

Tribal Engagement in Anbar Province

The Critical Role of Special Operations Forces

By THOMAS R. SEARLE

During a September 2007 visit to Anbar Province in western Iraq, President George W. Bush stated, “Anbar is a huge province. It was once written off as lost. It is now one of the safest places in Iraq.” The reason for this stunning turnabout was that Anbaris “who once fought side by side with al Qaeda against coalition troops [are] now fighting side by side with coalition troops against al Qaeda.”¹ The program that convinced the Anbaris to support the coalition and the Iraqi national government was called *tribal engagement*, one of the most successful U.S. programs implemented in Iraq. It has been so beneficial that it was extended to other provinces, and through the Concerned Local Citizens program, the same approach has spread to areas where tribal loyalties were weaker than in Anbar.

This article highlights the initial role of U.S. special operations forces (SOF) in tribal engagement in Anbar Province and how both Army and Marine Corps forces adopted the engagement strategy and greatly expanded the security environment, altering the political landscape in Anbar and other Iraqi provinces. Conventional U.S. forces have been critical to the success of tribal engagement in Anbar. Indeed, from the start of the initiative, SOF worked in close coordination with the conventional forces that were the “battlespace owners.” Various non-Department of Defense agencies made major contributions to tribal engagement at critical moments. The government of Iraq played a vital role, but most important, the heroes of tribal engagement have been the Iraqi people. In the face of horrifying reprisals, Sunni tribesmen have joined their erstwhile enemies, the U.S. and coalition military, and stood up to the al Qaeda terrorists. Without the



SEAL team secures Air Force One at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq

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courage and determination of the tribesmen in Anbar Province, tribal engagement would not have succeeded.

Initial Planning

Tribes in Iraq are ancient social organizations that have survived because they have constantly evolved. Economic activity has also changed the tribe, and these changes impacted both the power dynamics within each tribe and intertribal relations. During Saddam's reign, the tribes along the Euphrates River in Anbar Province had a strong tribal structure. Unable to subvert these structures, Saddam's government and the Ba'ath party coexisted uneasily with them.

In spring 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam's regime, U.S. SOF made contact with some tribes in western Iraq, but the collapse of conventional resistance led to the redeployment of the bulk of SOF. The remaining forces were placed under a new headquarters, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Arabian Peninsula (CJSOTF–AP), on May 1, 2003.² As 2003 progressed, however, the ineffective conventional resistance gave way to a much more dangerous insurgency and an incipient terrorist resistance to the U.S. occupation. To meet this threat, additional SOF were alerted for redeployment to increase their presence across Iraq, including in Anbar Province. The 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), slated to arrive in Anbar in January 2004, began planning during the second half of 2003.

The SOF planners considered various indirect methods to defeat the insurgent groups, led by former regime members and foreign fighters who were starting to coalesce under the leadership of Abu Musab al Zarqawi and would later become known as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The planners decided to engage Anbar tribes to gain access to the “human and geographic terrain” in the province and thereby deny that terrain to the insurgents and terrorists. In the words of one participant, this was a way to “dry up the lake so you can kill the piranha.” SOF planners selected the tribes that Saddam had oppressed and marginalized as the best candidates for initial contact.

Saddam had oppressed these tribes and forced them out of most forms of legitimate commerce. They had to rely on smuggling and the black market to survive. After Sadd-

am's fall, their smuggling networks brought foreign jihadists and weapons into Iraq, but the smuggling tribes were looking to make a profit, not to support religious fanaticism. With the right incentives, the SOF planners reasoned, these tribes would turn on the terrorists. The tribes and SOF teams, with coalition support, could then force the enemy out of the tribal areas. Planners also wanted each tribe to provide a small force to participate in coalition operations and, with training from the special operations teams, develop the capability to conduct unilateral counterterrorist and counterinsurgent operations.³

The planners believed they could start small, and when the first few tribes began demonstrating improvements in security and prosperity, other tribes would want to join. This “model city” approach took time, but once it got rolling, the tribes realized they could improve their security and economic prospects

those projects, building trust and respect. Over time, these projects increased the prestige and authority of the sub-sheikhs, thereby undermining the sheikhs above them. The top tribal leaders then realized that it was in their and their tribes' best interests to ask SOF troops for CA projects. This indirect approach took more time than approaching a top sheikh directly, but was more effective because the senior sheikh asked for a meeting with the team rather than the other way around.

Engaging the tribes was not easy in early 2004. The SOF troops ruled out trying to win “hearts and minds” by simply doing nice things for the tribes because the tribes did what was in *their* long-term best interest. Influencing the tribes meant earning trust and respect through commitment and continuity. At that point, the United States had not yet pursued the strategy of continuity and commitment in Anbar and, accordingly, had not



Sunni tribal leader signs declaration of support for Sons of Iraq program in Al Noor

by supporting the coalition. Any tribal leader who tolerated insurgent activity was brought into line by denying his tribe access to the economic benefits of supporting the coalition.

Starting from Scratch

In 2004, the mainstream Anbar tribes were sitting on the fence or leaning toward the insurgents and terrorists. The SOF teams modified their model city approach with some of the tribes. When they arrived in Anbar, SOF teams approached lower-level tribal sub-sheikhs and found out what they needed in terms of civil affairs (CA) projects. The SOF elements then “under”-promised and “over”-performed on

earned much trust or respect there. The SOF troops largely started from scratch.⁴

On the ground in Anbar, SOF teams soon learned that by managing the CA projects, they were in effect becoming sheikhs, as Iraqi civilians came to *them* with their problems. Not wanting to assume responsibility for the tribal social and political structures, SOF teams shifted their approach and publicly gave the resources to local sheikhs. In doing so, the teams lost some control over how the resources were used and accepted that some sheikhs would enrich themselves. Because of their cultural awareness, SOF personnel understood the way Iraqi society worked and made use of the

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tribal customs to advance tribal engagement. Empowering the sheikhs had the substantial benefit of reinforcing both the sheikh's authority and indigenous Iraqi social structures that could be maintained indefinitely. While the sheikh was responsible for running the programs, the SOF teams focused on building indigenous security forces, targeting terrorists and insurgents, and expanding the tribal engagement networks.

The special operators had to be skillful purveyors of "carrots and sticks" to win over the sheikhs. The rewards and punishments ranged from a commitment to reinforce the sheikhs' forces in the event of an al Qaeda attack, to denying CA support to an uncooperative sheikh, to public gestures of respect and indications of American support. The SOF teams arrived with strong cultural understanding but had to develop the detailed local knowledge necessary to determine whom to influence and how. The teams needed the authority to provide the precise carrot or stick the situation required.

violence all increased the pace of change in Iraq. The information gap between predeployment intelligence and ground truth had to be bridged. The SOF teams used the individuals and tribes whom they were already in contact with to arrange meetings with other tribal elders. In this manner, SOF expanded the network of people they were engaged with and the area of which they had detailed local knowledge.

Early 2004 was a difficult time in Anbar Province, particularly after four Blackwater contractors were killed in Fallujah in April and their bodies were hanged from a bridge and shown on television around the world. The U.S. Marines, who owned the battlespace in Anbar Province, had arrived with a strong appreciation for the potential benefits of engaging the tribes. The heavy fighting in and around Fallujah and Ramadi occupied the bulk of the Marines' effort, but they encouraged and supported the SOF tribal engagement efforts. For example, the Marines reinforced each SOF team with 10 or 12 troops, nearly

agency Relief Program (CERP) funds to pay local security forces, which meant that local U.S. commanders (SOF and conventional) could no longer unilaterally fund the tribal engagement security forces. The intent of this measure was to shift the onus for local security away from the tribes and U.S. commanders and toward the security forces of the new government. But it decreased tribal authority and took a valuable tool away from the SOF teams working on tribal engagement.

The centralized recruiting and training of Iraqi security forces posed special problems in Anbar at that time. To join the Security Forces, Iraqis would have to go to Ramadi, the province capital, for processing. As predicted by some sheikhs, their tribesmen were subjected to suicide bombings at the recruiting facility. Moreover, while the security force recruits were at the training locations, terrorists could threaten to harm or kill their families if the recruits did not drop out of training. Many recruits returned home to protect their families.

There were reasons, however, not to empower the tribes. In the past, U.S. policy-makers were concerned that local loyalties could break Iraq into smaller states.⁵ After the fall of Saddam, with a weak central government and al Qaeda terrorists working hard to foment ethnic and regional strife, it might not have been wise to reinforce the centrifugal forces in Iraqi society by strengthening the tribes.⁶ Senior leaders had to decide whether the tactical benefits of working with the tribes in Anbar warranted the strategic risks and whether tribal engagement was the best use of scarce SOF resources. In late 2004, U.S. leaders substantially reduced the SOF presence in the province. Those tribes that had worked with SOF limited themselves to defensive operations, and some suffered heavy retribution from AQI.

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Gaining detailed situational awareness was difficult. Although the tribes are some of the oldest and most stable elements in Iraqi society, they are still dynamic and always evolving. The U.S. invasion, fall of Saddam's regime, influx of foreign terrorists, and continuing

doubling the size of the teams and increasing what each team could do. Additionally, Marine Corps generals met often with tribal leaders brought in by the SOF teams. These meetings significantly enhanced the perceived (and thus real) authority of the tribal leaders and the SOF teams that worked with them.

In addition to the high level of enemy activity in Anbar Province in 2004, after the transfer of sovereignty to the Interim Iraqi Government in late June, U.S. commanders could no longer use Commanders' Emer-

Iraqi soldiers patrol in Anbar Province



MWH-2 Combat Camera (James F. Cline III)

Persistent Presence

In 2005, however, senior U.S. leaders increased SOF presence in Anbar. The teams that had operated there in early 2004 returned to the same locations and renewed their connections with the local tribes. The SOF deployment schedule of 7 months overseas and 7 months at home station allowed for "persistent presence," as teams routinely returned to the same villages during each rotation.

In 2005, as a partial substitute for the lost CERP funding, the Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) authorized SOF and conventional units to establish an indigenous force under the name "Desert Protectors." The initial vision

was that the Desert Protectors would bridge the gap between the government's forces and tribal militias by creating a government-sanctioned tribal force. The Desert Protectors would provide local intelligence and additional troops to U.S. and Iraqi forces and would help break the cycle of violence between the tribes and the U.S. and Iraqi government forces. Starting around Al Qaim, the Desert Protectors had a rocky beginning, but once it got started, other tribes joined. The program grew to hundreds of troops from several tribes. In November 2005, elements of the Marine 2^d Regimental Combat Team (RCT) and Army human intelligence personnel, supported by the Desert Protector forces, conducted a 2-week sweep along the Euphrates River in Anbar. Local cooperation helped apprehend 800 suspected insurgents.

MNC-I and the government later decided to turn the Desert Protectors into scout platoons in the Iraqi army. The tribesmen, however, wanted to serve closer to home and secure their families and villages, and many quit rather than join an army unit that was available for operations anywhere in Iraq. At the very least, the Desert Protectors may have looked like a failure because they seemed to quit rather than transition into the army as planned. In the fall of 2005, an unnamed U.S. officer in Iraq told *Inside the Pentagon*, "The issue is getting [tribal forces] to fight insurgents outside their tribal area. . . . So far, the tribal engagement strategy from a military standpoint has not [done] what it was advertised [to do]."⁷

This anonymous critic missed the point of tribal engagement, but did identify a key challenge: how to measure its effectiveness. Some felt that tribal engagement was just a way to generate more kinetic strikes and that the measure of success was the number of offensive tactical raids conducted by tribal forces outside their home areas. But tribal engagement was a type of indirect, irregular warfare, important at all levels, from the tactical to the strategic, and a better measure of effectiveness was the improvement in security within the tribes' areas of influence.

Since 2004, U.S. SOF and conventional forces have trained and worked with tribal forces to build capacity and capabilities. Although the tribal forces' tactical offensive strikes received much attention, the *real power* of tribal engagement, and the subsequent Concerned Local Citizens program, was creating local security forces that could, with backup from U.S. and Iraqi forces, defend their local areas against AQI. Their security activities had decisive operational

and strategic effects by driving the terrorists and insurgents out of safe havens in Anbar Province. The former Desert Protectors, who returned home, did just that when many joined the local police and continued to enhance local security, though not as part of the army. The tribes best influenced events outside their home areas by setting an example of success that other tribes would want to emulate.

Another measure of success in 2005 was that some tribes started to police themselves. This was an important change from 2004 when tribes would only pass along intelligence and conduct operations against other tribes. The effect was noticeable to the SOF teams because they were working with the same tribal leaders again.

Gaining Momentum

The SOF and conventional forces' successes with tribal engagement in 2004 and 2005 gained even more momentum in 2006. During 2007, tribal engagement enabled the coalition to drive AQI out of the province by increasing security and prosperity of the tribes that had joined the program earlier, and the publicity given to the tribal engagement program played crucial roles in this turnabout. There were also successful U.S. conventional

were trying to destroy the tribal system and their own authority and to replace them with a pan-Islamic fundamentalist theocracy.

Confronted with a brutal AQI occupation, the tribal sheikhs had ample reasons to look for alternatives. By 2006, the U.S. and Iraqi government policy toward the tribes was more sympathetic.¹⁰ In late 2005 and early 2006, U.S. conventional forces improved their counterinsurgency operations in several ways. The U.S. military leadership pushed more of their own forces into Anbar Province, which made the coalition more of a viable long-term force that could win against AQI. More important, coalition forces put increased emphasis on providing security for civilians. For example, the 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division, with interagency support, secured cooperation of tribal sheikhs to recruit local police for Ramadi. With the tribes' overt support, the police force grew from fewer than 200 to 5,000 and was critical to breaking AQI's hold on the city. Likewise, in July 2006, SOF and the 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry Regiment, combined to carry out the first successful police recruiting drive in the Anbar city of Hit; 150 tribesmen joined the local force as a result.

U.S. conventional and Iraqi forces also fanned out to small outposts in populated

starting around Al Qaim, the Desert Protectors had a rocky beginning, but once it got started, other tribes joined

offensives and AQI mistakes that convinced tribes to abandon AQI and assist the coalition in the fight against the terrorists.

To the tribes in Anbar Province, AQI may have originally appeared to be a valuable ally against the U.S. occupation, but as it gained strength, it imposed its will on the local community. After arriving in Anbar, these terrorists stressed their support of the local tribes in their fight against U.S. forces, but they soon attempted to take control of tribal areas and inflicted their own radical occupation on the tribal people. The organization imposed an extreme Islamic fundamentalism that in time alienated the local populations.⁸ AQI also forced the tribes to provide local women as wives for the terrorists, and their foreign fighters were often disrespectful toward the sheikhs and murdered those who resisted.⁹ Their extreme brutality intimidated the population in the short run and created an inevitable backlash. The AQI regime crippled the local economy. The sheikhs saw that the terrorists

areas, where they maintained a presence and backed up the local police. The combination of U.S. military prowess and Iraqi familiarity and ties to the province made them a better long-term bet for the tribes than AQI. Accordingly, support for AQI faded in the province.¹¹

Another major contribution of the conventional forces was engaging tribal leaders outside Iraq. Many large tribes extended into neighboring countries, and when violence rose, some top tribal leaders left Iraq. The SOF elements in Iraq lacked the rank to get the attention of these leaders, but general and flag officers from Multi-National Force–West, MNC–I, and Multi-National Forces–Iraq played critical roles by meeting with key tribal leaders outside Iraq.¹²

Tribal engagement was also challenging from a public affairs and information operations standpoint. To enlist tribes, the tribal engagement program needed to be well publicized. However, any publicity immediately made the tribes that joined, and the sheikhs

who led them, high priority targets for AQI. Once Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha decided to support the United States and the Iraqi government, he was tireless in promoting his new cause. He convinced many other sheikhs to side with them as well and gained much publicity for the program. AQI eventually assassinated him, but not before he had substantially strengthened the tribal engagement program.

As tribal engagement gathered momentum and conventional forces in Anbar Province took the lead, SOF shifted to a “connect-the-dots” role of working the seams and pulling together the many local tribal engagement activities across Anbar and in neighboring provinces. To do this, the SOF presence in western Iraq was increased by adding a Naval Special Warfare Task Group of SEALs. The CJSOTF-AP commander drew the boundaries between his elements so that they overlapped the boundaries between conventional forces in order to meet the challenge of closing the seams between conventional forces. This put SOF teams in a position to identify and address enemy efforts to find and exploit the boundaries between U.S. conventional forces.

MNC-I and Multi-National Division-Baghdad established “reconciliation cells” in the summer of 2007 to manage tribal engagement efforts and recruit tribal members into local provisional police and the Iraqi security forces.¹³ The 2^d Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, worked with a 2,300-man Sunni unit, dubbed the Volunteers, to patrol a sector of Anbar between Baghdad and Fallujah. According to the division commander, violence fell sharply in the area between April and July 2007, and there were no attacks on U.S. forces there for more than 2 months.¹⁴ The Marine 6th RCT trained tribal volunteers in eastern Anbar Province in mid-2007. Their sheikh asked tribal members to fight AQI, so the Marines agreed to train 50 tribesmen to form a provincial security force in their village.¹⁵ The success of tribal engagement in Anbar led other units to adopt similar approaches. In Babil Province, elements of the 25th Infantry Division began approaching tribes in the summer of 2007 to enlist volunteers for local security forces in exchange for funds and job programs in their areas.¹⁶

While tribal engagement has helped U.S. and Iraqi forces dramatically improve security in Anbar Province, significant challenges remain. In late 2007, for instance, the province still lacked a functioning Iraqi criminal justice system. Though the new police forces can

detain or arrest suspects, there was often no functioning court system or prison to hold convicted criminals. Here again the tribal system has been helpful because a sheikh can pay a “fine” to have the arrested man released. To avoid having to pay a fine repeatedly, the sheikh will typically either force the released detainee to cease his insurgent activities or leave the area. In extreme cases, the tribe may even kill a member who repeatedly brings dishonor on it. Tribal justice is not a complete substitute for a modern legal system, but it has helped to fill the gap until a fully functional Iraqi justice system is in place in Anbar Province.

Tribal engagement has been crucial in driving international terrorists out of Anbar Province. The same methods are being employed in other provinces¹⁷ to squeeze out Shiite death squads and al Qaeda terrorists.¹⁸ On the whole, tribal engagement has proven to be a highly effective counterinsurgent and counterterrorist technique, and it might not be an exaggeration to say that if the U.S. effort in Iraq is ultimately successful, tribal engagement will almost certainly be a main reason. This makes it particularly important to understand what tribal forces can and cannot achieve militarily, politically, and economically. It is also important to find the right balance between engaging at the tribal and national levels.

Tribal engagement is another aspect of the irregular warfare that has been so prevalent since 9/11. While tribal engagement may seem like an approach that will only work in a society that still has strong tribal and clan social structures, it is really just an example of the broader concept of societal engagement. Special operations forces are typically among the smaller elements in any given operational area, and as such, they have a particularly acute need to understand their operational environment, including the civilian society.

The basic premise of special operations societal engagement is to accomplish special operations missions (in this case, defeating the terrorists) by engaging the existing social structure (in this case, tribes). The cultural knowledge, foreign internal defense, and unconventional warfare training that special operations forces bring to the fight make them particularly well suited to perform tribal engagement (and societal engagement more generally), but other U.S. military forces and the broader interagency community have been essential to the success in this area in the past

and will continue to be effective, not only in Iraq but also across the war on terror. **JFQ**

NOTES

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