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One Tribe at a Time: The Way Forward

Major Jim Gant

Tribal engagement is the most viable option we have for changing the tide of the war in Afghanistan. Tribes, though weakened by decades of war and social unrest, remain the defining local organization in the rural areas of the east and south. This insurgency is about the Pashtuns. Pashtuns are waging the insurgency in the Pashtun tribal belt. The key to success in this very difficult and complex situation lies in the minds and the actions of the Pashtun tribesmen, not in the motivations of some foreign and Afghan officials who have far less invested in the war's outcome and are sitting in offices and ministries in Kabul and Kandahar protecting the "status quo."

The Pashtun tribes, with U.S. military assistance and on-the-ground presence, are the only force capable of pushing back the Taliban and providing the central government and Afghan security forces the time and space in which to assert greater stability. Seen in that light, contrary arguments that empowering the tribes would weaken the central government, interfere with the building of the Afghan Army and police, or prove too risky or unfeasible are short-sighted and reflect a failure to grasp the essential role of Pashtun tribes and tribal relationships in shaping the country's future.

At the same time, if we do not use this opportunity to give Pashtun tribes a voice in politics at the district, provincial and central levels of a reformed Afghan government, the long-term stability of the nation will be threatened. Borrowing a term from David Kilcullen at the [Tribal Engagement Workshop](#), the real challenge may be the "catastrophic success" of tribes that are providing security but are not empowered politically.

A strategy of tribal engagement in the east and tribal-building in the south will play a vital role in determining whether Pashtun tribal influence becomes a force to help stabilize Afghanistan rather than another missed opportunity. Trained teams able to speak Pashtu and see things through the eyes of a tribesman are essential to building the enduring relationships with tribal leaders necessary to make this time-sensitive yet resource-efficient strategy succeed. The Pashtuns have a saying: "You can build anything, but you cannot rebuild trust once it is broken." The Pashtun tribes want "people" not a plan or a process, a reality that has hit home as I've brushed up on my Pashtu over the last three months in preparation for deployment. The real question is – are we willing to give them that?

Jim Gant

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