [35] Abdul Sattar, who had lost his father and three brothers in insurgent strikes, shortly discarded this plan and allied with U.S. forces to cleanse the region of al-Qaeda. Abdul Sattar and many other regional tribal leaders founded a movement, the "Awakening Council" or "Anbar Salvation Council", in September 2006 to organize their forces and enable tribal members to confront al-Qaeda. The alliance began with approximately 31 tribes who formed their own paramilitary units and enlisted recruits to join the local police force to fight al-Qaeda.[36] Fifteen tribes in Ramadi, the capital of al-Anbar, amassed approximately 20,000 men to fight al-Qaeda. [37] Sheikh Ahmed Abu Rishah, the new leader of the Awakening Council and the elder brother of Sheikh Abdul Sattar, claims that 23 major tribes in and surrounding Ramadi have joined the Council. [38]

This organization was initially created as a regional attempt to assemble like-minded tribal factions against al-Qaeda forces in al-Anbar. In its early stages, the Council was self-dependent in financing and acquiring arms. With resources running out and a lack of support from the Shiite-dominant government, Sheikh Abdul Sattar launched an initiative to cooperate with U.S. forces, as well as offering them the assistance of thousands of young men who belonged to the tribes of the Council. An agreement was arranged under which U.S. forces would construct police stations in Ramadi, which had been a target of al-Qaeda and other insurgent attacks, and in exchange the Council would recruit residents to join local security forces. [39] Following the partnership, tribal and religious leaders called for thousands of young men throughout the governorate to join local police forces. [40] An estimated 8,000 men from al-Anbar's tribes joined the Iraqi police army. [41] The names of police recruits are scanned through a database containing the names of formerly detained insurgents. [42] At the time of this writing, the new police center that was recently built near Fallujah in mid-2007 just graduated its first classes of Anbari recruits to join the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). [43] The ensuing decrease in attacks indicates that the local police and security forces are successful in fighting al-Qaeda, and/or a number of the forces formerly belonged to al-Qaeda or the insurgency. [44]

American military commanders have adopted a strategy of decentralized control by forming new partnerships with local Iraqis on the grassroots level to counter al-Qaeda in Iraq. [45] Tribal leaders in al-Anbar signed an accord to organize a tribal force of around 30,000 men. [46] Many locals requested weapons from U.S. forces in order to fight al-

Qaeda on their own. [47] Instead, U.S. Captain Ben Richards recommended residents pass intelligence to U.S. forces, including information on the identities and locations of al-Qaeda members in the region, where they had buried their bombs and weapons, and other relevant intelligence on the group. [48] U.S. forces have gained a strategic advantage by working with tribal locals because they are familiar with the landscape and people of the region.

Col. Ahmad Hamad al-Dulaimi, a chief police officer in Ramadi, said that police forces in al-Anbar receive their commands from the U.S. military through the regional Joint Coordination Centers.[49] The JCCs were established at the local level in order for Iraqi and U.S. military units to monitor Iraqi security forces. [50] Underscoring the tribal principle of loyalty to one's tribe, lower-ranking police officers have pointed out that they take their orders from tribal leaders. [51] Colonel Steve Boylan, a spokesman for top U.S. military commander in Iraq General David Petraeus, stated the Iraqi Government's Interior Ministry finances and provides weapons and supplies for al-Anbar's police force. [52] However, according to Colonel Abdul Salam al-Reeshawi, the head of a police center in al-Anbar, over 90 percent of their weapons and supplies have come from U.S. forces, including medium machine guns, rocket launchers, and personal pistols.[53]

Sunni Tribes vs. al-Qaeda in Iraq

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has urged every province in Iraq to establish its own "salvation council" similar to the one in al-Anbar. [54] Sunni tribes throughout central Iraq have begun recruiting members to join the Council and follow the example of the al-Anbar model. In March 2007, the Albu-Issa tribes in Amiriyat al-Fallujah joined the Anbar Salvation Council and in late May, tribes in the Saladin province around Tikrit formed the "Saladin Awakening." Many community leaders in the region of Adhamiya have been working to create their own salvation council called the "Adhamiya Awakening." The plan has attracted support from hundreds of individuals in the area. The Karabila tribes in Qaim are coordinating with the Iraqi Minister of Defense to fight al-Qaeda. The Al-Zuba'a tribe, which is spread throughout Fallujah, Zaidon, and Abu Ghraib, has reportedly turned against al-Qaeda as well. [55]

In the province of Diyala, another area plagued by al-Qaeda, a number of locals requested assistance from U.S. forces to combat al-Qaeda. U.S. forces in Diyala have worked with residents to identify insurgents and roadside bombs planted by insurgents. [56] Such residents call themselves the "Local Committee," and have thus far captured over 100 suspected insurgents and several low-level al-Qaeda leaders. [57] However, U.S. cooperation with Diyala differs from that in al-Anbar, for Diyala lacks a cohesive tribal structure, which is more representative of many parts of Iraq than the Sunni tribal west.[58]

On 14 September 2007, al-Qaeda forces assassinated Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Rishah with a roadside bomb near his estate. [59] Abdul Sattar's elder brother, Sheikh Ahmad Abu Rishah, was selected as the new leader of the Anbar Salvation Council shortly after the killing. Since Abdul Sattar was the most fervent in such efforts, the initial concern

was that Abdul Sattar's death would weaken U.S.-tribal alliances. However, a number of tribes throughout Iraq have since initiated efforts to unite against al-Qaeda.

Two days after Abdul Sattar's death, envoys from the Anbar Salvation Council traveled to Mosul to assist tribal leaders in the formation of the Mosul Salvation Council, which decided to use the same tactic of enlisting local young men to join police and security forces to pacify Mosul, Tal Afar, and other surrounding areas where al-Qaeda maintains a presence. [60] Prominent tribes that have since signed on with the Mosul Salvation Council are the Shammar, Jubur, Tayy, al-Nuaim, Kirkeah, Albu Badran, and a few Yazidi tribes. [61]

Shiite Tribes Against Violence

Shiite Iraqis constitute approximately 60% of the total population and inhabit the southern regions of Iraq. The predominant Shiite tribe is the Bani Assad. Shiite tribes that are partnering with U.S. forces have done so based on a similar strategy of the Sunni tribes to fight al-Qaeda. In addition, Shiite tribes are attempting to control Shiite militias and extremists. U.S. forces negotiated an agreement between Sunni and Shiite tribal leaders in the Taji region to collaborate forces to fight al-Qaeda and other extremists. [62] Tribal leaders decided to draw upon members from more than 25 tribes in Taji to fight extremists.

Sheikh Majid Tahir al-Magsousi, the head of the Migasees tribe in the Wasit province, said that tribal leaders are creating plans to form a contingent of young men trained by U.S. forces to reinforce local security and assist in patrolling Iraq's border with Iran. [63] Army Captain Majid al-Amara has been assigned the task of organizing the brigade, and said that each battalion will be composed of 350 men chosen by tribal leaders and will be armed and equipped by the Iraqi government. [64] U.S. and Iraqi forces will respect the traditional role of the tribal sheikh by permitting them to continue to be in command of their brigade members.

The Role of the Tribal System in the Post-Saddam Era

Tribes have traditionally functioned as quasi-polities, and the revival of such a role in the 1990's after a long period of suppression makes the tribes especially reluctant to return to subjugation by a central authority unless they receive incentives from the Government to do so. Because tribes are inclined to cooperate with governing powers that offer advantages, such as semi-autonomy in exchange for support, and given the long tradition of tribal survival, tribal alliances are often transient. It is important to keep in mind that certain tribes, primarily Sunni tribes, are accustomed to enjoying a degree of influence and privileges when in close cooperation with the governing administration. More recently, such tribes have included the Jubur, Dulaym, Tayy, Khazraj, al-Azza, Harb, Maghamis, Mushahadah, Luhayb, and Ubayd. [65] Therefore, it is possible to conceive that traditionally dominant tribes or tribal confederations are more likely to cooperate with the U.S. due to its prevailing dominance in the country at the present time. They are

less likely to work with the current Shiite government on account of sectarian tensions and the weakness of the newly-formed central government.

At the same time, consideration must be given to the fact that the majority of Iraqi tribes, Shiite and Kurdish, were marginalized or harassed by Saddam's regime and staged tribal revolts when possible. Now that the Iraqi government is dominated by Shiites and Kurds, the Kurdish population is cooperating with the U.S government and thus, unlikely to instigate any problems. Shiite uprisings have largely taken place in urban regions rather than the countryside, where the tribes are anti-al Qaeda and increasingly hostile to Shiite militias that they deem to be agents of Iran or not of a nationalist agenda.

Conclusion

Considering that tribal alliances are transient and dynamic, it is probable that the U.S. and Iraqi government will change tribal alliances at different periods of time. There is also the risk that collaborating with one tribe may make adversaries out of rival or neutral tribes. [66] Therefore, if the United States and the Iraqi government intend to establish tribal alliances, they must customize such coalitions based on each tribe's background. They must make sure to bear in mind the structure and formalities of a tribe, historical feuds within and between tribes, find out the political inclinations of dominant tribes and their sources of authority and legitimacy, and determine a tribe's ties to the branches of its tribe in neighboring countries. [67] Only by acknowledging and demonstrating sensitivity towards tribal society will the Iraqi government, as well as the United States, be able to work alongside the tribal network to curb, and ultimately rein in, terrorist elements within Iraq.

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