

SUNNI OUTREACH: THE SEARCH FOR AN EFFECTIVE TRIBAL STRATEGY

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Abstract

The objective of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Sunni outreach strategy is to develop relationships and understanding with Iraqis in select communities and to encourage support for coalition initiatives.

Iraq's cultural environment represents a challenge not easily overcome by western outreach models and management techniques alone. Outreach initiatives must reflect cultural, historical, and socio-economic conditions.

The tribal ethos remains the basis for all social and political discussions in Iraq and must by default be considered in any outreach program. A detailed appreciation of tribal culture will assist in favorably positioning the CPA to shape tribal choices and in building an inclusive Iraqi nation-state.

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Glossary

Shame and Honor: Cultural construct of whereby individuals seek to avoid humiliation and to acquire *Sharaf*, or honor.

Sheik: Local ruler – a title of respect given to a religious leader or elder authority; it is also used to refer to the head of state in small Gulf states.

Tribal Culture: According to Dr. Richard Law of Washington State University, culture refers to the cumulative deposits of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, and notions of time acquired by a group of people in the course of generations. The main facets of tribal culture include honor (shame and honor), hospitality, warrior hood and revenge (blood feud). Demonstrating ones courage in battle is the key to understanding what motivates young men to fight. Goal is to avoid humiliation and acquire honor.

Chapter 1

Outreach

The tribal ethos influences all social and political discussion in Iraq and must by default be considered in any future outreach strategy. Understanding Iraqi tribal culture may have yet another function, perhaps not as apparent, but no less important than what emerges from its use in diplomacy and warfare. This knowledge enhances the general appreciation of the distribution of centers of power, and their uses and abuses in a post-Saddam Iraq. Appreciating tribal concepts of power; how configurations of tribal power work, how kinships of people are influenced, and how individuals and groups become vulnerable to internal contradictions and external aggression, supports the development of objective and realistic assessments of the cultural processes at work in an area under consideration. Sole reliance on the power of impersonal infrastructures of modern life to affect change in segments of society that jealously guards itself against outside interference will fail in the long-term.

Shaping change in a place so culturally dissimilar from western social and political constructs is best imagined applying the trim-tap metaphor. A large ocean-going ship is incapable of turning on short notice. It depends on the rudder to steer the ship. The rudder, on the other hand, is incapable of turning without the trim-tap. It is the trim-tap that influences the movement of the rudder that steers the ship. The trim-tap pierces the body of the water running parallel to the rudder and opens a gap redirecting the water flow to press against the rudder. This action, in turn, pushes the rudder in the desired direction. Given the appropriate amount of lag time, the ship turns and

assumes its new heading and course. We should not expect to change the direction of existing tribal social and political constructs on short notice, especially in the more rural areas of Iraq. Strategies to influence the development of Iraqi political culture must realize that coalition efforts are like the influence of a trim-tap on a rudder. The appropriate small action to pierce the wall of tribal culture will create the conditions for penetration, exploitation and expansion, which in time will redirect society on a new course and heading.

The post-Saddam Iraqi state and its institutions are being shaped, constructed, and primarily directed under coalition tutelage. Hence, the coalition vision of an Iraqi polity, and its relationship vis-à-vis the state, is crucial in the future evolution of state-society relations. Coalition conceptions of tribes, especially now at this critical juncture of state-society relations (security, reconstruction, economic development), play a critical role, whether acknowledged or not, in the development of the Iraqi polity and its relations with the state.

Tribal culture is extremely resilient and adaptive to changes in the social, economic, and political environment. Neither modern socio-political ideologies nor the state has succeeded in replacing or eliminating the kinship group or tribal ethos as an organizing principle and its influence in determining behavior. Iraqi tribal culture has mutated and evolved. With the demise of nomadism, the tribal ethos adapted itself to a sedentary agricultural society linked to a market economy and migrated to the urban centers. Although settled in urban areas, individuals retain their tribal names,

kinship networks and value systems, common residency patterns in city and provincial towns, and most importantly solidarity commitments.¹

Strategies

There are three major tribal strategies available to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) at this time. The first is to eliminate the focus on kinship ties and tribal allegiance and to minimize the sheik's control over the tribe. Sheiks are marginalized and individuals are encouraged and empowered to actively participate in the social, economic, political, security, and cultural spaces. Communal allegiances are redirected to the nation and the state. The second is to encourage kinship and tribal allegiances whereby Sheiks and tribes are encouraged to actively participate in the social, economic, political, security, and cultural spaces. The final option is to exploit the tribal network by engaging and empowering tribal leaders selectively in security and cultural areas for instance, while concurrently engaging, empowering, and expanding detribalized segments of society in the rest.

The first strategy – eliminating tribal allegiances - is very difficult to achieve in the short term. Pervasive family and quasi-family relationships make Iraq a vast kinship network in which the only kind of social relations known are those imposed by custom, moral code, and religious laws. These social relations are expressed as recipient-to-benefactor, client-to-patron, and servant-to-master relationships. This factor makes emancipation of individuals and social groups radically impossible in the short-term.

¹ Jabar, Faleh, A “*Sheiks and Ideologues: Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Tribes under Patrimonial Totalitarianism in Iraq, 1968 – 1998*”, page 78

The second strategy – encouraging kinship and tribal allegiances- is undesirable in the long-term. Tribal groupings adhering to customary laws and codes represent a potentially uncontrollable parallel governing structure inherently at odds with the goals and desires of the future new Iraqi government. Inter-tribal tensions are inevitable due to fierce competition among smaller and less powerful tribal groupings. Since clans and tribes are not equal in terms of status, power, size, patronage, and wealth, competition may be expressed in vendetta and tribal banditry (as evident among select tribes of the Dulaym Confederation in the vicinity of Al Qaim and along the Baghdad – Ar Ruthbah – Amman route). Additionally, tension between tribalized and detribalized, or non-tribal segments of society already exist and should not be underestimated. One reason for this tension is due to the penetration of customary tribal law into the provincial and urban spaces. Tribal groupings are imposing their customary laws and codes within urban areas, reestablishing quasi-feudal domains. The old legal duality, which had been to a large extent separated spatially along urban and rural lines, now cuts, in varying degrees, throughout urban social life unsettling urban spaces of mixed tribal/non-tribal neighborhoods.²

Exploiting the tribal network in the short-term to influence long-term change is the preferred option but by far the most difficult. Success depends upon a detailed understanding of the tribal ethos, culture, and concepts and distributions of tribal power. Expertise in tribal diplomacy, negotiating skills, a talent for subtle maneuvering and an appreciation for conspiratorial thinking are the prerequisite for success. On the other hand, the potential payoff for engaging in tribal diplomacy while exploiting the tribal network

² Ibid., page 97

as a medium for social change is well worth the attempt. Engaging select tribes to establish a safe and secure environment provides the CPA an opportunity to penetrate an area (reconstruction and economic development programs), exploit initial success, and expand into the economic, political, and security spaces. While expanding in the various social spaces, programs to redirect communal allegiances to the nation and the state are introduced and sustained. The CPA's initiative to provide for a "Systematic Review of Interim Local Advisory Bodies" characterizes an initial penetration strategy into the political space of an area. Targeting non-tribal entities for support, empowering and expanding their influence, sustains the effort for long-term change.

Chapter 2

Outreach Initiatives

The CPA's outreach strategy within Al Anbar Governorate seeks to address the "disenfranchisement" of the Sunni community. Its goals are to "promote and empower indigenous, legitimate political activity" and to "encourage dialogue and cooperation with coalition on both the political and security fronts".³ Implied in the concept of the Sunni community, whether as official CPA policy or not, is a willingness to recognize and empower tribal groups. For this strategy to succeed, detailed knowledge of tribal adversaries and supporters is required to effectively employ Coalition capabilities and resources.

The coalition in the Al Anbar Governorate is operating within a cultural environment best explained applying the trim-tap metaphor. The tribal culture within this area can be appropriately described as a large ocean-going ship incapable of turning on short notice. Its heading and course are set. The last course correction was initiated by the Saddam regime in 1996. It was in this year that the Ba'ath Party initiated measures to reorganize state-tribe relations by redefining duties and rights of tribes' vis-à-vis the state. The High Council of Tribal Chiefs (HCTC) was established with direct access to the President. Sheiks by mandate swore absolute allegiance to the President, who remanded them to ensure security and stability in designated districts. The state delegated judicial powers to the sheiks to settle tribal disputes and financial powers to exact taxes and penalties on behalf of the government. In return, sheiks received light arms and ammunition,

³ Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), "*Sunni Strategy (Draft)*", October 2003

communication equipment, vehicles, and logistic support. Land, if previously confiscated, was redistributed. Loyal sheiks received diplomatic passports and were exempted from military service. Three tribe-state liaison channels were established. These consisted of the Presidential Office for the more powerful and influential tribes, and tribal offices in the Ministry of Interior, and the National Security Bureau.⁴ It is noteworthy that the mental momentum of these measures to reorganize state-tribe relations during the Saddam era continues to this day. It is not surprising that many tribal sheiks continue to arrive at the Presidential Palace for an audience with Ambassador Bremer. He is considered the most powerful sheik, and in line with the 1996 reorganization, the Presidential Palace represents one tribe-state liaison channel. Prior to receiving an audience with the Ambassador, tribal sheiks are debriefed in the C2 Strategic Intelligence Debriefing Office. The sheiks understand that the coalition interviewers are serving intelligence officers. The C2 Strategic Intelligence Debriefing Office is comparable to the National Security Bureau, and hence, as far as the tribal sheiks are concerned, denotes the second state-tribe liaison channel. The Iraqi members of the Ministry of Interior have already announced plans to establish a tribal office soon. This corresponds to the third state-tribe liaison channel. Understandably, as far as the representatives of the tribes are concerned, nothing has changed in state-tribal relations. Actions are valued higher than words in tribal culture. The continuation of Saddam-era tribal institutions, albeit unintentionally, only reinforces the tribal worldview, which like the ocean-going ship, continues on the same heading and course.

⁴ Jabar, Faleh, A “*Sheiks and Ideologues: Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Tribes under Patrimonial Totalitarianism in Iraq, 1968 – 1998*”, pages 95-96

Initial outreach activities must be tailored to pierce the walls of tribal mentality like the trim-tap pierces the wall of water to redirect its flow. This is done through ritual. Ritual, in tribal culture, comes before substance and therefore serves a similar function as the trim-tap. Western-based community outreach models alone designed to “encourage dialogue and cooperation with Coalition on both the political and security fronts” will not pierce the tribal wall. Western-based conflict resolution models applied in non-western contexts seldom recognize the importance of indigenous ways of thinking and feeling, nor local rituals for managing, reducing, and resolving conflicts. Acknowledging indigenous patterns of perception and practice will help identify preexisting rituals for dealing with conflict as well as culturally appropriate prescriptions for peacemaking.⁵

The population of Al Anbar Governorate, rather than a cohesive assembly of citizens bound together by an agreed-upon set of rights and obligations, consists instead of competing communities requiring absolute allegiance and obedience from its members. Every one of these communities feels that the others have victimized it in one way or another. Coalition military activities as well as civilian programs perceived to favor one community over the other has added an additional ingredient into this volatile mix. Any process of acknowledgement and reconciliation will have to begin at the communal rather than the individual level, with the active participation of important group leaders.⁶

⁵ Irani, George, E and Funk, Nathan, C “*Rituals of Reconciliation: Arab-Islamic Perspectives*”, Kroc Institute Occasional Paper #9:OP-2, August 2003, page 2

⁶ Ibid., page 12

The western view of conflict as solvable has led many proponents of conflict resolution to identify random, as well as organized violence as symptoms of a need for social and structural change. Tribal culture takes the less optimistic or, if you like, a more pragmatic view. It accepts that conflict, regardless of its nature, may well be intractable. It can evolve through phases of escalation and confrontation as well as phases of calm and return to a status quo ante. Far from implying mere submissiveness in the face of conflict, such views are often associated with efforts to deal with incipient conflict quietly and indirectly, to mobilize social forces to control and reduce violence, and even to strive for comprehensive reconciliation when circumstances appear promising.⁷

Rituals are used in private or unofficial processes of conflict control, reduction, and resolution. These unofficial, informal processes are not controlled by the state. Instead, customary, traditional steps are taken to restore justice and social harmony. Sometime, both official and unofficial justice is invoked at the same time to nurture social peace and reconciliation. The CPA must therefore be prepared to perform two crucial rituals for its outreach program to work; a “Restitution and Reconciliation Ritual” with the groups of tribes that lost family members in the 23 April 2003 shooting incident in Falluja and the negotiation of a “formal truce” with competing communities to reestablish the status quo ante. The rationale for performing the restitution and reconciliation ritual for the incident in Falluja is based on the assumption that no formal “closure” in the form of ritual has occurred. Restitution payments to individual families must include reconciliation. The fact that reconciliation did not take place may be a contributing factor in the

⁷ Ibid., page 4

ongoing violence, expressed in the form of vendetta killings, in the Al Anbar region. Reports from the area indicate that the indigenous population is also concerned that the “death of innocent bystanders” may create new antipathies. Reconciliation and a formal truce may contribute to a reduction of tensions. The effects of these cultural initiatives, like the influence of a trim-tap on a wall of water, are the first step in shaping the conditions for exploitation and expansion of CPA initiatives into other social spaces. In time, the effects of these initiatives will redirect society on a new course and heading.

As mentioned above, exploiting the tribal network in the short-term to influence long-term change is the preferred, but by far the most difficult option. Success depends upon a detailed understanding of the tribal ethos, culture, and concepts and distributions of tribal power. Lacking this information, we will almost invariably be drawn into the power politics of tribal society with its perpetual conflicts and rivalries. We should not engage in a game without a clear appreciation of the rules and rituals that regulate play. In order to avoid the tribal trap an intimate understanding of the indigenous population within an operational area is essential.⁸

Tribal Information Office

The value added of establishing an office to research, analyze and assess the political aspects of tribal strategy is clear. The office would comprise specially recruited military and civilian personnel with the desire to

⁸ McCallister, William, S “*Integrated Security System: Requirement for a Well Reasoned Tribal Policy*”, September 29, 2003, pages 23-24

understand and exploit internal tribal dynamics shaping tribal strategy.⁹ A tribal information office already exists in the CPA, if not in name, then in function. The C2 Strategic Intelligence Debriefing Office, by default, interviews tribal chiefs seeking access to Ambassador Bremer's office. Word has spread quickly resulting in an increase in visits to this office by tribal chiefs seeking access, redress and support.

Deploying a Senior CPA representative to the region responsible for oversight of the outreach program is currently being contemplated. The responsibilities of the representative would be to "coordinate and guide regional and governorate efforts" in the Al Anbar Governorate.¹⁰ It is suggested that the senior representative, in addition to coordinating coalition initiatives, become a subject matter expert in tribal diplomacy and negotiations, as well as display a talent for subtle maneuvering and an appreciation for conspiratorial thinking.

⁹ Ibid., page 20

¹⁰ Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), "*Sunni Strategy (Draft)*", October 2003

Chapter 3

Security

An article published on 18 June 2003 reported that the coalition had transitioned from “liberation to counterinsurgency in less than 80 days”.¹¹

An insurgency may be defined as an “organized rebellion aimed at overthrowing a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict”. While the coalition is not opposed by an “organized rebellion”, it certainly is opposed by an array of organizations, comprised of either small, loosely affiliated groups, or independent of one another, bent on killing coalition soldiers for a variety of political, ideological, religious, and personal reasons. The greatest challenge faced by coalition forces is how to conduct military operations in civilian areas with limited language skills and or cultural understanding. The unintended consequence of alienating the population when innocents are inadvertently injured or killed, or humiliated when their sense of honor has been violated, adds to the operational challenges faced by the coalition. The danger of being manipulated by informants more interested in pursuing private or tribal interests against their rivals must always be considered when planning specific military actions. Depressed economic conditions add to the problem with unemployed Iraqis joining the fight against the coalition in order to earn a living wage.¹²

One security option is the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC). The Iraqi Civil Defense Corps is a Combined Joint Task Force –7 (CJTF-7) initiative to

¹¹ Lobe, Jim, “*Iraq: From Liberation to Counter-Insurgency in Less Than 80 days*”, June 18, 2003, <http://www.commondreams.org/views03/0618-08.htm>

¹² Sir Greenstock, Jeremy and Richard, David, “*Meeting with Sheiks of the Dulaim*” (Trip Report), October 12, 2003

support the Coalition Provisional Authority's core function of establishing a safe and secure environment in Iraq.¹³ Members are recruited locally and will operate predominantly in their home areas. Civil Defense Corps units are projected to relieve coalition forces of point security missions thereby freeing them for offensive counter-insurgency operations. Once trained, these units are expected to be a significant force multiplier, increasing the effectiveness of coalition forces. Upon completion of individual training, Civil Defense Corps units will initially augment coalition forces with language and cultural knowledge, timely human intelligence and contractor support including driver and security assistance duties.

The Civil Defense Corps template should be reevaluated in tribal terms. Personnel are locally recruited and deployed in their home areas. This makes them a tribal constabulary by default. This organization may well provide an ideal mechanism for confidence-building measures to be enacted in select areas. Many of the tribal sheiks that have been debriefed in the C2 Strategic Intelligence Debriefing Office have expressed the desire to secure areas within their control. It is noteworthy that the repeated requests for weapons, communications equipment, and vehicles represent continuity with the past. The change in regime has not, as far as the sheiks are concerned, changed state-tribe relations. A number of sheiks are prepared to swear allegiance to the new President who, as is expected, will remand them to ensure security and stability in designated areas. In return, loyal tribes expect to be provided with light arms and ammunition, communications equipment, vehicles and logistic support. It is this tribal mind-set that provides an opportunity for the

¹³ Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 28, "*Establishment of the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps*", September 3, 2003.

coalition Provisional Authority to exploit the Iraqi Civil Defense concept and expand the initial penetration of tribal culture.

The Iraqi Civil Defense template will have to be tailored to accommodate the cultural environment in Al Anbar. The leadership in the Sunni triangle will find it difficult to justify to its constituents the placing of its young men under the control of Coalition officers. The template should therefore be adapted for providing Special Forces Liaison Coordination Elements (LCE) to live and serve along-side select Civil Defense forces. LCE teams would provide the critical link, not only in communication and direction but also, and more importantly, in cultural terms between the tribes and coalition forces. This arrangement would provide for the tribal leadership to maintain its honor, and for the coalition to retain indirect military control. Control is exercised in the distribution of resources (funds, contracts, investments) in the area. The relationship must be managed on a quid-pro-quo basis. While conventional forces are very capable of defeating direct threats, they lack the temperament to navigate the subtleties of tribal politics. Special Forces soldiers are sensitized to the subtle maneuverings and conspiratorial thinking inherent in tribal diplomacy. As this relationship develops, as trust and confidence on both sides increase, the coalition footprint could gradually be reduced. Reduction of the coalition footprint would be based on the cooperation of the tribal leadership and success of the Civil Defense units to maintain a safe and secure environment. Concurrently, as a safe and secure environment emerges, CPA outreach programs expand into other social, economic, political, and cultural spaces.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Planning, momentum, strategy, and deception are critical for an effective outreach program to take shape. What is crucial is that all planning and strategic conclusions must be based on an understanding and appreciation of tribal culture. This understanding must include concepts and configurations of tribal power, kinship ties and how cultural processes influence an area under consideration. The Saddam regime exploited tribes to ensure his hold on power. A detailed appreciation of the tribal ethos, on the other hand, will assist in favorably positioning the CPA to pierce the wall of tribal culture and to shape tribal choices to create a nation.

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