



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

## Going Tribal in Afghanistan

By *SWJ Editors*

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**Going Tribal in Afghanistan** - James Dao, *New York Times*.

In Washington, the debate over Afghanistan seems to center around two broad ideas: counterinsurgency versus counterterrorism. Should the United States add troops for a more population-centric strategy, as Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal advocates? Or should it use a less ground-heavy approach, disrupting Al Qaeda with Special Operation Forces and unmanned drones, as Vice President Joseph Biden argues? There is, of course, no shortage of other ideas, many of them afloat in the blogosphere. Among the more provocative ones has been posted on Steven Pressfield's blog, **It's the Tribes, Stupid**, and it comes from an Army Special Forces major who has spent much time in both Afghanistan and Iraq training indigenous fighters.

The 45-page paper, "**One Tribe at a Time**" by Maj. Jim Gant, argues that one way to undermine the insurgency is to return, in part, to the strategy that ousted the Taliban to begin with: Embed small, highly skilled and almost completely autonomous units with tribes across Afghanistan. Much like the Green Berets who worked with the Northern Alliance to drive out the Taliban in 2001 and 2002, the units, which Major Gant calls Tribal Engagement Teams, would wear Afghan garb and live in Afghan villages for extended periods, training, equipping and fighting alongside tribal militias.

The goal would be to encourage what Major Gant sees as a natural antipathy between many tribes toward some of the more ideological, anti-American segments of the insurgency. Just as the Sunni tribesmen dubbed the Sons of Iraq turned against foreign al-Qaeda fighters in Iraq, Major Gant argues that Tribal Engagement Teams can counter al-Qaeda networks in Afghanistan by creating or strengthening indigenous fighting forces built upon local militias. That kind of strategy has been discussed in Afghanistan, where critics argue that it would undermine the central government in Kabul and encourage warlordism...

More at *[The New York Times](#)*.

### About the Author



**SWJ Editors**

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