

Field Notes on Iraq's Tribal Revolt Against Al-Qa`ida

By David J. Kilcullen

ONE OF THE MOST striking aspects of operations in Iraq during the “surge” of 2007 was the growing tribal uprising against al-Qa`ida. In late 2006 and 2007, this uprising began to transform the war. I spent considerable time on the ground throughout May and June 2007 in Baghdad and the surrounding districts working with U.S. and Iraqi units, tribal and community leaders and fighters engaged in the uprising. Listening to them talk, watching their operations and participating in planning and execution alongside American commanders supporting them provided insight into their motivations and thought processes. Moreover, during this process of participant observation I was able to gather some field data on the relationship between globally-oriented terrorists in Iraq (primarily al-Qa`ida) and the locally-focused militants who found themselves fighting as “accidental” guerrillas in the early part of the war, only to turn against the terrorists in 2007.

To understand what follows, it is necessary to realize that Iraqi tribes are not somehow separate, out in the desert, or remote; rather, they are powerful interest groups that overlap with and permeate all parts of Iraqi society. More than 85% of Iraqis claim some form of tribal affiliation. Iraqi tribal leaders represent a competing power center with the formal institutions of the state, and the tribes themselves are a parallel hierarchy that overlaps with formal government structures and political allegiances at every level. For most Iraqis, tribal affiliation exists alongside other strands of identity—religious, ethnic, regional and socio-economic—that interact in complex ways, rendering meaningless the facile division into Sunni, Shi`a and Kurd. The reality of Iraqi national character is much more complex, and tribal identity plays an extremely important part in it, even for urbanized Iraqis. Therefore, the tribal revolt was not a remote riot on a reservation: it was a major social movement with the potential to significantly influence most Iraqis wherever they live. This article

tentatively examines some of the reasons for the tribal revolt against al-Qa`ida, explores why certain tribes worked with coalition forces, and highlights key lessons learned during the process.

The Tribal Rebellion Against Al-Qa`ida

In 2007, Iraq experienced a spreading social movement, expanding along kinship lines that could best be described as a tribal rebellion against al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) by a large body of accidental guerrillas who had formerly allowed themselves to be exploited by the *takfiris* (*takfiriyyun*). It would be naïve, or perhaps reflect a lack of awareness of the history of disappointed expectations with Iraqi tribes since 2003, to interpret this rebellion as necessarily indicating support for the Iraqi government or for coalition forces. The tribes were not pro-coalition, much less pro-government but, rather, anti-al-Qa`ida. Nevertheless, our experience showed that, if correctly handled, the tribes could often be brought to see that their best interests lay in supporting the government and cooperating with the security architecture of the new Iraq. Yet this was not an integral part of their original motivation and required time, careful negotiation and confidence-building.

The rebellion against AQI was motivated, according to informants,¹ by a backlash against al-Qa`ida's exclusive emphasis on religion and disregard of custom. One key informant explained:

What you have to remember is that there are two things in Iraq, custom (*adat*) and religion (*dim*). Sometimes they go hand in hand, sometimes they clash. When they go hand in hand all is well, but when they clash they create discord (*fitna*). When you think about tribes, you almost take the religion out of it. The tribes care about *adat*. For example, if you ask a Shammari “what religion are you?” he will say “I am a Shammari.”

In Anbar, the tribes are Dulaim and Zobai. The Zobai are an *`ashira* of the Shammari [confederation].

The Zobai did not support Saddam 100%, though they got lots of money from him. He paid them to guard the roads and the oil pipelines. But they went their own way when they wanted to. When you [Americans] invaded, the Qa`ida came to the tribes and said “We are Sunni, you are Sunni. The Americans are helping the Shi`a, let's fight them together.” And so the tribes fought the occupation forces alongside the Qa`ida. Now, after a while, the tribes fell out with the Qa`ida. They began to argue over their women. The Qa`ida would come to the shaykh and say “give me your daughter” or “give me your sister.” I mean in marriage. The shaykh would say no, because in the tribal custom they protect their women and do not give them to outsiders. I mean, sometimes two tribes exchange their women as wives to settle a dispute, but they don't just let outsiders, who are not of the tribe, marry their women. The Qa`ida started arguing with them, saying “you must give me your daughter because this is sanctioned by religion, and in the Qur'an it says that tribal customs are ignorant.” So the shaykhs became angry and clashed with the Qa`ida because they were not giving any role to tribal custom, and were giving it all to religion.

Then the al-Qa`ida killed a tribal leader because of an argument over this. Then the tribes turned against them because they believed they were trying to rule over them and tell them what to do. The Qa`ida killed a shaykh's sons, and killed other people and attacked the fuel smuggling that the tribes use to make money. Then more and more leaders turned against the *takfiriyyun* and now the tribes are fighting al-Qa`ida.²

The Zobai tribe mentioned here has been closely associated with the 1920 Revolution Brigades and the Islamic Army in Iraq. Zobai tribal leaders have fought against the coalition since 2003, and the tribe has often shown a high degree of unity. By mid-2007,

1 All Iraqi informants gave their prior informed consent to the use and publication of their comments, and informant material did not derive from detainee interrogation.

2 This informant quote is drawn from Fieldnote I3/MN1/20070605.

however, the Zobai appeared to be turning against AQI in most of its tribal area. Indeed, there often seemed to be a “Zobai connection” somewhere in tribal groups opposing AQI. For example, one rural farming district in the southern belts of Baghdad experienced constant low-level warfare between Zobai and AQI fighters, with AQI or Zobai corpses turning up in the canals most mornings.³ The conflict oscillated in terms of who had the upper hand. The Zobai did not directly approach coalition commanders for support, but local shaykhs requested permission to raise an armed neighborhood watch and began policing their own area against AQI and sought to cooperate with coalition forces.⁴ Similarly, one group of fighters in an urban district in Baghdad was non-tribal, with leadership provided by imams of local mosques opposed to AQI. These imams drew on local urban youth to police their streets and fight the terrorists, but their military advisor and “technical expert” was a Zobai clan leader with previous insurgent experience. His assistance was called in by one of the local imams who was related to him through a tribal connection.⁵ Likewise, Zobai tribesmen in Abu Ghurayb district, west of Baghdad, were fighting AQI for most of 2007 and demonstrated increasing willingness to cooperate with coalition forces, although not initially with the Iraqi government.⁶ Tribal fighters who negotiated or engaged with coalition commanders in 2007 tended to make similar requests. In one case, these included the following set of demands:

- Local security must be led by local forces who reserve the right to run their own checkpoints and neighborhood watch organizations.

- Local leaders must have a role in deciding who is to be detained, including the power to detain and question

suspects themselves, and the power to give amnesty to individuals who promise not to fight for the terrorists any longer.

- Coalition forces are requested to help smooth any issues of deconfliction with Iraqi security forces. In some areas, locals asked for some form of recognition symbol so that they would not be mistaken for terrorists.

- Some leaders asked for logistical support (typically, food, fuel and propane for cooking) from coalition forces.

- Local leaders and their forces almost always wanted to be integrated into the Iraqi government structure as a local police force, legitimately employed under the Iraqi government but responsible for security in their own districts.

- Some leaders requested that Iraqi police and army units, regarded as sectarian, stay out of their area. In some cases, they were willing to accept Iraqi security forces provided they were accompanied by coalition forces.⁷

In most areas where local groups began working with coalition forces, they behaved responsibly. In one incident in Sadr al-Yusufiyya, a southern belt district, the local neighborhood watch discovered two terrorists (thought to be AQI) in the act of emplacing a roadside IED. They forced the terrorists to dig up the IED, and then handed them over to coalition forces for questioning. In this area, IED incidents dropped precipitously over several months from several per day along the main road (through a farming community in canal country) in 2006 and early 2007, to zero incidents by the middle of the year. This period coincided with the development of a close working relationship with local shaykhs on the part of Captain Palmer Phillips, an extremely energetic and capable local U.S. company commander who was given solid support by his battalion and brigade commander, and benefited from a highly capable group of platoon commanders and senior non-commissioned officers whose

application of counter-insurgency techniques was exemplary. This also led to the formation of a neighborhood watch to guard local villages, roads and bridges. The main issue in this area was that the tribes wished to be recognized as a Provisional Police Unit (PPU) and provided with recognition symbols that would allow them to work against local terrorist groups without being mistaken for insurgents and accidentally fired upon by coalition forces.⁸

In Zaydun district, a farming and canal area west of Baghdad that had long been noted for the presence of extremist groups that had dispossessed the tribal establishment and radicalized the district's youth,⁹ the 2/7 Marines under the energetic and insightful Lieutenant-Colonel Joe L'Etoile found themselves in the middle of a complex inter-tribal conflict. Local tribes backed the 1920 Revolution Brigades, a Sunni secular nationalist insurgent movement, in a fight against extremists from AQI. Each group fought both each other and the coalition, dispersing when confronted by superior coalition firepower and contracting to confront each other.¹⁰ The violence between the two groups was exceptionally bloody throughout the first half of 2007 but, through a skillful series of political maneuvers and careful targeting, Lt. Col. L'Etoile successfully played the two groups off against each other, devising a strategy of “fighting AQI to the last 1920s guy.”¹¹ After a period of time in which AQI so eroded and damaged the 1920 Revolution Brigades that the local insurgents were desperate, expecting annihilation and willing to ally with almost anyone in order to get back at al-Qa`ida, Lt. Col. L'Etoile approached them through a local tribal intermediary—again, a Zobai—in partnership with the local Iraqi Army battalion.¹² This joint Iraqi-U.S. approach immediately brought the 1920s insurgents to a cease-fire agreement, and they ultimately partnered with U.S. and Iraqi forces, joined local security force units and cooperated to defend

3 Personal communication, company commander responsible for Sadr al-Yusufiyya, company patrol base south of Baghdad, May 28, 2007.

4 Fieldnotes, combat advising in AO Commando, Sadr al-Yusufiyya district, May-June 2007.

5 Personal conversations, officers of 1/5 Cavalry Regiment, and personal participant observation, Amiriyya, Baghdad, June 2007.

6 Personal communication, Colonel J.B. Burton, commander of TF Dagger BCT, Northwest Baghdad, April 2008.

7 Lieutenant-Colonel Dale Kuehl, “Ameriya Freedom Fighters: Meeting with Dr. Kilcullen MNF-I Senior Counterinsurgency Advisor,” briefing, June 2007.

8 Fieldnotes, combat advising in AO Commando, Sadr al-Yusufiyya district, May-June 2007.

9 Personal interview, Dr. Mary Habeck, Washington, D.C., May 2008.

10 Personal interview, Lieutenant-Colonel Joe L'Etoile, Washington, D.C., April 2008

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

their communities against both Shi`a sectarian militias and AQI extremists. This brought a remarkable turnaround in the Zaydun situation over only a few months in mid-2007.¹³

Another example of local leaders' responsible attitude could be seen in their approach to amnesty and parole. Community leaders tended to draw a distinction between terrorist leaders and the rank-and-file. As one respondent pointed out, "they want the terrorist leaders gone, but the followers and ordinary fighters are their own children, so they want them freed of terrorist leaders, not killed or driven away."¹⁴ This, indeed, is a classic statement of the distinction between accidental guerrillas and globally-focused extremists. Therefore, local leaders who captured rank-and-file terrorists originating from the local district typically held them in custody until they agreed to sign an undertaking never to work with AQI again. The local leaders then summoned their parents to collect them, and they were released into their parents' custody, with their clan or tribe undertaking to enforce the agreement and ensure they never again worked with the terrorists.¹⁵

This tribal process involved clear political dangers. The Shi`a-dominated government, for one, was and remains suspicious of a movement that has so far largely occurred within Sunni-majority districts, and sees local fighters as temporary allies at best, tomorrow's enemies at worst. Second, the tribes themselves (particularly the Zobai leaders) sometimes talk as if they see their actions as a precursor to expanding their influence to regain control of formerly Sunni-majority districts in Baghdad.¹⁶ Third, at least some (though as yet undetected) human rights abuses are probably occurring and might be laid at our door if we cooperated with local forces but then failed to act adequately to prevent abuse. Finally, the existence

of armed security forces, however informal, operating outside the Iraqi government chain of command might be seen as a precursor to warlordism, or as compromising Iraq's sovereignty.

In my judgment, as of early June 2007, these concerns were real but manageable. An armed and organized Sunni population was not necessarily a destabilizing political factor. It created an informal authority structure that helped build political unity and social coherence within the Sunni community, moving away from the situation of hundreds of fragmented and independent insurgent groups, and community leaders unable to control them, which plagued the coalition's initial attempts to de-escalate the Sunni insurgency. Moreover, the existence of an armed local movement of Sunnis

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created a “balance of power” effect: it deterred Shi`a extremist groups such as Jaysh al-Mahdi that might otherwise have thought of “cleansing” Sunni communities, and reduced the fear of permanent victimization that had caused Sunni leaders to avoid involvement in the new Iraq. It also contradicted the al-Qa`ida propaganda claim that AQI was all that stood between Iraqi Sunnis and a Shi`a-led genocide. These factors, correctly handled, made local security forces a key element in a balanced, self-regulating, self-sustaining local security architecture that could potentially survive without coalition supervision. Moreover, a mechanism to enroll tribal fighters into legitimate security forces as local police—which is, after all, what the tribes most wanted—had the potential to bring these forces under government control, thus preventing the development of non-state forces that could undermine sovereignty.

Key lessons for coalition forces and commanders emerged from this process. We found that we had to:

- Treat local tribal irregular fighters as local allies, or a local “coalition of the willing,” not as “our new employees.” They began this rebellion because al-Qa`ida tried to push them around; the coalition needs to ensure that it does not make the same mistake. Local fighters were not under our command; instead, we approached them with “tribal diplomacy.”
- Build a personal partnership relationship, based on honor and trust, with local leaders.
- Expect leaders to act primarily in accordance with their group's interests, not their formal undertakings.
- Expect overlapping and sometimes conflicting spheres of authority within tribal groups, rather than a military-style chain of command. One group may respond to several different shaykhs to different degrees.
- Look for leaders who occupy positions of authority within several local power networks (tribe, mosque, business, governance). These are likely to be survivors who can influence others.
- Be wary of non-tribal Iraqis looking down on tribal shaykhs and treating them as ignorant or of no account.
- Avoid pushing a shaykh to make commitments until he is sure his tribal group will support him.
- Channel assistance to a tribal group through the local shaykh to cement his patronage power and increase his authority, thus making it easier for him to make agreements “stick.”
- Develop coordination mechanisms, and communications channels, to local leaders that enable deconfliction between local “neighborhood watch” organizations and coalition forces.
- Work to persuade local leaders of the benefits of supporting the Iraqi government—we found we could not expect support for the government to be part of their initial motivation, which was opposition to al-Qa`ida.

¹³ This information is drawn from an unclassified briefing with Lieutenant-Colonel Joe L'Etoile.

¹⁴ This quote is drawn from an Iraqi tribal leader's conversation with a U.S. battalion commander in central Baghdad in July 2007.

¹⁵ Personal communication, Lieutenant-Colonel Dale Kuehl, Baghdad, June 2007.

¹⁶ Personal conversation, former insurgent leader, Baghdad, June 2007.

- Expect a degree of mistrust of Iraqi army and police forces on the part of tribal leaders, and be prepared to act in the role of an “honest broker” in promoting cooperation between local fighters and Iraqi forces.

- Develop mechanisms for handing over locals who have been detained by neighborhood watch groups, including requiring clear standards of evidence and compliance with human rights before an individual is accepted into the Iraqi or coalition judicial system.

Tentative Conclusions

Although the requirements for counter-insurgency in a tribal environment may not be written down in the classical-era field manuals, building local allies and forging partnerships and trusted networks with at-risk communities seems to be one of the keys to success. Indeed, perhaps this is what T.E. Lawrence had in mind when he wrote that the art of guerrilla warfare with Arab tribes rests on setting up “ladders of tribes” to the objective.¹⁷ Marine and Army units that have sought to understand tribal behavior in its own terms, to follow norms of proper behavior as expected by tribal communities, and to build their own confederations of local partners have done extremely well in this fight. Nevertheless, this uprising against extremism was the Iraqi people’s idea; they started it, they are leading it, and it is continuing on their timeline. The role of the U.S.-led coalition should be to support these initiatives when needed, ensure that proper political safeguards and human rights standards are in place, and recognize and be prepared for a number of unpredictable outcomes.

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This article contains no material derived from detainee interrogation or other classified sources. All Iraqi informants gave their prior informed consent to the use and publication of their comments.

¹⁷ T.E. Lawrence, “The Science of Guerrilla Warfare,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XIVth Edition (1929).