

TRIBAL MILITIAS: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL TO COUNTER AL-QAIDA AND ITS AFFILIATES?

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Despite over a decade of open war, dealing with Al-Qaida and its affiliates in the Middle East is likely to remain a concern for the foreseeable future and will pose a challenge requiring the use of any tool that is likely to be effective in meeting the threat. Most of the local societies in which Al-Qaida has operated in the Middle East and Africa after September 11, 2001, have a predominantly tribal character or at least have a strong tribal component (Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Mali, and Sinai). Developing effective tools to counter Al-Qaida's continuing presence in that social environment, therefore, is a priority and requires understanding Al-Qaida's critical vulnerabilities when it operates in those societies and developing the means to counter Al-Qaida's efforts.

In particular, this monograph addresses the role of tribal militias in the context of the fight against Al-Qaida. The intent is to enrich policy analysis and clarify options for future operations. This is accomplished by focusing on past experience in order to identify the positive and negative aspects related to the use of such militias. The focus in this monograph is on Iraq and Yemen. However, many of the lessons learned may be applicable more broadly.

The thesis is that the capabilities which tribally-based militias provide may be one of the most efficient and cost-effective tools against Al-Qaida. In some cases, such militias can act as a force multiplier for U.S. Landpower forces, whether deployed on the ground in significant numbers, or, in other cases, if such militias can reduce the need for a U.S. commitment on the ground in environments that might present unfavorable conditions for a significant U.S. Landpower footprint. At the same time, given the complexity of the local political environment,

tribal militias are no panacea, but can be a two-edged sword and, like any weapon, this weapon has to be understood and wielded with caution and skill in order to avoid unintended consequences.

There are two models for the tribal militias based on the nature of their patron. This is a key factor insofar as affecting a patron's interests, the patron-tribe relationship, Al-Qaida's strategy, and the short- and long-term structure and the political and military functioning of tribal militias. In Model 1, the patron of a militia is an outside entity; in Model 2, the national government is the patron (although an outside patron may provide ancillary support).

The first case study deals with a Model 1 situation, where a foreign patron—the United States—acted in that role in Iraq from late-2006 through the December 2008-April 2009 period handover to the Iraqi authorities. The second case study deals with two ongoing Model 2 situations, again with Iraq, but in a Phase II, after the national government's assumption of responsibility for the tribal militia in 2009, and is especially useful for comparative purposes with the earlier phase. The third case study deals with Yemen, where the local government has acted as the militia patron since 2012.

Based on the experience from Iraq and Yemen, this monograph concludes that the positive results of using tribal militias in the fight against Al-Qaida and its offshoots may be significant. Within the context of fighting against Al-Qaida, encouraging and supporting any armed local constituency—such as Iraq's tribes—may be a reasonable or even an unavoidable option at a particular juncture in time for an outside power or for a local patron in dealing with that insurgency. Nevertheless, as is often true

in the real world, this is not a panacea and, based on past experience, there are cautionary guidelines to be remembered for the creation and functioning of such tribal militias that could make the difference between success or ultimate failure. Each of the two models studied has political and military advantages and disadvantages, but one may not have the luxury of which option to select in a specific situation.

Among the recommendations for policy in those situations where the United States is a tribal militia's direct patron are: to understand the strengths and limitations of tribal militias and shape the latter's roles and missions accordingly, support a tribal militia adequately in material terms, provide effective protection for key tribal militia leaders from inevitable Al-Qaida efforts to eliminate them, ensure that the U.S. management and use of tribal militias do not undercut an existing or emerging government's legitimacy, craft a realistic and effective demobilization plan, and conduct an effective information campaign directed toward the tribes. When the United States is in a supporting role to the local government, recommendations include: provide funding, arms, selected operational support, and intelligence channeled through the patron local government, advise the local government as to the best way to deal with the tribal militias, advise and

support other countries that might act in the future as potential patrons of tribal militias.

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