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The Anbar Awakening

Austin Long

In late 2006, after several failed attempts and false starts, a tribal group in Iraq's restive province of Anbar allied with the United States and the central government of Iraq to fight 'al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia'. The US alliance with this group, known as the Anbar Salvation Council (ASC), was widely hailed as a breakthrough both by members of the press and some officials in the US and Iraqi governments.¹ Certainly the ASC's cooperation made Anbar's capital Ramadi, previously one of the most violent cities in Iraq, much safer. Cooperation with the tribes of Anbar was not unprecedented for Washington and Baghdad, but the alliance with the ASC was both more public and more dramatic than previous cooperation and saw significant linking of certain tribes and tribal leaders with the formal government structure of the province. In 2007, the United States military began seeking to forge similar alliances across Iraq, making Anbar the model for the provision of internal security.

Relying on tribes to provide security is not a new phenomenon for Iraq. The British did so in the 1920s; later Saddam Hussein became a master of using them to ensure the continuity of his rule, particularly once the formal Iraqi state and the Ba'ath Party withered in the 1980s and 1990s. While the current attempt in Anbar is analogous, it is not identical, and the differences suggest that it is likely to be less successful in the long run than Saddam's effort. Moreover, the current attempt highlights tension between the means and ends of Iraq strategy. The tribal strategy is

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a means to achieve one strategic end, fighting al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, but is antithetical to another, the creation of a stable, unified and democratic Iraq.

The tribe and the state

The nature of tribes can be quite confusing to those unfamiliar with them. In general, a tribe consists of various smaller clans, in turn composed of extended families. Members of a tribe claim kinship, which is often based on association and assertion of a 'myth of common ancestry' rather than actual consanguinity.² This asserted relationship is sometimes called 'fictive kinship'. Fictive or not, this kinship helps regulate conflict and provides benefits such as jobs and social welfare in environments where the modern state does not exist or is too weak to function.³

In Iraq, both the basic structure of tribes and the terms used to refer to them have changed over time. In present-day Anbar, the basic unit is the tribe (*'ashira*), which is composed of clans (*afkhad*). These clans are made up of lineages or households (*hamoulas*), which are in turn made up of houses (*bayts*) that contain individual families (*'ailas*). In some cases, the term *qabila* is used to refer to a large tribe or confederation of tribes.⁴

Saddam Hussein's tribal position at the time of the second Ba'ath coup of 1968 provides a good example of this system. His tribe was the Albu Nasir, one of three main groupings in the town of Tikrit. The Albu Nasir had six clans; Saddam was from the Bejjat, the dominant clan. Within the Bejjat clan were ten lineages; Saddam was from the Albu Ghafur lineage. Within the Albu Ghafur were two main houses; Saddam's was the Albu Majid. His family was that of Hussein, though Hussein himself – Saddam's father – died before Saddam was born.⁵

It is important to note that kinship ties, while important, are not sacrosanct, particularly at the more abstract level of tribe and clan. Once again, Saddam Hussein's life provides an example. Saddam at the time of the 1968 coup was deputy to his kinsman Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr. Al-Bakr was also from the Bejjat clan. However, as his name indicates, al-Bakr was from a different lineage, the Albu Bakr. Despite these affiliations, Saddam eventually manoeuvred al-Bakr out of power and made his own lineage, Albu Ghafur,

supreme.⁶ Al-Bakr's subsequent death under mysterious circumstances is often attributed to those loyal to Saddam.

Saddam's closer kinsmen provided a more loyal power base. After the death of Saddam's father, his mother's remarriage to a member of the Albu Khattab lineage of the Beijat clan gave him three half-brothers from another lineage. He also drew upon his close cousins from the Albu Majid house of the Albu Ghafur lineage to fill his top security ranks. In general, close kinships like this have far greater strength than the more abstract links of tribe and clan.⁷

The impact of tribes on state formation in the Middle East has varied from state to state.⁸ In Iraq in the 1920s, the tribe was a rural organisation that stood in opposition to all things urban and modern. Following a revolt against the new Hashemite monarchy, the British and their allies in the royal family sought to appease and manipulate the tribes. In exchange for their support, areas outside cities were in many ways made a law unto themselves.⁹

The overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in 1958 initiated a decline in tribal power, as the new military regime eliminated laws that gave sheikhs legal authority and control of agricultural land. This led to an exodus from rural areas to the cities and the first encounters of peasant tribesman with an alien urban environment. Many used affiliation to anchor themselves in this often hostile setting and tribalism came to coexist with urban modernity as ever more Iraqis migrated to towns and cities.

However, though some Iraqis clung to traditional names and affiliations, tribalism's power waned through the 1960s. Iraq was slowly but surely becoming a modern nation-state with a functioning security apparatus, judiciary and bureaucracy. By the late 1960s, tribalism was at its nadir, with many Iraqis ceasing to define themselves in the traditional way (though more than a few existed in a sort of dual state, with membership in both a tribe and a modern organisation such as a trade union).¹⁰

In theory, the return of the Ba'ath Party to power in 1968 (it had briefly held power in 1963 but was ousted by the military) should have heralded the death knell of the tribe. Ba'ath ideology is relentlessly secular and mod-

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ernist. As Amatzia Baram notes, the first Ba'ath communiqué in July 1968 declared: 'We are against religious sectarianism, racism, and tribalism', the latter being one of 'the remnants of colonialism'.¹¹

However, the Ba'ath Party was highly insecure in its control of Iraq. In order to prevent another coup, the party both massively expanded membership and sought to place loyal elements in the military and security services. Many of these loyalists were members of the same tribe as the senior leaders of the party.¹² Thus, from its inception, the Ba'ath regime had an inconsistent policy and attitude which ensured that tribal power, though temporarily diminished, would endure.

Tribal–state security relations

The Ba'ath government's use of tribes to control Iraq's state-security apparatus is far from unique. Modern nation-states have in many instances turned to tribes to help provide internal security, generally because the state is either too weak to provide security itself or because it is too expensive to do so. In general, the weaker the state, the more autonomy is given to tribes to provide what the state cannot.

There are three basic patterns the relationship can take. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, so that different patterns can be seen in the same state. The first is most likely in relatively stronger states and occurs when one group seeks to dominate the state's security apparatus by commingling tribal networks with the formal state structure. This 'state tribalism' is common in states that have not fully institutionalised the mechanism for providing internal security.¹³ In the Middle East, Iraq, Syria and many of the Gulf States have practiced various forms of state tribalism.¹⁴ Other countries, such as Jordan, use electoral arrangements favouring tribes to ensure control of ostensibly democratic legislatures, partly to ensure internal security.¹⁵

Outside the Middle East, this pattern is commonly seen in post-colonial Africa. Kenya, for example, was dominated in the early post-colonial period by the Kikuyu tribe. The government of Jomo Kenyatta intentionally filled the army with Kikuyu tribesmen in the late 1960s to neutralise the Kamba and Kalenjin tribes that had dominated the country under the British. The government also used a paramilitary organisation

called the General Service Unit as a Kikuyu praetorian guard and 'Kikuyuised' the police and other intelligence services.¹⁶ Following the death of Kenyatta in 1978, Vice President Daniel arap Moi, a member of the Kalenjin tribe, assumed the presidency and began to seed the security services with his own kinsmen, allowing him to thwart an attempted coup in 1982.¹⁷ This pattern of state tribalism in the security services has continued and affiliation remains important to Kenyan politics and the preservation of internal security.¹⁸

The second pattern is common in weaker states and involves quasi-autonomous militias based on tribe (or more broadly on ethnicity). These militias are effectively 'deputised' to provide internal security in certain regions in exchange for some form of payment from the central state. This pattern can be termed 'auxiliary tribalism'. Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s provides one of the best examples of the successful application of this pattern as well as a caution about its possible consequences. The Communist government of Afghanistan faced a tenacious multiparty insurgency beginning in the late 1970s that even major Soviet intervention was unable to quell. The Afghan government began to arm and pay various tribal and ethnic militias to fight the insurgency, or to at least remain neutral. This process accelerated after Mohammed Najibullah replaced Babrak Karmal as president in 1986, and enabled Najibullah's regime to survive the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.¹⁹ Perhaps the most famous of these militias was that of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek from northwestern Afghanistan. Dostum's militia grew from a small force intended to protect gas fields to over 20,000 men armed with heavy equipment and artillery by the late 1980s. Dostum was so effective he became a *de facto* mobile reserve for the Afghan government. However, when the collapsing Soviet Union cut funding to Afghanistan and the ability of the Afghan government to pay declined, Dostum quickly switched sides to the insurgents. This defection precipitated the rapid collapse of the Afghan government in early 1992.²⁰

The final pattern of relations is the cession of all but the most desultory control over a territory to a tribe. Only the weakest or poorest of states would normally accept this type of relationship. Tribal leaders become, in effect, palatine vassals of the central state, and are often as restive as their

medieval counterparts. This pattern can be termed 'baronial tribalism'. It is fairly rare, as such feudal relations are anathema to modern nation-states, but can be seen in Pakistan in the region along the border with Afghanistan. Either *de jure* or *de facto* tribal autonomy characterises much of Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (which includes North and South Waziristan) and the North-West Frontier Province. The federal government's presence is felt lightly, if at all (apart from the occasional punitive expedition), a situation echoing the British imperial experience in these rugged border regions.²¹ Yemen offers another example: clashes between a very weak central state and well-armed tribes are frequent and violent.²² However, in most rural regions tribal law is far more powerful than the laws of the government, so despite these clashes the government also uses tribes to provide a degree of internal security.²³

A final variation on these three patterns occurs when an external power becomes involved in the provision of internal security to a state. This presents the possibility of a three-way relationship among tribe, state and external power that can produce many complications. The external power might choose to ally itself with groups that are hostile to the state or vice versa, potentially creating serious problems. Further, the existence of multiple tribes can mean that the external power must also balance relations with groups that compete among themselves.

The United States' involvement in Vietnam is a good example. In the early 1960s, the CIA and US Army Special Forces began arming and training Montagnard tribesmen in the mountainous west of South Vietnam to fight Communist insurgents supported by North Vietnam (a form of auxiliary tribalism). The Montagnard recruits were enthusiastic in fighting the insurgents, yet were only slightly less hostile to the government of South Vietnam, which had never treated the Montagnard minority particularly well. The government of South Vietnam was understandably nervous about this programme, known as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group programme. Tension came to a boil in late 1964, when several groups of tribesmen rose in open revolt. The situation was ultimately defused by the CIA and Special Forces advisers but could potentially have been much worse.²⁴

Saddam's tribal strategy

In Iraq, the Ba'ath Party's relationship to the Iraqi tribes was equivocal from the beginning. Ideologically and rhetorically opposed to tribalism, the regime nevertheless practiced a form of state tribalism to remain in power. Members of Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein's Albu Nasir tribe began to fill the security services in the 1970s, as did members of other favoured groups like the al-Jubburi.²⁵

The Ba'ath Party in the 1970s had three main mechanisms to conduct this strategy. The first was the Ba'ath military bureau, which selected and organised party members for military service under the direction of the Bejjat clan. The second was the security-service bureau, which was controlled by Saddam. The final and most obviously tribal instrument was the Committee of Tribes (Lajnat al-'Asha'ir), which was established to work with the tribes of the Sunni Triangle northwest of Baghdad, including Anbar, to secure the porous Syrian border.²⁶ These three organisations, combined with booming oil revenue after the oil shock of 1973, enabled the Ba'ath Party (and particularly the canny Saddam) to place kinsmen in power (state tribalism) and buy the loyalty of other clans (auxiliary tribalism).

The overall impact of tribalism on broader Iraqi society, however, remained muted in the 1970s. This was due to party efforts to weaken tribal power even as it sought to manipulate it, as well as the continuing modernisation and urbanisation of Iraq. Land reform was a major part of this, as the Ba'ath regime redistributed land or gave it to new peasant collectives. Tribesmen, including future sheikhs, often joined the Ba'ath Party and took up modern professions such as engineering.²⁷ The rural tribes as the British knew them in the 1920s and 1930s had effectively ceased to exist, mostly becoming rural-urban hybrids.

Events of the late 1970s and early 1980s would force the Ba'ath Party to increase its reliance on the tribes of Anbar for internal security. The Iranian revolution of 1979 seemed to provide Saddam with a golden opportunity to get even with an Iran that under the Shah had exploited Iraqi weakness. Now in sole

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command of Iraq following his ouster of Hassan al-Bakr, Saddam launched what was intended to be a limited incursion into Iran.

However, Iran's revolutionary fervour made it an implacable foe, and soon Saddam was fighting for his survival. In this period, he increasingly turned to the tribes to provide internal security. This process gathered momentum after the Iraqi retreat from Khorramshahr in 1982.²⁸ As the Iran–Iraq War continued, more and more party members (especially members of the Ba'ath militia known as the Popular Army) were sent to the front, thinning out the presence of loyal Ba'athists in tribal areas. This forced increasing reliance on tribal loyalty and Saddam widened the circle of tribes he relied on, drawing heavily on the large Dulaimi confederation of Anbar.²⁹

In addition to this conscious policy, Saddam and the Ba'ath Party also increased the importance of Iraqi tribes unintentionally by eliminating alternative elements of civil society. The Ba'athist totalitarian impulse crushed and absorbed all other forms of ideological organisation such as trade unions. Even as these alternative institutions contracted, the war consumed an ever greater portion of Iraq's wealth and managerial talent. This led to an accelerating decline of government social-welfare provision. Thus, by the mid 1980s, many Iraqis found themselves relying more and more on the social-safety net or personal network provided by the tribe, which therefore assumed ever greater importance.³⁰

Following the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait led to further devastation of the Iraqi state and further increases in tribal power. The decimation of the Iraqi military and particularly the regime's elite Republican Guard paved the way for widespread revolt in southern Iraq in 1991. The Ba'ath Party apparatus, drained by two wars, proved incapable of suppressing the revolt and Saddam was forced to turn to the tribes, including many Shia tribes around Baghdad, to put it down. The tribes of Anbar, particularly the Dulaimi, were critical to this effort and became increasingly integral to regime survival. Some dubbed Anbar the 'White Governate' to indicate its importance to the regime.³¹

After 1991 the state's reliance on tribes became truly explicit for the first time in Ba'athist Iraq, with sheikhs publicly visiting Saddam and being

praised in the state media. Saddam increasingly went beyond state tribalism and embraced auxiliary tribalism by allowing sheikhs to create their own private armies equipped with small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and allegedly even howitzers. These armies were intended to allow a sheikh to police his area, and this period also saw increasing legal deference to tribal customs.³²

By 1996, tribal formations had become so integral to the state that the creation of a formal High Council of Tribal Chiefs was proposed. Sheikhs were not only to have judicial and internal security powers but even the ability to tax on behalf of the central government. In exchange, they would receive not only money, weapons and equipment, but also land, government rations, diplomatic passports and exemption from compulsory military duty. Such was their importance for internal security that in the 1998 confrontation with the United States tribal units were deployed in large cities to support the security services. Previously this would have been the duty of the Ba'ath Party's Popular Army.³³ That the government even considered ceding this level of authority to the sheikhs shows that the Iraqi state, weakened by war and sanctions, was drifting beyond state and auxiliary tribalism and dangerously close to baronial tribalism.

This delegation of power to tribal authorities not only granted them formal authority but also enhanced their ability to seek extra-legal sources of additional revenue from smuggling (particularly lucrative as Iraq was under United Nations sanctions), government corruption and kickbacks, and even outright extortion and hijacking. Tribal gangs became increasingly common in this period.³⁴ Members of the Dulaimi, for example, are alleged to have raided cars and trucks using the Baghdad–Amman highway through their territory in the late 1990s. Tribal forces also intimidated or even assassinated state law-enforcement or security personnel; in other instances they demanded blood money or other compensation from the state for its actions. This latter practice became so widespread that the Ba'ath regime issued an edict making it illegal in 1997.³⁵

The 1990s also saw several serious challenges to Saddam's power by elements of various tribes, particularly those he had so actively integrated with the regime. In 1990, members of the Jubburi plotted a coup against Saddam.

The Iraqi leader successfully quashed this attempt (though in retaliation Jubburi pilots are alleged to have attacked the presidential palace) but it indicated that even his vigorous attempts to buy the loyalty of the tribes had not produced their unequivocal adherence.³⁶

The most serious challenge began in May 1995, when Saddam returned the body of executed Brigadier-General Muhammad Mazlum al-Dulaimi to his family. Mazlum al-Dulaimi, a prominent member of the Dulaimi confederation's Abu Nimr tribe, had been held along with some of his kinsmen after an alleged coup attempt in 1994. His body and those of his kinsmen bore marks of horrible torture when finally returned and sections of the Abu Nimr in the Ramadi area rose in open revolt in response to this provocation. Other Dulaimi staged an insurrection at the Abu Ghraib military base in June; some tribesmen who fled to Damascus are alleged to have proclaimed an 'Armed al-Dulaim Tribes Sons Movement'.³⁷

This movement eventually lost momentum and was finally put down by those loyal to Saddam. This was in large part because not even the majority of the Abu Nimr, much less the majority of the Dulaimi, participated. Despite this clear and widely reported rebellion, which led to the firing of Defense Minister Ali Hasan al-Majid, such was the reliance of Saddam on the tribes that he was unable to simply revoke the privileges of the Dulaimi or purge them from the security services.³⁸

Saddam continued to employ a strategy of state and auxiliary tribalism on the eve of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Tribal forces were to be integrated with other military and paramilitary formations to prevent an uprising like that of 1991 and, if needed, to fight invading coalition forces. To ensure that he could continue to buy tribal loyalty, Saddam removed over a billion dollars from the Iraqi Central Bank right before the war.³⁹ Unfortunately for him, once the attack began the loyalty of the tribes proved ephemeral and many chose not to fight. A senior military adviser to the Ba'ath Party near the city of Samawa recalled after the war: 'They called the tribal chiefs in As-Samawa to try and get more men, but the tribes said, "We have no weapons, so how can we fight?" I sensed we were losing control of the situation – and the American forces had not yet arrived, there were only air attacks.'⁴⁰

The US–Iraqi tribal strategy

Following the rapid success of US conventional forces in *Operation Iraqi Freedom* there was a need to provide internal security across the heterogeneous Iraqi nation, including in Anbar, the former bastion of the Ba’athist tribal strategy. Even in concert with Iraq’s interim government, this proved challenging and 2003–04 saw the birth of an insurgency in Anbar and major anti-coalition violence. Participants in the insurgency came from a mixture of groups and included former senior Ba’athists, tribesmen and foreign fighters. Though their motives differed, these groups made common cause against the coalition.⁴¹

In this period, the US–Iraqi tribal strategy was rudimentary in Anbar. However, by early 2004, US and Iraqi officials began engaging in dialogue with tribes, and in limited cases cooperated with them. Still, the tribes overall saw little reason to support the new order and often sided with the newly declared al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia or other insurgent groups.

Attitudes began to shift in early 2005, following the massive coalition assault on Fallujah in November 2004 and the Iraqi national elections in January 2005. Many tribal leaders began to conclude that the political process might hold more benefit than continued fighting. Further, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia’s transnational and fundamentalist goals were at odds with the local or national goals of the tribes. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia was competing for control of revenue sources – such as banditry and smuggling – that had long been the province of the tribes.⁴²

Under this interpretation, the tribes did not change sides in response to violence towards civilians or their Anbar kinsmen, as press accounts have suggested. While this violence was not irrelevant, it does not appear to have been the central motive for the shift. For example, some began fighting al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia at least as early as the beginning of 2005, well before most of the violence towards civilians and tribesmen in Anbar occurred. The primary motive was not moral; it was self-interested.

In fact, it can be argued that much (though far from all) of al-Qaeda’s violence against Sunnis in Anbar was intended to coerce the tribes back into

US and Iraqi officials began dialogue with tribes

alignment with the insurgents. Certainly this was the intent of attacks on selected tribal leaders. In other words, al-Qaeda's violence was principally an *effect* of shifts in allegiance rather than a *cause*. Though it often appears senseless and brutal to outsiders, the coercive use of extreme violence in insurgency and civil war is both fairly common and sometimes quite effective.⁴³

This shift in the strategic calculus of the tribes made a successful US–Iraqi tribal strategy possible, but the opportunity was not fully exploited. For example, the United States did not take full advantage of a shift among members of the powerful Dulaimi confederation in western Anbar. The Albu Mahal tribe around the city of Qaim resented the influx of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia to their border town and the group's competition with Albu Mahal's lucrative smuggling operations. With the support of members of the Albu Nimr, the Albu Mahal formed the Hamza Forces (also called the Hamza Battalion) to fight the newcomers. Al-Qaeda proved to be a tough opponent and in May of 2005 the tribes decided to turn to coalition forces for help in battling them. Fasal al-Gaoud, a former governor of Anbar and sheikh of the Albu Nimr, contacted US Marines for support.⁴⁴

The marines had already been planning an offensive around Qaim, so this could have been an ideal moment to cement an alliance. Instead, the marine offensive, known as *Operation Matador*, was uncoordinated with the tribes (some marines appear to have not been informed about the requested alliance) and made use of intensive firepower, which alienated many tribesmen by destroying portions of Qaim. Furthermore, the Iraqi government was hostile to the Hamza Forces, declaring that such vigilantes had no place in Iraq.⁴⁵

After *Operation Matador* there were no further attempts by the Hamza Forces to coordinate with the coalition for several months. Without coalition support, the Hamza Forces were overwhelmed by al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia by September of 2005.⁴⁶ Fortunately, coalition forces in Anbar learned from their earlier mistake and may have begun supporting the Albu Mahal with air-strikes in late August 2005.⁴⁷ This was insufficient, however, to defeat the powerful al-Qaeda forces around Qaim and in November 2005 coalition forces launched *Operation Steel Curtain*. This operation was marked by far

better coordination with the Albu Mahal, and cooperation improved still further after the operation, when marines and Iraqi Army personnel stayed behind to support the Albu Mahal in providing security.⁴⁸

The eventual success of US–Iraqi coordination with the Albu Mahal in 2005 was not widely emulated, though some tribes did continue to fight al-Qaeda. For example, members of the Dulaimi confederation fought the group around Ramadi in August 2005.⁴⁹ However, many in the coalition remained reluctant to fully embrace a tribal strategy. More importantly, tribal leaders were targeted by al-Qaeda in a coercive campaign of murder and intimidation which sapped many tribes of the will to fight.⁵⁰ The success of the terrorists in this campaign was due in part to the nature of tribal loyalty. Al-Qaeda was able to turn clans and families from the same tribe against one another with a combination of carrots (money and other patronage) and sticks (threats of assassination).

This pattern of failed efforts to oppose al-Qaeda in Anbar continued into 2006. Elements of the Albu Fahd tribe, for example, began distancing themselves from al-Qaeda in Ramadi in late 2005 and early 2006. Al-Qaeda quickly targeted Sheikh Nasr al-Fahdawi and other prominent tribesmen for assassination, which was carried out in early 2006 (with the support of some of al-Fahdawi's pro-al-Qaeda fellow tribesmen).⁵¹ A captured al-Qaeda document from this period reveals this strategy. Noting that tribal leaders had begun to cooperate with Americans, the authors write: 'we found that the best solutions [*sic*] to stop thousands of people from renouncing their religion, is to cut the heads of the Sheiks of infidelity'.⁵² They accuse Sheikh Nasr al-Fahdawi of using his money, power and reputation in Ramadi to 'violate' the authors' 'brothers', continuing: 'so the brothers raided his house in the middle of the night wearing the national guards uniform and driving similar cars, they took him and killed him thank god'.⁵³

Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia's campaign of murder and intimidation had the desired effect, as the document notes:

Then there was a complete change of events than is was [*sic*] before thank god, cousins of Sheik Nasr came to the Mujahidin begging, announcing their repentance and innocence, saying we're with you, we'll do whatever

you want. The turmoil is over, our brothers now are roaming the streets of AlbuFahd without any checkpoints.⁵⁴

The document goes on to list others who were killed or intimidated, indicating that the terrorists' coercive violence was successful.⁵⁵

Coalition cooperation with the tribes remained limited through early 2006.⁵⁶ There were some exceptional success stories, as with the Albu Mahal and US Army Special Forces relationship with the Albu Nimr around the city of Hit. Even in these limited cases, al-Qaeda recognised the threat and sought to target these tribes. In captured documents, the group noted the need to attack the Albu Nimr and regretted not crushing the Albu Mahal when it had the chance.⁵⁷

Starting in mid to late 2006, however, the cooperation started to become more serious. In Ramadi, Sheikh Sattar al-Rishawi of the Dulaimi confederation's Albu Risha tribe formally launched a concerted campaign against al-Qaeda in September 2006. Along with other leaders such as the Albu Nimr's Fasal al-Gaoud, Sattar founded a tribal alliance known as the Anbar Salvation Council (ASC).

Sattar himself was a smuggler and highway robber, and a fairly minor sheikh. However, he was bold and charismatic and had shrewd advisers such as his brother Ahmed; when opportunities presented themselves he was well positioned to take advantage. Sattar had previously been willing to work with al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, but began to clash with the group as it muscled in on his illegal revenue. In 2005, Sattar turned to other Iraqis to help him battle his unwelcome competitors, but this alliance was ineffective and short lived. He subsequently seems to have realised that the best way to defeat al-Qaeda and gain power was to side with the United States.⁵⁸

Sattar and his new alliance were soon supported by the coalition. The US military helped to protect Sattar, and the government of Iraq embraced him, albeit reluctantly, as well. Sattar was eventually made the counter-insurgency coordinator for the province, his tribesmen joined the Iraqi Police around Ramadi in droves, and his militias were formally deputised as 'Emergency Response Units'. A blind eye was turned to Sattar's extra-legal revenue generation.⁵⁹

With the Albu Mahal and the Albu Risha, the coalition was clearly employing both state-tribalism and auxiliary-tribalism strategies to provide internal security. The Albu Mahal were allowed to effectively take over the Iraqi Army brigade in their region, while the Albu Risha came to dominate the Ramadi Police.⁶⁰ The Iraqi government delegated significant authority to both tribes, along with the Albu Nimr around Hit.

The effect of this strategy in 2007 was dramatic. By the late spring and early summer, parts of Anbar (such as Ramadi) that had previously been horrifically violent were relatively peaceful. Sattar was hailed as a hero by many Iraqis and Americans.

The success was striking enough that the coalition attempted to duplicate the model across Iraq, giving rise to the euphemism 'concerned local citizens' or 'CLCs' (presumably to make the use of tribesmen and other former insurgents sound more palatable). These fighters have been recruited to help the coalition in Baghdad and in parts of Salah ad Din and Diyala provinces.⁶¹ There are also efforts to expand the strategy to the Shia south of Iraq.⁶² By mid 2007, Saddam's tribal strategy had in effect become the coalition's.

Comparing strategies

Despite the similarities between Saddam's relatively successful strategy and the coalition's present-day efforts, there is no guarantee that the coalition will prevail. The two have very different contexts.

The first and most obvious difference is the role of the United States as a third party. This creates the possibility for tension between Baghdad and Washington regarding the means and ends of any tribal strategy. Presently, the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is supporting the strategy, albeit with reservations. His government has been unable to establish security and has little authority in Anbar, so some formal deputisation of tribes there does not represent a tangible loss of government power. However, some Shi'ites may cease to support what they regard as a generous approach to the Sunni; the political coalition that supports al-Maliki is already fraying and might not survive.

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was dramatic*

This would confront the United States with a dilemma similar to that it faced in Vietnam's highlands in the 1960s. Supporting the tribes would increase the likelihood of success against the insurgents, but would alienate the government and possibly precipitate government-tribe conflict or even the collapse of the frail Iraqi state. Supporting the government would make the survival of a unified Iraq more likely, but could drive the tribes back to the insurgency. This situation would actually be worse than Vietnam; the Sunni tribes of Anbar are not a small rural minority like the Montagnard, which makes it harder for the coalition to exert leverage over them.

These tensions highlight a second and related difference between Saddam's and the coalition's tribal strategies. Saddam's strategy was relatively simple in that it had only one goal: keeping Saddam in power. The United States has at least two goals: achieving a stable, democratic Iraq and defeating al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. If the Iraqi government ceases to support the tribal strategy, these two goals would become mutually exclusive, at least in the short run. Already, the strengthening of unelected sheikhs in Anbar means an end to democracy in that province, at least for the present.

Further, the tribes themselves are no more unified now than they were under Saddam. The potential for both inter- and intra-tribal conflict remains. Some reports suggest that friction within the ASC is already high. Even if this is overstated it illustrates the potential for conflict in the future. Other tribes are reported to feel neglected or excluded from government and security-force positions.⁶³

Intra-tribal relations can be equally challenging. As an example, in the powerful Abu Nimr, Sheikh Fasal al-Gaoud was relatively weak despite (or perhaps because of) being the former governor of Anbar. The real power in the Abu Nimr belongs to other members of his lineage, such as Sheikhs Jubair and Hatem al-Gaoud. Hatem and Jubair in turn have some rivalry despite being not only from the same lineage but the same house (Hatem is Jubair's nephew).⁶⁴

While Hatem and Jubair have a good relationship with US special-operations forces, other members of the al-Gaoud family had close links to Saddam Hussein. Sattam al-Gaoud was the director of the largest network

of Iraqi front companies involved in smuggling for the regime. The network, Al-Eman, had numerous al-Gaoud family members in key positions. Sattam and many of his relatives were also associated with the Iraqi Intelligence Service.⁶⁵ While they have taken to spending much of their time in Jordan since the fall of Saddam, these al-Gaouds retain both wealth and connections inside Iraq, including to insurgent groups.⁶⁶

This tangled family situation represents the intricacies of just one prominent family in one prominent tribe. As it expands its tribal strategy in Iraq, the United States will have to manage dozens or even hundreds of these relationships, leading one intelligence officer in Anbar to compare Iraqi tribal relations to Latin American *telenovelas* in drama and complexity.⁶⁷ Because Washington lacks the detailed knowledge of Iraqi clans possessed by Saddam, its approach is more like the British approach of the 1920s. Rather than managing the tribes, it is simply ceding Anbar to them, and potentially other territories as well. This cession undermines the past five decades of attempts to build a modern state in Iraq.

The third difference between the two strategies is the relative strength of the Iraqi state. Under Saddam, the state was battered by two decades of war and sanctions, yet it nonetheless retained significant coercive capability. This was due in no small part to Saddam's ruthless willingness to cause civilian casualties and suffering, and the state's large numbers of military and security-service personnel backed by totalitarian intelligence services. On the eve of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, for example, Saddam is estimated to have had about 400,000 military personnel supplemented by perhaps as many police and security-service members. In contrast, the current Iraqi government has an authorised military end strength of 175,000, supplemented by a Ministry of Interior which has over 320,000 personnel on its payroll. Taking these numbers at face value, Saddam had a 50% advantage in total personnel, and more than double the number of military personnel. Yet the modern Iraqi military and security services are in reality nowhere near their authorised strength; indeed the Ministry of Interior is unable to determine which if any of its 320,000 employees is actually working. Further, the Iraqi military lacks much of the heavy equipment

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that enabled Saddam to punish tribal uprisings such as the Albu Nimr's 1995 revolt.⁶⁸

Admittedly, the government of Iraq does possess one significant tool of coercion: the United States military. Yet the United States lacks the ruthlessness of Saddam, and its forces are better suited to conventional battle than internal security. Also, the United States will clearly not maintain major force levels in Iraq indefinitely, so this coercive tool is a temporary asset for the government of Iraq. Whereas Saddam was able to restrict the power of the tribes to some degree, the present government of Iraq could soon face a situation in which baronial tribalism reigns throughout Anbar.

The fourth difference is the nature of the enemy that the respective tribal strategies are intended to defeat. Saddam's strategy was primarily aimed at other Sunni tribes and the restive Shia. Neither of these enemies had either motive or opportunity to outbid Saddam for the loyalty of tribes; the combination of carrots and sticks he could wield was too compelling.

Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, on the other hand, possesses a real capacity to outbid the coalition as it attempts to build alliances. Moreover, it is still capable of murder and intimidation against tribal leaders. For example, al-Qaeda is believed to be behind the bombing of the Mansour Hotel in June 2007 that killed Fasal al-Gaoud, the Albu Nimr sheikh who had long sought to arrange coalition cooperation with the tribes. The bombing also killed two other leaders of the Albu Nimr and a sheikh of the Albu Fahd, who had once again switched sides to join the ASC.⁶⁹ Other killings of ASC members take place frequently despite US support and protection.⁷⁰ Sunnis who have joined with the coalition in Baghdad and elsewhere also face fierce reprisals.⁷¹

Most notably, Sheikh Sattar was killed on 13 September 2007 by an improvised explosive device emplaced near his farm outside Ramadi. Unlike many previous assassinations of tribal leaders, this attack did not demolish the will to fight of the Albu Risha or the ASC.⁷² Sattar's brother Ahmed quickly stepped into his place, and while lacking some of Sattar's charisma, he is a capable leader. He has begun negotiations with Shia leaders and, realising that his tribal power base is limited, has attempted to build a political base beyond his tribe.⁷³ However, the fact that Sattar was killed in essentially

his own backyard despite significant ASC and coalition protection suggests that al-Qaeda (who may have bribed one or more of Sattar's guards) retains the ability to use coercive violence against even well-guarded senior figures, let alone rank-and-file tribesmen.⁷⁴

Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia still has substantial revenue from activities in Iraq as well as donations from abroad (according to some reports it has sufficient excess revenue to fund al-Qaeda in Pakistan in addition to its own efforts).⁷⁵ Al-Qaeda thus has significant carrots and sticks with which to motivate the tribes, or portions thereof, to switch sides.

Moreover, whereas Saddam, like the members of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, was a Sunni, the current government of Iraq is principally Shia. Many Sunni believe it is little more than a tool of Iran. Shia death squads have carried out ethnic cleansing in Baghdad and have infiltrated parts of the Iraqi government. In November 2007 senior leaders in Anbar complained that the government was not providing them sufficient resources, which they attributed to the government's sectarian bias. Leaders south of Baghdad have made similar complaints.⁷⁶ This perception of bias could make the tribes more inclined to listen to al-Qaeda, which can portray itself as seeking to protect the Sunni and limit the influence of Iran. This will be particularly true if sectarian violence rises again.

Looking to the future

With these key differences in mind, two scenarios can be envisioned for the next two to three years. In the first, current trends continue unchanged. The government of Iraq continues to embrace the current tribal strategy, and there remains sufficient US combat power to support and protect the tribes in Anbar and elsewhere. Patronage from both the government of Iraq and the United States continues to flow and the tribes' extra-legal income remains lucrative, while sectarian violence does not worsen.

This scenario looks favourable for the United States, as it would mean that al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia would be substantially weakened (though probably not eliminated). The trade-off for allowing continued state and auxiliary tribalism would be the possibility of putting democratisation on hold: elections in Anbar would likely be postponed or the formal structure

of governance marginalised. Though unfortunate, this would not necessarily be permanent and would probably be accepted in the short term by many residents of Anbar as the price of security. It is possible that the ASC could jointly assume governing authority with provincial officials as part of a state-of-emergency government. And if Sheikh Ahmed succeeds in creating a non-tribal party, local democracy might even be preserved.

For the government of Iraq, this scenario means accepting a short- to medium-term continuation of Saddam's tribal strategy with all the hazards that entails. The loyalty of the tribes would have to be continually paid for and relationships both with and among the tribes would have to be managed. Anbar would enjoy at least as much autonomy as it enjoyed under Saddam, when it was governed by a system approaching baronial tribalism. Indeed, the government of Iraq would have little more control over Anbar than the government of Pakistan does over its western provinces. Further, by allowing the tribes a virtual monopoly on military and security forces in Anbar, the strategy would make future coups or civil war possible. The power of

tribes in other regions would be expanded as well. For the Shia majority of Iraq, this might be acceptable but would remain worrisome.

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As problematic as the above outcome would be, a much worse outcome is easily imagined simply by factoring in likely medium-term events, among them a withdrawal of US forces that is not precipitous but

nonetheless substantially reduces combat power in Anbar and other provinces. This would mean less ability to protect and support the ASC and other tribes. It would also make the supply of material support and patronage by the United States more difficult (though not impossible).

At the same time, the al-Maliki government as currently constituted is likely to change. It could shift towards a more hardline Shia position or be supplanted entirely. Regardless, its support for the tribes will probably decrease if not end altogether. The combination of a US drawdown and a shift in the position of the Iraqi government could exacerbate sectarian violence.

Even as coalition support to the tribes wanes, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia is likely to retain much of its ability to employ both carrots and sticks. The

tribes may therefore be made 'an offer they can't refuse'. Like Rashid Dostum in Afghanistan, they could readily conclude that switching sides was in their best interest. This would be a particularly bad outcome for the coalition as it would have helped train, equip and sustain forces that would then begin to work against it. For the United States, this would mean Anbar and other regions would become havens for al-Qaeda as it worked to destabilise the region and possibly support attacks further afield. For the government of Iraq, it would mean de facto partition, civil war, or both.

Finally, it is not clear that the present internal-security model can be expanded to the Shia south. The power of the tribes dwindled more in the face of modernisation among the Shia than it did among the Sunni. The tribe was replaced or at least modified by the power of political Islam, so that in Shia areas political-religious parties or groups tend to dominate.⁷⁷ The largest at present are Moqtada al-Sadr's Office of the Martyr Sadr and affiliated militia Jayish al-Mahdi; and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council and affiliated militia, the Badr Organisation. However, there are numerous other groups with affiliated militias including the Fadhlila Party and several smaller organisations. While tribal groups are not wholly absent, they lack the power and organisation of these religious-political groups. In Basra, for example, armed tribesmen play a role in the fighting but the major factions are party militias.⁷⁸ So even if the United States' tribal strategy succeeds in the Sunni centre and west of Iraq, the Shia south would likely remain problematic.

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Fully embracing a tribal strategy for internal security in Anbar has been successful to date and expansion of this strategy over the rest of Iraq could provide real short-term security gains in at least some areas. There is little guarantee that these gains will persist, however, and there is some chance that the strategy will backfire in the medium term. Even Saddam Hussein had difficulty managing Iraq's tribes despite his totalitarian state and lavish patronage. As the United States prepares to reduce its commitment to Iraq, it should be clear on both the tension in its strategic goals and the potential for the tribes to once again switch sides.

Beyond Iraq, there has been discussion of a US alliance with tribes in Pakistan to fight al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the border region with Afghanistan. This alliance would face a welter of problems, including the lack of US combat forces in Pakistan and the fact that the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan have had years to integrate with and even dominate the area's tribes.⁷⁹ Beyond these daunting issues, the central challenge would remain the same as in Iraq: managing a three-cornered relationship between the tribes, the state and an external power as well as inter- and intra-tribal relations.

The tribe and the modern bureaucratic state are inherently in tension. Max Weber identified this difficulty nearly a century ago: tribes derive legitimacy from what he termed 'the authority of the eternal yesterday' while the modern state derives legitimacy from the rational application of the rule of law.⁸⁰ Attempting to use the former to secure the latter is at best a stop-gap measure. At worst, it sows the seeds of future state failure.

Notes

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- 54 *Ibid.*
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