

The Sunni tribes in Iraq: between local power, the international coalition and the Islamic State¹

By Hosham Dawod

■ Executive summary

Particularly in the Middle East there is increased interest in the social and political realities that the term “tribe” now refers to in societies experiencing internal conflict, with both local and global implications. Nearly everywhere the Arab Spring has ended in civil war, attempts at neo-authoritarianism or, more visibly, a spiralling increase in Islamic State-type radical jihadism. In the face of the weakness and even collapse of states, the international powers’ flexibility has been reduced and recourse to tribal support has become increasingly common. The following analysis looks briefly at the phenomenon of the Sunni tribes in Iraq – a country that is experiencing a political break-up, a weakening of the state, radical jihadism, a sectarian war, and regional and international intervention.

In the Arab Muslim world the tribe is back at the centre of political, military and – more generally speaking – security considerations. There is now no secret about the interest that the U.S. army, after getting bogged down in Iraq, has taken in the tribal question in that country since 2004, i.e. a year after invading it. This interest was manifest especially as of 2006, to the point where the U.S. sought to transpose this experience to Afghanistan and other conflict zones characterised by a weak state presence and the growth of subversive and jihadist movements. However, the Iraqi experience remains among the most interesting in terms of trying to understand why individuals are encouraged and even inclined to gather in tribes, as well as for the purpose of examining the group and individual interests that explain the reproduction of such groups in a new context. It has thus become highly relevant to question what we currently understand by the term “tribe”.

For the past two decades field researchers, informed political stakeholders and members of the military have been strongly encouraged to revise a largely evolutionist concept of the history of societies: modernisation and globalisation

do not necessarily trigger or accelerate the disappearance of a range of sociohistorical phenomena (local communities, infra-ethnic identities, tribes, etc.). On the contrary, we see in various places a significant dynamic resulting in a resurgence of these phenomena – to the extent that they are situated at the heart of conflict resolution. Thus, it has become normal for the U.S. president to receive tribal delegations at the White House – Iraqi Sunnis, ethnic Afghans or groups from other intervention zones. In turn, it has become just as normal for the majority of tribal chiefs to call more often on U.S. generals than on the political and military authorities of their respective countries.² We thus see a somewhat new situation in those parts of the world where tribalism is stimulated not only by the internal context, but also, in a direct way, by a complex relationship with the world’s most global force – the U.S. army.

What is a tribe today?

Nothing is less transparent in the debate – even, at times, among researchers – than the notion of the tribe and

1 This article was originally published in French in *Diplomatie* juillet-août 2015 no. 75 as “Les tribus sunnites en Irak entre pouvoir local, la coalition internationale et Daech”.

2 Both the news media and specialists focused solely on the role of Gen. David Petraeus in Iraq between 2006 and 2009. While his was certainly a key role, it was far from a unique one. In the same period, in implementing the “surge” strategy, the total number of U.S. soldiers and officers in Iraq far exceeded 150,000, with many army corps answering to distinct commands. While Petraeus was the commander of all armed forces and, therefore, the subject of media scrutiny and politicisation, other no-less-important generals were working quietly in the field. This was true of Marine Gen. John Allen, one of the commanders of the U.S. forces in al-Anbar province from 2006 to 2008 before he was posted to Afghanistan. Even after being recalled by his government, Allen never cut ties with certain tribal chiefs in western Iraq. His appointment in September 2014 as President Obama’s personal representative at the head of the international coalition against the Islamic State was undoubtedly based on his military abilities, but also on his contacts with local tribal actors. Most top U.S. army generals today have spent a number of years of their career in Iraq.

tribalism. The tribe is evoked to account for diverse phenomena that often run counter to modernity. Nonetheless, individuals and groups in Iraq, the Near and Middle East, and elsewhere live and identify themselves as male and female members of tribes. Tribes are thus unavoidably objects of growing interest, even if sometimes exaggeratedly placed at the centre of social relations.

Two terms are often used in the Arab-Muslim world to designate the tribe: *‘ashira* and *qabila*. In Iraq and certain Near Eastern countries, *‘ashira* is the term more often used and refers to a group of people who speak the same language, even the same dialect. Such tribes are typified by a patrilineal ancestry stretching far back – an ancestry more often claimed than real. People routinely manipulate their genealogy. Claiming to be part of a holy bloodline, for example, commands not only respect, but also social rank, but can also foster the subordination of the person’s group and possibly others. Thus, Ibrahim ‘Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, alias Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State (IS), claims to be a descendent of the Quraish tribe, which is also the Prophet Muhammad’s tribe.

In relation to the other members of a tribe, recognising oneself as a descendent of the same origin, from the same region, and sharing the same blood (the “ideology” of consanguinity) create obligations, but also efficient forms of solidarity for resolving certain conflicts within or between tribes, even with local and national powers, and sometimes even for gaining access through the tribe to certain positions. But this form of the tribe in its historical sense, far from being governed by an egalitarian system, has comprised ranks, a certain hierarchy, leading to appointed or imposed mediation bodies headed by a chief (a *shaykh* in the Arab world).

Tribes vary in size, although their size does not determine a commensurate political role. For example, the tribe of the late Iraqi president Saddam Husayn, Al-Bu Nasir, was known as one of the country’s smallest. Yet it marked Iraqi political life for many decades to the point where it had trouble adjusting to the post-2003 changes. Many of its younger members and their allies, like the Al-Bu ‘Ajil tribe from the same region, Tikrit, who in their hundreds joined the Special Republican Guard and the intelligence services, suddenly found themselves not only cut off from the state’s political and material resources, but also tracked down and punished by the new holders of power. This situation, affecting all the Sunni areas, in particular the region of Falluja in Anbar province, has driven some young people to become radicalised and join IS, and some people even and not without reason speak of a merger of part of the former Ba’th party (particularly its most loyalist functions of intelligence and Republican Guard serving as the former regime’s praetorian force) with IS. These tribes are often small, but, it should be noted, barely any large tribes, either in central or western Iraq, have seen fit to officially pledge allegiance to IS. These tribes seek to maintain their

ties with the state, however weakened, and particularly with representatives of other countries in the region – Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – and even more so with major powers such as the U.S.

In Iraq and Syria, however, the tribes – or what remains of them – retain a political role, although this role is far from being central or independent – even if they do not always take similar positions on the ongoing conflicts and with regard to the government. The tribe does not, moreover, position itself as a unified body, particularly in the political and military spheres (Digard, 2003). In Anbar province, where certain forms of tribal belonging persist, the various tribes are deeply divided over whether to support or oppose either the government in Baghdad or IS. Most are maintaining a wait-and-see posture (Habib, 2014). As for tribes hostile to the central government, they have stood apart for a number of years through social mobilisation and, in some cases, paramilitary mobilisation. Thus, during the Iraqi Sunni Arab protests against the government of the Shiite former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, in 2012-13, some tribes were able to organise sit-ins, set up camps, and organise banquets for thousands of people and even occupy the international road linking Iraq to Jordan and Syria, as well as most central places in large, predominantly Sunni cities (Dawod, 2014).

Another fact often ignored when addressing the reality of tribes is that they adapt and evolve, and even modernise and transform themselves, despite the clichés about their being stuck in the past. The individuals who today make up the tribe no longer necessarily feel indebted to it, and no functional link remains to draw them together save on the infra- or sub-tribal level (as with clans and powerful families). However, as soon as the need arises, be it a conflict, for example, within or outside the tribe, or when entering the civil service, the individual relies on tribal relationships once thought to have been a thing of the past. The confusion here also stems from the difficulty in understanding this fact: tribes exist in most Near and Middle Eastern countries, but society no longer operates on a tribal basis, since tribes have long lost sovereignty over their members and, in large part, over their own territory. The tribe nevertheless operates as a sociocultural relationship susceptible to being invested with, subject to, manipulated by and subordinated to a much more encompassing structure imposing itself on the tribe from outside. Thus, sovereignty over the individual and the territory has for many years been the prerogative of the state, otherwise it would be difficult, for example, to understand why most tribe members do not automatically vote in local and national elections for their chief or his family members (if they are candidates) (Godelier, 2014).

Territoriality, power, community spirit (*‘asabiyya*) and the manipulation of family relationships were at the origin of the tribal reality until the mid-20th century. Today, the communal land of various tribes has been appropriated either by the state (in terms of farmland and water power

resources) or by individuals. People continue to speak of a territory marked by the seal of a tribe when it has been privatised and divided among its members. With the state having imposed itself, often by force, the tribes have had to contend with it and negotiate with it part of the economic and social management of their territories. In a major change, citizens' sovereignty and representation have come to form the basis of the state's legitimacy and that of local powers.

The tribe in Iraq: from al-Qa'ida to IS

The return in force of al-Qa'ida that started in 2012 soon transformed into IS and profoundly divided the Sunni-majority tribes: they had to either stop protesting and start cooperating with federal security forces (seen as being under Shiite domination), thereby opening up the possibility of a second *Sahwa*³ (while waiting to become a "national guard"), which was the position of the major tribes, or else join the Sunni insurgents, represented in part by IS. However, the tribes hostile to the government are themselves divided into three broad groupings.

The group of tribes rallying to the jihadists essentially consists of those tribes that since 2003 have never truly accepted Baghdad's authority: the Al-Jumaila, Al-Halabsa, Al-Bu 'Issa, Azza, Al-Mishahda in the Anbar region, Al-Bu Ajil, Al-Bu Nasir and certain clans of the Al-Jubur and 'Ubaid tribal confederation in the region of Salahaddin and Nineveh, etc. The U.S. invasion and the 2003 political rupture that brought Shiites and Kurds to power were experienced by these tribes' members as a loss of power, the end to easy access to state dividends, and being stripped of an essential political and symbolic position. When added to the marginalisation and humiliation experienced since the invasion, this punishment slowly encouraged their turn towards subversive organisations, jihadists and, finally, IS, where they now constitute its military, security and even political foundation. These groups have thus slid from the old statist and authoritarian Ba'thism to radical Sunni-Arab jihadism.

The second group of tribes comprises those that have joined the Military Council of Tribal Rebels. It is made up of former armed movements⁴ and fights (or fought) alongside IS in Anbar, Nineveh and Salahaddin provinces, as well as in Diyala and in the Kirkuk region.

The third group of tribes, which is open to negotiating with the central state, encouraged and aided by the international coalition and particularly by the U.S., has not fought with IS. Since Maliki stepped down as prime minister in August 2014 this group's members have envisioned a support role in the counter-insurgency battle and their reintegration into the security forces (the future national guard).

It is thus well known that the various tribes are now entities permeated by changing currents and dynamics. Apart from Anbar province, where the role of the tribes remains socially significant, their role in the other Sunni-majority provinces continues to fluctuate. In Nineveh, religious circles, local notables and powerful families continue to play an important role. In Salahaddin, the old elites that had transformed themselves are positioned at the heart of political dynamics without, however, having entirely marginalised the role of particular tribes (notably the Al-Jubur tribal confederation), which have entered into an alliance with Baghdad against IS.

Based on this brief analysis, what can we conclude from examining the tribal phenomenon and realities in Iraq and that part of the world? For the political and military authorities and the international coalition (particularly the U.S.), the tribe remains either a useful actor or, on the contrary, a destabilising element with regard to local order. To assert itself as such, however, the tribe now needs either the support of the state, where the state enjoys presence and supremacy, or the support of other powers in the region and possibly, and directly, the backing of Western nations like the U.S. If, materially, the tribes require the aid of outside forces, their power reproduces itself in accordance with local norms and codes. This is precisely what jihadist organisations such as al-Qa'ida did not grasp between 2004 and 2010. Here it is useful to look again at the example of Anbar province, where the strategy of U.S. generals Petraeus and Allen from 2006 to 2009 worked fairly well. Both understood that a jihadist amir always sought to impose his power in the name of an abstract, global, hard-line, radical Islam. For such an amir, the local population was but a fraction of the *umma*, or community of Muslims all over the world, that was his to lead along the path of God – his God. Meanwhile, a tribal shaykh, despite his eroded power, continues to derive legitimacy from his social, cultural, and political base and

3 The "tribal awakening" movement, or "Sahwa", was begun by tribal chiefs in the province of al-Anbar starting in 2005 to fight al-Qa'ida in Iraq, in close collaboration with the U.S. army and Iraqi security forces. Al-Qa'ida was seen by the tribes as a destabilising element. After the "surge" campaign by the U.S. army against al-Qa'ida in Iraq and the disarming of the Shiite militias between 2006 and 2008, the Sahwa was continued in the country's northern and western sections as a civil and surveillance militia. Numbering some 100,000 members in 2008, the core of this movement was integrated into the Iraqi armed forces, with the remaining members used as guards, in particular in Sunni zones. However, during the period of former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki's rule there was a double movement: the Sahwa was weakened and even ended, while what remained was politicised and put at the government's disposal. The growing professionalisation of the army, combined with sectarian tensions, the marginalising of Sunnis and the rising power of IS have all profoundly destabilised the Sahwa as an anti-jihadist force.

4 This council's members have for the past several months lost strength in the face of IS. The principal elements of these armed groups are as follows:
 – The *1920 Revolution Brigades*, formed in 2003 by former officers of Saddam Husayn's army, call themselves Islamist nationalists.
 – The *Naqshbandi Army*, created in 2003 by Saddam Husayn's right-hand man, 'Izzat al-Duri, is made up of former officers and Ba'thists and has a Sufi religious dimension (and recently acquired a Salafist branch). It is undoubtedly behind the infiltration of the armed forces in Sunni zones and played a role in the "defeat" of the armed forces in Mosul. This organisation has, in turn, been weakened and its leader is from time to time rumoured to have died.
 – The *Islamic Army*, created in 2003, is more accurately an Islamist-nationalist entity, with a tribal base led by Shaykh Ismail al-Juburi.
 – The *Al-Rashideen Army*, formed in 2003, comprises elements of the former regime (the Fadayin) and is nationalist, even pan-Arabic in its outlook.
 – The *Iraqi Hamas*, formed from the 1920 Brigades, was created in 2007 by jihadi Salafists.

from his relations with the central state and beyond. Hence, a major conflict of interest and legitimacy was inevitable between the Sunni Arab tribes of western Iraq and radical Islamists.⁵ IS has sought to avoid or at least limit the effects of this error, which proved fatal to al-Qa'ida in its relations with the tribes. A contradiction will always remain between an organisation that is motivated by general principles and is grounded in transversal networks, and local groups such as a tribe. Unlike al-Qa'ida, IS is a structure that enjoys international jihadist support while maintaining a territorial anchoring that leaves a portion of the command to locally based combatants. Given this key fact, IS seeks, more than al-Qa'ida did, to preserve a kind of agreement with particular tribes, preferably those hostile to the ruling power. By the same token, the organisation has come down hard on those who refuse to rally around jihadism, those who wish to remain neutral and those who have allied themselves with the central government and, in a broader sense, with the U.S. In the past months IS has beheaded hundreds of men belonging to the large Sunni tribal confederations, such as the Al-Bu Nimr, Al-Bu Fahd, Al-Bu Alwan, Al-Bu Daraj, Jubur, 'Ubaid, etc. In the race to gain the support of the tribes, weakened though they may be, the federal state and the international coalition have started out as favourites owing to their resources, as well as their ability to distribute dividends and delegate some local security (especially during the period following the liberation of territories), thus acknowledging the tribe's role in local-level management.

5 For a more detailed analysis, see Dawod (2004).

References

- Dawod, H., ed. 2004. *Tribus et pouvoirs en terre d'Islam*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Dawod, H. 2014. "Le sunnisme politique en Irak: du centralisme modernisateur au régionalisme confessionnel." *Moyen-Orient*, no. 24, October-December.
- Digard, J.-P. 2003. "Tribus, maisons, Etats: modernité de la parenté arabe." *L'Homme*, no. 166.
- Godelier, M. 2013. "Tribus, ethnies et Etats, en guise de conclusion." In H. Dawod, ed. *La constante 'tribu': variations arabo-musulmanes*. Paris: Démopolis.
- Habib, M. 2014. "Iraq's tribes not united on extremists – and bloody tribal justice will likely prevail." *Niqash*, November 6th.

■ THE AUTHOR

Hosham Dawod is an anthropologist at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, the director of the "Crises des sociétés, crises d'Etats" research programme at La Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, and a researcher associated with NOREF. His published works include "La Société irakienne: communautés, pouvoirs et violences" with H. Bozarslan, "Tribes and power: nationalism and ethnicity in the Middle East" with F. Abdul-Jabar, "Tribus et pouvoirs en terre de l'Islam", and "La constante tribu, variations arabo-musulmanes".

Disclaimer

The content of this publication is presented as is. The stated points of view are those of the author and do not reflect those of the organisation for which he works or NOREF. NOREF does not give any warranties, either expressed or implied, concerning the content.



- The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre
- Norsk ressurscenter for fredsbygging

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or @PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32