

Systems thinking in irregular conflicts: Al-Qaeda & the Islamic State tribal management

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Introduction

Iraq is engulfed in a series of overlapping conflicts, each with their own internal divisions, suspicions and allegiances. The 2003 Iraq War unleashed deep-seated sectarian differences that drew in regional powers, each vying and supporting their respective power groups. The United States was just one actor surrounded by multiple conflicts. A series of miscalculations had the United States at a disadvantage for the majority of the Iraq conflict; no more so than the dissolution of the Iraqi state institutions and military as frequently commented by other writers. Combined with a high degree of suspicion of the newly formed Baghdad government, the social conditions were set for a brutal insurgency, further confounded by foreign interference. Al-Qaeda seized upon this local discontent to co-opt the local population and incited a vicious Shia-Sunni division through a series of car bombings and assassinations. Al-Qaeda, however, started to make critical strategic errors, most notably in its management of the tribal system. Herein lay the opportunity for the United States to utilise growing internal dissent against al-Qaeda's presence and subsequently initiated a concerted outreach to Iraq's tribal structure. This paper will examine al-Qaeda's tribal management during the Iraq War, most notably after the US-led surge in 2007; and the strategic mistakes that were committed and how the United States shaped the 'conflict ecosystem' to gradually secure tribal support.

Secondly, this paper will assess the Islamic State and its tribal management and determine potential strategic options to extract tribal support to degrade Islamic State local support.

Al-Qaeda's Tribal Management

Al-Qaeda was able to exploit and leverage local discontent among the Sunni population to incite a vicious insurgency. Al-Qaeda fed off the discontent regarding a supposedly anti-Sunni government in Baghdad and the loss of prestige following the disbandment of the Iraqi military and political institutions. Coupled with growing Iranian influence and long seated suspicion of Shia motives, al-Qaeda had the perfect back-drop and information operations material to exploit local resentment and undermine US efforts in al-Anbar in particular. At one stage, al-Anbar province was for all intents and purposes considered 'lost' to the US-led Coalition and Baghdad, with multiple efforts to infiltrate the disaffected Sunni social network having failed. Abu Jafar al-Ansari, one of al-Zarqawi's senior lieutenants, stated: "*How can we imagine that the tribal chiefs would expel their sons or those who support them?*" so much so was their confidence in their dominance over the tribes.¹ Clearly al-Qaeda had failed to calculate their actions and the tribal long-term strategy for survival.² Al-Qaeda started to make dramatic strategic mistakes just as the United States started to gain a clearer appreciation of the situation.

The high proportion of foreigners among al-Qaeda's leadership, combined with excessive violence and poor management of clerics, hastened its demise among the

¹ Norman Cigar, 'Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle', No. 2, (September 2011), *Middle East Occasional Papers*, Marine Corps University Press.

² Norman Cigar, 'Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle', No. 2, (September 2011), *Middle East Occasional Papers*, Marine Corps University Press.

tribal elements traditionally suspicious of outsider influences.³ The violation of such tribal concepts was considered as humiliating and served to distance al-Qaeda from tribal support. Co-option of important financial routes and forced marriage of daughters were added insult to injury. Rather than continue to maintain a strategy of political support and co-ordination, al-Qaeda started to demand tribal conformance; it was a strategy of 'with us or against us'. In reality, the Iraqi tribal structures never worked on strict principles but shifted their power depending on the greatest return on investment for their survival. The tribes employed a situational ally construct whereby they adjusted their support based on the highest probability of their survival and power vis-à-vis other actors. The relationship with al-Qaeda was one of convenience in the conflict with Baghdad and never one of full-scale support. However, as al-Qaeda started to gain additional control and commit indiscriminate acts of violence, the social landscape slowly started to revolt. Rather than work in partnership and subsequently create a strong and near impregnable social foundation, al-Qaeda started to dominate tribal agreements.⁴

Al-Qaeda in effect started to turn on its host to gain additional control, resources and political leverage, alienating the very social foundation that provided support. The Sunni tribes, having to contend with their power being eroded from their situational ally, finally turned against al-Qaeda. After a number of failed starts due to the systematic removal of tribal power brokers and limited central government support, the Sunni Awakening finally gained solid foundation and support from the US military. Al-Qaeda, desperate to regain control of the ecosystem, identified key tribal

³ Dr Norman Cigar, *Tribal Militias: An Effective Tool to Counter Al-Qaida and its Affiliates?* (US Army War College: Carlisle, November 2014).

⁴ Harmony Project, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, (Combating Terrorism Centre: West Point, 2009).

leaders for removal to regain their influence. The scene was subsequently set for a new power broker, in this instance the US military, to shape the political landscape to their advantage.

Counter-Strategy

The United States also adjusted its position within the tribal structure and opened opportunities for engagement. In a classic example of power politics at the local level, the improved US-tribal relationships and resulting employment opportunities provided sheikhs greater influence over their subordinates, as well as the political leverage to position themselves as the defenders against al-Qaeda.⁵ The improved relationships between US forces and Sunni tribes wasn't so much based on any concept of hearts and minds, but traditional power politics and the tribal desire for survival and power distribution.

The presence of US forces in the west of Iraq and its security umbrella against al-Qaeda elements allowed the tribes to contend with their own internal issues. While there were certainly direct clashes with al-Qaeda elements, the US security buffer allowed the tribes to purge themselves of al-Qaeda infiltration. The fight against al-Qaeda followed tribal rules and convention with the removal of tribal protection for any member having been associated with the terrorist organisation. As such, any members disowned from the tribe could be eliminated with impunity according to tribal tradition. Disavowed and with no tribal system to protect them, any identified

⁵ Recommend Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq*, (Random House: New York, 2008). This is an excellent account of the shifting relationship between the US military and Sunni tribes. As the United States effectively become the governing body in Ramadi and Fallujah the tribes identified the US military as the key power broker to assist them in reclaiming their political prestige.

al-Qaeda tribesmen were in effect fair game. Al-Qaeda were misguided and assumed that due to adoption of the tribal members into their terrorist organisation that it implied tribal support, whereas it was merely a tactic to survive for a future opportunity to reassert their power. While al-Qaeda's application of indiscriminate violence may have partially contributed to the rejection of the Sunni tribe – al-Qaeda alliance, the main driver was the growing concern that al-Qaeda was co-opting or gaining greater influence and power over their Sunni allies.⁶

The Islamic State Tribal Management



Figure 1. Islamic State fighters posing

The war against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq may have its origins in the Iraq conflict, but the strategic landscape is significantly different. There are additional layers of influence and political management, including tribal engagement, inter and intra sectarian divisions, and the broader strategic rivalry that will need to be taken into consideration if any external power is to intervene against the Islamic State.⁷

This section will assess how the Islamic State has managed the tribal landscape and conclude

⁶ John A. McCary, 'The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives', *Parameters*, Vol. 32, No. 1, (2009), pp. 43-59.

⁷ For a deeper understanding of broader sectarian issues and the role of Iran: Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'A-Sunni Divide*, (Washington DC: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, April 2013).

with potential strategies to extract tribal support.⁸

The Islamic State is not a homogenous entity but a loose confederation of irregular groups, including tribal elements, who have sought to leverage upon the territorial success of IS. The success and failure of the Islamic State is based upon its ability to secure the support of various tribes and/or other irregular groups branded under the Islamic State construct.

The Islamic State is positioning itself as the protector of Sunni Muslims. Information operation campaigns have been structured to capitalise upon the perceived injustice towards Sunni tribes and sectarian policies from Baghdad. The Islamic State grows upon the extreme polarisation of Sunni and Shia Muslim camps. Al-Baghdadi, leader of the IS ‘Caliphate’ instructed IS members *“to attend to the Muslims and the tribes of Ahlus-Sunnah (the Sunnis) with goodness. Stay awake guarding them so they can be safe and at rest. Know that today you are the defenders of the religion and the guards of the land of Islam”*.⁹ The Islamic State controls vast stretches of territory across Iraq and Syria. Such an area of control would be impossible without the tacit support of select Sunni tribes who may feel marginalised from Baghdad, or failed to respond to the power emergence of IS. The Islamic State has also started to offer basic government services to consolidate local support and further polarise the population from Baghdad. Herein lays its greatest strength and weakness.

⁸ For a deeper understanding of broader sectarian issues and the role of Iran: Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi’A-Sunni Divide*, (Washington DC: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, April 2013).

⁹ Haroro J Ingram, ‘Three Traits of the Islamic State’s Information Warfare’, *RUSI*, (23 DEC 2014), pp. 4-11.

While such diversification may well allow for greater access to resources, the various supporting groups can be slowly coerced to abandon support. Islamic State has expanded to approximately 30,000.¹⁰ This may be achieved via a variety of mechanisms, including payment of forces via oil revenues, assimilation of smaller groups, and also an influx of recruits in light of the Islamic State's military successes in Iraq and Syria. Supporting this is a sophisticated social media and political propaganda regime that exploits the growing sectarian rift and marketing of military successes.

The Islamic State has established a command relationship of convenience across various tribes and smaller terrorist organisation. This relationship is not so much based on a singular ideology, but the conformance of tribal support for immediate survival or long-term strategic gain. Sunni Arab tribal support for the Islamic State may not be motivated by religious elements or the desire to create a new state, but the fundamental desire to survive in light of Baghdad-based sectarian policies and military dominance by other tribal and Sunni insurgent groups who have joined the IS cause. It is this clash of motivations which has already manifested in direct clashes between some Sunni tribal elements and the Islamic State. Captured documents portray the difficulty the Islamic State is encountering with managing the Sunni tribal system. For example one document states:

Most of the brothers have severe difficulty reciting the Qur'an and understanding its meaning... often deferring to the head of the tribe in matters of war and peace. They seem to have joined the ranks of jihadists

¹⁰ W. Andrew Terrill, 'Confronting the Islamic State: Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS', in *Parameters*, Vol. 44, No. 3, (Autumn 2014), pp. 13-24.

so that they can secure their daily bread...without having their sincere intention to take up arms and fight against the infidels and apostates.¹¹

Support should not be mistaken for obedience and already the Islamic State is starting to commit similar strategic errors to that of al-Qaeda. There have been reports of executions against tribal elements. While unconfirmed, on 23rd January 2015 it is reported 56 people from the Albu Mityut tribe, located towards the north-west, were executed. IS executions in Ninewa may also indicate its control is starting to slip and has subsequently resorted to intimidation to maintain control. In June 2014, ISIS destroyed the home of Anwar al-Asi, leader of the Ubayd tribe near Kirkuk, after he refused to swear allegiance to the IS caliph. Over 700 Sheitat men were killed after tribal members killed Islamic State fighters. The examples of tribal attacks against the Islamic State are numerous.

The political foundation is emerging to revolt against the Islamic State. However, the environment that proved so fertile for the original Sunni Awakening may not be currently present. The Sunni tribes as per their usual modus operandi are orchestrating a fine balancing act between survival and exploiting the Islamic State in their protestations against Baghdad's current policies. Add to this the heavy Iranian presence and powerful Shia militia squads, and the Sunni tribes are in a strategic dilemma. Either detach entirely from the Islamic State and assist in its downfall and potentially fall victim to Shia militia activities, or develop a strong relationship with IS and have their tribal power effectively co-opted. While the removal of political

¹¹ Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton, Bryan Price, *The group that calls itself a state: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State*, (Combating Terrorism Centre: West Point, December 2014), pp. 20.

support of the Sunni tribes may eventually fracture the Islamic State, the ability to establish a credible and robust ‘Sunni Awakening’ to defeat IS will be exceptionally more complicated to develop as other power brokers, most notably Shia militia squads, also need to be defended against.

The barbarity of the Islamic State may be both its greatest advantage and also disadvantage. The slaughter of civilians will go some way to coercing sectarian groups to adhere to Islamic State principles, however, as al-Zarqawi found, the indiscriminate killing of civilians will eventually harden the population against them if they are given the security breathing space to push back. The purely Sunni-Arab composition of the Islamic State also makes them highly unattractive to other groups across Iraq and Syria. Regardless of the eventual defeat of the Islamic State, the probability of Baghdad ever truly removing the sectarian-based divisions is highly unlikely. As such, while Sunni tribes may certainly not want to ‘do a deal with the devil’, the more grotesque the actions of the Islamic State, the more reluctant Baghdad will be to any sort of accommodation to Sunni tribes who may be implicated in such crimes. Breaking the political stranglehold of IS over the Sunni tribes will be a pure calculation of power politics that must also take into account Baghdad and Shia political developments.

Potential Counter Strategies

As stated, the tribal political situation is markedly different to that which assisted the Sunni Awakening and the revolt against al-Qaeda between 2007-2008. The Islamic State has exploited local discontent and, combined with a sophisticated information

operations campaign, has positioned itself as the defender of the Sunni tribes and intentionally polarised Iraqi politics.

While the Islamic State has been skilful in managing the Sunni tribal groups, there is growing evidence of tribal opposition who refuse to adhere to their principles. Much like during the Sunni Awakening, it may be possible to divide the Islamic State from the tribes through establishment of a national guard program being proposed by the United States and Baghdad. However, IS has gained valuable lessons from al-Qaeda's defeat at the hands of the tribes and infiltrating sub-tribal politics to potentially turn the tribes on themselves if a local revolt ever gained momentum. Economic incentives are also provided to young tribesmen, disenfranchised from Baghdad, to join the IS rank-and-file and subsequently internally weakening the tribal system. With the rise of Shia militia and reported atrocities being committed in liberated areas, there is little incentive for IS-affiliated tribesmen to switch sides to Baghdad unless significant efforts are introduced to control Shia militia reprisals and concrete military gains are secured. The tribes are effectively in a political dilemma.

Al-Baghdadi has been warned about the brutality and harsh treatment of Sunnis by al-Qaeda chief al-Zawahiri. The violence is being used for intimidation and coercion. Its application however, is haphazard and losing the political intelligence. There are already multiple local reprisals against ISIS forces, including tribes strongly aligning to the former Iraqi Army. The tribes are skilled political survivalists and will adhere

to Islamic State rule until a new power broker emerges on the political scene who can be leveraged in their political campaign vis-à-vis with Baghdad.¹²

Conclusion

The Islamic State is an allergic reaction to the shock effect caused by the 2003 invasion and sectarian-based policies henceforth under then Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki. Even if physically defeated, the Islamic State is merely the latest terrorist group the international community will need to confront; more will follow after its demise unless the causes of the disease are addressed. The layers of sectarian division make developing any form of regional counter narrative and strategy highly problematic, and the Islamic State is intentionally striking at the sectarian divisions to fuel this confusion and subsequently assist in its survival.

IS is not a rigid and fixed entity, but a loose confederation of irregular groups and tribal elements each exploiting recent military successes to consolidate respective power bases. These situational alliances are not resolute but can fracture if the right amount of pressure is applied at the correct fissure across various nodes, time and intensity. The Islamic State has learnt a valuable lesson during the Sunni Awakening and sought to infiltrate tribal politics at various levels. In the event of an internal revolt, the tribes can be turned in upon themselves. However, this is again not a new development to tribal politics and can be defeated if sufficient security is provided throughout key points of the system. The significant complication, however is the powerful Shia militia and overt Iranian presence which makes gaining Sunni tribes or

¹² Dr Norman Cigar, *Tribal Militias: An Effective Tool to Counter Al-Qaida and its Affiliates?*, (Carlisle: US Army War College, November 2014).

other irregular groups extremely difficult. The tribes must either contend with the Islamic State or Baghdad, neither power centre they particularly trust.

The tribes are far from an inert actor in the Islamic State and previous al-Qaeda attempts to control them. The tribes understand the fundamentals of power dynamics, competing interests and long-term survival, especially as suspicion over Baghdad government policies and Iranian interference continue to manifest. Rather than being perceived as an agent that needs to be managed, the tribes need to be viewed as a powerful political actor that will adjust its political position based on the highest probability of survival and self-interest.^{13, 14}

The Iraqi tribal system is as complicated for any intervening power as it is for al-Qaeda or the Islamic State to manage. Much like the Islamic State is not a monolithic entity; nor are all Sunni tribes or Shia militia units internally cohesive. Such loose situational alliances mean any intervening force will have to be highly politically astute. However, it also presents numerous opportunities to gradually peel back the layers of local support that underpin IS control.

How the Islamic State manages its tribal engagement can result in the difference between success and failure. There are indications the Islamic State is starting to commit significant strategic errors akin to that of al-Qaeda. While executions may

¹³ Norman Cigar, 'Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle', No. 2, (September 2011), *Middle East Occasional Papers*, Marine Corps University Press.

¹⁴ For information of Iraq tribal structure refer to: Patricio Asfura-Heim, "No Security Without Us": Tribes and Tribalism in Al Anbar Province, Iraq", (Centre for Stability and Development: Washington DC, June 2014).

succeed in intimidating locals, the Sunni tribal – IS ‘alliance’ is purely situational and there are indications of armed revolts against elements of the Islamic State. Reports continue to emerge of massacres at the hands of resolute IS elements and the burning alive of Sunni civilians implicated in supporting government security forces. Whether these acts are being committed by Iraqi-IS elements or foreigners cannot be ascertained; regardless, such depravity will turn local population against the Islamic State if a neutral powerful armed force can provide the political breathing space for the local elements to identify and eliminate the extremist forces. A new and more powerful tribe needs to emerge under which the Sunni tribes can lend their political support. However, at present there does not appear to be an influential new power broker that can provide this leverage.

This analysis leads us to the conclusion that the military intimidation and subsequent information operations aura IS has created for itself, needs to be broken. To be perceived as the new power broker will require a very significant and deadly clash to break the political hold IS has over the local population and tribal elements. The situational allies will subsequently peel away from IS, leaving the more resolute and non-negotiable elements to be eliminated. There will be a short-term spike in civilian casualties. The type and nature of crimes will only become more grotesque as the Islamic State will desperately try to enforce local consent via brutal intimidation. Any anti-IS coalition needs to include a strong military roll-back and concerted out-reach to Iraq’s Sunni tribes with strict control over Shia militia to add credibility to political concessions. While the Islamic State needs to be militarily broken, so too must the Shia militias be controlled to make any political accommodation realistic in the eyes of the Sunni populace.

Epilogue

Since the March 2015 briefing for pre-deployment training to al-Taji, a number of these points continue to stand true. While Baghdad has indeed been successful in securing tribal support for counter-IS operations, these are fleeting situational alliances. The growing political clout and prestige of the Shia militia will continue to complicate Prime Minister al-Abadi's ability to fundamentally secure Sunni tribal support. Further to this, the re-emergence of al-Sadr and growing Shia political unrest to the South has added another power dimension the Prime Minister needs to take into account. Al-Sadr has leveraged the unrest to demand a re-shuffle of Cabinet. Meanwhile the former Prime Minister al-Maliki continues to undermine reform efforts – all of which is being closely monitored by the tribes. As forewarned in early 2015, while attention may be focused on the Islamic State, the political battles in Baghdad will be just as crucial as the kinetic action.

Added to this is the Iranian cocktail of intervention, including Quds Force members, intelligence specialists and other political support. Tehran has been actively engaged, in particular in Southern Iraq, to secure the clerical political landscape following the eventual death of al-Sistani. Tehran is abundantly aware of the opportunity now available in Iraq. Shia Iraq must also not be viewed as a singular entity. Shia Iraq's religious centre is al-Najaf - not Iran. However, power politics being what it is, the Iranian intervention is particularly useful for the Shia militias in their own political campaign within Baghdad. As David Kilcullen inferred in his latest publication *Blood Year*, everything is connected within a system upon systems with no event going

unnoticed or having some impact upon other elements.¹⁵ Couple the Iranian influence with other developments such as the Iranian nuclear deal, the Sunni-based tribes and other nationalist insurgent groups perceive, rightly or wrongly, a growing openness to Shia Iran by the United States, which further heightens anxiety on Baghdad's political leaning towards Tehran. Prime Minister al-Abadi is in a dilemma. While a political coup cannot be discounted, for all intents and purposes a soft-coup is already in place. The Prime Minister cannot introduce effective reform while the Shia militia and deputy Prime Ministers counter-balance him. How the Prime Minister manages the Shia equation, including the heavy Iranian presence, whilst attempting to alleviate Sunni anxiety, will be a crucial political development over 2016. It is this system contest, where the war against IS will be won or lost.

If the Prime Minister is unable to manage the powerful Shia political blocks and introduce genuine reform, any efforts to secure the tribal elements will be purely situational and lack strategic substance.¹⁶ The next publication in this series will focus on this broader political landscape and its impact upon the effort against IS, including the identification of key Sunni/Shia actors and networks. If the political landscape of Baghdad fractures or implodes, then any efforts to win the tribes will fail. IS as a result will be able to run un-checked. This is the crucial contest for 2016.

Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of
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¹⁵ David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*, (Black Inc: Melbourne, 2015).

¹⁶ David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*, (Black Inc: Melbourne, 2015).

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