

Engagement in Al Anbar

Success or failure?

by BGen David G. Reist, USMC(Ret)

There is no doubt that engaging the tribes throughout Iraq was a good thing. The tribal engagement effort in Al Anbar has been heralded as a major contributing factor that led to the demise of al-Qaeda throughout Al Anbar Province. Much has been written and discussed about these efforts in bringing the “Awakening” movement to the forefront, and some speculate that in conjunction with the surge, the tide was turned. It has been further stated that the Awakening then spread to other parts of Iraq in 2007 and 2008, especially the Sunni Provinces of Ninewah and Saladin, and even influenced the Shi’a areas. Both the tribes and the coalition came to the table, and the coalition got the defeat of al-Qaeda. What did the tribes get? Some would offer that the tribes wanted al-Qaeda removed from Al Anbar as much as the coalition. In some cases this is true; some tribes enjoyed the chaos as it allowed them to prosper. The question remains, tribal engagement was conducted in order to do what? Tribal engagement from the U.S. vantage point was aimed at the elimination of al-Qaeda, but from the tribe’s perspective, they looked to the United States for the follow-on mission—reinstating the power, authority, and money equilibrium that is the foundation of tribal structure. (I refer to this as the commercial battlespace.) We can argue all day whether the tribal way is right or wrong, and we can continue to try to bring governance, rule of law, and a Western philosophy to the world, but in the end, rich men (sheikhs) will always want to get richer, and eventu-

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Tribal leaders will have a hand in what laws are passed. (Photo by Cpl Jeremy Gadrow.)

ally they will have a hand in what laws are passed in their country. (Just look at the United States and how it’s done.)

Roots of Tribal Engagement

The tribal engagement effort was ongoing before the war even started, for all of the right reasons (coalition warfare). When the Marine Corps entered Al Anbar in 2004, an initiative was undertaken to get businessmen together. This initiative was, in essence, bringing together sheikhs interested in stability so they could continue to conduct business and make money. Four bodies that were hung from a bridge in Fallujah crimped this initiative, but the tribes were still interested in talking. An offshoot manifested itself in west-

ern Al Anbar in 2005 when the confluence of U.S. military force and tribal support resulted in al-Qaeda being defeated in the vicinity of Al Qaim, the city located at the major crossing point at the Syrian border. Al-Qaeda has not returned since to Al Qaim, but they have tried. Both sides got rid of al-Qaeda, and the tribe that aligned with the United States got control of the area. The quid pro quo was oversight of the border crossing. This oversight (commercial battlespace) comes with many benefits, and those benefits remain today. The same thing happened in central Al Anbar in early 2006 when an Iraqi colonel took control of his area (Baghdadi, just north of Al Asad Airbase) and al-Qaeda was pushed out. Al-

though there were not many visible gains to U.S. eyes, the colonel obviously gained increased wasta (clout), control of the area, etc.

Let's Get Business Going!

In early 2006 one of the major pillars of tribal engagement was economic growth in Al Anbar. Two economic conferences were held in Amman, Jordan, in May 2006; one in January 2007 in Dubai; and then another in March 2007 in Qatar. A final economic conference was held in Jordan in early 2009. Several less formal events were held inside Al Anbar Province. The aim was to stimulate economic growth within the region and offer the alternative of jobs vice violence. The sheikhs understood this strategy. They "get" the commercial battlespace. Numerous, and almost endless, ideas were proffered or tried in conjunction with the sheikhs—micro-finance loans, wireless local loop telecommunications to provide both voice and data, date palm spraying, trash/rubble cleanup, Iraqi railroad



U.S. military forces and tribal support resulted in al-Qaeda defeat in Al Anbar. (Photo by Cpl Antonio Rosa.)

resurgence, countless construction projects (e.g., sewers, schools, power generation), sewing centers, house construction projects, toll roads, money delivery and bank reestablishment, veterinary care, seed distribution, oil and gas initiatives, canal clearing to enhance agriculture, honey bee regeneration, etc. Another aspect of economic development that blossomed at this time was the emergence of the Deputy Under

Secretary of Defense (Business Transformation)/Director, Task Force for Business and Stability Operations that looked to open some of the state owned enterprises and produce jobs. The Provincial Reconstruction Team was just beginning to take shape in Al Anbar in the summer of 2006, and while they were getting their feet on the ground, all of the entities with Baghdad were kept aware of initiatives.

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Did Business Blossom?

Yes and no. Let's look at Al Qaim. With al-Qaeda removed from that area by the Syrian border in 2005, the opportunity for stability and growth was present. There is a phosphate plant in the Al Qaim area. It is relatively large, and the fuel needed could be trucked or brought by rail. The Iraqi railroad was opened to Al Qaim in mid-2006 by way of Baghdad to Baji in the north then back south and west to Al Qaim. (Through Fallujah and Ramadi the railroad tracks had been destroyed and that repair would have to wait until 2009 to occur.) The railroad ran, fuel was delivered, and progress was being made. The railroad was attacked, repaired, reattacked, etc. (Think the railroad during the U.S. Civil War.) Many other things in Al Qaim were ongoing also, mainly involved with the border crossing (albeit "officially" closed) and the preeminent tribe controlling the commercial battlespace. When the local businessman was asked how he found workers, ensured security, and kept work moving without interruption, he put his arm around the head sheikh of the local tribe and smiled. Areas, such as Fallujah, saw construction boom in 2006, while Ramadi was just coming out of battle over control of the city. It would see the same boom in 2007. In sum, when there was enough stability for economic growth to take hold, it did. When the local sheikhs weighed in, stuff happened quickly.

Tribal Engagement: The Step After al-Qaeda Defeat

The sheikhs needed the United States more than ever immediately after al-Qaeda was defeated in Al Anbar. The sheikhs needed (and wanted) the United States to leverage all global assets and skills to assist them in exploiting the commercial battlespace. They needed U.S. assistance to accelerate growth of small businesses, the delivery of raw materials for construction, markets for some of their goods to start them off, and in some cases knowledge to assist (e.g., the most



The United States must demonstrate a willingness to stay and care about continued success in Iraq. (Photo by Capt Timothy LeMaster.)

advanced agricultural techniques). We gave them the best military force in the world to defeat al-Qaeda and followed it up with a nonagile response that was perceived as less than caring. As much as the sheikhs need the United States, we need them, as they can't hold on forever, and in the absence of jobs, the enemy will have fertile ground to reemerge.

Failure or Success?

In the short term, we succeeded. In the long term, how do we avoid failure? The sheikhs needed us, and we could not deliver fast enough as a Nation, which opens the door to less favorable suitors. If we ignore the preeminence of the commercial battlespace, we fail to shape and ensure the peace. Although much is being worked in the physical battlespace, planning must be integrated prehostility, and it must be agile in its application. In today's lexicon this belongs to the interagency, but after 8 years of learning, are we mature enough to grasp the lessons? This has been hard because it defies a military solution. If it were a military problem it would be easy. We need the same talent that exists on the battlefield to be present and leading/fighting in the commercial battlespace.

Quick, tell me who is leading the military effort in Iraq or Afghanistan? Now, tell me who is leading the economic effort? Furthermore, which countries make up the economic solution? There is a vacuum in the commercial battlespace, and we are not winning. Who is?

The final point that would have made a huge difference is Sunni solidarity. The tribes are the tribes, and they compete and have competed for countless years. They were unable to set aside their differences in order to establish a unified, and more powerful, position in Baghdad. The Kurds were able to do this, and from 1991 on (with the existence of the 36th parallel to keep Saddam at bay) the Kurdish area exploded economically. The same was potentially possible with Al Anbar Province, which likewise possesses huge economic possibilities, and with the confirmed resources it could be one of the wealthiest provinces in Iraq. As a leading sheikh once said, "If you know what you want, it is easy."

