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Going Tribal: Enlisting Afghanistan's Tribes

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My duties were simple; I was to encourage the local inhabitants to stand up for themselves.

-- Former British officer and diplomat Alec Kirkbride, 1971

As United States policy-makers undertake a series of exhaustive reviews of U.S. policies in Afghanistan, they are taking a closer look at Afghan tribes as part of a new strategy for confronting increasing violence.

Much of this newfound interest stems from the very successful turnaround of Anbar Province, Iraq, where Arab tribes played a key part in changing the province from a hotbed of the Sunni Arab insurgency to a place where security has improved to the point that U.S. troops are beginning to be withdrawn.

The tribes are also receiving increased attention because the U.S. does not have enough troops available to undertake a proper counterinsurgency campaign, because of existing requirements in Iraq and the dwell time required between deployments.

But as tribes assume a more central role in our Afghanistan strategy, it is essential that we approach the challenge *informed* by our experiences in Iraq, not dominated by them, and that we craft a pragmatic strategy that will achieve enduring security effects for the Afghan population.

Afghanistan's tribes must forcefully confront the insurgency and not be overwhelmed by it, while maintaining the active support of the people and reducing the tendency of the tribes to fight among themselves.

All of this must be done while building the capacity of the Afghan state without creating a parallel tribal system. Though this would seem to be an almost insurmountable challenge, it is not impossible, and to quote General David Petraeus's view about creating security in Iraq: "Hard is not hopeless."

Any tribal-engagement strategy in Afghanistan that seeks to use the tribes against the insurgency must begin with an understanding of how the Afghan tribes are different from Iraqi tribes. Though Iraq's tribes were, to varying degrees, suppressed, co-opted, included and divided during Baathist rule, their structures remained largely intact. Even though tribal leadership in Iraq was often quite fluid, as rivals made competing claims based on different familial ties to a tribal patriarch, conflicts were generally circumscribed within a coherent tribal structure.

Many of Afghanistan's tribes have been systematically undermined by the Taliban, Pakistani intelligence and local warlords; perverted by the free flow of arms; and weakened by mass migrations of people. Leaders in power may not be the traditional tribal leaders, and some tribes have been so weakened that no single individual leads them. That situation complicates leader selection, legitimacy and efficacy and leads to conflict within and between tribes.

Because many tribes lack a unifying leader, a key aspect of a tribal-engagement strategy should be the convening of tribal security jirgas (a meeting of village elders) throughout a province, primarily orchestrated by the government of the Independent Republic of Afghanistan, or GIROA. The goal of the jirga is to introduce the strategy of empowering the tribes and to identify not only a leader who can marshal the tribe or village against the insurgents but to also select a security committee. The chief goals of the committee are to advise the leader; assist in the selection, vetting and support of lashgars (tribal militias); and create a pool of potential replacements for the leader if he is ineffective, corrupt or killed.

These leaders would form the nucleus of a province-wide tribal force who would, in turn, select a provincial leader who could lead the tribes and take decisive action (in some cases, this may be an existing security official). This individual would, in turn, have a small executive committee to advise him and to help with security planning and the administration of salaries and other support.

Another key distinction between Iraqi and Afghan tribes is that most of Iraq's tribal leaders are well-educated, or at least have a modern outlook with respect to the way they run their affairs, and they are used to working within an established state structure. Many of Afghanistan's tribal leaders are illiterate, have limited administrative ability and often see very little reason to cede authority to the state or to other tribal leaders.

Furthermore, in Afghanistan, powerbrokers often struggle to control the few resources that do exist in the country, such as government revenue, land, roads and bazaars. There are no mitigating factors, such as oil profits, a robust state employment sector, a large private economy or an extensive road system facilitating commerce, to dampen tribal conflicts over resources.

For these reasons, an Afghan tribal-engagement strategy may have some natural limits in terms of how well indigenous forces are able to organize themselves. U.S. forces may encounter resistance from some tribes who either oppose an expansion of the state's authority or see an inclusive approach of empowering all tribes as unacceptable. Additionally, many tribes will be reluctant to diminish or eliminate their revenue streams (e.g., increasing transparency in government revenue as a way of reducing corruption or ceding control of a checkpoint to another force) and will have to be approached in a careful and deliberate manner that seeks to deconflict

tribal friction points. Furthermore, because of the limited education of many tribal leaders, the U.S. will likely have to devote some resources to helping with the administrative tasks of tribal security, such as registering tribal members, administering salaries and facilitating other logistical support.

As effective as a tribal lashgar would be in confronting the insurgency, it must be nested within the institutions of the Afghan state. To ensure that local warlords are accountable to the people and the government, the tribal security leaders should be answerable to a provincial government committee comprised of the governor, the provincial council and the province's members of parliament. Each district chief would ostensibly lead his local committee of tribal elders, and the security committee would be led by the district police chief.

A provincial security committee, which would answer to the government committee, should be led by the Afghan National Police, or ANP, and have members from the National Directorate for Security, the Afghan National Army, or ANA, coalition forces and the heads of the tribal lashgars. To increase political legitimacy, access to the resources of the GIROA and support of the international community, the political leaders would set the tone for the lashgar, moderate disputes, build popular support, ensure government transparency and investigate abuses of authority (in conjunction with the judiciary and local mullahs).

While the security committee would have overall command of the tribal forces, it would work with other state security representatives to create the security plan for the province. The provincial security committee would be tasked with identifying the locations for checkpoints, facilitating the fortification of villages by allocating HESCO barriers, concertina wire and lumber; disbursing pay, ammunition and weapons; registering tribal members and issuing identification cards; and training lashgars while providing overall security direction.

Both the government and security committees would require staff who would process payments, investigate problems, provide reports and facilitate the business of the committees. Following the Iraq model, each tribal member of the lashgar should be promised the opportunity to work for the ANP or the ANA if they perform their tasks well. The promise of future employment works as a check on bad behavior and will eventually serve as an employment magnet for military-age males who support the insurgency out of a need for income. Employment also provides a path for tribes to become legitimate members of the security force.

The role of coalition forces in the raising of tribal lashgars must be targeted, supportive and active. Throughout the process — tribal consultation, selecting leaders, standing up a security committee, creating a provincial government committee, adjudicating disputes and investigating abuses — the coalition must be present. We are often viewed as an honest broker and have the institutional capacity to make the ideas a reality. For example, in a tribe that does not have an identifiable leader, a CF member could facilitate a tribal meeting and work behind the scenes to achieve an understanding among rival candidates. Ideally, the GIROA would undertake this effort, but unfortunately, the GIROA is not viewed as an honest broker by many tribes, and in those instances, a CF member might have to intervene.

Additionally, if an investigation were undertaken by Afghan security and political

representatives about claims of abuse, those men would have to travel to the area, convene an inquiry and then make the consequences of their investigation stick. At that point, friction can occur, particularly if a man has to be fired or arrested because he demanded bribes or beat someone. If the coalition is part of the process, Afghans can feel confident that their decisions will be followed. The CF should assign staff to support government and security committees and enhance their understanding of tribal dynamics by expanding the human-terrain-team system and lengthening the tours of select officials.

In addition to these mentoring, advising, liaison and support functions, the CF will also have to disperse among the tribes to bolster their fighting capability, advise their leaders, train their men and limit tribal conflict. The CF soldiers would have to live with the tribe or village full-time, as was done in many cases in Anbar Province, in numbers large enough to prevent their being overrun by the insurgents or, quite frankly, betrayed by the tribe, while facilitating an active defense of the village. This is especially needed in villages where tribal structures are weak or a leader's capabilities are lacking. This aspect of Afghan tribal-engagement strategy will require more soldiers and a readjustment of existing forces into a population-protection posture.

But not every tribe will need an increased CF presence. Many tribes are already able to provide their members security and need only occasional meetings with the GIROA and CF to replenish ammunition, provide weapons and humanitarian assistance, and coordinate strategy. Although a population-protection approach has largely been undertaken in eastern Afghanistan, it should be broadened to include the whole Pashtun belt. As our Soldiers live with the tribes, they will also have to undertake a mentoring program for the tribal lashgars, but their efforts shouldn't be confined to security training. They should also initiate a literacy and administrative-training program to better develop the abilities of the tribal members to manage their affairs. This kind of training will help tribes become better ANP members as the lashgars transition into official police forces. As our troops disperse among the tribes, it is imperative that they also receive Civil Affairs assistance and work closely with the local provincial-reconstruction team. As security becomes the norm, it will be necessary to follow up quickly with community projects.

Winning and maintaining the support of the population must be a central feature of a tribal-security strategy. While the government, security committees, the judiciary and mullahs will adjudicate disputes and investigate claims of abuse and consequently reduce cases of mistreatment, we should also seek to enlist the population as the eyes and ears of the tribal-security effort.

One possible way of doing this would be to create an anonymous reporting system by which the people could regularly inform on tribal and government officials who abuse their authority. For example, during the 1950s, as the Philippine government battled the Huk insurgency, Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay initiated a system of postcards people could use to report abuses of authority directly to him. He would then investigate the claims and take prompt action, thus putting all government officials on notice that they would never know who might inform on them.

That strategy could be adapted to Afghanistan by creating an anonymous reporting system. For the postcard system to work, postcards would have to be distributed throughout the area, at

bazaars, mosques, government buildings, etc., and, when completed, dropped off anonymously at boxes erected at area mosques or given directly to a CF member. Because most Afghans attend a mosque regularly, their pattern of going to the mosque to pray would help keep them from being identified and subjected to reprisals.

Because the population is mostly illiterate, each postcard could have a series of symbols indicating various abuses of authority or corruption, such as a picture of a hand with money in it for bribery, and colors for each checkpoint could indicate where an abuse had taken place. Additionally, a phone number could be posted for residents to anonymously report abuses. This process must be effective and produce results, and the CF must play a central role in its operations, if we hope to maintain the support of the people.

Another element crucial to maintaining the support of the population is incorporating village mullahs into the tribal security process. Mullahs play a crucial role in Afghan village life because they are often the only literate person in the community, and they perform an important function as peacemaker and reconciler, as well as religious leader.

While they shouldn't have a formal role on a government or security committee, they should be incorporated into the process as observers. Appropriate roles include: serving on committees investigating abuse or serving as mediators between warring factions.

Additionally, through their participation, they give the tribal security effort the imprimatur of religious sanction, blunting efforts by the Taliban to present the tribes as un-Islamic. Furthermore, if complaint boxes were located in each mosque, the local mullah could be given the responsibility for ensuring that no harm came to those who filed a complaint. A final benefit of having the help of the mullahs is that they can speak out in favor of the tribal effort, helping to maintain popular support by telling villagers they must help the tribes resist violence and intimidation. Their help could be facilitated by generous Civil Affairs assistance and other support.

No matter how well-organized the tribal security effort may be, it must have a unifying theme and message to effectively counter the insurgents' messages and propaganda and to inculcate the values of the tribal movement in its members. The tribal security effort should have a distinctive name that captures the aspirations of the people and, conversely, negatively portrays the Taliban. For example, the Taliban or "students" initially sought to eliminate warlordism and corruption from Afghan society by portraying themselves as students of Islam seeking to purify Afghanistan. One possible name could be "The Sarmaalim Movement" or "Principals Movement," which would put the tribes in the dominant position of "teaching" and "directing" the Taliban "students."

Another possibility could be a *Chegha* Council, or "Call for Action" Council, because *chegha* is rooted in the code of Pashtunwali. The themes of law and order, security and justice could be reinforced by messages such as "power to the tribes," "justice for the people" or "revenge for the innocent." Those themes could be summarized as *sialy* (equality), *ezaar* (respect of all people), *badal* (revenge) and *teega/nerkh* (law). Deciding upon a theme and a message reinforces the goals of the tribal lashgar, establishes a code of behavior for tribal members, marginalizes the

Taliban and captures the aspirations and hopes of the people.

An individual code of behavior should also be crafted that can be posted in every village, broadcast over the radio, and seen at bazaars, checkpoints and government buildings. Much like the code former British officer John Bagot Glubb used when he created the Southern Desert Camel Corps and professionalized the Arab Legion in Jordan, the code would spell out the positive behaviors that tribal members should follow and those they should avoid. For example, it could say such simple things as, “Treat the people with respect,” “Be polite and courteous,” “Work hard, be honest, and the people will reward you,” “Don’t lie, cheat or steal,” “Show up on time and work honestly.” These messages may sound a bit simplistic, but the goal is not only to set expectations for tribal behavior but also to limit the ability of the Taliban to feed off of popular distaste for the abuses of power that local security leaders often commit. If a tribal lashgar treats the people with respect and through its positive behavior earns the trust of the people, the people and the government will be united in defeating the Taliban.

One of the central features of the Afghan political and military landscape is the warlord. Many of these men seized power during the struggle against the Soviets, and their corrupt and violent behavior following the communist withdrawal deeply alienated the Afghan people, who, in many cases, welcomed the rise of the Taliban as a force for justice against the depredations of the warlords. Following the toppling of the Taliban in 2001, U.S. policy focused on putting warlords back in power as an inexpensive and quick way to re-establish authority in the countryside. Since that time, the population has become increasingly alienated from the GIROA because of the behavior of the warlords, many of whom are allies of President Karzai, and the people have often enlisted with the Taliban out of frustration. Though some warlords have been removed, their replacements, who have usually been technocrats, are often systematically undermined by the warlord.

If the tribes are going to rise up against the Taliban, the CF must work to check the power of the warlords, but it must do so in a way that doesn’t prompt the warlords to sabotage the tribal movement. A necessary first step is to have CF troops train the warlord’s men and live among them. The goal of this effort is not only to train and professionalize the warlord’s militia but also to gather information on him and his men while monitoring their behavior. Over time, the CF will gain a better understanding of the sources of the warlord’s power, identify leaders within his camp who could be influenced to support the new security order, and have opportunities to mitigate the warlord’s predatory behavior toward the local population and to win his support for the tribal movement.

The warlord will likely oppose or undermine the tribal movement if he doesn’t feel that it is in his interest to support it. If he sees the movement as a possible source of funds for his men, he will support it. If his sources of revenue are directly challenged (e.g., control of checkpoints), he will oppose it. If some of the warlord’s men are known to have committed abuses, it would be better to relieve them quietly and one at a time, so that they don’t have an opportunity to organize against the process. If a warlord-controlled checkpoint is notorious for corruption, for example, it would be best to “Afghanize” it by putting the ANA in charge of it or by creating a joint tribal checkpoint. A strategy of warlord containment and enlistment should move carefully and deliberately to remove any obstacles that could prevent the tribal movement from working;

reduce and remove tribal conflict points, such as checkpoint control and access to government resources; and seek to transform the warlord and his men into responsible citizens.

As tribes assume a more central role in U.S. security policy for Afghanistan, it is essential that we modify the lessons of Iraq to reflect the history and tactical reality of Afghanistan. We should craft a pragmatic strategy that will achieve enduring security effects for the local population by taking advantage of traditional authority structures without replicating the rampant warlordism of the past. We must enlist Afghanistan's tribes to help them forcefully confront the insurgency while maintaining the active support of the people and reducing their tendency to fight among themselves.

We will have to embrace some additional risks for our troops as they live among the people and learn the intricate details of tribal political life. But their efforts will be worth it, because the Afghan people are with us, and if we work with them, breaking bread and suffering through the same struggles to secure their communities, we will decisively defeat the Taliban. As one tribal elder recently told a Marine in Helmand Province (as reported in the Associated Press), "When you protect us, we will be able to protect you." Through this active partnership, Americans and Afghans can defeat terrorism, resist intimidation and set the conditions for peace through victory.

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Notes:

1. John Bagot Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948), 120.
2. Alec Kirkbride, *An Awakening: The Arab Campaign 1917-18* (London: University Press of Arabia, 1971), 104.
3. Members of human-terrain teams are forward-deployed social scientists who help CF members understand the history and culture of a local area to improve their decision-making.

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