

■ **YOUR MOVE:**

A U.S. Army officer meets with an Iraqi sheik based in the Khadamiya neighborhood of western Baghdad.

Chess With the Sheiks

■ By Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.

Victory in a conventional war goes to the big battalions. Defeating an insurgency is a more intimate affair; it requires small units that can win over, or kill, one enemy fighter at a time. ■ Danjel Bout took command of his infantry company in Iraq, about 130 soldiers, after his predecessor, Capt. Michael MacKinnon, was killed in October 2005. MacKinnon, a regular Army officer, had been a friend and mentor to Bout, a National Guardsman from California. “MacKinnon taught me to not just assess the

A key reason for the declining violence in Iraq is that U.S. troops have come to understand—and begun to form alliances with—Iraq’s many tribes and their leaders, the sheiks.

combat situation,” Capt. Bout told *National Journal*. “One of the biggest lessons I learned from him was to think through the second- and third-order consequences toward the civilian population. You’re not playing checkers anymore. This is chess.”

So, in the sudden rise of insurgent attacks that followed his mentor’s death, Bout applied MacKinnon’s techniques to finding his killers. In Bout’s sector, a semirural region on the southern outskirts of Baghdad, that meant going to the tribes.

“More so in our area than in most of Baghdad,” Bout explained, “there was a very strong network of tribal connections, and the sheiks were the real power brokers; the mayor was really a figurehead. I leaned on the locals that MacKinnon had built these relationships with and said, ‘If you won’t give me information, you’re as complicit as the people who pulled the trigger.’ Maybe 50 percent [of the locals] know who these guys are; they just don’t want to talk—it’s like being in a gang neighborhood.”

So Bout ramped up U.S. patrols in the tribal areas of uncooperative sheiks, disrupting daily business and undercutting their power. He rewarded cooperative ones, on the other hand, with gifts, contracts for local work, and public deference from American officers. As more and more tips came in from the sheiks, many of whom had genuinely respected MacKinnon, Bout was able to deploy U.S. and Iraqi security forces in a series of precisely targeted operations “that basically decimated the enemy.”

Progress in Bout’s sector was short-lived, however. A new and undermanned unit soon replaced his company. And then, across Iraq in February 2006, after the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, a Shiite holy site, the country descended into brutal Sunni-Shiite violence. But over time, the isolated and easily reversed successes of individual units such as Capt. Bout’s have given rise to a new strategy for Iraq. The significant, if unsteady, decrease in violence since 2006-07 owes much not

only to the yearlong “surge” of 30,000 American troops but also to a more enduring change: the U.S. military’s institutionalization of lessons painfully learned by junior officers such as Daniel Bout and Michael MacKinnon.

“When we went into Iraq in 2003, there was a lack of appreciation for the cultural complexity,” said Conrad Crane, a retired lieutenant colonel who is now the director of the Military History Institute at the Army War College. “The initial focus was very much on the Kurds and the Shia and the Sunni, these broader groupings. I don’t think we were really aware of the tribal loyalties. I don’t think that we understood how the sheiks operated.”

The Anbar Model

In 2005, Crane’s West Point classmate, Gen. David Petraeus, commissioned him as the lead co-author of a new counterinsurgency manual for the Army and Marine Corps. One of the manual’s main case studies is the Marine Corps’s cultivation of relationships with the sheiks in Anbar province in western Iraq, an operation widely credited with enabling the “Anbar awakening,” in which formerly pro-insurgent tribes turned against Al Qaeda in Iraq. Such tribal alliances with U.S. troops have since spread to much of the country. “A lot of the success we’re having today,” Crane said, “is because we’ve learned to work with the tribes.”

At the same time, the tribal sheiks have learned to work with, around, and through the Americans in pursuit of their own purposes. What the British statesman Lord Palmerston famously said of nations also applies to tribes—they have no permanent friends or allies, only permanent interests. Many of the sheiks now working with the United States against Al Qaeda in Iraq fought on the other side before and could change their al-



- The security breakdown in Iraq after the U.S. invasion helped to increase the power of the tribal sheiks.
- Sheiks are unsteady partners—many who now work with the United States fought on the other side before and could change their allegiances again.
- The sheiks of Iraq are savvy, adaptable politicians with a strong sense of their constituents’ needs—jobs, security, self-determination.

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Distinguishing Tribes



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—Marine Maj. Morgan Mann

legiances again. They therefore remain distinctly unsteady partners not only for the United States but also for the Iraqi central government, which is dominated by Shiite clerics, political parties, and other nontribal forces.

Although tribes are by no means the only players on the Iraqi scene, American intervention, both by accident and by design, is increasing their power. The U.S. started its occupation of Iraq by dissolving or undercutting Western-style institutions such as the Iraqi army, the Baath Party, and state-owned industries, without providing alternative sources of security, leadership, or jobs. Now the U.S. is trying to end its occupation of Iraq in large part by working with, and strengthening, the tribal sheiks who stepped into the vacuum the U.S. had created.

“Before the war, tribes were not particularly important in Baghdad. They might have been in remote areas such as Anbar, but in Baghdad, it was an urban, professionalized society,” said Montgomery McFate, an anthropologist who is the senior civilian adviser to the Army’s Human Terrain Team program, which deploys social scientists to Iraq and Afghanistan to advise brigade commanders. “Tribes became suddenly more important because that’s how people were getting their economic interests met, their security interests met,” McFate continued. “The breakdown in security is one of the things that caused the retribalization of Iraq.”

Influenced by our own mythology of the Wild West, Americans tend to think of tribal groups as unchanging, isolated, and naive. This perception was never really true of American Indians, and it is fatally misleading in Iraq. The sheiks of Iraq are

savvy, adaptable politicians with a strong sense of their constituents’ needs—jobs, security, self-determination—and generations of experience in manipulating central governments and foreign occupiers. If the successes of the past year are to be built on, not squandered, the United States needs to get as smart about sheiks as the sheiks already are about us.

Pragmatic Tribalism

It is too easy to think of Arab sheiks as exotic. Indeed, tribesmen often like to romanticize themselves. “They will tell you these enormously fanciful genealogical stories that trace everyone back to one guy who was the ancestor of them all,” said retired Col. Patrick Lang, formerly the Defense Intelligence Agency’s regional director for the Middle East. “Sometimes they just invent these things. Sometimes families get associated with a tribe and convince themselves that they, too, are descended from this original ancestor.”

A tribe is formally defined as a “segmentary lineage,” a kinship network organized by branching lines of descent from a common ancestor, with the most-direct male-line descendants holding the greatest prestige. But anthropologists are quick to note that such kinships are often hazy or even fictitious, projected onto the past to justify practical arrangements in the present. Tribal sheiks hold power not because they can recite their distinguished ancestry but because they can get things done.

When Maj. Damon Cluck’s unit of the Arkansas National Guard arrived in Iraq in 2004, for example, it needed to put up a chain-link fence around its new base, an abandoned Iraqi army facility. “A college-educated [Iraqi] civil engineer, who spoke very good English, showed up and said, ‘I can do this kind of work for you,’” Cluck said. To get around the unit’s limited budget, the Iraqi even worked out a deal whereby his workers would be paid in scrap metal they scavenged from the base. “The guy made contact as a businessman,” Cluck said, “but the guys who showed up to work were people out of his tribe.

“He was supplying jobs for the people in his community,” Cluck went on. “And a guy who is a member of a tribe is used to providing his sheik a certain percentage of his income in return [for the sheik’s] providing him with the job. We’re very quick to point at that and call it corruption, but you really have to spend a long time to convince them that there’s something wrong with that.”

The American military has increasingly accepted that the tribal leaders allocate everything—from reconstruction contracts to police jobs—according to tribal notions of kinship, not Western notions of efficiency. “People will get mad at me for saying this, but a certain level of corruption is business as usual in the Middle East,” said Col. Martin Stanton, chief of tribal reconciliation efforts for the U.S. military headquarters in Baghdad. “They’re going to take care of their families and their constituencies first.”

A 2,500-Year Head Start

Indeed, much of what a successful tribal leader does would be instantly recognizable to a machine politician in any Ameri-

can city. And a sheik's influence, like any politician's, lasts only as long as he can bring home the spoils for his people. True, sheiks do not stand for election, and tribal leadership does tend to run in families. But the constant competition within those families over who will lead would not be unfamiliar to American politicians such as President Bush and his brother Jeb. A powerful sheik may pass over his eldest son in favor of the younger son, or a nephew, or a cousin; or he himself may be pushed aside—quietly or not—by a challenger who proves himself better able to deliver jobs, contracts, subsidies, and respect.

That said, tribal Arabs have a distinctly indirect approach to problems that often infuriates cut-to-the-chase American executives, especially military officers. In the case of Cluck's English-speaking civil engineer, "as it turned out, he wasn't the sheik: I think he was a nephew of the sheik," Cluck said. "To my knowledge, none of us ever met the sheik."

Using intermediaries is classic tribal deal-making. "A real sheik won't come out and say, 'I am the sheik of the tribe.' He'll send a messenger," explained Col. Alan King, a civil-affairs specialist in the Army Reserve who negotiated with some 900 sheiks while he was serving in Iraq in 2003 and who now, as a consultant, maintains a database of more than 4,000 tribal leaders. Like an American president preparing for a superpower summit, the wise sheik will not risk his prestige by sitting down personally at the negotiating table until he is confident that his subordinates and go-betweens have worked out a deal for him to close. Said King, "If he can't bring something back—get somebody out of prison or whatever—the meeting was meaningless."

In this culture of indirection, even something as simple as placing name cards on a table can offend the sheiks' finely tuned sense of hierarchy and who sits where. "The thing that makes it challenging is discovering what that pecking order is, because they're not going to tell you," Stanton said. "One of the biggest things I do in my job is sort through the sheiks and figure out who has got power and who is just trying to get the Americans behind him to raise his social status."

Sheiks from all parts of Iraq and all ethnic and religious groups are well aware that the United States is a major source of power in the new Iraq. And although the Americans struggle to figure out the hidden hierarchies among the tribes, the sheiks themselves have a 2,500-year head start in figuring out foreign powers. Said Col. King: "The area that's known as Iraq today has been occupied since 539 B.C. [the year Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great, a Persian king] by everybody: the Persians, the Ottomans, the English. They've learned to deal with occupation."

From Abraham to Saddam

The word "tribe" calls to mind a group of savages, noble or otherwise, living in splendid isolation from civilization. But the land now known as Iraq is the place where civilization began. Writing, cities, armies, and bureaucracy were all invented here. The tribes of Iraq have more than 4,000 years of experience dealing with central governments, many of them imposed by foreign occupiers.

Today's tension between small-town sheiks and Baghdad politicians has its roots in the biblical conflict between nomadic herdsmen and settled farmers: "Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground" (Genesis 4:2). At the same time, Genesis also testifies to delicate but mutually beneficial interactions, as when the nomadic patriarch Abraham bargained with the city fathers of Hebron to buy a tomb for his wife, Sarah (Genesis 23). The sheiks who negotiate with American commanders today inherit this tradition of savvy deal-making.

Another Old Testament custom that is still alive in Iraq is what anthropologists call endogamy, the practice of marrying close relatives rather than non-kin. The Bible describes Abraham and Sarah as half-siblings: "And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife," Abraham explains (Genesis 20:12). Later, on his deathbed, Abraham arranges the marriage of his son, Isaac, to his brother's granddaughter, Rebekah (Genesis 24).

Although Arab tribal custom does not go as far as Abraham and Sarah's half-sibling match, it strongly endorses first-cousin marriage—specifically between the children of two brothers, not between the children of a brother and a sister. "It is generally the case in the Middle East that the most-favored form of marriage is to marry your father's brother's daughter," Col. Lang explained. "It isn't just among the tribal guys; it's among the city people, too." Modern Westerners might find such inbreeding repugnant, but it was common practice among the



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SOT. SERENA HAYDEN

Hapsburgs and other European royal families, and for much the same reason: It keeps family property, and family loyalty, concentrated in a clear dynasty instead of dispersed among an ever-widening array of heirs.

To the degree that tribal groups maintain such ancient traditions, the reason tends to be some practical benefit; and when change is advantageous, tribes can prove quick to adapt. Much of the sheiks' power dates not to time-honored custom, but to 20th-century dealings with central governments. When the

said, that "up until the early 1990s, you weren't allowed to use your tribal name on your ID card."

But Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait led to military disaster, widespread revolt, and economic sanctions. Saddam cynically turned to religious and tribal traditions to shore up his power. "He had to manipulate the tribes," King explained. "Everybody was paid. You'd get a new car each year," government grants, or other perks appropriate to your rank on the regime's official list of 7,380 recognized sheiks. Uncooperative tribal leaders found that Saddam appointed rivals from within the tribe as "fake sheiks" and propped them up with government largesse.

So when the United States invaded in 2003, Saddam's meddling had already made tribal power structures more important, and more confusing, than they had been for decades. The subsequent collapse of central authority gave sheiks additional influence—and the resultant decentralized power reverted to its most basic form: the force of arms.

Politics of the Gun

Westerners tend to think of fighting and negotiating as incompatible. Arabs tend to see them as complementary. The West's great military theoretician, the 19th-century Prussian Carl von Clausewitz, is often quoted as saying, "War is a continuation of politics by other means," as if normal politicking suddenly switched off when violence switched on. But Clausewitz's actual point is more nuanced and more applicable to Iraq: "War is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse with an admixture of other means." American military officers reared on the short form of Clausewitz's maxim are now learning the full principle and how to blend their two approaches to Iraq: the one they call "kinetic"—

bullets and bombs—and the one they call "nonkinetic"—negotiations and deal-making.

This is not necessarily a kinder and gentler way of war. Although negotiation can sometimes forestall violence, in Iraq it is more often the case that violence is a necessary form of negotiation. "Of the seven or eight tribes in my area," said Maj. Morgan Mann, a Marine reservist who commanded a company in Babil province, south of Baghdad, in 2004-05, "one was the primary financiers and coordinators of most of the enemy activity." Much as Capt. Bout did a few months later, Mann targeted the leaders of the "enemy tribe" with relentless house searches, heavy patrolling, cordon-and-search operations that shut down entire neighborhoods, and "very aggressive counterfire"—that is, shooting back intensely at attacking insurgents. "It culminated in my arresting the grand sheik of this tribe," Mann said. "That was one of the no-no's, supposedly. But as a result of that, we were able to get that sheik and about 20 or 30 of the sub-sheiks of this large tribe into a meeting in Baghdad to discuss how we were going to work together." One of the subordinate sheiks put it bluntly to Mann: "I'm not your friend, but it doesn't make sense for me to fight you"—for now.

"It quieted down the zone considerably for the duration I was there," Mann said, "which unfortunately was only about another month." When Mann's unit went home, its personal rela-



New Partners

The U.S. commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, met with Iraqi tribal leaders when the surge began in 2007. This sheik, Sattar Abu Reesha, was killed in a bomb attack a few months later.

British occupied the region during World War I and established the borders of what they called Iraq, they drew most of their administrative personnel and garrison forces from the colonial government of India. The British colonial government had long kept down the cost of empire by delegating power to rajas and other local potentates. When the British sought to recreate this system of "indirect rule" in Iraq, they looked to the sheiks as natural partners.

But Arab sheiks were not like Indian rajas or British lords. They wielded influence by custom and consent, not by written law. Rather than having private estates, they supervised the use of land owned collectively by the entire tribe. The British imposed laws that codified and solidified the power of the sheiks, above all by giving them formal title, as individual property owners, over land that the tribes traditionally held in common. (A similar practice in England was called "the fencing of the commons.") The British reforms transformed many sheiks into landlords and reduced their tribesmen to tenants.

After World War II, successive leaders of independent Iraq whittled away the power of the sheiks and increased the authority of the central government. Their changes culminated in the dictatorial rule of Saddam Hussein, who mobilized the entire population and economy of Iraq for his fruitless eight-year war against Iran. So thoroughly was tribal identity repressed, King

tionships and hardball tactics did not carry over to the follow-on unit. The result was a resumption of violence.

But this kind of chronic violence is short of all-out war. The Western tradition calls for seeking the enemy out, engaging him in battle, and defeating him decisively. That approach can work—albeit at a terrible cost in blood and treasure—in a conflict with two clearly defined sides. It is suicidal in the complex politics of Iraq.

“If you’re in a multi-sided game, there’s really no point in a decisive victory,” said Bruce Gudmundsson, a retired Marine Corps major and military historian. “If you spend too much energy defeating one opponent, your other potential opponents will stand by the sidelines, cheer you on, and then, when you’re exhausted and bloodied by your victory, they’ll come over and grab your goats.” Instead of decisive battles to the death, therefore, much tribal warfare is calibrated posturing. “It’s like those films about being in a maximum-security prison,” Gudmundsson continued. “If you prove you’re willing to fight, then you’re not a victim. You don’t have to be the strongest guy—but you can’t be the weakest.”

The tribal preoccupation with honor, vengeance, and status is therefore, at its base, entirely pragmatic. It is essential to maintain a “don’t mess with us” reputation in a society where courts are corrupt, law enforcement is either weak or abusive, and no one answers when you dial 911.

“We don’t understand the power of humiliation,” said Col. David Sutherland, who recently ended a 15-month tour commanding an Army brigade in the fractious province of Diyala, north of Baghdad. “One tribal leader, his daughters were kidnapped. He will be humiliated for the rest of his life until he can get his daughters back, because he was unable to protect them.”

Mediation and Cooperation

Precisely because violence between tribes—even if it occurs at a relatively low level—can be so pervasive, tribal custom also provides ways to contain and mediate conflicts. A killing—accidental or intentional—traditionally calls for a truce, an *atwa*, of 40 days. “During that time, the parties to the dispute cannot interact with each other,” explained Andrew Shryock, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan who has lived with tribes in Yemen and Jordan. “They can’t go to the mosque at the same

time, they can’t go to weddings and funerals at the same time.” During this customary cooling-off period, Shryock went on, “each side will go to several respected men and ask them to serve as guarantors. Those men will then negotiate with each other to decide on compensation.”

The American military has increasingly come to use traditional compensation payments to head off retaliatory violence after “collateral damage” from military operations. (See “Shoot/Don’t Shoot,” *NJ*, 10/13/07, p. 24.) The challenge has been for out-

siders to insert themselves into the complex system of relationships that tribal custom requires to work, relationships that link the opposing sides to mediators whom both can trust. The opportunity is that once the Americans embed themselves in this network, they can help bring the whole country together.

“One thing that surprised me, talking with some of the sheiks, is that these tribes are not divided religiously,” Crane said. Many of Iraq’s most respected tribes have both Shiite and Sunni branches. (Historically, widespread conversion to Shiism in Iraq did not begin until the 18th century, and the common ancestors around which tribes unite go back much further.) Also, Crane said, “their loyalty is much more to the tribe than to the religion.” In a country trying to recover from the sectarian bloodshed of 2006-07, such mixed-sect tribes can act as unifying forces.

Indeed, patterns of conflict and reconciliation born among the tribes are increasingly evident across Iraqi society. Although these customs will complicate any lasting peace, they restrain rivals from fighting to the death. The revolt of Sunni Arab tribes in Anbar against the extremist tactics of Al Qaeda in Iraq is well known. But even non-Sunni, nontribal groups such as Muktada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army,

despite their apocalyptic rhetoric, have shown immense flexibility in fighting the Americans one day and cooperating with them the next. The same cultural tendencies that make Iraq so turbulent have also held it back, thus far, from a genocidal civil war.

“The Iraqis have to come up with their own definition of democracy,” Sutherland said. “We can’t do it for them. We don’t understand their culture well enough. They have to define democracy using their social norms, and one of those is tribal.” ■

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