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2 Al-Qaeda and its affiliates

A global tribe waging segmental warfare

David Ronfeldt

As coeditor John Arquilla points out in the Introduction, “identifying the right kind of knowledge needed for a particular conflict may be the single most important choice the information strategist makes.” In this chapter, I address this important insight by examining how al-Qaeda is viewed by US analysts and strategists.

It has become sensibly fashionable to regard al-Qaeda as a cutting-edge, post-modern phenomenon – an information-age network, or network of networks. But this emphasis misses a crucial point: Al-Qaeda and affiliates are using the information age to reiterate ancient patterns of tribalism on a global scale. They are operating much like a global tribe waging segmental warfare.

My purpose in this chapter is to describe the dynamics of classic tribes – what motivates them, how they organize, how they fight – and show that al-Qaeda fits the tribal paradigm quite well; I argue that the war they are waging is more about virulent tribalism than about religion. The tribal paradigm should be added to the network and other modern paradigms to help formulate the best policies, strategies, and analytical methods for countering it. What follows is a slightly revised edition of an earlier paper (Ronfeldt 2005) and an op-ed piece (Ronfeldt 2006). I have added a postscript to elaborate on the earlier discussion.

Trends in analysis

According to the latest thinking, al-Qaeda is now more important as an ideology than an organization, as a network than a hierarchy, and as a movement than a group. It is increasingly amorphous, although initially it seemed tightly formed. Osama bin Laden’s core group may even be too weakened to matter very much in orchestrating specific operations.

These changes represent a considerable evolution for al-Qaeda as well as for expert thinking about it. Initially – before and after the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington – analysts wondered whether this mysterious organization was structured like a corporation, a venture capital firm, a franchise operation, a foundation, a social or organizational network – or all of these. Today, now that al-Qaeda has more affiliates, the network and franchise concepts remain in play, but the emphasis is on al-Qaeda’s evolution into a decentralized, amorphous ideological movement for global jihad.

Since so little about al-Qaeda's organization is fixed, counterterrorism analysts and strategists have to be ready to adapt their views to shifting realities and prospects. For example, a major new strike on American soil directed by bin Laden might jar analysts back to a belief that al-Qaeda's core remains (or has recovered as) a strong, central unit with an effective capacity for command and control. Also, while al-Qaeda may look amorphous, the deeper reality may be that it is polymorphous, deliberately shifting its shape and style to suit changing circumstances, including the addition of new, semiautonomous affiliates to the broader network. And that raises a further reason for analysts to remain flexible: Clear as it may be that al-Qaeda and its affiliates are organized as a network, evidence is still lacking about many design details.

It is not enough to say that something is a network. According to one model (Krebs and Holley 2002), a network may start out as a set of scattered, barely connected clusters, then grow interconnections to form a single hub-and-spoke design, then become more complex and disperse into a multihub "small world" network, and finally to grow so extensive, inclusive, and sprawling as to become a complex core/periphery network. For a while, the pressures put on the al-Qaeda network evidently reduced its structure from a hub-and-spoke design back to a scattered-cluster design. But now it is growing again, apparently into a multihub design. Which design is it? Do the pieces consist of chain, hub (i.e. star), or all-channel subnets? And where are the bridges and holes that may connect to outside actors? The answers matter, for each design has different strengths, weaknesses, and implications. Some designs may be vulnerable to leadership targeting, others not. As research proceeds on how best to disrupt, destabilize, and dismantle networks, analysts are finding that in some cases it may be best to focus on key nodes and in other cases on key links; in some cases on middling rather than central nodes or links; and in other cases on peripheral nodes or links. But this view remains tentative. Moreover, much less is known about how to analyze the capacity of networks to recover and reassemble after a disruption (including the possibility of their morphing into a different design).

In short, analysts and strategists have adopted a basic set of organizational views to work with, but they still face a lack of knowledge about al-Qaeda and its affiliates, particularly about how they may combine and shift among network, franchise, hierarchical, and possibly other design elements. Thus, it is advisable for analysts not to become fixed on any one view but instead to work with "multiple models" (Davis and Arquilla 1991) whose content and probability may continue to vary. It is also advisable to keep looking for additional views that have not yet been fully articulated.

Here is a viewpoint worth adding to the mix: The organization and behavior of al-Qaeda and its far-flung affiliates are much like those of a classic tribe, one that wages segmental warfare. This view overlaps with the network view but has its own implications. It shows that al-Qaeda's vaunted, violent fundamentalism is more a tribal than a religious phenomenon. It also shows that continuing to view al-Qaeda mainly as a cutting-edge, postmodern phenomenon of the

information age misses a crucial point: Al-Qaeda is using the information age to revitalize and project ancient patterns of tribalism on a global scale.

My main purpose in this chapter is to urge thinking more deeply about the tribal paradigm and its applicability to al-Qaeda. The tribal paradigm may have useful implications for US policy and strategy – especially for conducting the ideological “war of ideas” – although these are given only some preliminary attention at the end of the chapter.

Basic dynamics of classic tribes

As people banded together to constitute primitive societies thousands of years ago, the first major form of organization to emerge was the tribe. Its key organizing principle was kinship, as expressed through nuclear and extended family ties, lineage segments (notably clans) that spanned various families and villages, and claims of descent from a common, often mythologized, even godlike ancestor. The tribe’s key purpose or function was to infuse a distinct sense of social identity and belonging, thereby strengthening a people’s ability to bond and survive as individuals and as a collectivity.

A classic tribe may be tied to a specific territory and the exploitation of resources located there. Its formation may represent an evolution from the hunter-gatherer life of nomadic bands to a more settled agrarian village lifestyle. It may span various villages and hamlets, and its size may grow to several thousand people. Its identity as a tribe may harden as a result of conflicts with outsiders. And it may lack the formal institutional hierarchies that characterize chiefdoms and states, the two types of societies that come next in evolutionary theory. Yet even if these or other observations made by scholars are added to the definition of the tribe, kinship remains its essence.

As tribes grow, clans usually coalesce inside them. Clans are clusters of families and individuals who claim a particular lineage and, because of this, act conjointly in a corporate manner. Typically, a clan has its own legends, rituals, and ceremonies, its own lands, households, and other properties, a “Big Man” or an elder to represent (but not rule) it, and perhaps a particular function, such as progeny who serve as priests or warriors. Mutual defense and aid are keenly important in clan systems; indeed, an insult or threat to any one member is received as an insult or threat to all – as is also the case for a tribe as a whole vis-à-vis other tribes and outsiders.

While lineage and marriage ties can keep small tribes together, they alone do not suffice to keep large tribes and clans integrated. Integration on a larger scale requires the rise of a variant of the kinship principle: fraternal associations and corporate orders based more on a sense of brotherhood than on blood – what anthropologists call “fictive kinship.” Such associations may combine individuals from various families and villages for a specific corporate purpose. Examples include secret brotherhoods and age-grade, warrior, healing, ceremonial, and religious associations. While some such brotherhoods may derive directly from lineage (e.g. a clan), others do not, yet all emulate kinlike rela-

tions. The larger and more complex a tribe becomes, the more important such brotherhoods become. (In modern times, these are often called clubs, gangs, and secret societies.)

Kinship considerations permeate everything – all thought and action – in a tribe and its constituent segments. One’s identity is less about one’s self than about one’s lineage; lineage determines most of one’s identity as an individual and submerges it in the tribal whole. This applies also to one of the most important activities in a tribe, namely, arranged marriage, which itself is about the linking of families, not individuals. From our distant remove, varied economic, political, and cultural activities may appear to occur in a tribe; but seen in their own light, tribes lack such differentiation; everything one does in a tribe is done as a kinsman of one kind or another. In tribal milieus, strategy and tactics revolve around what might be called *kinpolitik*, far more than *realpolitik*.

While kinship charts and calculations can become enormously complicated, it suffices to say here that individual identities and possibilities in tribal/clan societies are both fixed and fluid at the same time. Lineage positions are fixed, because of who one’s parents were and when one was born. Moreover, as a rule, tribe trumps clan, family, and individuals, binding all into a nested social (but not political) hierarchy. Yet, kin and their associates operate on lateral as much as vertical ties; for example, a person can choose which relative (say, which distant cousin) to ally with on which issues and under what circumstances. This structure can make for highly flexible social possibilities that resemble not only circles within circles but also circles across circles. It offers extensive room for maneuver, which can be used for promoting rivalries as well as alliances.

As individuals, families, clans, and tribes as a whole assert their place and maneuver for position, maximizing honor – not power or profit – is normally their paramount motivation. This emphasis is often thought to flow from the fact that tribes arose in subsistence times, way too early for power or profit to matter. But there must be more to the explanation, for the pattern persists in modern varieties of tribes and clans. Wherever people (even powerful, rich people) turn tribal and clannish, honor and its concomitants – respect, pride, and dignity – come into serious play in social interactions. Thus, warlords and warriors fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other tribal zones are renowned for the value they place on upholding codes of honor and avoiding shameful humiliation. Everyone wants to gain honor for themselves and their lineage, clan, or tribe; no one can afford to lose face, for that would reflect badly not only on them as individuals but also on all their kin. (If the word were in a dictionary, it might be said that tribes and clans are deeply “honoritarian.”)

Let us turn next to organizational principles. Reflecting the primacy of kinship bonds, tribes are resolutely egalitarian, segmental, and acephalous – to use terms favored by anthropologists. These three principles are interlocking.

First, in being egalitarian, a tribe’s members are deemed roughly equal to one another. The aim is not so much absolute equality as respect for individual autonomy, and especially the autonomy of individual households. In this spirit, members emphasize communal sharing, as in sharing food, giving gifts, and

doing favors. These practices oblige recipients to reciprocate, for honorable reciprocity, not exchange, is the underlying ethic. Elitism is avoided, and domination efforts are not tolerated for long. Upstarts, such as alpha-type bullies and despotic self-aggrandizers, are eventually restrained, as are overly selfish free riders and oddball deviants. Indeed, classic tribes are so egalitarian that no fixed rank or status system exists in them. There are tendencies for elders to receive more respect than the young, men more than the women, and a “Big Man” more than others. Also, family heads may lord it over others inside their own households; and some lineages and clans may compete for status. But overall, the egalitarian ethos limits hierarchical and competitive tendencies. Whoever shows leadership has to be modest, generous, and self-effacing and treat others as peers. There is constant groupwide vigilance to keep anyone from gaining sway for long. If necessary, coalitions form to assure leveling. In tribal systems rent by feuds and rivalries, egalitarianism becomes more an ideal than a reality, but it is still the desired ethos. In short, tribes behave more like balance-of-honor than balance-of-power systems.

Second, the classic tribe is segmental, in that every part resembles every other – there is no specialization. Tribes have no distinct central nervous system, and all households and villages are essentially alike: resolutely self-sufficient and autonomous. Because tribes are so segmental and undifferentiated, their constituent parts – families, lineages, clans, and so on – tend to oscillate between fusion and fission. Fusion occurs, for example, when clan intermarriages foster unity across villages and other segments; when segments, even ones that were feuding, ally against an enemy; and when a tribe absorbs an outside band or tribe. Fission occurs when a tribe is so beset by shortages or feuds that a segment (e.g. a few related households, an entire clan) hives off and goes its own way, forming a new tribe that immediately replicates the design of the old. Whether in a state of fusion or fission, each segment guards its autonomy.

Third, the classic tribe is acephalous. The earliest form of social organization was not hierarchy; egalitarian tribes were the norm before hierarchical societies – first chiefdoms, then states – emerged. Classic tribes had no formal leaders, not even chiefs. Informal status differences that arose (e.g. deference to elders) were kept muted. Political hierarchies, dominant groups, class structures, and other status systems are absent at this stage. The title of chief, if there was one, meant little; a chief was a man of influence, an adviser, a facilitator, a broker – but he could not give orders that had to be obeyed. Thus, leadership, which might be needed when hunting for big game or in the conduct of a ceremony, was transient and low profile; it kept shifting and depended more on the situation than the person. One day’s “Big Man” was not necessarily tomorrow’s. Major decisions, such as whether to go to war or where to migrate, were made in tribal councils open to all, where anyone (at least all household heads) could speak. Indeed, consultative consensus seeking in tribal councils was the first form democracy took.

What matters for maintaining order and peace in such tribal milieus is not leadership, hierarchy, force, and law – it is too early a form for that – but the

customs and codes of etiquette that flow from revering kinship bonds. Kinship systems place high value on principled, praiseworthy displays of respect, honor, trust, obligation, sharing, reciprocity, and acceptance of one's place. Rituals and ceremonies – and later, religion – reinforce these customs. In the event of wrongdoing, sanctions run the gamut from public blame, shame, shunning, ostracism, and a withdrawal of reciprocity to expulsion or execution if the group reaches consensus on it.

Principles of respect, dignity, pride, and honor are so important in a tribal society that humiliating insults may upset peace and order more than anything else. An insult to one individual is normally taken as an insult to all who belong to that lineage. There are only two ways to relieve the sense of injury from insult: compensation or revenge. A call for compensation or revenge may apply not just to the offending individual but to his or her entire lineage. Responsibility is collective. Justice is less about punishment for a crime than about gaining adequate compensation or revenge to restore honor. It is not unusual to find clans and tribes engaged in prolonged cycles of revenge and reconciliation – i.e. fission and fusion – deriving from insults that happened long ago.

These, in summary fashion and skipping many intricacies, are the basic dynamics of classic tribes. They took shape more than 5,000 years ago during Neolithic times. They characterize many bands, tribes, and some chiefdoms that social and cultural anthropologists have studied in recent eras, such as the Nuer (Africa), the Trobrianders (Melanesia), the !Kung (Africa), the Iroquois (North America), and the Yanomamo (Brazil), not to mention examples from European history. Some examples may look ancient, primitive, or backward. But the tribal form is not ancient history; it endures today – indeed, one manifestation or another makes media headlines almost every day. This is true not only for events in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia but also in fully modern societies in North America and Europe, where the tribal paradigm is constantly reiterated in small but significant ways, such as in the often clannish organization and behavior of civic clubs, fellowships, fraternities, sports clubs (e.g. soccer hooligans), car clubs, and ethnic urban gangs, to note a few examples. All such organizations reflect the tribal paradigm, for they are normally more about ancient desires for identity, honor, and pride than about modern proclivities for power and profit.

War and religion in tribal settings

At its best, the tribal way of life imparts a vibrant sense of solidarity. It fills a people's life with pride, dignity, honor, and respect. It motivates families to protect, welcome, encourage, shelter, and care for each other (and guest outsiders) and to give gifts and hold ceremonies that affirm their connections to each other and to the ancestors, lands, and gods that define the tribe's identity. This kinship creates a stable realm of trust and loyalty in which one knows (and must uphold) one's rights, duties, and obligations. Many people around the world still prefer this ancient way of life over the ways of modern, impersonal,

hierarchical and market systems. As noted above, even advanced societies that lack explicit tribes and clans still have tribelike sensibilities at their core that show up in nationalism, cultural festivities, civic interest groups, and sports and fan clubs.

But tribalism can make for a mean-spirited exclusivity and partiality too. Tribes and clans can be terribly sensitive about boundaries and barriers – about who is in the tribe and who is outside, about differences between “us” and “them.” One’s tribe (assuming it is not riven with feuds and rivalries) may seem a realm of virtue, where reciprocal altruism rules kin relations. But in tribal logic, virtuous behavior toward kin does not have to extend to others; outsiders can be treated differently, especially if they are “different.”

Sometimes tribal exclusivity and partiality lead to war. When a tribe does go to war, it tries to do so as a whole, but it fights as segments. Internal feuds, rivalries, and other differences are set aside in order to unite against the outside enemy. Strategic agreement on the broad outlines of war may be reached in consultative councils. But each segment guards its own autonomy; not even in battle do they organize under a central command. If a war is based on alliances among groups within a tribe or between tribes, that may be another reason to guard autonomy; in tribal milieus, one day’s ally may turn into another day’s betrayer, and a group that takes shape one day may not be able to form anew later.

Classic tribal warfare emphasizes raids, ambushes, and skirmishes – attacks followed by withdrawals, without holding ground. Pitched battles are not the norm, for tribes lack the organizational and logistical capacities for campaigns and sieges. Sometimes the aims are limited, but tribal warfare often turns into total warfare, aimed at massacring an entire people, mercilessly. Killing women and children, taking women captive, torturing and mutilating downed males, scalping, and beheading are common practices. So is treachery, such as inviting people to a feast then slaughtering them on the spot. Tribal fighters may absorb women and children from an enemy tribe, but they do not hold prisoners. Enemies who are not massacred are put to flight, and their lands and homes seized. Bargaining in good faith to end a conflict becomes nigh impossible, for the attackers have denied the legitimacy of those whom they are attacking. In ancient times, this brutal way of war did not ease until the rise of chiefdoms and states, when leaders began preferring to subjugate rather than annihilate people. In today’s world, examples are still easy to find – the Hutu massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda come readily to mind, as do episodes in the Balkans.

Tribes that go to war normally do so in the name of their god or gods. Indeed, many religions, from ancient totemism onward, have their deepest roots in tribal societies. The major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – each arose in a tense tribal time in the Middle East. And each, in its oldest texts, contains passages that, true to traditional tribal ethics, advocate reciprocal altruism toward kin yet allow for terrible retribution against outside tribes deemed guilty of insult or injury. Today, centuries later, tribal and religious concepts remain fused in much of the world, notably Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

The more a religion commends the kinship of all peoples, the more it may lead to ecumenical caring across boundaries (as Islam often does). But the more a religion's adherents delineate sharply between "us" and "them," demonize outsiders and view their every kin (man, woman, child, combatant or noncombatant) as innately guilty, adhere to codes of revenge for touted wrongs, and seek territorial or spiritual conquests, all the while claiming to act on behalf of a deity, the more their religious orientation is utterly tribal, prone to violence of the darkest kind. This is as evident in the medieval Christian Crusades as in today's Islamic jihads, to mention only two examples.

All religious hatred – whether Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, or Hindu – is sure to speak the language of tribe and clan, and that language is sure to be loaded with sensitivities about respect, honor, pride, and dignity, along with allocutions to the sacred, purifying nature of violence. This is a normal ethic of tribes and clans, whatever the religion. Indeed, as Amin Maalouf says about today's world in his *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (2001, pp. 28–9), "[I]f the men of all countries, of all conditions and faiths can so easily be transformed into butchers, if fanatics of all kinds manage so easily to pass themselves off as defenders of identity, it's because the 'tribal' concept of identity still prevalent all over the world facilitates such a distortion."

Savagery may worsen when tribal elements are led by a sectarian chieftain who is also a grandiose, ruthless warlord, like Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Taliban's Mullah Muhammad Omar, or Chechnya's Shamil Basayev. If the outsiders they target (including Americans) react with a tribalism (or extreme nationalism) of their own, battles over whose religion should win become inseparable from those over whose tribe should win. While the modern idea of separating state and church is difficult enough, any notion of separating tribe and religion is inconceivable for many people, especially in wartime.

Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and global jihad

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda fit the tribal paradigm quite well. There is ample evidence that bin Laden thinks and operates in tribal/clan terms, as seen in his selection of wives, his aptitude for forming secretive brotherhoods, and his rhetoric about Islam, the Arab world, and jihad. The regions where al-Qaeda has been based are notoriously tribal: Afghanistan under the Taliban and now allegedly along the Afghan–Pakistan border. Also, al-Qaeda's main targets include Saudi Arabia, a tribal kingdom, and Iraq, where much of the population has reverted to tribal and clan ways since the collapse of the Iraqi state.

This is not the dominant way in which al-Qaeda and its affiliates are viewed. Analysts have preferred to keep looking for central decision-making nodes and specialized structures – even committees – for matters such as targeting, recruitment, financing, logistics, and communications, as though they might uncover a corporate pyramid. Or they have treated the creation of affiliates as though they were franchises that took the initiative to become affiliates or were concocted at al-Qaeda's behest. Or analysts have emphasized the sprawling network designs

that al-Qaeda and its affiliates increasingly exhibit. Or they have applied social movement theory. All these analytical approaches make sense and should continue. But they end up making al-Qaeda look like a work of dauntless, modern, forward-looking genius, when it isn't. Its design looks backward more than it looks forward; it reiterates as much as it innovates – and that's because of its enduring tribalness.

The tribal paradigm – and a case that al-Qaeda is like a global tribe waging segmental warfare – shows up across five analytic dimensions: narrative content, social appeal, leadership style, organizational design, doctrine and strategy, and the use of information technology.

Narrative content

Many themes in bin Laden's and other jihadists' statements fit the tribal paradigm. The world is divided between good-hearted believers – the worldwide *umma* (kindred community) of Muslim brothers and sisters – and evil nonbelievers (infidels, apostates, heretics). Arab lands and peoples have suffered far too much injury, insult, and humiliation – their honor has been trampled, their families disrespected – by arrogant, self-aggrandizing intruders (particularly America and Israel). Muslims have a sacred duty to defend themselves, fight back, wreak vengeance, seek retribution, and oust the foreign invaders. The transgressors must be made to pay; no mercy should be shown – no matter if civilians die, even women and children. They deserve every punishment, every catastrophe, every tit-for-tat that can be heaped upon them. Defensive warfare is a necessary duty to restore honor and pride. This story line is made to sound Islamic, and it has Islamic aspects that are not necessarily tribal – for example, requiring that an enemy be warned. But overall, it is tribal to the core. Indeed, similar story lines have cropped up among virulently tribal Jewish, Christian, and other religious extremists as well, all across history.

Social appeal

Among Muslims, the jihad narrative is not alien, academic, or bizarre. It requires little indoctrination, for it arouses both the heart and mind. Recruits willingly come from among militants who fought in Afghanistan, Chechnya, or the Balkans; immigrants in Europe and refugees in Jordan and Palestine who are leading alienated, unsettled lives; youths leading comfortable but constricted lives in Saudi Arabia; and Sunnis whose lives have been shattered by the warring in Iraq. What drives them, according to many analyses, are shared sensibilities about loss, alienation, humiliation, powerlessness, and disaster. Such analyses may also note, more in passing than in depth, that joining al-Qaeda or an affiliate provides a familylike fellowship. However, this factor should not be given short shrift; participation may appeal largely because it binds members in such a fellowship – in mosques, training camps, militant cells, and so on. And it may do so not simply because many members share the social-psychological

sensibilities noted above but because they come from cultures that are deeply, longingly tribal and clannish. For the lost and the adrift, joining al-Qaeda recreates the tribal milieu. This may even apply to the attraction of nomadic loners from faraway cultures who convert to Islam while seeking a more meaningful identity and sense of belonging for themselves (e.g. a John Walker Lindh).

Leadership style

Bin Laden's stylized demeanor is in the tradition of a modest, self-effacing, pious tribal sheik. He espouses, interprets, advises, facilitates, brokers, and blesses. His ideas are embedded in Islamic tradition – he does not concoct them to express his ego. He radiates a commanding presence, but he does not give orders or demand submission to his leadership (although he may well be chief of his own cell, i.e. household). He is generous with funds. His co-leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, conveys a similar though edgier image. In contrast, their fellow warrior in Iraq, al-Zarqawi, acted like a ferocious alpha-male bully who would just as soon create fissions between Sunni and Shi'a tribes in Iraq. Yet he was so respectful of bin Laden, who takes a more ecumenical approach to pan-tribal fusion, that bin Laden declared him to be his emissary in Iraq. Information is lacking on how these and other chieftains make decisions affecting al-Qaeda, but the process appears to involve mutual communication, consultation, and accommodation to reach a consensus that does not smack of hierarchy or imposition – much as might occur in a classic tribal council.

Organizational design

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are organized as a (multihub? core/periphery?) network of dispersed nodes, cells, and units, all campaigning in a similar direction without a precise central command. This structure looks like an information-age network, but it is equally a tribal-age network. It is bound together by kinship ties of blood and especially brotherhood. What look like nodes and cells from a modern perspective correspond to segments from a tribal perspective. Some segments come from true tribes and families; others are patched together in terms of "fictive kinship" by jihadist clerics, recruiters, and trainers. Yet all who join get to feel like they belong to segments of an extended family/tribe that reaches around the world. Al-Qaeda had a segmentary quality even before 9/11; for example, some training camps in Taliban Afghanistan were divided along ethnic lines (e.g. here for Algerians, there for Chechens), and the cells that struck on 9/11 consisted of a Saudi segment. Furthermore, this jihadist network is vaguely acephalous (or polycephalous), as a tribe should be. It is held together not by command-and-control structures – tribes are not command-and-control systems – but by a gripping sense of shared belonging, principles of fusion against an outside enemy, and a jihadist narrative so compelling that it amounts to both an ideology and a doctrine.

Doctrine and strategy

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates fight in the field much like tribes and clans: as decentralized, dispersed, semiautonomous segments that engage in hit-and-run (and hit-and-die) tactics. These segments vary in size and makeup. Some are small and fit our notion of terrorist cells. Others (e.g. in Afghanistan and Iraq) are larger, more like platoons with commanders (thus it might be more accurate to refer to Ba'thist segments than Ba'thist cells). Some may resemble close-knit, exclusive brotherhoods; others may keep shifting in membership. Meanwhile, they fight like modern terrorists and insurgents but do so in the tradition of tribal warriors, relying on stealth, surprise, treachery, and savagery while avoiding pitched battles. And they are comfortable with temporary marriages of convenience, such as in Iraq, where Ba'thist and Islamist units cooperate on tactical missions but keep separate organizations and strategies. The absence of a central hierarchy is not a sign of disorganization or weakness – it is the tribal way. Thus, while al-Qaeda's underlying doctrine and strategy have been acquiring the sophistication of modern notions of asymmetrical warfare (e.g. for netwar and swarming), its tribalness endures within that modern frame.

Use of information technology

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have an extensive, growing presence on the Internet. Their statements, speeches, and videos are posted on myriad Websites around the world that advocate, sympathize with, and report on jihad. As many analysts have noted, the new information media are enabling terrorists and insurgents to augment their own communication and coordination and to reach outside audiences. The online media also suit the oral traditions that tribal peoples prefer. What merits pointing out here is that the jihadis are using the Internet and the Web to inspire the creation of a virtual global tribe of Islamic radicals – an online umma with kinship segments around the world. The Internet can help members keep in touch with a segment or reattach to a new segment in another part of the world as they move around. Thus the information revolution, not to mention broader aspects of globalization, can facilitate a resurgence of intractable tribalism around the world. Al-Qaeda and its ilk are a leading example.

In other words, al-Qaeda is like a global tribe, waging a modernized kind of segmental (or segmented) warfare. In Afghanistan and Iraq, we are fighting against virulent tribalism as much as Islamic fundamentalism. Salafi and Wahhabi teachings urging jihad against infidels, fatwas issued by Islamic sheiks to justify murdering even noncombatants, and stony ultimatums from Sunni insurgents who behead captives are all more manifestations of extreme tribalism than of Islam. In Islam, jihad is a religious duty. But the interpretation of jihad that al-Qaeda practices is rooted less in religion than in the appeal of virulent tribalism in some highly disturbed contexts.

Overlap with the network paradigm

American analysts and strategists should be treating al-Qaeda more as a tribal than a religious phenomenon. They should be viewing al-Qaeda from the classic tribal as well as the modern network perspective. It is often pointed out (including by me) that al-Qaeda represents a postmodern, information-age phenomenon. But it is time to balance this view with a recognition that al-Qaeda also represents a resurgence of tribalism that is both reacting to and taking advantage of the information revolution and other aspects of globalization.

The tribal view overlaps with the invaluable network view of al-Qaeda, particularly the one that Arquilla and I have called “netwar” (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001), in which the protagonists use network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies, and technologies attuned to the information age. Netwar protagonists – like al-Qaeda and its affiliates – tend to consist of dispersed groups and individuals who communicate, coordinate, and act conjointly in an internetted manner, often without a central command. Their optimal mode of attack is stealthy swarming. In many respects, the netwar design, like al-Qaeda’s, resembles the “segmented, polycentric, ideologically integrated network” (or SPIN) that Luther Gerlach (1987) identified in his 1960s studies of social movements.

But tribes and networks are not the same phenomenon. For one thing, tribes are ruled by kin relations, whereas information-age networks operate mainly according to modern criteria. Consider the issue of information sharing, for example. In tribal systems, the sharing of information may proceed after a recipient’s lineage has been checked and found suitable. In networks, the decision criteria are not about lineage but the professional nature of the role or person who may receive the information. Also, in tribal and clan systems in which members are maneuvering for influence, fluid alliances often arise that look odd and contradictory to outsiders from an ideological or other modern perspective but are sensible from a tribal or clan perspective. For example, it may behoove a tribal or clannish elite circle (as in the old Iranian *dowreh* or Mexican *camarilla* systems) to stealthily include elites from right and left, military and religious, business and criminal sectors, so that the circle is plugged into all circuits vying for position in a society. In contrast, modern networks – for example, in the area of civil-society activism – generally aim for ideological and professional coherence. Finally, if tribes and networks were similar concepts (as some social network analysts might argue), then modern corporations might as well be advised to adapt to the information revolution by becoming more tribal instead of networked – but that is patently not sensible, except where particular issues are concerned, such as employee morale or product branding.

In short, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have formed a hybrid of the tribal and network designs – a tribalized network or networked tribe, so to speak, that includes bits of hierarchy and marketlike dynamics as well. The tribal paradigm has a striking advantage over the network, hierarchy, and other organizational paradigms. The latter models point to organizational design first, and then to

matters of leadership, doctrine, and strategy. But they have nothing clearly embedded in them about religion. As voiced in terrorism discussions, they are secular paradigms; religion is grafted on, as a separate matter. In contrast, the tribal paradigm is inherently fraught with dynamics that turn into religious matters, such as altruism toward kin, delineations between “us” and “them,” and codes of revenge. And that is another valuable reason to include the tribal paradigm in analyses of al-Qaeda and other terrorist movements.

Preliminary implications for policy and strategy

Americans comfort themselves by thinking that no other nation will be able to match our power for decades to come. But from ancient times to the present, great powers that expand globally often run into subnational tribes or clans that resist fiercely, even unfathomably. Sometimes this has dire, wasting consequences (as it did for the Roman Empire), although a great power can extemporize by playing segments against each other (as Britain did during the Pax Britannica). Also, ever since ancient times, the more tribal or clannish a society, the more resistant it is to change and the more pressures for modernizing reforms must come largely from outside or above (e.g. Meiji Japan). Americans still have much to learn about dealing with tribalized and clannish societies and devising programs that work in them (remember Somalia).

The United States is not at war with Islam. Our fight is with terrorists and insurgents who are operating in the manner of networked tribes and clans. US military forces are learning this the hard way – on the ground. But policymakers and strategists in Washington still lag in catching on. For example, the *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication* (Defense Science Board 2004, p. 2) recognizes quite sensibly that “the United States is engaged in a generational and global struggle about ideas, not a war between the West and Islam.” It notes the role of tribalism, but only barely. A RAND report titled *The Muslim World After 9/11* (Rabasa *et al.* 2004, p. xx) goes further in saying that “extremist tendencies seem to find fertile ground in areas with segmentary lineal tribal societies,” but it mainly laments the fact that “the literature on the relationship between tribalism and radicalism is not yet well developed.”

US counterinsurgency and counterterrorism methods – for interrogations, intelligence assessments, information operations, strategic communications, and public diplomacy, and indeed, for the whole “war of ideas” – would benefit from our upgrading our understanding of tribal and clan dynamics. Although identifying exactly what reconsiderations should take hold is beyond the scope of this paper, generally speaking, we must learn better ways to separate our strategies toward Islam from our strategies toward tribalized extremists who ultimately cannot endure such a separation. Whose story wins may well depend largely on just that.

The tribal paradigm may be useful for rethinking not only how to counter al-Qaeda but also what may lie ahead if al-Qaeda or an affiliate ever succeeds in seizing power and installing an Islamic caliphate somewhere. Then neither the

tribal nor the network paradigm would continue to be so central. Hierarchy would come to the fore as a caliphate is imposed. Over the ages, people have come up with four major forms of organization for constructing their societies: tribes, hierarchical institutions, markets, and networks. How people use and combine these forms, both their bright and dark sides, pretty much determines what kind of society they have. Were an al-Qaeda-inspired caliphate to take root, we can be pretty sure that it would combine hyperhierarchy and hypertribalism while leaving marginal, subordinate spaces for economic markets and little if any space for autonomous civil society networks. When this has occurred in the past, the result has typically been fascism.

Postscript: redirecting the “war of ideas” (May 2006)

Events since an earlier version of the preceding text was published in 2005 have further substantiated the thesis that al-Qaeda-type terrorism involves a strong dose of tribalism, in all the ways noted above. But analysts and strategists continue to have difficulty using a tribal paradigm. In this postscript, I stress the theme anew and elaborate a little more on the “so what” question for information strategy.

Neglect of the tribal paradigm by terrorism analysts and grand strategists

The significance of tribalism has not been ignored by analysts and strategists. It just has not gained traction. First of all, the tribalism theme has never been out of reach for terrorism analysts. Most are aware, for example, that terrorism often involves a “true believer” mentality. The originator of “true believer” analysis, Eric Hoffer, warned about its tribal nature decades ago:

To ripen a person for self-sacrifice he must be stripped of his individual identity and distinctness. . . . The most drastic way to achieve this end is by the complete assimilation of the individual into a collective body. . . . When asked who he is, his automatic response is that he is a German, a Russian, a Japanese, a Christian, a Moslem, a member of a certain tribe or family. He has no purpose, worth and destiny apart from his collective body; and as long as that body lives he cannot really die. . . .

This is undoubtedly a primitive state of being, and its most perfect examples are found among primitive tribes. Mass movements strive to approximate this primitive perfection, and we are not imagining things when the anti-individualist bias of contemporary mass movements strikes us as a throwback to the primitive.

(Hoffer 1989 [1951], pp. 62–3)

These are solid points; and indeed, the worst terrorist attacks in the West – those on 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, on 11 March 2004 in

Madrid, and on 7 July 2005 in London – were mounted in part by Islamic “true believers.” But while this concept continues to receive occasional notice, Hoffer’s diagnosis of its tribal nature is rarely noted.

Most analysts prefer mainstream psychological, social, and cultural frameworks for working on terrorism. They also prefer terms such as “sectarian” or “factional.” These frameworks and terms are not inaccurate, but they neglect explicitly identifying the tribal and clan dynamics that, according to my analysis above, lie at the heart of organized terrorism. (It is not only al-Qaeda but also other terrorist movements – notably, all the segments that have fought and feuded in Ireland – that may be reinterpreted from a tribalism perspective. So may violent, clannish urban youth gangs – such as the Bloods and Crips in Los Angeles and the transnational Mara Salvatrucha.)

Second, the tribalism theme has never been far out of reach for grand strategists either – but again it has not gained traction. Broader tendencies in American strategic thinking have not helped. To begin with, a leading new idea after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War held that history would progress next to fulfill liberal democratic ends – the “end of history” argument (Fukuyama 1989, 1992). This was a valuable idea, but it was too premature and optimistic to hold center stage for long. It looked too far forward; most of the world was not suited to it yet.

To other thinkers at the same time, a contrary idea – regression to tribalism – made greater sense, particularly as murderous ethnonationalist hatred unfolded in freed-up parts of Eastern Europe. For example, one observer warned:

Unless we take early action, I fear that Yugoslavia will be only a beginning. A new variant of the domino theory will be upon us. But the dominoes will fall this time not toward communism, not even toward nationalism, but rather toward tribalism. . . . Without action to stop wholesale disintegration the basic political unit will become the tribe, its normal state one of war with all other tribes, each fighting for a position of dominance it can only hold temporarily, each feeling insecure and threatened by its neighbors, and each seeking alliances to pursue its narrow ends.

(Attali 1992, p. 40)

This view recognized that where societies crumble under great stress, people are likely to revert to tribal and clan behaviors that repudiate liberal ideals. However, for whatever reason – perhaps because “tribalism” sounds too archaic and anthropological, or because it was voiced more by European than American strategists, or because it was never spelled out authoritatively in detail – it did not take hold. Instead, grand strategic thinking and policy dialogue came to revolve around a more high-minded but less accurate concept that soon emerged: “the clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993/1996).

Now, over a decade later, this mostly pessimistic concept remains central to the “war of ideas” around the world. It is voiced at times not only by Western political leaders, such as British prime minister Tony Blair, but also by Islamists

in the Middle East and South Asia, notably during protests against the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in early 2006. The clash of civilizations is not the only idea in play among policymakers and strategists – promotion of democracy still matters – but it has acquired a kind of grip on grand narratives about where the world is headed, as expressed in story lines such as “the West versus Islam.” Tribalism is treated as a secondary or tertiary phenomenon.

If the tribal paradigm were taken more seriously by terrorism analysts and global strategists, it could affect all the areas noted briefly earlier: interrogations, intelligence, information operations, strategic communications, public diplomacy, indeed the whole “war of ideas” – all that falls under the broad rubric of information strategy, and what Arquilla and I (1999) call “noopolitik.” Of these matters, I limit my remarks in this postscript to the “war of ideas” and some of its implications for information strategy.

The crucial clash: a turmoil of tribalisms

The “war of ideas” against al-Qaeda and its affiliates is said to involve a “test of wills” and a “battle of beliefs” for the purpose of “winning hearts and minds.” The language that keeps rising to the top in the West portrays this clash as a war about freedom and tyranny, good and evil, innocence and guilt. Thus, it is about who is and is not civilized and whether Islam is being hijacked by savage extremists. But is this an optimal basis for information strategy?

It is not. The catchy phrases about civilization are working poorly and proving to have inherent limitations. If it is said that the fight against al-Qaeda (not to mention the insurgents in Iraq) fits the clash-of-civilizations paradigm, then by implication the terrorists (and insurgents) somehow represent a civilization. Moreover, if the fight is said to be between the forces of civilization (mostly meaning the West) and its barbaric opponents (meaning Islamic terrorists), then a rhetorical door is left open for counterclaims that the West is not as civilized as it supposes and that Islam (not to mention the Arab world) has contributed greatly to the growth of civilization for over a thousand years. Besides, all great civilizations, as they arise, display potent new combinations of military might and religious zeal – al-Qaeda and its ilk can claim that this is what they are doing and set heads nodding among sympathizers who yearn for the revival of a great Islamic caliphate.

Thus, it is inadvisable for American strategists to continue playing up, or playing to, the clash-of-civilizations perspective. It does not provide an accurate, appealing, or agile basis for information strategy. In some respects, it plays into the cognitive hands – the “hearts and minds” – of the terrorists and their sympathizers.

What troubles the world today is far more a turmoil of tribalisms than a clash of civilizations. The major clashes around the world are not between civilizations per se but between antagonistic segments that are fighting across fringe border zones, such as Christian Serbs and Muslim Kosovars, or feuding within

the same civilizational zone, such as Sunnis and Shi'ites in Iraq. And most such antagonists, no matter how high-mindedly they proclaim their ideals, are operating in terribly tribal and clannish ways. Some, including al-Qaeda terrorists, are extreme tribalists who may dream of making the West start over at a razed tribal level.

Indeed, essentially tribal or clannish societies, chiefdoms, and clan-states, some dressed in the trappings of nation-states and capitalist economies, remain a ruling reality in much of the world. The densest arc of tribalism runs across North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia and up into the “-stans” of Central Asia. There, with exceptions (e.g. Egypt, Israel, Iran, and India), what pass for nation-states mostly amount to hardy hybrids of tribes, clans, chiefdoms, kingdoms, and feudal gangster regimes. All across this arc, the observation applies that “much of the warfare today is more like past tribe- and chiefdom-level warfare than the high-tech wars of the modern era” (LeBlanc 2003, p. xv). Yet, this is where US power is being most fiercely invested and contested these days.

This turmoil of tribalisms is sure to persist a long time, fueling terrorism, ethnonationalism, religious strife, sectarian feuds, clannish gang violence, and crime. The cartoon-related riots by Muslims in 2006 fit this pattern; they represented an endeavor to mobilize a global tribe, not a civilization. And even though al-Qaeda and its affiliates constitute an information-age network, they too continue to operate like a global tribe – decentralized, segmental, lacking in central hierarchy, egalitarian toward kith and kin, ruthless toward others.

Besides being more accurate, the tribalism paradigm also better illuminates the crucial problem: the tribalization of religion. As discussed earlier, the more these extremists foster prejudicial divisions between “us” and “them,” vainly claim sacredness solely for their own ends, demonize others, revere archaic codes of revenge, crave territorial and spiritual conquests, and suppress moderates who disagree – all the while claiming to act on behalf of a deity – the more their religious orientation is utterly tribal and prone to wreaking violence of the darkest kind. They can only pretend to represent a civilization.

Whose story wins: extremists or moderates?

In short, Islam, a civilizing force, has fallen under the spell of Islamists who are a tribalizing force. In the war of ideas, as well as in the battles on the ground, whose story wins may depend largely on addressing this brand of tribalization.

Shifting to a turmoil-of-tribalisms perspective would have to be carefully thought out. The point is not to condemn all tribal ways. Many people around the world appreciate (indeed prefer) this communal way of life and will defend it from insult. Moreover, even the most modern societies retain tribal tendencies at their core – as expressed, for example, in nationalism, cultural pride, and all sorts of civic groups and fan clubs that express social identities. That must be upheld; it is not always uncivilized to be tribal. Instead, the point is to strike at the awful effects that extreme tribalization can have – to oppose not the

terrorist's or insurgent's religion but rather the reduction of that religion to raw tribalist tenets.

This approach could help rally moderates to resist clannish, sectarian extremists. Western leaders have put Muslim leaders everywhere under pressure to denounce terrorism as barbaric and uncivilized. But this approach to the "war of ideas," along with counterpressures from sectarian Islamists, has put moderate Muslims on the defensive, often inhibiting them from speaking out. An approach that focuses instead on questioning extreme tribalism, particularly the tribalization of religion, may be more effective in freeing up dialogue and inviting a search for common ecumenical ground.

This is a domain – and a task – for information strategy. It involves knowing the enemy, shaping public consciousness, and crafting persuasive messages for friend and foe alike. It involves getting the content of those messages right and finding the best conduits for them. It is about winning the battle of the story. And it involves doing all this in such a way that soft power works as well as hard power, and information-age *noopolitik* outperforms traditional *realpolitik*.

Sources

The sections on classic tribal dynamics and tribal warfare draw heavily on the sources listed below. Many points are condensed and paraphrased from them, and there is hardly an idea or observation in those sections that does not come from those sources. In addition to the sources listed below, some points derive from articles in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* and from a C-SPAN2 broadcast of the conference "Al Qaeda 2.0: Transnational Terrorism After 9/11," convened by the New America Foundation and the New York University Center on Law and Security in Washington, DC, 2 December 2004, which included presentations by many top experts in the field of terrorism.

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