



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

## Tribal Engagement: The Jirga and the Shura

**Jim Gant and William McCallister**

According to NATO's military chief of intelligence in Afghanistan, the Taliban now maintain shadow governors in thirty-three out of thirty-four provinces. While we like to see the world in black and white, the complexities of relationships and alliances in the village and valley make it anything but a straightforward contest between two parties. The U.S. strategy of stripping away Taliban loyalists is not easy in a very complex socio-political landscape. This landscape includes different types of traditional authority, local rivalries and the various configurations of social power in each village and valley.

The rubber of U.S. strategy meets the road in the village assembly. It is in the local assemblies where Coalition Forces speak directly with the local inhabitants and indirectly with the shadow governors of the Taliban. Identifying ahead of time the familial, sectarian, security, economic and political alliances represented in a given village or valley assembly will assist in identifying how these alliances might influence group decisions. We must also contemplate, identify and differentiate between two very different village assemblies: the jirga and shura.

### **Jirga**

*Mac McCallister:*

The jirga is an assembly of village elders and reflects the rituals of the Pashtun traditional assembly in which village and valley notables gather to discuss and resolve disputes and make collective decisions about important social issues.

What follows is a simple model of the types of decision-making makers found in the jirga. The jirga is likely comprised of three major decision-making powers: "the elders," "those with grey beards," and "people with white turbans" or mullahs. The grey beards are knowledgeable in "folk Islam" or *narkh*, i.e. customary law of the village or valley. The elder, the grey beard, and the mullah each represent a distinct center of social power. This does not mean that younger inhabitants of the village or valley are excluded from power or the decision-making process. Remember, this is a simple model. Not every grey beard is a Khan, malik, tribal chief or leader of a solidarity group. Some mullahs are closely aligned with a particular village or valley leadership, some are not. Before I am accused of overly simplifying the complexity that is the Afghan village, my advice is not to get hung up on titles. The model provides a simple framework to start you off. Watch how individuals interact with one another; listen before speaking. Apply your emotional intelligence to identify those individuals that are considered

credible and legitimate voices in the community. Don't forget that the "powerful send messengers."

*Jim Gant:*

It is also sometimes used by other neighboring ethnic groups. Jirgas are most common in Afghanistan and among the Pashtuns in Pakistan near its border with Afghanistan. This definition comes straight from Wikipedia and is as good as any. The key thing to understand is that it is a *tribal* mechanism.

It is also important to note that there are three types or levels of jirgas: a maraka (local jirga), a qawmi (tribal jirga) and a loya jirga (national assembly)."

## **Shura**

*Mac McCallister:*

Shura is an Arabic word for "consultation" or "council". The word itself can describe an assembly, an organized body of participants, an administrative body or council, or may describe a decision-making process.

Islamic scholars consider decision-making via Shura as either obligatory or recommended. The shura is considered obligatory by those Islamic scholars who choose to emphasize the Quranic verse: "...and **consult** with them on the matter" (3:159). The shura is recommended by those Islamic scholars who emphasize the verse "...those who conduct their affairs by **council** are praised" (43:38). One can't help but notice the religious subtext when requesting that a shura be held in an Afghan village or valley.

## **Deciding to Request a Jirga or a Shura**

*Mac McCallister:*

If Coalition Forces request an assembly, consider the differences in effect between calling for a jirga or shura. If you seek to focus on the legitimacy and credibility of the village elders and grey beards, request that a jirga be held.

If you seek to focus on the legitimacy and credibility of the mullah, request that a shura be held. Since you may well be negotiating with a representative of the Taliban shadow government, take care not to inadvertently help the Taliban by adding temporal power (prestige) to the spiritual, especially if you request a shura when a jirga will suffice.

A strategy that seeks to strip away the followers of a local powerbroker requires an understanding of a very complex socio-political landscape. A mental model that informs in terms of shame and honor, segmentation, patronage and territory may help pierce this fog of complexity.

*Jim Gant:*

Ensure you understand the difference between a jirga and a shura. A shura is not purely tribal, but is a political assembly that involves representatives from different levels of government as well as the security forces.

### **Top Ten “Golden Rules” of a Jirga**

1. “De Pakhtu lar ba neesu” - It means “I am speaking to you as a Pashtun”, “I want to see these issues as a Pashtun”, or what I call seeing the perspective of the Pashtun.
2. Keep their culture. Know the customs. Know the culture. Know the people.
3. Listen. Listen. Listen. DO NOT TAKE NOTES.
4. Never “cut” anyone off. Ever.
5. Be honorable.
6. If you think you are “better” than them (smarter, stronger, etc) DON’T GO. SEND SOMEONE ELSE.
7. Be patient. Take your watch off. “How saylah”.
8. Do not make promises you cannot keep.
9. Talk slowly and only when you understand the implications of your words.
10. Pa Pakhtu ba ye khalasswo”...We will end this in the Pastun way...

### **Planning Considerations for a Jirga:**

1. Security Measures:
  - a. The tribal chief that you attend the jirga with must understand that you are turning your “close-in” security over to him.
  - b. You must accept risk here. There might be hundreds of men in and around the area that you do not know.
  - c. Do not “**advertise**” your presence with multiple armored vehicles and heavy weapons systems all over the place.
2. Talk to your tribal chief about an agenda. Ensure it is HIS agenda, not yours.

3. Determine who will attend with you. I attended two jirgas. I went on my own to one, and to the other, I took one man with who moved around outside and kept an eye on the site.
4. If possible, find out the location of the site, so you can better prepare over-all security.
5. Be prepared to brief past, present, and future “accomplishments/plans” to the entire jirga, if asked. Also be prepared to answer questions about the ENTIRE U.S. plan for Afghanistan and its goals. Think this through carefully.
6. If possible, and if the chain of command supports it, you can use this as a platform to announce a new project.

### **Possible Reasons to Attend a Jirga**

1. At the request of the tribal leadership.
2. To establish a personal/professional relationship with the tribal leadership.
3. Some type of conflict resolution.
4. Discuss Tribal Engagement Team (TET) abilities and limitations.
5. Discuss procedures for developing “pillars” for the tribes at all levels.
6. How to improve over-all security measures.
7. Discuss threat activity.
8. Discuss all boundaries.
9. Establish positive US influence.
10. Discuss what THEY need.
11. Plan future projects/operations.
12. Ensure cooperation between TET and bordering tribes.
13. Emphasize “Unity of Effort” with open dialogue.
14. Plan and coordinate projects/operations in conjunction with coalition forces.

Remember, the TET gains “*influence without authority*” through its ability to build relationships with the tribe. The personalities of the tribal chief, as well as the influential members of the tribal

elders, are very important. **YOU MUST BUILD REAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THESE KEY PEOPLE.**

The jirga influences tribal members or other tribes to accomplish goals by providing purpose, direction and motivation. Purpose gives the tribe the reason why; direction tells them what must be done; and motivation gives the tribe the will to do everything they are capable of to accomplish their goals, in some cases at great risk to themselves and families.

Historically, in Afghanistan tribal leaders have been recognized as leaders within a specific sphere of influence. This sphere can expand and shrink. Ensure you know where this influence is “on the ground” and over whom he has influence. The TET should then help him with any shortcomings he may have or with other issues if requested.

Within regards to conducting security and offensive operations, the tribal leader should be responsible for the following:

1. Appoint or recognize subordinate Arbakai or tribal security force (TSF) commanders
2. Prepare the overall plan to accomplish the mission and goals of the tribe
3. Collects supplies from local sources
4. Resources and supplies from external sources (the TET will advise him on their capability)
5. Allocates and distributes resources to his Arbakai commanders (you should never do this. Let the tribal chief do this himself, or set up a system to do so.)
6. The TET **MUST** support the tribal chief however they can. Additional elements may or may not be available to assist the TET.
7. Never promise anything you cannot deliver.
8. Give the tribal chief what he needs and wants.
9. Do not ever “take credit” for anything. The TET does not want dependence but is striving for cooperation.
10. Always remember your presence gives the tribal chief legitimacy. Legitimacy is power.
11. Be prepared, your decisions and your actions could have not only tactical effects, but strategic effects, as well.

*Mac McCallister:*

**The Shura, Excerpted from “[COIN and Irregular Warfare in a Tribal Society Primer](#)”**

1. Shura is an Arabic word for “consultation” or “council”. It is the method by which Arab tribes select leaders and make major decisions.
2. The term has caused much confusion for it is used extensively by tribal leaders to describe an organized body of participants, administrative body, tribal council or consultative and meditative process. In essence, all consultative bodies organized to bring tribal leaders and representatives together are called a shura.
3. For simplicity sake, a shura should be considered a higher level of tribal representational organization that includes the leaders, councils, advisors and principal lieutenants of multiple tribal groups for the purposes of consultation and mediation among tribes.
  - a. The Shura reflects a decision making process — consultative decision making — that is considered either obligatory or desirable by Islamic scholars. Those scholars who choose to emphasize the Quranic verse: “...and **consult** with them on the matter” (3:159) consider shura as mandatory. Islamic scholars who emphasize the verse “those who conduct their affairs by **counsel** (43:38) are praised”, consider shura as recommended.
  - b. A shura is an arena in which each individual tribe voices its concerns and pursues its interests and is not in the Western sense a disciplined interest group representing one party platform.
  - c. A shura is not a political party. If a political party is desired, members of the shura will form a political party distinct and separate from the shura.
  - d. Decisions are reached by consensus and reflect the ability of tribal leaders to build alliances and persuade other tribal sheikhs. ‘Ability to attract’ vice ‘enforce’. Decisions based on consensus not majority rule.
  - e. Persuasion, mediation and negotiation are basic tenets of tribal politics and diplomacy, not the use of force or intimidation. The shura has no “leader” in the Western sense of the word. A respected family based on lineage and bloodline will be named to act as moderator, spokesman or representative for the council.
  - f. Note: any dissenting tribe can decide to remove themselves from the shura, in essence “vote with its feet”, and form its own shura.
  - g. Identifying the networks of familial, tribal, security, economic and political relationships composing a given shura will assist in identifying how these networks influence group decisions.

## **Listening Points During a Visit to the Tribal House/Shura**

1. Designate “observers” and “listeners” to gather atmospherics throughout the visit.
2. Observe and note which other sheikhs (tribes) have also been invited. Note the distance they sit away from paramount sheikh and the order in which they present themselves to him during the initial gathering. This information will assist in developing an understanding of present and potential alliances developing among the tribes.
3. Note the groupings of sheikhs as they meet and talk to each other and the general body language, and approximate length of time they converse with one another.
4. Note the groupings of sheikhs as they approach the paramount sheikh periodically to present petitions or to engage in conversation to determine which sheikhs (sub-tribes) may be aligned for specific objectives.
5. Designated listeners now listen for pledges of loyalty and or petitions that address security, political or economic issues or general exchange of pleasantries to indicate relationships.
6. Listen for concerns in regard to present provincial governance and administration / distribution of resources (patronage building).
7. Observe participant’s body language if discussion involve sectarian political parties, provincial council, and elections.
8. Observe groupings of sheikhs during discussions and note those that speak favorably and those that do not (also take note of those that do not express an opinion) concerning the subject matter of interest.
9. Observe body language and facial expressions if topic involves security, security forces and role of Ministry of Interior (MOI), Ministry of Defense (MOD) or any other central governmental agency. Pay particular attention to side-bar discussions.
10. Designated observers judge body language and facial expressions (after translation) of comments made by U.S. military representative. Especially “key” comments crafted by the U.S. military representative designed to make a point, recommendation or achieve a specific effect.

*Major Jim Gant is currently assigned to the Afghanistan Pakistan Hands (AFPAK Hands) Program as a Tribal Engagement Advisor. AFPAK Hands is designed to develop cadres of officers (and civilians) from each of the military’s services who agree to three to five year tours to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Under the program, the Pentagon plans to assemble a dedicated cadre of about 600 officers and civilians who will develop skills in counterinsurgency, regional languages, and culture, and then be “placed in positions of strategic influence to ensure*

*progress towards achieving US government objectives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Gant, a Special Forces Officer, has served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Warfare Training Group and the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Groups to include tours as a Team Leader and Unconventional Warfare Instructor. In Iraq, he served as a Transition Team Leader with the Iraqi National Police Commando Battalion. Gant has also served as an infantry Rifle/ Scout Platoon Leader. Gant is author of One Tribe at a Time.*

*William S. McCallister is a retired military officer. He has worked extensively in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. While on active duty, McCallister served in numerous infantry and special operations assignments specializing in civil-military, psychological and information operations. He is a published author in military affairs and tribal warfare and has guest lectured at Johns Hopkins University and presented numerous papers at academic and government sponsored conferences such as the Watson Institute, Brown University, Department of the Navy Science and Technology, DARPA, and the Central Intelligence Agency. He has also appeared as a guest on National Public Radio (NPR). McCallister is currently employed as a senior consultant for Applied Knowledge International (AKI). He continues to study current events in Iraq and Afghanistan in tribal terms, including the tribal art of war and peace, tribal mediation processes, development of tribal centers of power, and tribal influence in political developments. He has applied his study of tribal culture in assessing reconstruction efforts, as well as insurgency and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror.*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).  
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: [comment@smallwarsjournal.com](mailto:comment@smallwarsjournal.com)

Visit [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)