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The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives

The now-deceased leader of the Anbar Awakening, Sheikh Abd al Sittar Abu Reesha, once said, "Our American friends had not understood us when they came. They were proud, stubborn people and so were we. They worked with the opportunists, now they have turned to the tribes, and this is as it should be."[1]

Until 2007, the most violent region of insurgent attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq had been al Anbar, the largely rural, expansive western province stretching from the outskirts of Baghdad to Iraq's lengthy, mostly unsecured desert borders with Sunni-dominated Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.[2] In what is most easily described as a marriage of convenience, Sunni insurgents and foreign Sunni al Qaeda fighters in al Anbar had formed a strategic and tactical alliance against what was perceived as an occupation by the United States or, more pointedly, against the occupation of a Muslim land by a largely Christian force, a deep affront to traditional Muslim values harkening back to the Crusades of the Middle Ages.[3] Iraqis in al Anbar provided local knowledge, logistics, and up to 95 percent of the personnel, while experienced foreign al Qaeda fighters provided training, expertise, and financing. The pitch was simple: "We are Sunni. You are Sunni. The Americans and Iranians are helping the Shi'a—let's fight them together." [4]

Yet, as al Qaeda mounted a campaign of deadly intimidation, and slowly but surely began taking control of money-making activities traditionally held by the tribes, this alliance began to wear thin. As early as 2005, tribal leaders in al Anbar began quietly forming working alliances with U.S. military forces against al Qaeda. Then, in September 2006, an Iraqi-led coalition of Sunni tribal

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The changes had already begun long before the surge was even an idea.

sheikhs in al Anbar publicly announced their split with al Qaeda and began working with U.S. military forces to oust the foreign-led terrorist group. These tribal sheikhs, with hordes of dedicated armed militiamen at their disposal, combined with U.S. forces to oust al Qaeda from the region in literally a few months, succeeding in a task that had eluded U.S. forces for four hard-fought years. Today, al Anbar is one of the least violent regions in all of Iraq.[5] U.S. Marines stationed there are known to complain of a lack of things to do because there are so few firefights and incidents to which they must respond.[6]

Although media coverage and analysis has focused heavily on al Qaeda's campaign of violent coercion and the supposed improved efficacy of the U.S. military after the arrival of the "surge" brigades, testimony from Iraqis themselves and U.S. military commanders on the ground in Iraq tells a different story of why the sheikhs chose to change sides. The changes leading to this new alliance had already begun long before the surge was even an idea. And it was not the grotesqueness of the violence perpetrated by al Qaeda which caused the change, for Iraq and al Anbar have a long storied history of using violence for political ends. Rather, there appear to be two main factors: the Sunni tribal sheikhs' own changing perception of al Qaeda's threat to their continued hold on power and the developing U.S. military approach in al Anbar.

After the U.S. invasion and the emergence of the insurgency, Sunni tribal sheikhs in al Anbar faced two primary threats: one from the continued occupation by U.S. forces, and the other from the increasingly intransigent and dominating presence of al Qaeda. Initially, the major threat to the sheikhs was the U.S. military and its imposition of martial law, democratic processes, and support of the new Iraqi government based in Baghdad as the locus of power for the country. All of these elements undermined their traditional position of power in the region and disrupted their ability to control their tribesmen. Later, the sheikhs began to face a similar threat from al Qaeda itself, which increasingly asserted control in the region through money and violence but also posed a clear and real mortal threat to the leaders themselves.

Eventually, Sunni tribal leaders in al Anbar deemed al Qaeda's influence as more of a threat to their continued rule, while U.S. forces were considered to be less and less of a determining factor in the region. By 2006, al Qaeda had become nearly unstoppable as both a political and tactical force in the region, and the U.S. military unofficially declared al Anbar politically and militarily "lost."[7] These conditions coincided with a high-level U.S. policy debate over withdrawing troops in the near future, which led to a perception that the

United States was (and still is) leaving, was no longer a long-term occupying threat, and was therefore a better short-term ally.

At the same time, U.S. military leaders began a drastically different approach by actively courting Sunni tribal sheikhs in al Anbar. The U.S. military almost completely changed its reconstruction and security policy in the province, sending money through Sunni tribal sheikhs instead of contract bids or the central government. Most significantly, the United States authorized, funded, and armed Sunni militias, which co-opted al Qaeda and insurgent recruiting and provided local security.

> It is not plausible that moral outrage at the brutality of al Qaeda's tactics provoked the rebellion.

The U.S. military's new approach toward courting Sunni tribal leaders and the sheikhs' newfound appreciation of the United States as an ally combined to produce dramatic regional changes in record time. The success in al Anbar has been heralded by military commanders, politicians, and analysts alike, with subsequent similar efforts in other regions of Iraq meeting with varying degrees of success. The strategy of building alliances with local tribal leaders and reconciling with former fighters has been mentioned by newly appointed head of U.S. Central Command, Gen. David H. Petraeus, as an important option in the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan against the resurgent Taliban and al Qaeda.[8] The alliance and allegiance of tribal leaders, both Sunni and Shi'a throughout Iraq, is tenuous but remarkably effective at reducing violence. Although it remains to be seen whether these tribal militias can be successfully converted to state-run security forces or a civilian sector job force, the hard-earned lessons from both sides on how to form an alliance to reduce violence and root out destabilizing extremists certainly merit closer examination.

Tribal Leaders: The True Power in al Anbar

After the 2003 invasion, the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority began pressing for secular democracy, eschewing tribal, religious, sectarian, and other historical orders within Iraqi society. The call for secular democracy was coupled with dismantling the Iraqi military and expelling the ruling Ba'ath party political infrastructure, leaving little in the way of institutions to maintain order in Iraqi society.[9] For Sunni Muslims in al Anbar, the strongest remaining form of identity was their tribe, which "consists of various smaller clans that are in turn composed of extended families. This kinship helps regulate conflict and provides benefits such as jobs and social welfare in environments where the modern state does not exist or is too weak to function."[10] Each tribe is headed by a sheikh,

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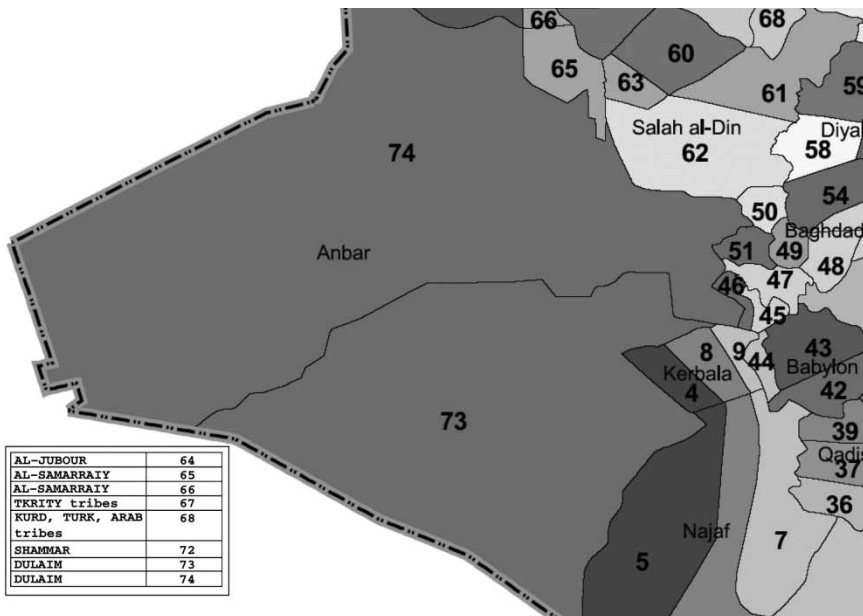
whose legitimacy is based on his ability to provide for his people, which engenders patronage to his will.

The Dulaym tribe dominates al Anbar, as indicated in Figure 1. Within the Dulaym tribal federation, there are literally hundreds of smaller tribal groupings.[11] These tribes are not separate from society at large but instead are highly influential groups woven into the fabric of daily life in Iraq. In essence, they form a parallel power structure, overlapping official government and political party affiliations. In fact, the largest tribal confederations operate as "dynastic states," levying taxes, providing social goods, and generally acting as a political entity with religious and ethnic overtones.[12]

In traditional insurgency and counterinsurgency theory, support of the local populace is the deciding factor.[13] None of these theories, however, address the unique feature found in al Anbar, in which a separate, nongovernmental ruling order represents and organizes the local population according to its own priorities. In al Anbar, it was the Sunni tribal sheikhs, not the general populace, who decided that al Qaeda's goals no longer coincided with the best interests of their people. Neither the central Iraqi government nor the U.S. military could control insurgent activities until the Sunni tribal sheikhs decided to take away

Figure I. Map of major tribes in al Anbar from Globalsecurity.org.

AL-JUBOUR	64
AL-SAMARRAIY	65
AL-SAMARRAIY	66
TKRITY tribes	67
KURD, TURK, ARAB tribes	68
SHAMMAR	72
DULAIM	73
DULAIM	74

their support and safe haven. Al Qaeda's targeting of the tribal leaders and the U.S. military's courting of them provide evidence that Sunni tribal sheikhs and their strategic calculus truly make the difference in al Anbar. It is the Sheikhs who decide whether their tribesmen serve as willing foot soldiers in the insurgency or dedicated volunteer militiamen in local security forces.

> The perception that U.S. troops will leave Iraq is a key factor in tribal leaders' cooperation.

The Anbar Awakening

In the wake of the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, al Anbar tribes found themselves vying against the U.S. military and al Qaeda for control of the province. Upon arrival in the region, al Qaeda immediately began to seek sources of local revenue, as is typical of the organization.[14] In al Anbar, the easiest sources of revenue were illegal activities, such as smuggling and extortion, the same activities in which the local tribes had been engaged for decades.[15] To force sheikhs and tribal leaders in Iraq to cede financial or tactical control, al Qaeda mounted a violent campaign of gruesome, demonstrative intimidation: kidnappings, assassinations, torture, and grotesque murders of tribal leaders and their family members, including beheadings and public dismemberment.[16]

Al Anbar has a long and checkered history of violence that predates the arrival of al Qaeda, so the idea that moral outrage at the brutality of al Qaeda's tactics provoked the rebellion is not plausible. In fact, the campaign of violent intimidation was far more likely a result, not a cause, of the tribal leaders' disobedience.[17] One example is the December 2005 assassination of Sheikh Nasr, head of the Albu Fahd tribe. He was abducted and murdered by al Qaeda operatives a day after meeting with U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and other tribal leaders, who had gathered to discuss ways to reduce violence in al Anbar, which included reaching out to insurgent leaders. The sheikh's murder is often cited in Western media as a turning point in the Awakening, but a captured al Qaeda letter from an unknown author entitled ''Al Qa'ida in Iraq Situation Report'' shows how his murder actually helped keep several tribes in line.[18] The al Qaeda letter relates how ''there was a complete change of events . . . cousins of Sheik Nasr came to the Mujahidin begging, announcing their repentance and innocense [sic], saying we're with you, we'll do whatever you want.''[19]

On October 15, 2006, al Qaeda declared that al Anbar and parts of several other western provinces now comprised the Islamic State of Iraq. The declaration signaled the shift in al Qaeda's campaign from resistance and subversion to outright competition for political control of the region by attempting to displace and replace two existing Iraqi political bodies, the

The number of U.S. troops is much less important than the decision to empower local leaders.

central Iraqi government and the tribal order. As a result of al Qaeda's increasing takeover of all forms of power in the region, from violence to politics to finance—all at the expense of tribal leaders—some of the tribal leaders had already begun to offer alliances with U.S. military and Iraqi security forces against al Qaeda. The alliances came from two groups: the Anbar Salvation Council—led by the former governor of Ramadi, Fasal al-Gaoud—and the Awakening—led by Abd al Sittar, sheikh of the Albu Reesha tribe. Both men were politically and tribally ostracized in al Anbar because of their personal histories, and therefore drew tremendous leverage and power from their newfound alliance with U.S. military forces in the region.

Al-Gaoud had already chosen sides in 2003 by allying with the United States and the central government. When he became governor of al Anbar, al-Gaoud's position in his tribe was not initially that strong. Combined with his overt affiliation with the United States, his position was weakened even further, as most of his fellow tribesmen began to make deals with insurgent groups and al Qaeda. In 2005 he was voted out of office in the Iraqi parliamentary elections and replaced by a member of the Iraqi Islamic Party.[20] It was later that year, after being ostracized by two failed strategic moves, that al-Gaoud first proposed an alliance between his tribal followers and U.S. forces. Al-Gaoud was instrumental in forming the Albu Mahal Desert Protectors in 2005, a tribal militia along the remote Syrian desert border in al Qa'im and an important example of an early tribal willingness to resist al Qaeda.[21] His proposal was working but was derailed when indiscriminate U.S. forces came crashing down on al Qa'im near the Syrian border, killing and capturing insurgents, al Qaeda, and al-Gaoud's tribesmen alike.[22] After an extended absence, al-Gaoud returned to Iraq in late 2006 to help form, and bring other leaders into, the Anbar Salvation Council, continuing to do so until his assassination in June 2007.

Abd al Sittar was head of the Awakening movement, another tribal group pledging to fight al Qaeda.[23] Abd al Sittar was the sheikh of a lesser tribe within the Dulaymi confederation. After the 2003 invasion, he is said to have accumulated significant amounts of money running criminal operations, including armed robbery and smuggling along the province's many rural roads, and likely had some sort of working agreement with al Qaeda at the time. Al Qaeda's technique of taking over local sources of revenue such as smuggling and extortion, however, was directly impacting Abd al Sittar's operations. So, in late 2005, he tried to rally against al Qaeda by seeking the aid of nationalist Iraqi

insurgents, probably those under the leadership of Ibrahim al-Shamari, head of the Islamic Army of Iraq. The attempted alliance failed, however, and Abd al Sittar was isolated. In the meantime, al Qaeda had killed Abd al Sittar's father and several brothers as part of their campaign to intimidate tribal leaders and take control over their income and people. After gathering several sheikhs alongside him against al Qaeda, Abd al Sittar publicly announced in September 2006 that his group would resist al Qaeda and seek U.S. support.[24]

As evidence of their significance to the movement and the threat it posed, al Qaeda assassinated both men (al-Gaoud in a hotel suicide bombing on June 25, 2007, and Abd al Sittar on September 13, 2007).[25] All assessments point to growing differences between al Qaeda's foreign-led takeover of the insurgency with its moneymaking criminal activities, such as those previously held by Abd al Sittar, and the imposition of a fundamentalist Islamist lifestyle against the more practical, secular, survivalist orientation of the Iraqi tribal sheikhs as the reasons for the split.[26] Even Iraqi nationalist insurgent groups, such as the Islamic Army of Iraq and Hamas Iraq, have cited a lack of trust and clarity in al Qaeda's intended national agenda as reasons to withdraw their support of al Qaeda in Iraq.[27]

How the U.S. Military Changed Its Approach

As late as the spring of 2007, U.S. forces in al Anbar were fighting a losing battle. Their experience was marked by heavy combat, high casualties, a nonfunctioning local government, and worst of all, few prospects for things to get any better.[28] In August 2006, a U.S. Marine Corps intelligence officer's assessment declared that U.S. and Iraqi troops "are no longer capable of militarily defeating the insurgency."[29] Others declared that the area was "beyond repair"[30] and that the United States had "lost" in al Anbar.[31] In other words, the most dominant political force in the region was neither the U.S. military nor the Iraqi government, but al Qaeda.

To win back al Anbar, the commanding Marine general for al Anbar and the commanding Army colonel for Ramadi combined separate but complimentary efforts to woo the tribes to their side. The Army commander for Ramadi, Col. Sean MacFarland, essentially offered to "deputize" a sheikh's militia, allowing police recruits to guard their own neighborhoods, an approach previously expressly forbidden by U.S. policy. Police recruits in Ramadi tripled in June 2006 and again in July, totaling more than 3,000 by the time the colonel's brigade left Iraq in February 2007. Colonel MacFarland was also willing to overlook the "checkered past" and questionable allegiance of many of the sheikhs, claiming, "I've read the reports. . . . You don't get to be a sheik by being a nice guy. These

> The addition of unhampered local intelligence made the military a far more effective force.

guys are ruthless characters. ... That doesn't mean they can't be reliable partners."[32]

There was another key change in the military's policy in al Anbar: money. After several years of trying to rebuild al Anbar according to Western concepts of free market competition, U.S. military commanders eventually realized that a system in which competing contracts went to the lowest bidder was counterproductive. Although the policy was designed to promote competition and fairness, in reality it undermined the tribal system of patronage. Sheikhs traditionally maintain the fealty of their subordinates by providing for them financially. They needed the leeway to funnel funding for reconstruction projects to lesser sheikhs within their tribe in order to reinforce a system of patronage. These higher sheikhs could then ask for cooperation in the form of volunteers for security forces. Without a consistent source and control of revenue, the sheikhs had lost a major method of control over their territory and their people. By paying the sheikhs directly and allowing them to distribute the money as they saw fit, tribal leaders were able to regain their legitimacy and demand the fealty of their tribesmen as they had done in the past.[33] Concurrent with the new approach to providing security on the ground through alliances with local leaders, commanding Marine Brig. Gen. John Allen began courting exiled sheikhs living in Jordan, Syria, and elsewhere abroad. He spent long hours negotiating with them, convincing the sheikhs that he would be able to provide them with power and money upon their return, in addition to their own security forces. He even went so far as to escort a sheikh personally from Jordan to Fallujah, and to walk him to his door.[34]

While the U.S. military was implementing its new strategic approach in the region, the high-level U.S. congressional debate over troop withdrawal began making headlines before the 2006 elections. This led to the perception among the Iraqi population that the United States and its military were most likely going to leave Iraq in the near future. A fundamental consideration for Iraqi leaders when choosing an ally was whether or not that same ally was a political competitor. Al Qaeda had initially presented itself as a complimentary power but eventually became a competing and then dominant power. Although initially perceived as an occupying force bent on stealing Iraq's oil and natural resources, the U.S. military became and is now seen as a complimentary and supportive power. The perception that U.S. troops will leave Iraq in the "near" future is a key factor in the Sunni tribal leaders' willingness to cooperate.[35] As one sheikh

put it, "We consider the Americans to be our friends at the moment so that we can get rid of the extremists."[36]

The pattern of change from the U.S. military, therefore, was one of exercising less control over local leaders, allowing for cultural differences in the way tribes do business, and accepting the fact that tribes will only continue to cooperate as long as it is in their own best interests. The number of troops associated with the surge, often credited for increasing stability in the region, is much less important than this strategic change to empower local leaders and, ironically, the perception that U.S. forces were eventually leaving the region, not increasing.

> The key is not to combat, or counter, insurgency but to transform it.

Changing Winds: The Power of Tribal Identity

The tribal leaders' decision to change sides was no small matter. Only after their partnership with al Qaeda became untenable and there were incentives to ally with the United States did they choose to form a new alliance. Despite years of efforts by U.S. political and military envoys in the region, only this convergence of disillusionment with and rejection of al Qaeda, along with a new approach and incentives from the U.S. military, brought the sheikhs forward. Perhaps no one, however, anticipated the dramatic change in the security of al Anbar as a whole.

Having lost the ability to rid themselves of al Qaeda, the overwhelming might of the U.S. military became a tool at the sheikhs' disposal. The most difficult aspect of counterinsurgency is identifying insurgents.[37] Whereas the U.S. military had previously been unable to target al Qaeda effectively without sufficient local knowledge, the addition of unhampered local intelligence made the military a far more effective force. Muhammad Fanar Kharbeet, son of the late Sheikh Fanar Kharbeet of the Albu Khalifa tribe outside Ramadi, helps clarify why:

> The Coalition Forces has the very strong military ability. The civilians and the tribes, they have a difference that the Coalition Forces doesn't have. It's that they're local – they found and knows who comes from outside. They know who are the insurgents and who are al Qaeda in general, such that there is no more al Qaeda or anything else. You wouldn't believe me. I'm not exaggerating that in two months, in two months everything was finished.[38]

Once given an incentive to do so, the Sunni tribal sheikhs were able to produce tangible results that had eluded U.S. and Iraqi government efforts in the region for years. The most dramatic change was the drop in attacks. Ramadi

commander Colonel MacFarland said, "Once a tribal leader flips, attacks on American forces in that area stop almost overnight."[39]

The most plausible explanation for the immediate drop in violence after a sheikh formed an alliance with U.S. forces is not actually the tactical power of their new alliance, but that reinvigorated tribal allegiances held out over other obligations. There is a misperception among analysts and those unfamiliar with Iraq and al Anbar that insurgents, militias, death squads, security forces, and local al Qaeda members are all entirely separate entities. In truth, many in Iraq pledge allegiance to more than one cause, meaning various groups could count on many of the same individuals within the general populace to support their causes, from providing personnel to logistics support to navigating unknown territory. Previously, the one thing every single group had in common was a disapproval of the continued U.S. military presence. Once this unifying factor was erased, varying allegiances became competing interests in the minds of participating individuals. When forced to choose, these men followed their tribes.

The newly invigorated tribal allegiances made it much more difficult for al Qaeda to operate in the largely homogenous and tight-knit al Anbar society. There are not even any street addresses in the region, so for "outsiders" to infiltrate requires help from "coyotes," men who use their local knowledge to bring strangers through unnoticed. At an April 2007 meeting of the newly formed tribal alliance, one sheikh grabbed the microphone and announced, "If it was not for the coyotes among us, no one would have been killed, kidnapped, or bombed. You know who among you brought the Yemeni with the suicide vest."[40] In effect, the sheikh was decreeing what later events would prove true: without local support, al Qaeda operatives could not work effectively in the region.

General Petraeus's new counterinsurgency strategy, or the surge, was not actually implemented on the ground until mid-2007. Because the Awakening movements began as early as 2005 and continued to gain momentum throughout 2006, the counterinsurgency strategy cannot explain the birth or effects of the Awakening movements in al Anbar. The additional troop strength required for the surge did not finish arriving until the end of May 2007.[41] In fact, surge architect Frederick Kagan admits that full-scale surge operations had not yet begun even by June 30, 2007, long after the changes in al Anbar had taken place.[42] None of the military personnel, even those who caused or participated in the change, have accredited the surge as a factor, nor have any of the sheikhs themselves said that an increase in troop presence and strength was key in driving al Qaeda from the region.[43] Whereas an increased tactical force presence may have helped in crowded urban areas with sparring ethnicities, such as Baghdad, a few thousand troops in the vast rural expanses of al Anbar would not

have made a difference. Furthermore, these new troops would not have been able to curry favor from the sheikhs. Only a concentrated campaign from military leaders to focus on the sheikhs, combined with al Qaeda's increasing intransigence, was able to bring success.

Renewed tribal allegiances are the key ingredients that have undermined, thwarted, restricted, and destroyed al Qaeda's operational, recruiting, and even ideological haven in al Anbar. With the proactive enmity of tribal leaders and the overwhelming might of the U.S. military, al Qaeda now holds few of its earlier advantages.

Policy Implications: Transforming Insurgencies

The Anbar Awakening has since spread across not only regional borders, but sectarian ones as well, with Shi'ite tribal leaders in the north and south of Iraq leading similar movements against al Qaeda and even joining forces at times.[44] The movement, however, has its own internal fractures. Even as violence is down and reconstruction is up, tensions between competing factions within the Awakening councils have arisen.[45] Some Sunni tribal leaders in al Anbar are still suspicious of the Shi'ite-led central government and its perceived association with Iran. The central government rightly sees the increasing power and independence of al Anbar tribes as a threat to its control.[46] Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of Iraq has insisted that continued funding for the militias come under state control and has formed a central committee in his government to oversee their continued arming, training, and funding, much of which comes under his control in October 2008.[47] He has also strictly limited the number of tribal militias officially converted to Iraqi security forces and reserved the right to screen their members.[48]

Marine Col. Stacy Clardy, who commanded coalition forces in al Anbar in 2007, has said, "You can only trust people to do what is in their best interests. The Iraqis are doing what is in their best interest. . . . These are a practical people. But it takes trust."[49] As the colonel suggests, newly formed alliances in the region will succeed or fail not based on political or religious affiliation, but on whether the groups' interests continue to converge on common incentives, such as political participation and economic redevelopment.

Currently, most al Anbar leaders appear far more focused on taking advantage of their newly regained status and rebuilding the region, as well as jockeying for relative position among themselves, rather than marching on Baghdad. With regard to the United States, al Anbar leaders' interests will continue to mesh well as long as the sheikhs' strategy toward Baghdad and each other remains largely nonviolent. If al Anbar leaders begin attacking each other or Iraqi central government forces, then the United States may once again become an adversary

or, at the very least, a hampering obstacle, which could easily lead to the withdrawal of the sheikhs' decrees not to attack U.S. forces.

The new leader of the Awakening movement, Ahmed Abu Reesha, brother of Abd al Sittar, has expressed an interest in gaining formalized representation for his group as a political party with seats in the Baghdad parliament.[50] Some have harkened this development as a harbinger of disaster, a result of the United States having fueled "revanchist fantasies" of Sunni leaders.[51] Nothing could be farther from the truth. The change from an armed movement to a political party displays the essential appeal of a multiparty government, in which minority parties perceive the incentive to continue to participate in governmental processes as outweighing the incentive to secede. Ahmed Abu Reesha is indeed challenging the central government, but he is pursuing his challenge peacefully, through political participation. Having addressed what his people considered the major threat to their security—al Qaeda—they no longer feel the need to pursue armed resistance. For what better solution to violent sectarian divides can one ask than to trade bullets for ballots?

To determine how to maintain this incentive, the balance of economic development and political participation over violent resistance requires a closer examination of the outlook, deference, and ultimate humility of U.S. military commanders on the ground in al Anbar toward tribal leaders. These commanders realized that a good solution is not necessarily a perfect one. As Colonel MacFarland observes, "No matter how imperfect the tribal system appeared to us, it was capable of providing social order and control through culturally appropriate means where governmental control was weak."[52] Rather than looking for ways to subvert or convert existing lines of social and political order, these commanders sought out existing nodes of power and influence within Iraqi society. To be fair, they came to this conclusion only after several years of bloody conflict and multiple failed attempts to produce a lasting peace through largely Western means.

The long-term solution for al Anbar lies in those same indigenous lines of power that military commanders used to form the initial coalition. These commanders helped tribal leaders regain the ability to provide their population with security by strengthening preexisting, traditional means of power sharing and fiscal distribution by reintroducing tribal ordering. Tribal sheikhs in al Anbar are the traditional holders of power in the region. They have a vested interest in maintaining a stable, workable order, within and around their territories, which serves the best interests of their people. These leaders have the capability, dedication, and credibility to guide their people into political participation with the new Iraqi government.

It is imperative that our policies in Iraq not be misled by terminology to counter, or combat, insurgency. At this point, the U.S. military approach could

more appropriately be described as defusing or transforming insurgency instead. It seems not only more apt, but more accurate, as the insurgents who compose the majority of the ranks of the nationalist resistance and al Qaeda's foot soldiers in Iraq have not all been killed, captured, or driven underground. They are the same ones who now occupy positions in the security forces, who have once again become loyal to their tribal sheikhs. They are not gone; they are transformed.

For other conflicts involving tribal dynamics, such as those in Afghanistan and Pakistan's Northwest Territories, what can and most certainly should be applied is the conscientious assessment of local social patterns and nodes of influence. Military commanders in Iraq had to find indigenous currents of power and social order, and find a culturally appropriate way to tap into them. Rather than countering them, commanders plugged into these local lines of power and used them to reach an unprecedented level of cooperation and coordination. Yet, the concepts themselves are not unprecedented; successful counterinsurgencies in the twentieth century have frequently involved the use of local militias.[53] These efforts require trust and a willingness to place that trust on locals, as well as the confidence to empower and enable local leaders.

Finally, local leaders must also want to cooperate. Simply presenting an idea or an alliance to a population and hoping to bolster its survival with military force is insufficient. Local leaders must desire these changes for themselves and their people. Both Abd al Sittar and al-Gaoud were disenfranchised leaders, but both had also proven fiercely loyal and dedicated to the needs of their people. Finding community leaders and local methods with the power to unite others should be a priority, but must be combined with openness toward new ideas. Al Anbar tribal leaders came to U.S. forces more than once before finding a receptive audience.

Tribal leaders in al Anbar and elsewhere in Iraq have helped create a unique opportunity, a period of relative peace and stability in which redevelopment and political representation are more appealing than a return to violence. U.S. and Iraqi leaders should take full advantage of the chance to find workable solutions between groups. These solutions do not have to be perfect, but must have credibility and buy-in from the local populace that will engender continued dedication to peaceful and political solutions to issues rather than violent ones.

Local Knowledge+Military Power=Success

The key to the change in al Anbar and likely in other conflicts involving tribal dynamics over vast rural expanses was not the number of troops, nor was it moral outrage at the brutality of tactics employed by al Qaeda. Instead, it was the Sunni tribal sheikhs' changing assessment of al Qaeda from a complimentary to domineering power, attributable to al Qaeda's success in dismantling and taking over the traditional power structure in al Anbar. The sheikhs' assessment of the

U.S. military changed from that of an occupying power to a supporting one, due in great part to the humility and deference of U.S. military commanders on the ground in al Anbar and their willingness to empower tribal leaders using non-Western methods. The resulting marriage of tribal support and local knowledge combined with U.S. military power produced dramatic results almost overnight in a region previously considered lost beyond all repair.

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