Soldier questions an Iraqi about insurgent activity

Marine Forces, Pacific (JonDior Ferrell)

Center of Gravity and Asymmetric Conflict **Factoring In Culture**

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This essay addresses asymmetric conflict in its current manifestation, which has come to be called *jihadism*. It accepts that the concept of *center of gravity* is applicable to such conflict, as has been argued by many study projects at the U.S. Army War College.[1] These studies, however, do not extend to the resistance struggle in Iraq. Even in their treatment of al Qaeda, they disagree as to what constitutes its center of gravity and reflect questionable assumptions about Islamist militancy. Departing from the conventional systemic approach, the present study focuses on contrast of culture to tie together loose strings and add clarity to the dynamic of jihadism.

To begin with, center of gravity in the context of asymmetry has no correlation with the disposition, maneuverability, or sustainability of a field force or to the capacity of states to mobilize assets of manpower and materiel. Nonetheless, the term remains applicable, particularly as used by Antulio Echevarria. In his treatise on "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity," Echevarria reinterprets Clausewitz's words as advice to look first for unity of effort and then "for connections among the various parts of an adversary, or adversaries, in order to determine what holds them together," as if by centripetal force. "Centers of gravity are focal points that serve to hold a combatant's entire system or structure together and that draw power from a variety of sources and provide it with purpose and direction."[2]

The term *asymmetric warfare* similarly deserves clarification. The base concept of a weaker adversary using unconventional means, stratagems, or niche capabilities to overcome a stronger power remains pertinent. However, the original hypotheses of rogue states launching chemical, biological, and radiological attacks or millennialist terrorists wreaking havoc in the United States have been supplanted by the realities of the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban/al Qaeda aggression in Afghanistan, and the Sunni resistance in Iraq. The common denominator of these realities is the legitimizing of hostile action through the tenet of *jihad*—the Islamic imperative of fighting infidels to regain independence of action on the micro level or to bring social justice and ultimately salvation to mankind on the macro level. Thus, asymmetric conflict has become associated with jihadism. As any complex word-symbol, *jihad* lends itself to various interpretations, including who may rightfully invoke it and how it may be conducted. Such considerations notwithstanding, jihadism is the hallmark of America's current opponents.

Given this delimitation of asymmetric conflict, jihadism manifests itself to the U.S. military as an array of relatively small-scale, low-level attacks by tribal militias, armed brotherhoods (Sufi militias), factional/party militias, outlaw gangs, and militant cells. This phenomenon is very different from the long-held image of companies or battalions deployed "as two up and one back"—doctrinal, spatially structured combat by state-organized forces. It does not, however, defy analysis of force generation and sustainment. Hence, this essay seeks to expose and explain the centripetal (in-drawing) force that binds the disparate elements in their asymmetric approaches to jihad. The process results in finding centers of gravity.

Tribes and Clients

Two countervailing social forces shape the jihadist community, *tribalism* and *clientelism*. Both are outside the experience of most Americans. Both terms generally evoke disdain, albeit for quite different reasons.[3] *Tribalism*, as a derivative of *tribe*, is problematic because many scholars contend that the base term lacks specificity and therefore analytic usefulness. *Clientelism*, on the other hand, evokes images of the old-time, party-linked patronage politics of America's big cities, which the school of political correctness sees as deserving avoidance if not censure. Disdain notwithstanding, anyone who has lived beyond the Western enclave in most of the Islamic world knows such terms are indispensable.

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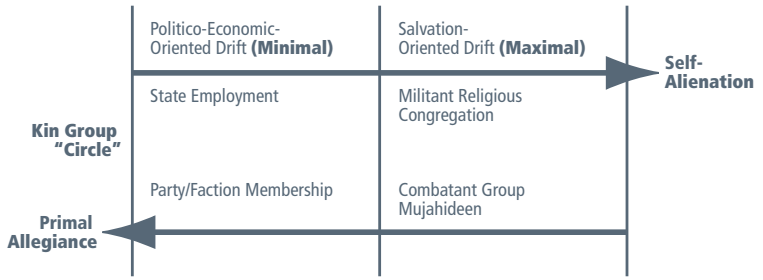
The scholarly critique of the term *tribe* draws attention to its seemingly arbitrary use to denote groups as small as extended families and as large as nationalities. The head count of a tribe correspondingly ranges from a few score to hundreds of thousands. There is controversy whether the term applies to urban as well as rural populations and where the distinction lies between *clan* and *tribe*. Moreover, genetic linkage may not correlate with tribal alliances and rivalries. However, none of these objections are critical because *tribe* and *tribalism* can indeed be defined in practical terms. According to William R. Polk, a tribe is a kinship group that is optimally sized to its ecologic setting—large enough to accomplish its minimal economic chores and defend itself but small enough to keep members in contact and remain proportional to the supply of food. Thus, history reveals that "clans were constantly splitting apart as they grew beyond their resources or as their resources contracted in times of drought or seasonal change, [and] some of *us* were periodically becoming *them*."[4] This process is depicted in the Bible, when the extended families of Isaac and Ishmael, the sons of Abraham, drew apart, evolving into two distinct and now antagonistic peoples, the Jews and Arabs. Then, too, there is evidence that tribes intermingled for ecologic reasons, yet upheld a myth of common ancestry.

If we accept *tribe* as a valid term of analysis, we can proceed to a meaningful definition of *tribalism*. It is not the antithesis of globalism, as some scholars suggest, nor a primitive form of nationalism. Rather, it is the self-legitimation of the kin group and its intent and endeavor to optimize its collective self-interest. Self-legitimation is conviction that the tribe is the beginning and end of loyalty, identity, obligation, purpose, status, honor, past, and future—*exclusiveness* relative to society at large. Thus, the tribe constitutes its own armed force—a militia consisting of most or all fit adult males. The influence of tribalism may be strong or weak, depending on such circumstances as affronts to honor, threats to security, challenges to livelihood, or summons to jihad. Circumstances may lead to voluntary or compulsory compromises with kin group exclusiveness. (See figure 1 for a depiction of this phenomenon.) Individual tribesmen may be compelled to serve in the state's military establishment or voluntarily join the party that rules the state. At a higher degree of drift, they may voluntarily leave their homeland at the behest of some militant preacher to join a mujahideen group. However, the tribal bond remains unbroken except in cases of full self-alienation. Up to that extreme point, the individual expects, and is expected, to serve tribal interests. He will give the needs of his kinsmen priority and respond to the directives or entreaties of the tribal authority.

It is at the point of full self-alienation that clientelism prevails: individuals stop acting as tribesmen and unquestioningly submit to the authority of preachers or operational leaders. This phenomenon, which involves a small minority, has parallels in Western societies, where youths alienate themselves from their families to follow cult leaders. In both cases, the leader (patron) offers the followers (clients) religious salvation in return for loyal service. The comparison has limits because the personality factor—adulation of the leader—seems more significant in the Western case than in Islam. Osama bin Laden himself *seems* to be creating a cult of personality through his media releases, but this may be a hasty

Figure 1: Compromise of Kin Group Exclusiveness



interpretation. It is noteworthy that his harangues are largely cast in nonegotistical terms, phrasing in grammatical third person (*it, that*) rather than first person (*I, me*). Neither his deputies nor the leaders of allied militant groups seem to exploit a personality factor. In their propaganda, the more infamous actors pledge to cooperate with al Qaeda and recognize bin Laden as head. However, such allegiance is based on volition, not obligation as is the case with tribalism. Hence, it seems that the militant group leaders attract followers from both self-alienated individuals and genuine outcasts by justifying and facilitating jihad.

Coopting Tribal Authority

There is certainly give and take, and even some overlap, between the competing influences of clientelism and tribalism. The Ba'thist resistance in Iraq ostensibly derives motive from old party ideology, yet it must heavily resort to the tribal environment for manpower, subsistence, weapons caching, smuggling assistance, and safe haven since the party/state structure has been destroyed. The real authority within a tribe might be contested among its nominal chief, council of elders, or religious leaders. The outcome might determine whether the males of the tribe mobilize together as an integral tribal militia or component of a Sufi militia, or go off individually to a mujahideen camp.

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Such variances should not be daunting, however, because graphing them affords the necessary perspective on the adversary. Figure 2 depicts the resistance construct for Iraq, which includes a small foreign component and a much larger native component. The graphing of the native component indicates tribes with members in the Salafist (religious militant) and Ba'thist arenas as well as the military-security establishment, where they covertly facilitate resistance activity. The tribal leaders have plausible denial insofar as the tribal militias as such are not committed against multinational forces, while the tribe has ostensibly committed assets to the new regime.

In figure 2, space B, at which these various arenas (shown as circles) overlap, is tribal authority, which in this scenario abets the resistance. That space is both physical and moral; it consists of the tribal assemblies where decisions are made as well as the beliefs and rituals that legitimize such decisionmaking. Space B, with its two dimensions, is thus the notional center of gravity for tribally connected resistance. Reversing the scenario perhaps better illustrates the point. Should the tribal authority opt to support the new government, the tribal members in the ranks of the military-security forces would cease their subversive activity, and those acting out Ba'thist or radical Salafist agendas would cease hostilities. From either perspective, the associated critical capabilities of tribal authority are ensuring that the kin group has economic sustenance and security from threats.

Specifying a center of gravity, however, is far from devising an effective strategy. The first relevant consideration is that the two dimensions of tribal leadership are not equally approachable. Addressing the moral dimension would be a generational project and is, therefore, a nonstarter. On the other hand, addressing the physical dimension is more feasible and suggests two approaches: removing tribal leadership, hopefully without provoking greater antagonism, or coopting tribal authorities and, through them, their tribes. Still, determining the best course of action requires many other considerations. There are hundreds of tribes in Iraq, as there are in Afghanistan and many other Islamic countries. Within a country, some tribes are more powerful than others, some are bitter rivals, and some have regional dominance without ranking very high in the national pecking order.

These power relations can of course be uncovered and then factored into a counterresistance strategy. The operative questions are:

- Which tribes are most significant in terms of manpower, control of strategic terrain or resources, external influence, and historic role?
- Which tribes will resist cooptation, either as a matter of principle or as a matter of irreconcilable rivalry?

■ Regarding those tribes open to cooptation, what is the cost of coopting them, for example, in terms of money, official positions, local development projects, or public sector employment? Is the cost bearable?

■ What are the tradeoffs between coopting at the regional or subregional versus the country level?

■ How does the stabilization force contain the tribes that cannot be coopted, for whatever reasons?

These are not questions for the military alone. They require interagency and bilateral coordination to answer and convert into a strategic plan. However, the reality is that the military is engaged and often makes decisions about who is worth training, who cannot be trusted, who gets hired, which areas to cordon and search, or where a project is initiated. The military also regularly gains information on tribal power dynamics and crafts its own ad hoc models to make sense of it. Lastly and perhaps most significantly, the military is sustaining discussion on the potentiality and actuality of coopting tribal leaders. Operational and tactical commanders and their troops must deal with the dynamics of tribalism despite the lack of an integrated strategic plan.

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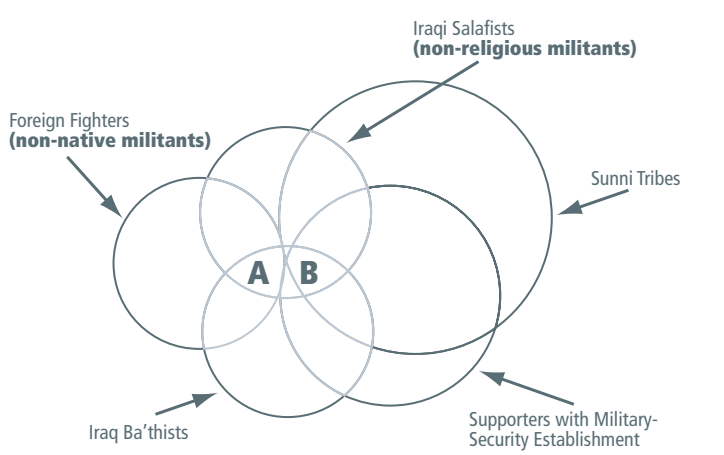
Critiquing Extremist Doctrine

What of the center of gravity in the clientele version of jihadism? From what has been discussed, it appears that it is neither the person nor the legend of Osama bin Laden. If it were, one would expect to find doctrinal cohesion among the mujahideen in the camps supposedly run or supported by al Qaeda and between it and those remote groups who are said to respond to bin Laden's direction. Yet one finds evidence of doctrinal discord and of bin Laden's indifference to it—of his willingness to make use of even those he considers beyond the pale of Islam.[5] If it is not leadership, then perhaps al Qaeda's center of gravity is its aggregated capacity to project terror. However, this recourse leads to consideration of critical capabilities or resources, not center of gravity per se. Besides, al Qaeda's resources are of very low density and of various technological levels and are therefore relatively easy to move, conceal, replace, reschedule, or retool. There is perhaps a more subliminal dynamic at work—the possibility that the center of gravity of bin Laden's network equates to the word *qâᶜida* (corrupted into *qaeda*). The Arabic word has numerous meanings—basic and extended, concrete and metaphoric. It can designate *base* in the concrete sense of foundational or operational base; it can also designate *fundamental principle*. Thus, it connotes the same two dimensions, physical and moral, that were pertinent in the discussion of tribal authority. As a two-dimensional force, al Qaeda's critical capabilities are to uphold radical interpretations of the jihad tenet, inspire complementary actions (strikes), and covertly gain new adherents to Islamist radicalism.

Compared to the tribal case, however, the physical dimension of al Qaeda is diffuse—even more so than it had been—lacking geographic, institutional, or temporal consistency. Prior to the onset of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, the al Qaeda network was present in many countries in the form of mosques creating jihad-adepts and training camps generating jihadist operatives. The command center and main concentration of manpower were in Afghanistan. Consequent to *Enduring Freedom* and regional cooperation in the war on terror, mosque preaching was censured, and camps were abandoned. The militant leaders and their followers went into hiding and changed sites as needed to avoid detection. Nonetheless, capabilities in tradecraft, communications, financing, and arms procurement were conserved through better concealment techniques or modified procedures. Terrorist strikes have continued, and often it is such atrocities that first indicate presence in an area.

So long as any cell can make gain for the whole movement, the effort to stop jihadist terror-

Figure 2: Sunni Resistance Construct



A–Voluntary Cooperation B–Obligatory Cooperation

ism demands a long-term, wide-ranging commitment. Here again, formulation of strategy belongs in the interagency arena. The military has already shown that it has suitable assets and techniques to contribute to the cause and will likely remain engaged as long as America's will endures. However, targets such as leadership, weapons caches, and smuggling rings are in the physical dimension of al Qaeda. What of the moral dimension?

Many observers in the governmental, military, and media arenas have already argued for an information warfare campaign. However, the preponderance of advice calls for an external, as opposed to internal, approach—promoting tolerance, freedom, and democracy as countervalues rather than discrediting the tenets of Islamist extremism. The former approach makes little sense when the adversary's propaganda has already distorted American values into licentiousness, irresponsibility, and hypocrisy. This rejection of Westernism is buttressed by a full complement of extremist treatises and jihad lore (salvation histories, myths, and folklore that portray hero-martyrs, epic struggles, and the sense of Providence). Both sets can be targeted. However, the treatises are more vulnerable in that they lend themselves to critique on points of doctrinal validity. The jihad lore, like American frontier lore, is too embedded in the popular culture to be easily subverted. The doctrinal vulnerability, though, cannot be directly targeted. Few Americans have the knowledge to critique the tenet of *takfir* (as it justifies Muslims conducting jihad against other Muslims) or Sayyid Qutb's construct of the "universal Islamic concept." Even those who do would have virtually no credibility with a Muslim audience, since they would be immediately dismissed as Westerners and infidels, regardless of their credentials. The task must be shared with Muslim intellectuals who do have the credibility to critique extremist ideology yet need the technical assistance in information warfare America can offer.

the Taliban continues to lose numbers through members returning to their tribal obligations and primal allegiance

One last consideration: how does the Taliban movement fit into the above scheme? The Taliban are adversaries of the United States largely because they have been, and remain, allies of al Qaeda. They are not, however, agents of global terrorism. They are a regional, religious-based faction that gained and lost control of most of Afghanistan. The Taliban have unity of doctrine (Deobandist) and a high degree of ethnic homogeneity (Pashtun). Their profile is a variation of the competing allegiance dynamic graphed in figure 1. The organization, with its hard-core leadership and henchmen, retains residual support among the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, it continues to lose numbers through members returning to their tribal obligations and primal allegiance. The progress of Kabul's recently initiated "Reconciliation Program" should offer many examples of how wayward kinsmen are coaxed back into the tribal fold.

Afghanistan seems to offer some prospects for Iraq. However, the analogy should not be taken too far. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military had an important advantage in the initial stage of *Enduring Freedom*—the cooperation of a domestic ally, the Northern Alliance. This coalition not only had the necessary military and political organization to take charge of the country; it also had experience with accommodating tribalism. (During the civil war, some militias switched allegiance, according to tribal interest, just as occurred earlier in the Lebanese conflict.) The United States had no such advantage in Iraq—excluding the Kurdish autonomous zone—and thus remains challenged with developing that capacity in a new Baghdad regime. The pacification and stabilization of Iraq may consequently take longer. The bottom line is that leveraging tribalism should be critical to that effort.

There will be ample opportunity to test the above thesis because militant jihadism is likely to challenge America and its allies for some years to come. It may be an allied Muslim state, however,

Marine confirming destruction of hostile vehicle during Operation *Spear* in Karabilah, Iraq

2d Division Marine Division Combat Camera (Neil A. Sevelius)

U.S. Air Force (Jamie M. Shultz)

Security Force Airman speaking to a tribe leader's son through an interpreter

that ultimately leads the way against the jihadists' center of gravity. Regardless of which government leads and whether the requisite interagency approach ever becomes reality, the U.S. military must prepare to factor culture into mission planning at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Many initiatives have been undertaken—particularly by the Army and Marine Corps, whose missions more directly engage foreign cultures. The increasing inclusion of cultural courses in service school curricula as well as cultural factors in training scenarios is a positive development. However, there are questions of proper focus and effectiveness of instructional time invested. It is important, too, to preclude easy but meaningless fixes, such as casting an exercise opposing force as Maoist-Marxist guerrillas with turbans. But where is the source of authority to rule on such issues? Perhaps the joint military community should establish a clearinghouse and staff it with specialists with genuine knowledge of indigenous customs and social dynamics, Islamic theology and social thought, and related subjects. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] The relevant works, all products of the Strategy Research Project at the U.S. Army War College, are James A. Bliss, "Al-Qaeda's Center of Gravity" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, May 3, 2004); Stephen W. Davis, "Center of Gravity and the War on Terrorism" (April 7, 2003); Joe E. Ethridge, Jr., "Center of Gravity Determination in the Global War on Terrorism" (May 3, 2004); John L. Haberkern, "The Global War on Terrorism: Ideology as Its Strategy Center of Gravity" (May 3, 2004); James Reilly, "A Strategic Level Center of Gravity Analysis on the Global War on Terrorism" (April 9, 2002); Joseph P. Schweitzer, "Al-Qaeda: Center of Gravity and Decision Points" (April 7, 2003).

[2] Antulio J. Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing Our Warfighting Doctrine—Again!" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2002), vi–vii, available at <www.carlisle.army.mil/usassi/welcome.htm>.

[3] Some of that controversy is noted in Howard Handleman, *The Challenge of Third World Development*, 3d ed. (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 86.

[4] William R. Polk, *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 30, 218.

[5] Various Internet sources allude to doctrinal disagreements among the jihadists. See, for example, the section on Isam al-Turabi's testimonies in "Bin Laden's Life in Sudan—Part One," excerpt from FBIS translation of Arabic text of *al-Quds al-Arabi* (November 24, 2001), <www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ladin-sudan.htm>, 13.