



The challenge of addressing tribal "revenge-taking" will assume greater importance as areas of Anbar Province are cleared of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces and efforts are undertaken there to reestablish civil governance. If not dealt with appropriately, revenge-taking by aggrieved tribesmen will contribute to a second wave of instability in cleared areas and has the potential to unravel recent security gains. Meetings with tribal and government leaders from Anbar indicate that revenge-taking is a real concern and requires a comprehensive effort from the Government of Iraq. However, addressing the sources of grievance from which tribal members suffer will involve more than simply providing compensating payments, it must be holistic, specific to each tribal situation, well-resourced, and actively supported by Coalition Forces and the Government of Iraq. A number of complicating factors will make this challenge more difficult including the fact that there will be a lag time between the liberation of an area and the reconstitution of local government, rule of law, as well as police departments. Newly empowered tribal factions, which are now armed and organized, will also have the preponderance of power in a post liberation environment and will have the means and incentive to exact revenge. Many tribes have also seen their leaders killed, discredited, or displaced which will further complicate revenge mitigation efforts. Some tribes will need to select new leaders, which will likely be a contested process, marginalize or exile others, and facilitate the reconsolidation of the tribe. However challenging addressing revenge-taking may be for the Government of Iraq and Coalition Forces, a number of lessons can be drawn from past experiences with this issue as well as from a greater understanding of Arab tribal culture which may provide a way forward.

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# THE CONCEPT OF "REVENGE"

## IN ARAB TRIBAL SOCIETIES

BY LIEUTENANT COMMANDER  
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### TRIBAL STRUCTURES

Tribes are extended family and kinship groups which through shared ancestry operate as collective organizations the members of which have rights and responsibilities to each other.<sup>01</sup> Tribes vary in size from a few hundred members to hundreds of thousands and can span the length of a country. Largely settled Arab tribes, as opposed to nomadic tribes, have developed extensive tribal hierarchies, often initially tied to control of arable land, and are usually led by a paramount sheik (leader) who presides over, but simultaneously consults, as equals sub-sheiks who lead other family clusters. The most basic component of a tribe is the family unit, the next level of complexity is the clan followed by the sub-tribe, tribe, and then tribal confederation. Every tribal member has an identity which affixes them to the tribe's social and familial hierarchy and is usually reflected in their formal name (e.g. Sheik Ghazi Faisal

Nejres (father) Al-Gaoud (family) Al-Nimrawi (tribe) Al Dulaimi (tribal confederation)). A tribal member's name serves as a reference point for other tribal members to understand their place in the family's structure and to determine their behavior towards them. While a name determines a tribal member's social identity in a tribe, it does not prevent him from ascending or descending in social, economic, or political status in the tribe. Every tribal member has a collection of rights which they can call upon to be respected (e.g. the right of appeal to a sheik for justice) as well as responsibilities to the tribe as a whole (e.g. volunteer for collective tribal defense) and to specific tribal sheiks (e.g. right- for patronage; responsibility- to defer to their leadership). Because Arab tribes pre-date the modern Iraqi state and can often trace their lineage back for centuries, a collection of tribal mores, codes, and values have developed over time which guide and shape their behavior. In many respects, this collection of tribal behavioral guidelines is an attempt by the tribe to ameliorate disputes, establish social expectations, provide for stability, and to regularize tribal interactions. Tribal sheiks typically perform the role of guiding the tribe and are often deferred to by tribal members for judgments concerning violations of tribal tenets.

## TRIBAL MORES: HONOR, SHAME AND VENGEANCE

Within Arab communities where tribal identity is strong, one's individual identity is, to a great extent, sublimated within the collective identity of family, clan, sub-tribe, and tribe. Concomitant with this is the centrality of personal, family, and tribal honor within a shame based society. Within western countries, shame pertains to an *individual's* social status and standing and is a function of guilt which relates to how an individual's conduct interacts with their internal values and conscience. In the Middle East, an individual's shame is related to how that person's conduct reflects upon the status and standing of a person's *social group* (family, clan, or tribe). A tribal member's honor is a function of how his behavior, as well as the wrongs he has suffered, impacts the reputation of his social identity. When a tribal member seeks revenge for a wrong he has suffered, he does so to restore his honor and that of his family, clan, sub-tribe and tribe. Declining to do so

compounds the dishonor and, if not addressed, could contribute further to reputational losses. Over time, a lack of honor could lead to social ostracizing within the tribe as well as personal, political, and financial hardship and invite further attacks as others sense weakness. However, reacquiring honor through revenge varies based upon the victim, the perpetrator, and the nature of the crime. A useful perspective on this issue is the former Commander of the Arab Legion in Jordan, General John Bagot Glubb:

*"Another aspect of tribal law is that the same crime differs according to the circumstances and the identity of the victim. To murder or rob a member of an enemy tribe (in the days of tribal war) was, of course, no crime at all. To kill a man of another but friendly tribe cost the murderer only seven camels in compensation. To kill a man of his own tribe would cost fifty camels and many other expenses. In either case, if the victim were at the time a guest of the murderer, the compensation would be quadrupled."*<sup>02</sup>

This need to establish the status of a victim as well as the perpetrator and determine the nature of compensation adds layers of complexity to revenge-mitigation efforts. It also complicates revenge seeking for tribal members since affixing responsibility can sometimes be very difficult, prompting some to seek proximate revenge versus absolute revenge.

Within the broad categories of honor and justice are a set of rights and obligations between sheiks and tribal members that, in their totality, amount to a rudimentary social safety net. This community ecosystem provides protection and support of the weak, hospitality, patronage, and social equality. While material inequality can be quite stark within a tribe, it is mitigated by a form of social equality so that even the poorest member of a tribe can engage with his paramount sheik as a social equal although the sheik is first among equals. In some respects, it is a form of social egalitarianism rooted in respect and honor that no amount of material or status difference can diminish. The expectations that flow from these obligations include the ability of sheiks to facilitate patronage (e.g. jobs), provide for those who are less well off (e.g. charity), and adjudicate disputes by administering justice (e.g. conflict resolution). Tribal leaders also seek to promote stability in a tribe through regular consultations with both other sheiks as well as members of the tribe to maintain harmony within the group. This process usually takes place

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 Local sheiks in Balad, Iraq, discuss the way forward during a meeting with both Sunni and Shia sheiks. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY RICK RZEPKA

**IN THE MIDDLE EAST, AN INDIVIDUAL'S SHAME IS RELATED TO HOW THAT PERSON'S CONDUCT REFLECTS UPON THE STATUS AND STANDING OF A PERSON'S SOCIAL GROUP ... WHEN A TRIBAL MEMBER SEEKS REVENGE FOR A WRONG HE HAS SUFFERED, HE DOES SO TO RESTORE HIS HONOR AND THAT OF HIS FAMILY, CLAN, SUB-TRIBE, AND TRIBE.**



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concerning the strategic direction of a tribe, other matters internal to the tribe (e.g. leadership selection), and how the tribe will engage outside actors. As extended family networks, tribes have also adopted a practical approach to interactions, with the state and politics more broadly, and are not typically prone to either political or ideological rigidity. This is not to say that some individuals within tribes or even sections within tribes do not have strong views, but that a tribe's typical manner of behavior is realistic pragmatism. In some cases, a perceived ideological motivation may in fact be in the service of other short-term goals such as a struggle for influence within a tribe. It is not uncommon, for example, for some tribes or elements within tribes to align with groups (e.g. ISIS) hostile to their interests in order to achieve other goals. Taken together, this collection of tribal rights, responsibilities, mores and values creates a lattice work of connections that tie individual tribal members together and provides benefits for them as well as obligations to the tribal collective.

As extended kinship networks, tribes are also able to call upon a variety of resources to buttress their interests and any tribal member has the potential to be called upon to assist the tribe, especially if it is thought that a threat exists to their collective interests. These networks also typically seek to place additional members of their group in key places of influence, especially if it is regarded as an influential political position, provides economic benefits, or provides for a military/security advantage. It is not uncommon for Westerners to view such behavior as nepotistic but from a tribal perspective it is seen as a benefit to the tribe and a means of ensuring compli-

ance with its decisions. It is a commonly held view in many Western countries that the path to success in life is by allowing the individual to excel which then only allows for a secondary benefit to accrue to a group he/she might claim membership in. Within tribal cultures, this perspective is reversed where the individual succeeds because the group has been allowed to prosper. Additionally, by establishing a robust network of influence, the tribe is better positioned to adjust to the ups and downs of politics and can call upon the collective resources of the group to bolster their position when required.

An example of this is the Albu Nimr tribe in the Anbar town of Hit wherein one sheik is a Member of Parliament, some are leading police and tribal security forces, others are running the tribal businesses in Jordan and in other countries, and a sheik is the mayor of Hit. This combination of political, economic, and military/security power makes the Albu Nimr a very strong tribe. Family networks also provide linkages to other tribes, since tribal members frequently intermarry, and many tribes have histories of either cooperation or antagonism based upon a variety of calculations of self-interest. Thus, no single tribe stands alone and many are interconnected with each other. However, like many families, there are rivalries and struggles for power within tribes and so Coalition Forces members must be mindful of the fact that some tribal leaders will take advantage of their ignorance of tribal politics in order to expand their influence. It is essential that engagement efforts be robust enough to ensure that a baseline of tribal organization is established so that engagement efforts do not inadvertently support one faction or another which may destabilize local security efforts.

## REVENGE - THE ANBAR AWAKENING

The Anbar Awakening process wherein Coalition Forces collaborated with tribal leaders to recruit, train, and deploy their members as security forces served to significantly diminish revenge seeking behavior during Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>03</sup> The general approach of the program was to work through traditional tribal leadership structures to establish enduring local security by empowering legitimate leaders. This allowed them to reestablish social control over their members and preside over a process of tribal reconciliation, consolidation, and mobilization. In this respect, the U.S. acted as a "super-tribe" mitigating tribal friction points within and between tribes, facilitated tribal reconciliation through development contracts and access to employment as security forces, and enhanced the status of tribal leaders through political support, attention, and inclusion in planning efforts. Additionally, military operations against insurgent

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**Sheiks speak with members of the Iraqi military and police forces. Tribes typically seek to place members of their group in key places of influence, especially if it is regarded as an influential political position, provides economic benefits, or provides for a military/security advantage. This combination of power makes a strong tribe.**

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS COURTESY OF 3RD SFG(A) PAO

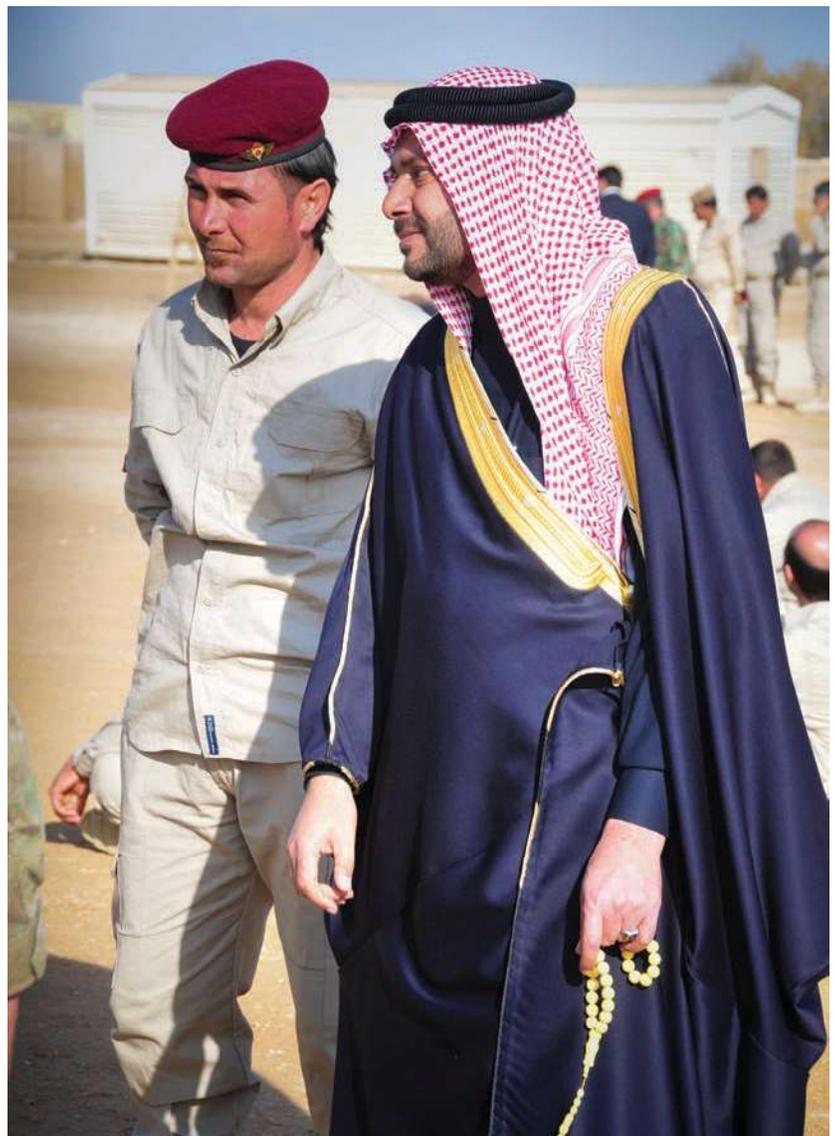
members also served to pressure tribal members to reconcile with their home tribe. Tribal engagement was usually conducted through a paramount sheik who, through a process of consultation with the tribe's sub-sheiks and tribal members, presided over a process of tribal reconciliation. This entailed using patronage and influence to convince, cajole, and pressure tribal members to rejoin the fold.

This process required tribal members who had been aligned with al-Qaeda in Iraq to provide intelligence on the terrorist group and participate in operations against it. By turning against their former colleagues this process facilitated the inclusion of the formerly ostracized tribal member back into the tribe by establishing a blood-debt between the former AQI tribal member and his past terror associates. It was also a demonstration of his loyalty to the tribe. Another aspect of the Anbar Awakening was that the terms of the conflict differed from the subsequent struggle with ISIS forces. Tribal members who participated in the insurgency, both the nationalist and Islamist aspects of it, focused most of their efforts against Coalition Forces and Iraqi Security Forces. While opportunists within tribes sometimes used violence to seize more power, these efforts were relatively modest. Once the insurgency split, tribal leaders focused their efforts on killing foreign jihadists and overseeing a process of adjudicating local collaborators. Individual revenge-seeking took place as tribes internally policed their members but no quarter was given to foreign jihadists by the tribe. Paramount sheiks also participated in the selection of tribal members to be trained as security forces and frequently sought to ensure tribal balance, within the tribe in order to maintain their position and to reconcile different family groups.

## REVENGE — THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA

The rise of ISIS in Anbar was due, in part, on tribal collusion with the group, through action or inaction, as well as the ability of ISIS military forces to coerce compliance to their rule through fear, intimidation, and violence. Some tribal factions that had been affiliated with the Anbar Awakening worked with ISIS while others resisted and large numbers of tribal members fled the province causing tribal structures to weaken. The violence directed against the tribes partly reflected the determination by ISIS to ensure the tribes did not challenge their power since they had played such a prominent role in fighting AQI in the past. Suppression and cooptation were key elements of their approach and their conventional-sized forces ruthlessly implemented their vision of Sharia Law on the population. The

large scale violence that ISIS used to exert its control, as well as tribal complicity in enabling them to do so, escalates the potential for revenge-seeking behavior dramatically. Furthermore, the local governance program ISIS imposed on the population and the lack of accountability for their actions further exacerbated the abuses the population experienced. The variety, scale, frequency, and length of time the tribes experienced dishonorable acts suggests that revenge-seeking will occur on a similar scale. Abuses occurred within and between families and clans, sub-tribes, and tribes. It encompassed personal affronts such as loss of property, abuse, rape, and murder to larger scale atrocities where specific groups within tribes (e.g. factions) or large components within tribes were systematically killed (e.g. Albu Nimr in the town of Hit). Foreign fighters as well as local tribal members participated in the abuses and so a process of disentangling responsibility and establishing accountability must be attempted.





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## RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

A process of mitigating tribal revenge should seek to establish a process wherein the Anbar Government and the Government of Iraq more broadly empower tribal structures to reconsolidate, reconcile, and address their problems using a mix of traditional tribal practices as well as rule-of-law procedures. A blended approach of formal state activities and customary practices will create a legitimate process for both parties and further enable follow-on reconstruction activities, the reestablishment of local governance, and facilitate enduring security in the area.

- **Establish a Tribal Truth and Reconciliation Process.** Initial revenge-mitigation efforts should focus on reconciling elite tribal factions so they can better work together. This will significantly diminish revenge-seeking activities within and across the tribe. A panel of tribal and government officials from Anbar Province should be established to convene shuras with tribal sheiks from targeted tribes to explore the nature of their grievances and to facilitate a coming together of the factions. This process will be facilitated not just by government participation but through the implied expectation that such a process could eventually lead to reconstruction of an area and the potential for lucrative contracts. Additionally, this process of consultation will also begin a conversation about how the tribe will address revenge-seeking behavior more broadly and allow the tribe and state to begin preliminary planning to that end.

- **Determine the Facts.** A supplementary effort should simultaneously be undertaken to help tribal members establish the facts of what took place in their community. Iraqi police, justice, and intelligence officials, under the auspices of a Tribal Truth and

Reconciliation effort, should begin a public process of interviews to (1) establish how ISIS seized the area, (2) the nature of their rule, (3) what locals supported the terrorist group, (4) the nature of crimes committed, and (5) the whereabouts of perpetrators. This particular effort must be robust since the scale of atrocities and those seeking redress will be significant. A public effort to establish what took place in a newly liberated area will do much to dampen revenge-motivated ardor as locals see that a legitimate process of addressing grievances has been established. A temporary, local amnesty should be declared that allows local ISIS supporters to provide truthful and complete testimony about their actions and the crimes they witnessed in return for a more lenient sentence or, quite possibly, forgiveness. This will require some ability to protect these individuals from reprisal as they participate in the reconciliation process.

- **Orchestrate "Noble Gestures" of Forgiveness.** As the victims, perpetrators, and scale of the crimes become known, a simultaneous process of sanctioning guilty parties, as well as forgiving others, should be explored. The dimensions of this process will need to be established through elite tribal consultation. Due to the scale of the crimes and their horrendous nature, a tribal process of reconciliation might need to be embraced allowing lower-level crimes to be addressed under the tribal system while allowing more grievous crimes to be addressed by the state. Thus, crimes such as property damage and theft could potentially be forgiven if compensation was paid to the victims under the tribal system. Large scale events wherein tribal leaders orchestrate forgiveness ceremonies as part of a process of establishing tribal harmony should also be explored. Herein, General Glubb shares his views on the subject: "His pride being thus salved, a poor bedouin will often forgo the prospect of wealth in order to make a dramat-

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A detainee holds his children following his release as part of reconciliation efforts in Iraq.  
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. MARGARET NELSON

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Members of the Implementation and Follow-up Committee for National Reconciliation meet with the Former Regime Element to discuss veteran benefits in Iraq.  
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JOANN S. MAKINANO

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A child waves Iraqi flags during a ceremony celebrating the reopening of a water pumping station in Burhitz, Iraq.  
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY PFC. KIRBY RIDER



ic gesture of forgiveness before a noble audience.” Facilitating the orchestration of these “noble gestures” by empowering tribes to work through their own process of forgiveness should also be supported. A built in flexibility must exist wherein establishing the rule of law is balanced against internal tribal revenge-mitigation and reconciliation efforts. Establishing stability that is enduring is more important than a perfect process that will likely never be implemented.

- **Create Accountability.** A process of allowing damaged communities to knit themselves together will eventually require a process of accountability. Reestablishing the rule of law in newly liberated areas will be difficult as local governments reconstitute themselves and trained judicial officials return from exile, emerge from hiding, or are brought in from the outside. A transparent legal process must be established that will give the people confidence that tribal reconciliation, establishing the facts of abuses, limited amnesty, and orchestrated forgiveness will lead to final accountability. To this end, detention facilities will also need to be evaluated and as well as justice infrastructure and will require strong Government of Iraq support.

## CONCLUSION

Once ISIS has been defeated militarily in an area, dealing with the legacy of their rule will assume greater importance. The scale, complexity, and duration of the violence they committed against residents of Anbar Province will have long-term effects if not addressed properly. As a society that is strongly influenced by tribal traditions, mores, and structures, Anbar is poised to experience a second wave of violence as tribal members seek private redress for wrongs they have suffered. If not addressed in a timely and comprehensive manner revenge-seeking behavior has the potential to

destabilize Anbar once again prompting outside groups to militarily intervene to re establish order. A holistic approach requiring a partnership between the Government of Iraq, tribal leaders, and Coalition Forces must be undertaken that seeks to empower tribal leaders to address as many sources of grievance as they can to prevent revenge-seeking behavior. A transparent process facilitating tribal leadership consolidation and reconciliation as well as establishing the identities of victims, perpetrators, and potential compensation should be established that will allow communities to heal and justice to be served. If a serious attempt is undertaken to address revenge-seeking behavior in



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newly-liberated areas, significant strides will have been made to reestablish stability and freedom in Anbar for the long-term and to allow local residents to once again participate in the national life of their country. 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**NOTES** 01. Daniel R. Green, “The Fallujah Awakening: A Case Study in Counter-Insurgency,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 2010, 21:4, 591-609. 02. John Bagot Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion*, 1948, page. 176. 03. Daniel R. Green, *Fallujah Redux: The Anbar Awakening and the Struggle with al-Qaeda*, (Naval Institute Press, 2014), pps. 1-158. 04. John Bagot Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion*, 1948, page. 159.