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## The Tribal Configuration Matrix

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**I have been an Iraqi for 70 years; a Muslim for 1400 years; but, a Tribesman for many thousands of years. -- Iraqi/Sunni Tribal Source, 2009**

### Introduction (by COL Sinclair)

Military planning since the start of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have centered on scenarios designed to kill or capture enemy forces determined to harm the United States while simultaneously limiting collateral damage to prevent alienating the populations of these countries. Coalition military forces revisited endless texts and historical publications on the ways and means to achieve victory fighting insurgent forces. Every reference to include the recently published Counterinsurgency manual FM 3-24 highlights the difficulty of distinguishing an enemy who can blend among the population through the use of threats and coercion to establish complicit sanctuary or as a natural borne citizen of the host country.

Nearly every military commander in Iraq and Afghanistan developed some form of process to analyze indigenous populations to determine agendas and motivations in geographical centers tied to security. In the past five years success in this effort has been mixed based upon the level of violence in any given area and often the level of experience and talent among ground forces or the analysts that support their efforts.

In 2008 I was introduced to a unique tool in the early development phase by my assigned Human Terrain Team. This data call system known as the Tribal Configuration Matrix (TCM) established the first documented baseline for effects based operations in our Brigade's Operational Environment. This tribal network tool resulted in a reconfiguration of the brigade staff to full time effects groups focused on tribal networks in lethal and non-lethal targeting, the new Rule of Law, and political party influences under the recently elected provincial governments. The unique understanding of the sub-tribal powers and their relationships allowed the brigade to rapidly shift from COIN to Foreign Internal Defense and cement the gains of the previous five years through functional relationships with tribal and institutional leaders.

### Narrative

When Human Terrain Team, IZ10 arrived at FOB Kalsu in Babil province in mid-2008 the peak of sectarian motivated violence had already passed. During this time many questions were raised about how enduring the peace might be; countless hours of effort were being given to researching strategic and tactical factors that might again trigger the violence, or sustain peace. The Brigade Combat Team on the ground had been in the area for nine months when the HTT joined them. When this brigade entered the battle, less than 40% of the roads in the province were secure enough for use; by the time the HTT landed most roads were trafficable, but no one was celebrating final success yet.

One of the team's first study efforts was to inquire with the brigade S3 about current maps of provincial tribal areas with associated networks of Sheikhs. An enthusiastic NCO in the brigade topography office said that he had shape files of twenty-seven tribal areas, and he would combine them to produce a tribal map for the province. About two days later he arrived with a large box; he explained that in order to make the map more useful he had put each tribal area on a separate clear plastic overlay sheet. When he laid out his product there were twenty-seven essentially identical overlay sheets; the maps showed that all the tribes in the province owned

exactly the same territories. Clearly this was not the truth of the situation and confirmed why no one in the brigade was using tribal data in planning military operations.

A few weeks after this event the HTT was out at a patrol base south of Baghdad; inquiry of the company S2 about tribes caused him to present the team with a precise map of the surrounding area with details on tribes in their AO. This effort had come about because the company operated in an area where AQI and JAM operations had displaced large segments of the resident population. Each time one of the sectarian militias would sweep through the area, a new group of internally displaced people was created; and, each time the militias left, families came back to their home areas. The company commander needed to know if people in his area were regular residents, or merely passing through; and he needed to know who their community leaders were so he could facilitate communication with the populace. His needs had produced a map of the area that coincidentally showed details of tribal presence and sectarian affiliation, and he had files identifying the local tribal and civil leaders.

This led the HTT on a hunt for similar files in other units; interestingly, all really solid tribal information lay at the company level and below. Details on tribal areas were cataloged and available from the troops on the ground; the data just had not percolated up to the brigade level. After several weeks of searching and collecting separate files of data from numerous commands, a rough map for tribes in Babil Province was produced. From the original, redundant, twenty-seven shape files, this new effort showed dozens of distinctive polygons showing many more tribal groupings in the AO.

The HTT added one level of distinction to the map by using color and shading to indicate whether a particular polygon was entirely Sunni or Shi'a, or whether the space was mixed with one sectarian group as dominant. Blue was chosen to show the Sunni areas, and green was chosen to show the Shi'a tribal areas. The first draft produced an interesting patchwork of mixed colors groupings across the province. When the map was about to be briefed to the brigade commander, one of the senior staff officers looked at the mix of colors and declared, "No, this map will not work. This does not reflect what we know about sectarian locations." Regardless that data for the map had come from commands in the field, this officer drew a line across the map in north Babil province declaring that everything above the line was Sunni, and everything below the line was Shi'a. In doing this he was seeking to reinforce an idea, one making the map fit a popular cliché that north Babil was the site of the "Shi'a/Sunni Fault Line." Colored in this way the map fit the tactical notions driving many of the brigade commander's decisions in the AO.

From a social science perspective this ordered change was unacceptable; it violated the data, changing it to create false impressions in the development of information to support decisions. If the HTT was going to make a different impression about tribal space, then a more complete package of information was needed so the brigade CO would have a representation closer to that revealed by units in the field. The incoming BCT commander (Sinclair) supported an HTT decision to develop an inter-related template of tribal information that would more fully inform unit commanders and Soldiers about tribal presence in their areas; thus the Tribal Configuration Matrix (TCM) was developed. This decision acknowledged another quality of all tribal studies – they are 'living documents'; societies always shift and change; and, because social science study is an on-going endeavor, new refinements and discoveries will emerge as study continues. The first company S2 who had cataloged data on tribes in his AO pointed to the constant need to study the local populace. In areas with high numbers of Internally Displaced Populations (IDP's), people are always moving in, out, and across the battle space. In such situations a commander's need for constant study means a never-ending social science research workload. The 172BCT picked up this task and made study of tribes and their social networks an on-going task for its assigned HTT. This work continues; and, for documents that will be produced in the future by the brigade, it is acknowledged they will remain in need of constant refinement as the social and culture landscape they describe continues to change and evolve.

The Tribal Configuration Matrix has four interrelated elements:

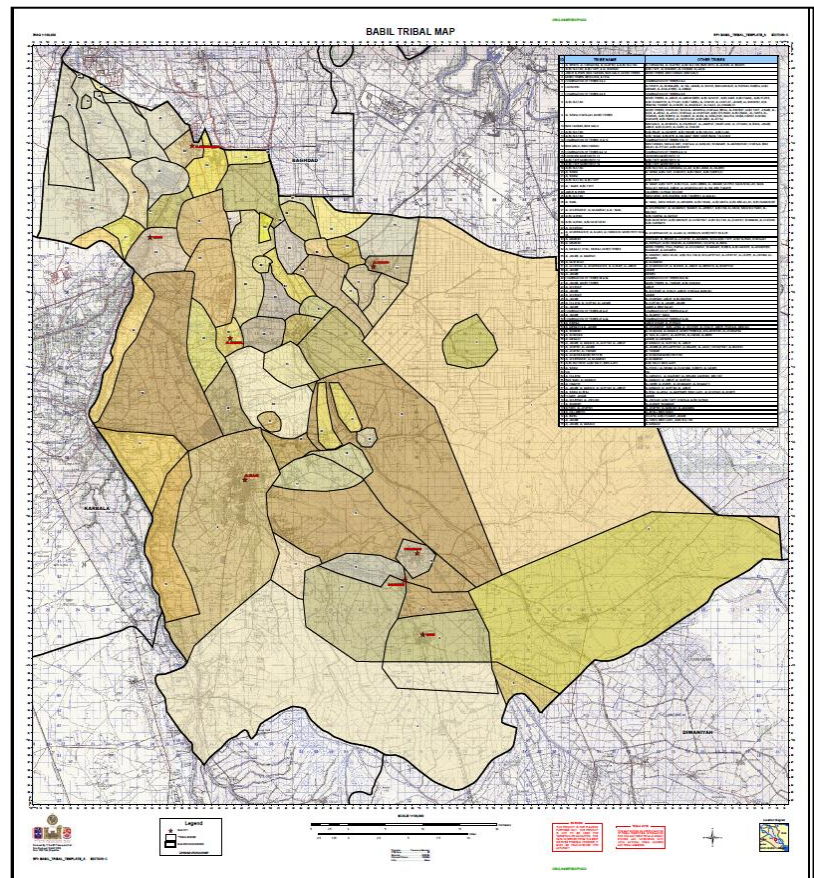
- A Tribal Map showing approximations of tribal (at the "Ashira" level) territory
- Tribal Leader Baseball Cards
- Social Network Link Charts for tribal leaders
- A Tribal Database correlating leaders, areas, and contact information

Connecting these four elements in a collated package allows for a greater degree of educational impact when briefing units and for greater clarity in understanding the effects of strategic and tactical decisions. While these elements can be used individually, having them produced in an integrated package allows for the widest use of academic research, local national accounts, and Soldier experience in the development of useful data. This effort produces a coordinated system of products to assist unit commanders and leaders to distinguish the importance of tribally-centered social and cultural factors that might influence Course of Action Development.

**Tribal Area Map** – This is a geophysical representation of areas claimed by tribal members to be under their ownership or control. The map is built up from polygon shape files with layers of associated information. Tribal areas/polygons are numbered; and, on the side of the map, a corresponding numbered table contains the predominant tribe(s) and sub-tribes within that area. Because tribal areas are informal rather than documented legal areas, borders of polygons are perceptual boundaries rather than rigid demarcations of tribal spaces. Combining a variety of accounts by asking each person about the shape of the territories of rival tribes produced a configuration of data with high confidence and reliability.

This product represents the first of the four layers of the Tribal Configuration Matrix. The Tribal Area Map is designed to supply the user with a rapid, holistic view of tribal territories within the AO. The other three pieces; Tribal Leader Baseball Cards, Tribal Leadership Social Network Mapping, and the Tribal Database provide a greater depth of information regarding individual tribes and their traditional leaders. While the tribal Area Map is designed to provide commanders and soldiers with a holistic view of tribal territories within the AO, the other three layers supply more comprehensive information about individual tribes and their related tribal Sheikhs.

**Tribal Leader Baseball Cards** – Each key tribal leader is described in an individualized information packet. The document contains: a photograph (when available), basic information on personal background, social and cultural factors illustrating their positions on topics and support for US and Coalition Forces, and notes for determining the possible operational relevance of the individual. An important part of the Review Sheets is advice on proper cultural protocols for interacting with each Key Leader; this advice helps to avoid cultural faux pas so critical in Irregular Warfare settings where gaining the confidence of the local populace is so vital. These sheets provide a brief overview of information on the associated person to facilitate rapid learning. Personal background information is collated with communal and official associations which are then visually depicted in the Network Chart portion of the TCM.



## Initial KLE Review

Human Terrain Team, IZXX

**Date:** 26 December xxxxx

**Name:** Sheikh Adnan Ahmed Salem ((Al Salami))



**Role:** Sheikh Adnan carries the rank of "Sheikh Al-'Aam" or "General Sheikh" for Al Salami tribe. He represents all Al Salami tribesmen on social, economic, and security matters at the tribal level. Sheikh Adnan has effective command and control over a population in Iraq estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands.

**Scope - Tribal Area:** The Al Salami tribal territory covers significant portions of the northern third of the Brigade AO; and, neighboring areas to the north and northwest giving them a presence in south Baghdad province and deep into Al-Anbar province. The Al Salami tribal outreach also extends into Baiji and Baghdad cities.

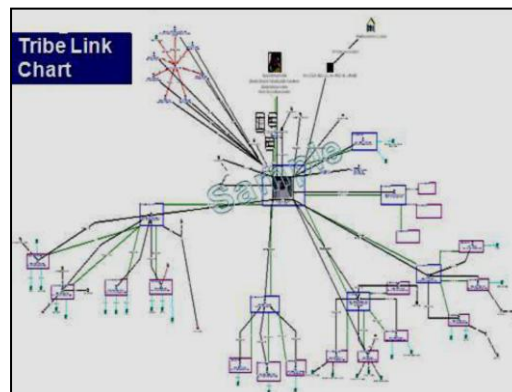
**Scope - Principle Links:** Member - Secular Block (the People Party), Iraq Parliament, Tribal Support Council, SOI Council, Babil Provincial Council, and regional and international connections.

**Cultural/Social Considerations:** Honor is a core value for all Arab KLEs. Since all Sheikh Adnan represents all Salami tribesmen in Iraq, actions expressed towards him impact not only his personal honor, but potentially the honor of all Salami tribesmen. He should be accorded all the protocols and courtesies given any major social leader/dignitary. For example: He should not be subject to search when coming to USF FOB in Babil; he should be the honored guest of the most senior US person in the meeting; and, he should always be seated in a place at meetings befitting his position in society.

**Background:** Sheikh Adnan is a significant international leader for the Al Salami, and for the people of Iraq. He is a former member of the National Assembly and a former Minister of State. He was trained at Cambridge University in Britain, and holds degrees in Economics and Engineering. He resigned his last position in the new government in 2004, noting that similar disrespect had been shown other ministers. His primary residence is in Syria.

**Operational Relevance:** Sheikh Adnan currently holds to a solidly pro-US stance. He is an advocate of "Iraq for Iraqis" and appears interested in bring forth a post-Saddam image of Iraqi (versus' sectarian) identity. He does not take the power inherent to his position lightly; and, he does not make 'statements of convenience.' Getting his endorsement brings immediate authority; because of this, he uses his influence wisely and sparingly. When he endorses a person, position, or policy, several hundred thousand Iraqi Al Salami tribal members are likely to follow his edicts with little question. Important to note: Not all Salami tribesmen hold to his pro-US feelings; and, as of this time, he has not confronted them to bring them into alignment with his stance.

**Social Network Link Charts** - A social network link chart is developed for each key leader associated with a polygon on the Tribal Area Map. As prominent tribal, religious, economic, and political leaders are identified, a comprehensive link analysis chart, using analytical software such as Analyst Notebook, is built to show the complexity and strength of ties between people. The only thing limiting the development of these charts is the degree of relevance deemed necessary. These charts show inter-and intra-tribal relations and begin to illustrate the scope of a Sheikh's influence. Because tribal, economic, political, religious, and tribal information appears on a single product, it is possible to quickly capture the leadership strength of the person of focus.



**Tribal Database** - This is a compendium listing of information on all tribes and tribal leaders in the AO. The database illustrates the structure and the breakdown of each tribe into its sub-tribe layers with corresponding Sheikhs, providing primary contact information (address or grid coordinates of home, phone number, and e-mail - if available). Additionally, the database includes a brief description of the Sheikh's geographical area of responsibility. This database is designed for rapid access, giving Soldiers the basic information on each tribal leader.

## TCM Methodology/Process

Ethnographic research with indigenous populations living in conflict zones is an endeavor requiring great skill and sensitivity; the personal and social trauma inherent in these populations create obstructions a military-based social researcher must overcome as they strive to develop sound information for use. Cross-cultural relationship building skills are the central aptitude required for anyone engage in this type of work. When a tribal informant is being interviewed the researcher is asking for intimate information. People living in areas of long-lasting conflict understand very well the usefulness of such information to those who might do them harm. Aiding the work of the IZ10 Human Terrain Team was the fact that both researchers for this tribal study were themselves

raised in tribal social settings and in modern urban cities. This background allowed them as cultural 'outsiders' to confirm their respect and appreciation for the sensitive nature of the information being shared by Iraqi tribal members. The methodology of the work of tribal mapping must be grounded in researcher skills and attitudes; internal temperament is a precursor to any externally produced social science research stratagem.

For the TCM under discussion from central Iraq, it was created by synthesizing ethnographic data gathered by using multiple, overlapping collection techniques. The first step was an analysis of Arabic and Western texts on Iraqi tribes. Information from these sources was combined with data derived from structured and non-structured interviews with provincial tribal members and leaders. This combination of methods was synthesized to produce the core data from which to construct the initial TCM elements. The background of the researchers and cooperation of tribal members combined to allow for use of participant and non-participant qualitative methods to further validate collected data.

Because of the vast amount of information generated, the creation of a Tribal Configuration Matrix for any specified area requires a minimum of a three person team - two field research elements and one research manager. If significant literature exists on tribes in an area, the research team conducts an initial text analysis to provide an initial basis of data from which to vet data coming in from field studies. In keeping with the operational needs of the command, the field research element then travels to areas of interest to gather data on tribal areas and leadership networks. Two researchers are used in these efforts simply because cultural environments are exceedingly complex sources for communication; especially when more than one local informant is in the room, many small gestures, glances, and comments can occur outside the focus of a single researcher engaged with interviewing. Many times it will be small communications away from the center of engagement that provide affirmations of the truth (or lack of truth) of information being given in interviews. Data from these findings are then passed back to the research manager who catalogs information and builds the companion social network maps, key leader baseball cards, and the tribal database. The research manager also serves as the key logistical support for the field team, assisting them with outside research requests, logistical arrangements, and personnel support. The amount of time it will take for the field element to gain the trust of people in the area under study will vary; this is a phase of work that cannot be rushed. While the field team is out the research manager continues to collect and catalog information gleaned from academic sources. This information is collated with data coming in from field interviews.

At some point, when the field team has built sufficient trust, they can begin to ask tribal people about the territories under their control (and/or territories that *were* under their control). Sometimes it is possible to bring out a Western-style map and literally draw out tribal areas; but the field researchers must be prepared for the fact that many indigenous populations do not visualize their landscape in ways that makes two-dimensional paper maps understandable. Extensive interviewing may be required to develop information that the researcher can later reinterpret on to a two-dimensional map. Some indigenous populations have multiple dimensions in their territory, (physical, historical, and/or spiritual), making the process of cataloging space even more interesting for the researcher.

Another factor that must be clarified is that feelings of *ownership* over a territory do not always translate into *control* over that same space. For example, many different religious groups claim ownership over sacred sites in the city of Jerusalem, but this does not mean that they have any real control over those locations. This is where the researcher must have an idea of how they will illustrate the data on a paper map for military clients. A tribal map not only illustrates physical territory it often reports map layers of emotional, historical, and social information.

It is critical for study validity to interview multiple people about the area of a group. It is common for ethnographic researchers to seek out community leaders; but sometimes these people exaggerate or hide information. Interviewing people from various social class layers can reveal unique information not available from tribal leaders alone. It can also be informative to interview people about tribal territories from people not their own. It is not uncommon for people to have a view of themselves skewed from the perceptions of those outside their tribe. Overlapping data from multiple layers provides offsetting perspectives to strengthen the results of field work.



In mapping tribal areas, knowing something of the history of the tribe is useful. This is an area where literature searches and study are important; for example, a group at one time may have been in an area they no longer occupy, but still claim as a part of their traditional territory. For example, one of the points of current contention in Iraq are areas in the north that were “Arab-ized” during Saddam’s regime. The Kurds who were living in these areas were moved out or killed, and Arabs from the south were moved in to shift the balance of power. Refugees who moved to other parts of Iraq or the Middle East are now returning to some of these areas and are attempting to reclaim them as their own. Sometimes the returnees have documentation of prior ownership and sometimes they do not; but in either case, the presence of documentation is irrelevant to their feeling and claims of ownership. Tribal maps can show who is there, who was there, or even who claims the space even though they do not reside there at present; knowing tribal histories a way of distinguishing what kind of data is being given in informant interviews.

One of the strengths of the Tribal Configuration Matrix process is the flexibility inherent in its data collection methodology. The adaptability of the research protocol allows for study to be conducted in stable areas and in more stressful and tenuous security circumstances. Having this adaptability ensures continuing support to commanders in almost all operational environments. A further strength is the manner in which the four TCM elements support key data conclusions by their interrelated nature.

## Operational Relevance

Any social science tool or protocol must always answer the military question: “So what?” All military social science applications must address the challenges and pragmatic needs of units in the field. In a world where our forces must fight both small scale conflicts tied to international terrorist organizations and large scale operations like in Iraq and Afghanistan, then social science research and products must be arrayed over a similarly wide spectrum of operational challenges. Reviewing the “Combined Arms Center Commanding General (CAC, CG) Priority Research List, 2008-2009,” shows several areas met by use of the Tribal Configuration Matrix.

### **“How will we improve COIN strategy based upon the battles in Iraq?”**

Knowing whose lands and territory on which you stand on is a fundamental need of any commander. Knowing the networks of local leaders and the history that ties or separates them will inform tactical, operational, and strategic options. Some of the battles in Iraq were made harder or easier, because of the availability and use of cultural knowledge about local tribes and their leaders. Few commanders in a COIN environment would consider operating in an area without core information on the indigenous people who surround them. The battles of Iraq have included so many kinds of military operations – international terrorist organizations, tribal vendetta groups, local militia forces, and, sometimes, corrupt local security forces. This reality has required Coalition Forces to form alliances with men that in 1999 or 2003 were their operational enemy. The Tribal Configuration Matrix expands the knowledge available to a military leader as he moves from active war through an irregular war through to stability operations. Having the maps of tribal areas with files on associated leaders for those areas allows forces to vet individuals based on tribal, social, and geographic information as the nature of the fight morphs over time. The TCM assists commanders in determining whether actions in tribal areas are inter-tribal conflicts, criminal actions, or intra-tribal disputes. These tools allow the commander to focus on the right tribes for reward or punishment. Having this collection of maps and files more fully shows the nature of the balance of power in an area, and gives some idea about how to operate more effectively within those areas.

### **“How can units balance the use of ‘hard power with soft power’ in the phases of COIN?”**

One of the clear ways to reduce the need for severe controls over an area is through solid relations with local residents with whom you share a sense of mutual respect. People more willingly supply information when they see how their interests are tied with ours. Local leaders have a greater chance of effecting changes at a lower level of intensity than do foreign military forces. The TCM with its integrated layers of information on tribes and leadership networks reveals cultural ‘leverage points’ within the community, allowing commanders to be more effective in their use and application of power.

**“How should U.S. forces facilitate Afghan (or other) elections in a COIN environment?”**

Knowing tribal areas and leadership networks allows for visibility of other power networks within a community. The phenomena of democratic elections are a new reality for many people who may have lived their whole lives under the control of despots, the “Strong Man” phenomena, or traditional leaders and elders; these are leaders whose authority is never put to a vote. Voting in ways the West might call ‘fair’ will require large shifts in understanding from populations who are used to looking to their tribal elder/leader for guidance. Educating traditional leaders on ways to adapt to a working democracy is a prerequisite to mobilizing a tribal populace to vote. The TCM offers a view of the scope of tribal power in an area; giving some insight into who must be first brought on board if democratic reforms are to succeed.

**“How should local national labor and contractors be employed in a COIN environment?”**

When funds for contracts and labor force hiring comes into many tribal areas the normative balance of power may suddenly shift as new sources of money and scales of economy are presented. Knowing who the tribal ‘strong men’ are, and who they are aligned with in relationships, political, business and tribal affairs, will aid US and coalition forces in making better decisions about how to distribute the influence that comes with money and contracts for labor and services.

**“How does a military force successfully transition responsibility for COIN, stability, and foreign internal defense back to the host nation?”**

The Tribal Configuration Matrix allows for precise location of sources of social power in a region. Overlaying tribal, religious, economic, and military capacities and obstructions will inform planners about the best ways to go about developing local national security forces, economic assets, and governance needs.

**“What institutional or cultural weaknesses of military forces stand in the way of establishing effective post-conflict governance?”**

In tribal areas of the world, locations where modern democracy is entirely new, or at least poorly expressed, it then sometimes falls on US military commanders to shepherd tribal societies through governmental reform. No shift from tribal leadership to a participatory democracy will be successful without the cooperation of traditional tribal leaders. A balance must be struck between over- and under-empowering the tribes and their leaders in this process of change. The TCM reveals where it may be possible to create alliances across tribal lines. It allows a commander to overlay other layers of influence (economic, religious, etc.) onto an area in the development of a plan for supporting the development of effective post-conflict governance.

The combination of elements of the Tribal Configuration Matrix is a considered method that brings a commander rapid access to layers of community, socio-cultural information that might otherwise take years to come to know. From the general picture available on the Tribal Area Map, to the individual information on the Tribal Leader Baseball Cards, to the collective of power from the Social Networks Link Chart, to the collection of information on the Tribal Database, the TCM provide the 172<sup>nd</sup> BCT wide-angle and pinpoint vision on layers of local communities in the five provinces of Iraq in their AE. The availability of an array of information like this offers field commander in other parts of the world access to options and opportunities for application of a wide range of strategic and tactical opportunity.

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