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HUMAN TERRAIN SYSTEM—RESEARCH REACHBACK CENTER

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE REPORT



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Afghan Tribal Structure Versus Iraqi Tribal Structure

Request for Research Summary

- 1 Provide compare and contrast Iraqi tribal structure with Pashtun tribal structure.
- 2 Provide any Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) for “tribal engagement” that have been either successful or detrimental to US efforts in Iraq.
- 3 Provide suggestions for TTPs that might prove successful if used in Afghanistan.

Purpose/Justification

Most US personnel that are serving in Afghanistan have already served a tour in Iraq and are accustomed to doing things “the Iraq way”. Many people are trying to apply the lessons learned in Iraq to Afghanistan, which in many cases is inappropriate. AF2 wants to provide a product to US units to compare and contrast Iraqi tribal structure and Pashtun tribal structure to prevent future missteps by US forces.

The notion of applying ideas that worked in Iraq to Afghanistan is fraught with problems. The “lessons don’t transfer directly,” according to John Nagl, one of the authors of the Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24).¹ William McCallister, an expert advisor to the Marine Corps on tribal dynamics in Iraq² said he is “not a fan of taking the Anbar experience and creating TTPs” for a Pashtun context.³

The reasons behind this are legion. For one, the historical experiences of Iraqi and Pashtun societies are so dissimilar as to make comparing them difficult, if not impossible. For another, the specific circumstances of each warzone—one a sectarian conflict, the other a fractured society handling an international insurgency—doesn’t allow for easy generalization between the two.

Furthermore, each society is fundamentally different on a structural level. In Iraq, leadership is in a sense “institutionalized,” or “codified” in the sense that there is a set and identifiable structure for community leadership to interact with each other and with the State. In Afghanistan, however, that system is neither “institutionalized” nor “codified” in any real sense; therefore, structures of community leadership and power relationships within and between tribal groups and the state are much more *ad hoc* and cannot be discussed in a general sense. Comparing these two societies side-by-side demonstrates this, and shows just how difficult it is to draw lessons from one to the other.

Bottom Line Up Front

- Iraqi tribes are ordered hierarchies
- Pashtun tribes are not ordered hierarchies
- While a tribal hierarchy allows for coherent, ordered engagement policies, Pashtun tribal structure does not
- Thus, TTPs from Iraq are not transferrable to Afghanistan except in the vaguest sense
- While not necessarily TTPs, there are guiding principles that will be effective in engaging Pashtun tribes

Iraqi tribes are like most tribal societies in Southwest Asia: they tend to be patrilineal, hierarchical, and geographic (though some of the specific tribes that formed the Sons of Iraq are almost exclusively geographic in organization: their cohesion is based not on family ties, but rather on co-location⁴). They are also segmentary. As explained by Evans-Pritchard, segmentary tribes consist of equal and opposing divisions “nested” within a division of higher level along the hierarchy (see Figure 1, below).⁵ At each level in the hierarchy, individuals support closer kinsmen against threats from more distant lineages. In other words, there is a structural impetus to form closely related communities who defend their community against outsiders.

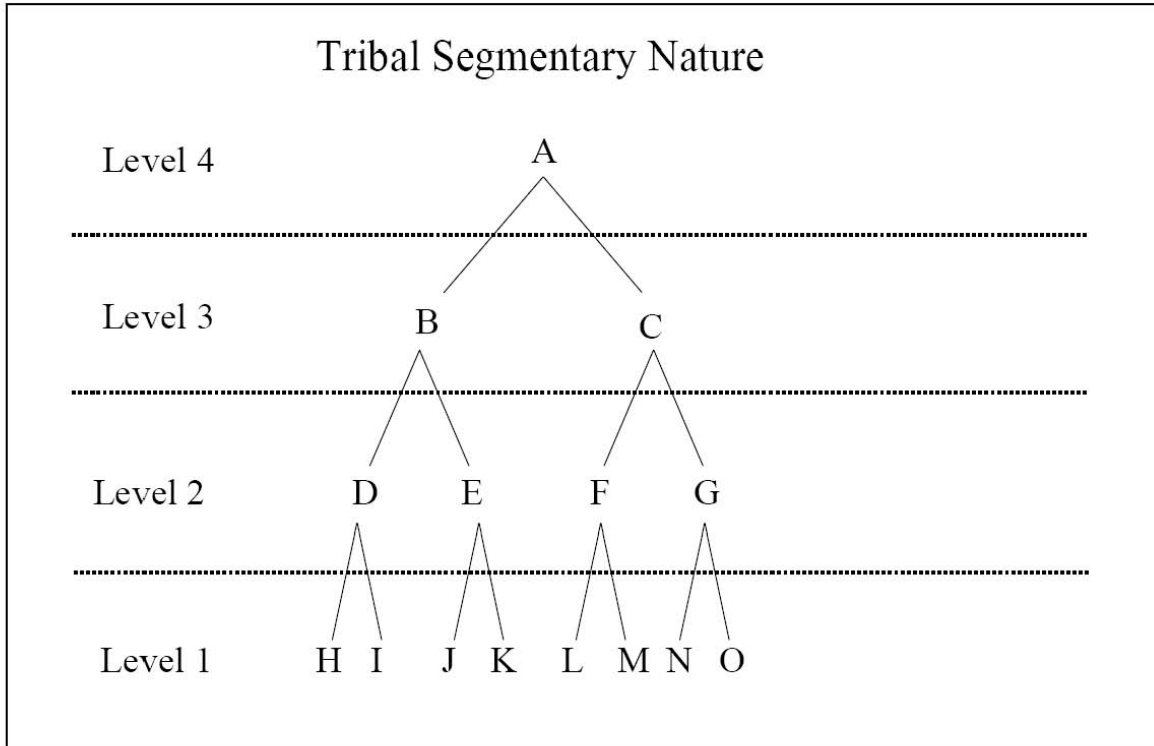


Figure 1. Typical tribal segmentary system.⁶

In his primer, “COIN and Irregular Warfare in a Tribal Society,” McCallister describes the structure of tribal governance in a general sense.⁷ It is broken into classes, with a defined hierarchy, with generally clear roles for sheikhs and their subordinates with legitimacy based on lineage. Sheikhs can organize into Shuras, which are “all consultative bodies organized to bring tribal leaders and representatives together.”⁸

In a broader sense, McCallister describes the tribal system as a power-sharing one. “It is nested within the overall power-sharing system that includes governmental, urban and rural, political, sectarian and ethnic groupings.” At least since the military coup of 1958, the Iraqi government has traditionally considered the tribes as a sort of “government within a government,” in that the central government granted tribes a form of semi-autonomy so long as they recognized the authority of the state. While this

decreased after the 1968 Ba’athist Revolution—the Ba’athists viewed tribal autonomy as a threat to the Pan-Arab State—after Saddam Hussein took over the government in 1979, the relative power of the Sheikhs increased during each new conflict. During the Iran-Iraq War, and later the First Gulf War, tribal sheikhs grew in power so much that the Iraqi government was forced to incorporate tribal leaders into From a security standpoint, Iraqi tribal security “must take into account... the state as an institution” and consider that the state is a playing field for political maneuvers within a broad, multi-tribe system.¹⁰

This is important, as Iraqis seem to regard their membership in a tribe at least partially in political terms.¹¹ These terms are fluid, and result in a constant flux as members change their membership based on their group’s affiliations. Much more importantly, however, is the realization that the central government has had a hand in the creation of the current mixture and balance of Iraqi tribes through the political promotion of certain tribes over others.

Most of Iraq’s population can be traced into 150 tribes.¹² These tribes tend to have a hierarchical structure with noble lineages and a stratification of sub-clans. In essence, it is a corporate structure, with influence flowing down the hierarchy. Sam Stolzoff, however, warns that this is not a command structure, despite its segmentary nature: super-tribes do not issue orders to sub-tribes.¹³ This nevertheless results in a highly segmented system, in which sub-groups team up to form opposition blocs against a similarly-shaped bloc. It generally follows the following pattern (see Figure 1, above): “groups H and I would act together as group D, if confronted by group E. Similarly, in the case of dispute with C, both D and E would engage in collective action as B.”¹⁴

The segmentary and hierarchical nature of Iraqi tribes also makes engagement relatively straightforward, in theory. Each tribe has a defined set of sub-tribes, and these can be mapped fairly definitively given the time and resources. There are certain key players at each level of hierarchy with whom to establish relationships, and these key players carry an enormous amount of influence—thus, engaging with the right leader at the right level can bring along that tribe, though not necessarily the sub-tribe.¹⁵

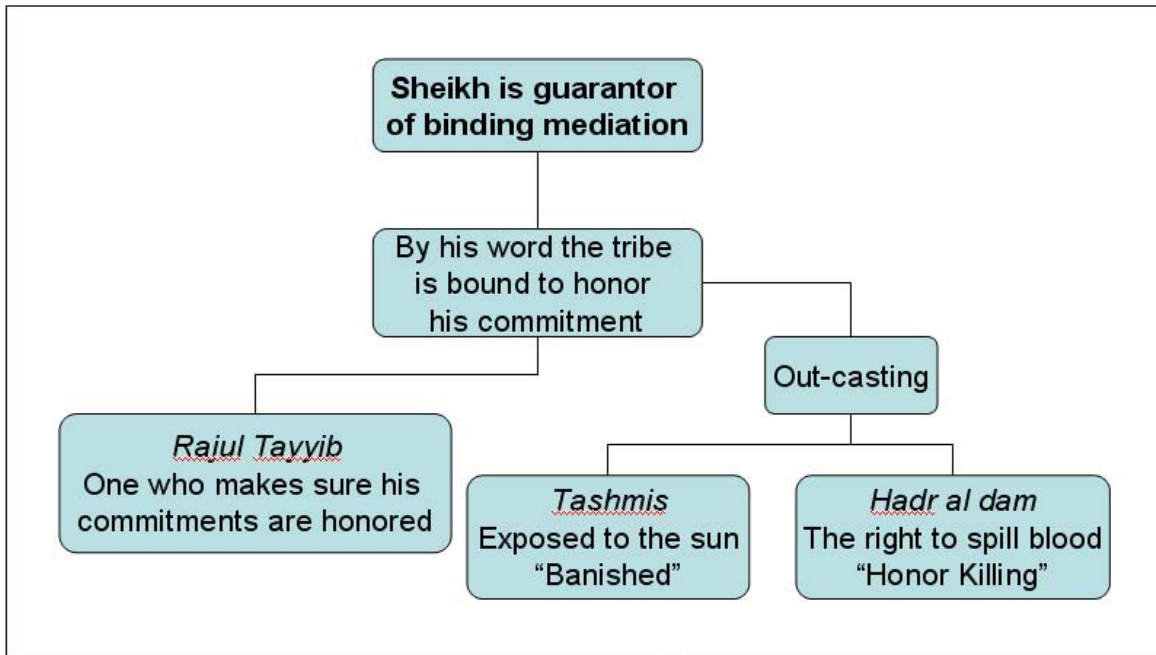


Figure 2. The "Binding Mediation" model of Iraqi tribes.¹⁶

Conflict is generally settled through a tribal shura, though this is structured to accommodate the nature of Iraqi tribes. One method of resolving disputes is the idea of “binding mediation” (see Figure 2, above), in which a sheikh negotiates on behalf of his entire tribe, and the decision he makes during that negotiation

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* This should be distinguished from the relationship between elders and tribe. The government of Iraq essentially “bought” the support of tribal groups, while elders and sheikhs simply command respect through wisdom and jurisprudence.

General Pashtun Tribal Structure

In stark contrast to segmentary Arab tribes, Pashtun tribes are neither rigidly hierarchical nor segmentary. Instead of close kinsmen forming a defensive bloc against distant kinsmen or outsiders, Pashtuns tend to ally themselves with more distant relations in competition with close relatives. The relative instability that results from such an acephalous, or headless, social structure—without rigid hierarchy, there is no defined and permanent leadership—also results in a higher level of endemic conflict than one would expect in a segmentary society.

In Pashtun societies, collective action takes place at the community level, and networks of key actors form alliances within and across communities. Cooperation and conflict in Afghanistan occurs between these networks rather than between tribes. And Afghans engage in collective action with the outside world through these networks rather than through tribes. Therefore, the ways that these networks interact with each other and the world at large are far more relevant than tribal considerations.

Because networks between communities are the important collective actors in Pashtun society, the Afghan state and Pashtun tribes do not engage in patron-client relationships. In fact, Pashtun communities have sought to keep the Afghan state—which they often lump into the category of “outsiders”—at arm’s length, as Louis Dupree describes:¹⁹

Sustained relations with the outside world have seldom been pleasant, for outsiders usually come to *extract* from, not bring anything into, the village... The process, therefore, has generally been one way, *away* from the village. As a consequence, most villagers simply cannot believe that central governments, provincial governments, or individual local or foreign technicians want to introduce permanent reforms. Previous attempts have generally been of short duration and abortive, for once the “modernization” teams leave, the villagers patch up the breaks in the “mud curtain” and revert to their old, group-reinforcing patterns.

In other words, rather than forming a collaborative patron-client relationship with the state (as in Iraq), Pashtun communities tend to form an adversarial relationship with the state. Even so, they will sometimes ally themselves with outsiders. Rubin, for example, includes the international patronage networks that developed during the Soviet War as another way communities behaved collectively: since the operations of the mujahidin parties destroyed traditional social relationships,²⁰ community leaders built relations with outside benefactors.²¹ These patronage networks are vital to understanding how conflict gets transmitted through social structures.

This is driven by the way Pashtuns express identity. Olivier Roy notes the challenges in identifying how that happens:

‘Real’ political life is played out at the local level and primary loyalty lies with a ‘solidarity group’, whatever its sociological basis. This function can be fulfilled by any community, clan, tribe, village etc., composed of an extended network of people who tend to consider that they are protected by this group affiliation and that they could build on it for whatever purpose (business relations, political constituency, patronage and clientelism, and also -during the war -armed resistance).²²

Further, unlike Iraq tribes, tribes in Afghanistan are apolitical from a state perspective. They do not organize into political groups, and while they behave as corporate groups, at the national or governance level they are not political actors. Figure 3 below maps the strongest tribal affiliations of the political leadership in Paktika province. There is no noticeable relationship between tribe and position at this level of analysis.

Many authors define, or at least characterize *tribe* as a **political** unit. I would prefer to omit this as a defining criterion because at this point of the discussion, I use *tribe* merely as a structural concept, as a principle of social order, rather than to define “real” social groups or acting political units...

Although tribal structures can be found all over Afghanistan, they do not have everywhere the same ordering and organizing quality as they do in the East of the country, and even there the tribal system is only one of various ordering principles within the society.²³

Despite this, tribes can form the blueprint of political organizations, even though this tribal stratification can sometimes lead to increased fracture. Glatzer goes on to discuss why limiting one’s conception of Pashtun (or any) society to “tribe” is a mistake. He argues further that Pashtun tribes do not have “observable organizations” that enable collective action.²⁴

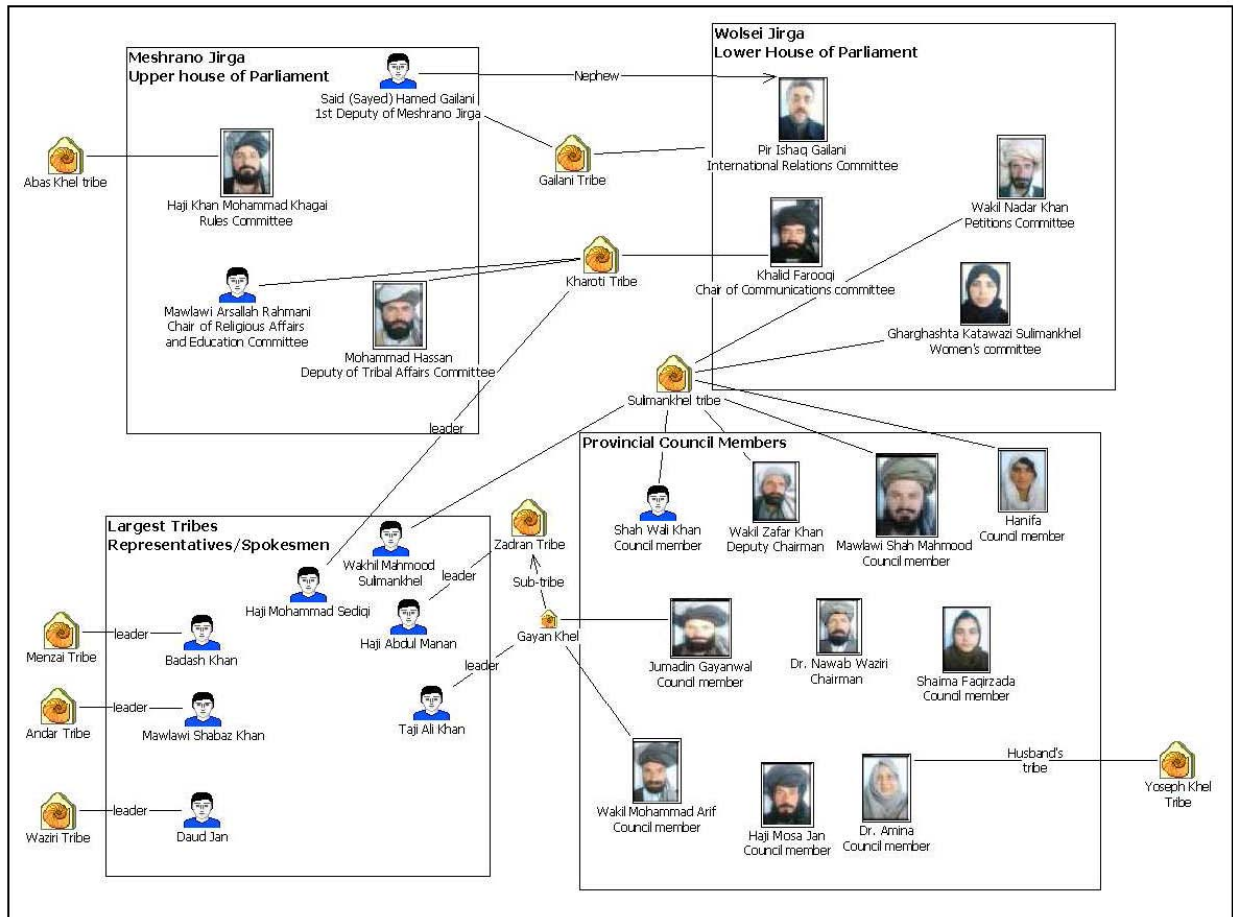


Figure 3. Social Map of tribal presence in Paktika's government.²⁵

While these social structures can be exploited, the process is not the same as it is in Iraq. Both Roy and Glatzer note, for example, that warlords and commanders deliberately manipulate tribal affiliations to stoke conflict. But rather than building a patron-client relationship, as the Iraqi government did with the major Iraqi tribes, these warlords maintained power by becoming the arbiter of tribal disputes. A local commander would keep two tribes in opposition and only grudgingly or half-heartedly offer mediation; by serving as the go-between, his power would become entrenched. Roy notes, however, that this is opportunistic: the tribes are not suicidal (in that they will not continue a rivalry to their own destruction), The drivers of Pashtun conflicts, however, are not necessarily intuitive. Just as Pashtun social networks are more complex than Iraqi networks, so are their conflict patterns. While there are Jirgas and Shuras for resolving *some* disputes, there is nothing equivalent to the “Binding Mediation” model of Iraq’s sheikh system. While the Pashtun maliks seem to resemble Iraqi sheikhs, their power relationship with the rest of

their tribe is far weaker. Thus, decisions made at the tribal level are not considered binding as they are in Iraq. While there are surface similarities—closely related tribal elements seem primarily to feud with more distantly related ones—the situation is actually far more complex: at the micro-local level, conflicts actually occur with great frequency between close relatives. Recurring drivers of these conflicts are ownership of and access to land and women, as well as violent events and subsequent revenge. Political alliances within Pashtun tribal hierarchies are sought with more distant units of the tribe, as illustrated below:²⁶

Because conflict so often centers on ownership of land and resources, close male relatives such as brothers or cousins are structurally prone to conflict over, for example, an inheritance. Furthermore, closely related tribal segments tend to live near one another, further increasing the likelihood of conflict. As the two relatives fight, one side may choose to “leave” the tribal segment of which it was formerly a member and found a “new” segment. This is a fairly common occurrence, which creates the constant fission of Pashtun sub-tribal elements and makes their mapping nearly impossible. New sub-tribes form often as conflicts over land and resources arise among close relatives.²⁷

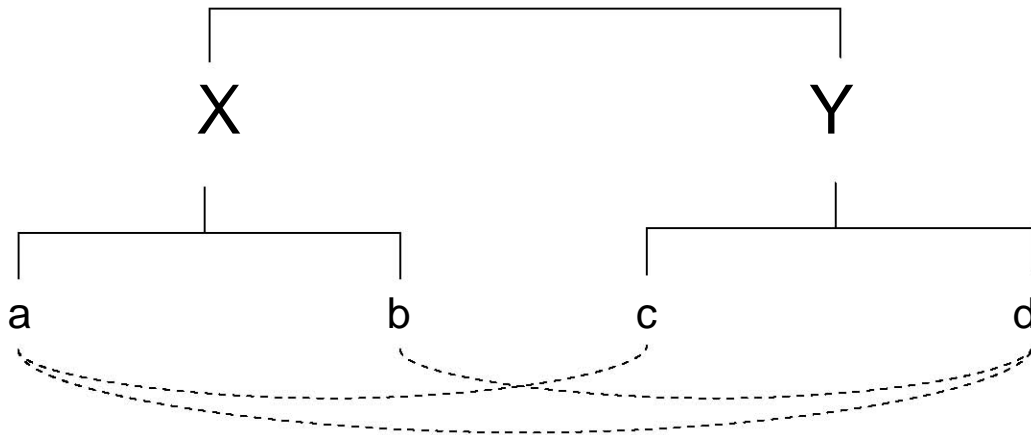


Figure 4. Diagram of the Pashtun conflict model.²⁸ X and Y are structurally opposed. a are the rivals of b, and c are the rivals of d. a may form an alliance with c or d, while c may form an alliance with a or b, since either of the mentioned party represents a more distantly related collateral relative. Thus the potential number of issues of conflict is limited. In case of meeting on a higher level (e.g. when X and Y segments form a council as well as in a conflictive event), a and d contract to combine against their respective relatives b and c. The extended version amounts to a recurrent pattern of political dual division called *dullah*.²⁹

Thus, the most common alliance seen in a Pashtun conflict cycle is against a local rival, which often happens to be from the same family. When external patrons get involved, the complexity of a local conflict is often lost as the patron tries to settle matters in its client’s favor. Regardless, it is important to understand that almost all “tribal” conflicts in Pashtun society are in fact local, community-based conflicts.³⁰

One of the mainstays of the Marines’ methodology for handling the tribes in Anbar Province in Iraq was based on “categorizing expressed behavior” based on a “mental model” of describing the motivations of local decision-makers. In essence, it is about discovering the motivations behind certain decisions, such as whether or not the support the Coalition. Based on how this decision is formed, one can deduce the

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factors the decision-maker thought most important. From this flows an understanding of behavioral patterns and preference ordering, which can be intuitively predicted on the tactical and operational level.³¹

The Relevance of Afghanistan TTPs

In Afghanistan, “predicting” likely responses is far more difficult. A better solution would incorporate “cultural operating codes and [the] coordinating messages model” as a framework for structuring analysis—with the intent of recognizing patterns, and understanding how those patterns form and possibly evolve.³² In essence, it is learning to understand the rules that govern behavior. In a society like Iraq, which despite sectarian divide remains relatively ordered, this is comparatively easy when compared to a thoroughly fractured society like that in Afghanistan.

Because both Iraq and Afghanistan are essentially tribal societies, it is natural to assume that one can take general lessons from Iraqi tribal groups and apply them to Afghanistan. Structurally, this is problematic, as the above section argues. But there are deeper problems in drawing analogies from Iraq to Afghanistan.

The segmentary nature of Iraqi tribes lends itself to a standard social network analysis, as typified in Appendix B of the Counterinsurgency Field Manual.³³ Because Iraqi social hierarchy is fairly rigid, relationships tend to form in an understandable, networked fashion. With regards to Pashtuns, however, a network-centric model of social organization is practically impossible. While tribes can behave politically, they are not “political” in the sense of organizing into politically homogenous blocs. Conversely, Pashtuncentric political organizations are almost never explicitly tribal in nature.

Thus, Pashtun society does not lend itself to a TTP-style set of procedures. Rather, “Guiding Principles” would be more effective in formulating an engagement policy based on the organizing principles in Pashtun society. An initial list follows:³⁴

- **Accept Ambiguity.** People will lie and twist the truth to suit their own ends, saying only what they want someone else to know. Accepting that one cannot know for certain the unalterable truth of a situation is important for being able to engage each leader or influencer on his own terms.
- **There Is No Silver Bullet.** Each valley, and each tribe, has its own unique set of needs and concerns. There is no universal approach or solution for engagement, but working *through* (instead of above or around) culture is vital.
- **Understand Processes.** The VIPs for a given problem vary from situation to situation. Understanding how and why that is—and only then figuring out who—is the only way to guarantee a successful engagement. Conversely, crafting policy based on a single point of view will distort local relationships as influence is leveraged for personal power, and this can erupt in unpredictable ways.
- **Nothing is Quick.** Afghanistan is a fundamentally relationship-based society. Building relationships takes time—sitting over tea, hours of small talk, expressing genuine concern for well-being. Afghans understand that anyone they talk to will be gone the following year. There is no substitute for taking the time required to build trust, and more importantly passing along that trust to subsequent units.

Final Considerations

There is a very real danger in elevating tribal militias as primary counterinsurgency forces, as many have suggested based on the Anbar model. Aside from the many historical reasons Pashtun tribal militias have been ineffective in the long term,³⁵ there are practical reasons to question the utility of tribal forces. A late2007 poll, for example, found a rather serious mistrust of tribal militia groups in a plurality of polled. Furthermore, the problem of hyper-locality makes the utilization of Tribal Defense Militias, or Lashkars, a practical impossibility. Christian Bleuer argued:

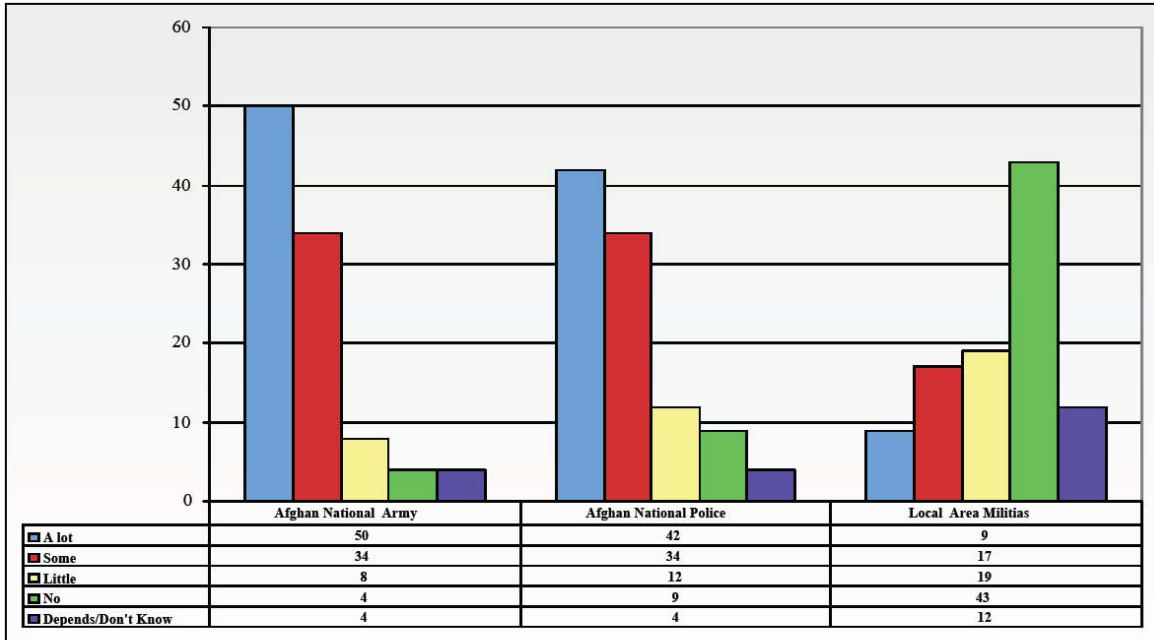


Figure 5. Relative popularity of indigenous security forces.³⁷

Unfortunately, it would need an intense level of micro-managing and an excellent knowledge of local politics that just doesn't exist. It would also require some co-optable local authority figures whose influence extends past their own valleys. Furthermore, the exact percentage of those insurgents who would fall into the economic-and-local-power-politics-grievances category is not known with any certainty. There are other factors too that make Eastern Afghanistan not as conducive to this strategy as Al Anbar was in Iraq. For many in Eastern Afghanistan an American paycheck would be as good as a death certificate. For those locals who aren't too xenophobic, the security dilemmas (especially for many in the East) are just too great for most to consider joining any sort of American supported "Awakening".³⁸

Building off of this, however, one can realistically imagine exploiting the familial conflict model mentioned above. Understanding the ways in which conflict patterns emerge at the local level could theoretically allow an ordered approach to community engagement. From a policy perspective, however, a proper understanding of Pashtun power relationships and dynamics does not lend itself to predictability—making any set of applicable TTPs a relative impossibility: not only do community groups tend to have a strong resistance to external influence, it is impossible to realistically guess the ways intra-community interaction will proceed.³⁹

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¹ Urs Gehriger, "Wir müssen aus ihren Töpfen essen," *Die Weltwoche*, August 2008

(<http://www.weltwoche.ch/artikel/?AssetID=20965&CategoryID=91>, accessed 17 September 2008)

² Greg Jaffe, "To Understand Sheikhs in Iraq, Marines Ask 'Mac,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 September 2007, pp. A1 (accessed via Nexis)

³ Personal correspondence with William McCallister, 18 September 2008

⁴ Correspondence with Jay Leach, Chief of Current OPNS, Research Reachback Center, East

⁵ Edward Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford University Press, 1969.

⁶ William McCallister, "COIN and Irregular Warfare in a Tribal Society, Version 2.0." *Applied Knowledge International*, 2007.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See RRC Oyster Point report #RRC-IZ3-07-004.

¹⁰ McCallister, "COIN and Irregular Warfare," pp. 72

¹¹ SGT Christopher Alexander, CPT Charles Kyle, MAJ William S. McCallister, "The Iraqi Insurgent Movement," unpublished from the Naval Post Graduate School, 14 November 2003 (<http://www.comw.org/warreport/fulltext/03alexander.pdf>, accessed 17 September 2008).

¹² Steven J. Clain, "Stronghold Can Backfire: Iraqi Tribes are Key Source of Loyalty, Rebellion," *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2000 (accessed via Nexis).

¹³ Sam Stolzoff, *The Iraqi Arab Tribal System: A Reference Manual for Social Scientists, Analysts and Tribal Engagement* (Unpublished, 2008)

¹⁴ "Iraqi Insurgent Movement," pp.10

¹⁵ Correspondence with Sam Stolzoff

¹⁶ From a powerpoint briefing, "Mediation, Conflict Resolution, and Alliance Building in Iraq: 'The Tribal Way'"

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Stolzoff, *Iraqi Arab Tribal System*

¹⁹ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980

²⁰ See RRC Leavenworth report #RRC-AF1-08-0023

²¹ Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation & Collapse in the International System*. Yale University Press, 1995

²² Olivier Roy, "Afghanistan: Internal Politics and Socio-Economic Dynamics and Groupings," *Writenet* No. 14/2002, March 2003.

²³ Bernt Glatzer, "The Pashtun Tribal System," in G. Pfeffer & D.K. Behera (eds.) *Concept of Tribal Society*. New Delhi: Concept Publishers, 2002, pp. 265-282

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Derived from: Michael Bhatia, Human Terrain Team (HTT) Report: Initial Assessment – Operation Sham Shad – December 2007, Paktika Province, Afghanistan, January, 2008; SFC Rachael Ridenour and Tom Garcia, Human Terrain Team Report: Initial Assessment – Operation Attal – November 2007, Paktika Province, Afghanistan, December 2007; and Timothy Timmons and Rashid Hassanpoor, Paktika Personalities: An Examination of the Tribes and Significant People of a Traditional Pashtun Province, May 2007.

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²⁶ José Oberson, ““Khans and Warlords: Political Alignment, Leadership and the State in Pashtun Society. Anthropological Aspects and the Warlordism Debate.” Master’s Thesis, Institute for Ethnology, Berne, Switzerland, 2002

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Frederik Barth, “Political Leadership among the Swat Pathans,” in Steffen Schmidt, Laura Guasti, Carl Landé, and James Scott, *Friends, Followers and Factions: A reader in political clientelism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, pp. 207-219

²⁹ Oberson, ““Khans and Warlords.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ William McCallister, “Strategic Design Considerations for Operations in Pakistan’s Tribal Areas: Dust Up Along the Northwest Frontier,” *Small Wars Journal*, 30 January 2008 (<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/01/operations-in-pakistans-tribal>, accessed 16 September 2008)³² William McCalliser, “Afghanistanica on Abu Muqawama: A Response,” *Small Wars Journal*, 1 February 2008 (<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/02/abu-muqawama-response>, accessed 17 September 2008)³³ <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24fd.pdf> ³⁴ This is partially based on “Observations and Opinions IRT Operations in Afghanistan by a Former ETT OIC” by LtCol Chris Nash USMC, August 2008 (unpublished)³⁵ See RRC Leavenworth report #RRC-AF2-08-0008 ³⁶ Anthony Cordesman, “Armed Nation Building: The Real Challenge in Afghanistan,” CSIS, November 2007 ³⁷ Environics, “2007 Survey of Afghans,” 19 October 2007 (http://research.environics.net/media_room/default.asp?aID=653, accessed 15 September 2008).³⁸ Christian Bleuer, “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Franchisees,” *Complex Terrain Laboratory*, 8 September 2008 (<http://www.terraplexic.org/review/2008/9/8/insurgency-and-counterinsurgencyfranchisees.html>, accessed 17 September 2008)³⁹ Armando Geller and Scott Moss, “Growing *Qawm*: An Evidence-Driven Declarative Model of Afghan Power Structures,” *Advances in Complex Systems*, Vol. 11, No. 2: 321-335 (2008).