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Tribal Engagement: The Way Forward in Afghanistan

Steffen Merten

Following the cooption of the powerful Shinwari tribe of eastern Afghanistan last week, it seems defense planners have finally realized the unsophisticated reality that *tribes* form the fabric of Afghan society. The compounded impotence of the Karzai regime and the recent successes of direct tribal engagement have highlighted the potential of empowering tribal institutions, but years after the success of the Anbar Awakening in Iraq, why are we only now choosing to tap the power centers that have driven the history of Afghanistan for centuries? Perhaps it is Afghanistan's imperial legacy, which speaks to the "ungovernable" nature of tribes that have devoured armies whole, or perhaps naive political hopes for a robust central government, a situation more or less unknown in Afghan history. A third possibility may lie in the popular myth that the "backward and anarchic" habits of tribes preclude their integration within the institutions of a modern nation-state, lest their inherently belligerent and barbaric nature lead to its ruin. Whether stalled by daydreams of a different political reality in Afghanistan or by recalcitrant Afghan elites in Kabul, recent developments suggest that warfighters and scholars like Major Jim Gant, author of "One Tribe at a Time" and an outspoken advocate of tribal engagement, seem to be gaining traction within the defense establishment. But the question remains: what will a tribal strategy spell for the future of Afghanistan?

With due respect to the notion that all counterinsurgency campaigns inevitably differ, the case of the Sultanate of Oman, seated on the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, and its history of tribal rebellion in its mountainous interior, may serve to dispel a degree of the aversion and apprehension for tribal cooption strategies. In the late 1950-1970s Oman experienced a number of tribal insurgencies aimed at unseating the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty based in Muscat. Although the Sultanate benefitted from British assistance and eventually modest oil revenues, the traditional dominance of the tribal system and severely underdeveloped national institutions made tribal cooption a foregone conclusion. This strategy entailed the enlistment of tribal leaders through a combination of inducements and coercion, while belligerent tribes were relegated to political purgatory and denied state resources. Through this process the former Sultan built a coalition of supportive tribes in the country's north, which functioned as the state's de facto bureaucracy.

Following the outbreak of a second rebellion in the country's south in the 1970s (this time of a Marxist flavor) the recently crowned, Sandhurst-educated Sultan Qaboos again resorted to tribal cooption involving the development of tribally-based paramilitary units called "firqats," not dissimilar to the "lashkars" of the Anbar Awakening in Iraq. These irregular forces were based upon existing tribal groups and boundaries, and worked in concert with the British to provide

intelligence and secure tribal territories. Slowly the tribes of the rugged mountainous region, which had little ideological affinity for Marxism, were induced to “peel” away from the insurgent core, and join the Sultan’s Armed Forces through successfully administered amnesty and development programs, until the insurgent force had dwindled to an impotent vanguard.

Following the conflict’s conclusion, “firqats” were either integrated into the Omani army *or* allowed to persist within their territories under a government subsidy which exists to this day. Likewise, powerful tribal leaders from both the north and the south are represented in the regime, and form a key element of the Omani bureaucracy, although the authority and institutions of the tribes have slowly been replaced by the central government following nearly forty years of stability and development. Nonetheless, the tribal system remains an influential element of Omani society, and exhibits a generally symbiotic relationship with the central government.

Despite the impressive success of the Sultan’s counterinsurgency campaigns, the point of this story is not that tribal engagement strategies may be fruitful counterinsurgency tools, – this precedent is clearly set – but more importantly, that the cooption and institutionalization of tribes need not obviate the possibility for stability and development. Though it’s true that the development of consensus and patronage require a more elegant touch than does coercion or even a western conception of democracy, a situation of weak central government, which has typified the history of Afghanistan, need *not* lead to the “Chaostan” that so terrifies American policy-makers. If in doubt whether a strategy of tribal empowerment in Afghanistan need necessarily result in a dangerous political black hole, one need only look to perhaps the sleepest corner of the Middle East and behold the potential of tribes.

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