http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/

Posted by **Dave Kilcullen** on August 29, 2007 2:52 AM | **Permalink**| **Print**

Some aspects of the war in Iraq are hard to fit into "classical" models of insurgency. One of these is the growing tribal uprising against al Qa'ida, which could transform the war in ways not factored into neat "benchmarks" developed many months ago and thousands of miles away. I spent time out on the ground during May and June working with coalition units, tribal leaders and fighters engaged in the uprising, so I felt a few field observations might be of interest to the Small Wars community. I apologize in advance for the epic length of this post, but it's a complex issue, so I hope people will forgive my long-windedness. Like much else, it's too early to know how this new development will play out. But surprisingly (surprising to me, anyway), indications so far are relatively positive.

To understand what follows, you need to realize that Iraqi tribes are not somehow separate, out in the desert, or remote: rather, they are powerful interest groups that permeate Iraqi society. More than 85% of Iraqis claim some form of tribal affiliation; tribal identity is a parallel, informal but powerful sphere of influence in the community. Iraqi tribal leaders represent a competing power center, and the tribes themselves are a parallel hierarchy that overlaps with formal government structures and political allegiances. Most Iraqis wear their tribal selves beside other strands of identity (religious, ethnic, regional, socio-economic) that interact in complex ways, rendering meaningless the facile division into Sunni, Shi'a and Kurdish groups that distant observers sometimes perceive. The reality of Iraqi national character is much more complex than that, and tribal identity plays an extremely important part in it, even for urbanized Iraqis. Thus the tribal revolt is not some remote riot on a reservation: it's a major social movement that could significantly influence most Iraqis where they live.

Birth of the revolt

The uprising began last year, far out in western Anbar province, but is now affecting about 40% of the country. It has spread to Ninewa, Diyala, Babil, Salah-ad-Din, Baghdad and – intriguingly – is filtering into Shi'a communities in the South. The Iraqi government was in on it from the start; our Iraqi intelligence colleagues predicted, well before we realized it, that Anbar was going to "flip", with tribal leaders turning toward the government and away from extremists.

Some tribal leaders told me that the split started over women. This is not as odd as

it sounds. One of AQ's standard techniques, which I have seen them apply in places as diverse as Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Indonesia, is to marry leaders and key operatives to women from prominent tribal families. The strategy works by creating a bond with the community, exploiting kinship-based alliances, and so "embedding" the AQ network into the society. Over time, this makes AQ part of the social landscape, allows them to manipulate local people and makes it harder for outsiders to pry the network apart from the population. (Last year, while working in the tribal agencies along Pakistan's North-West Frontier, a Khyber Rifles officer told me "we Punjabis are the foreigners here: al Qa'ida have been here 25 years and have married into the Pashtun hill-tribes to the point where it's hard to tell the terrorists from everyone else.") Well, indeed.

But this time, the tactic seems to have backfired. We often short-hand the enemy as "al Qa'ida" but in Iraq we primarily face *tanzim qaidat al-jihad fil bilad al-Rafidayn* (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's organization, which swore allegiance to bin Laden in 2004, is now taking strategic direction and support from Al Qa'ida central, and whose archaic name literally means "the qai'da organization for jihad in the land of the two rivers", i.e. Al Qa'ida in Iraq, AQI). This group's foot-soldiers are 95% Iraqi, but its leadership is overwhelmingly foreign. The top leaders and several key players are Egyptians and there are Turks, Syrians, Saudis, Chechens, Afghans and others in the leadership cadre. Moreover, the group is heavily urbanized, and town-dwellers – even urban Iraqis – may as well be foreigners as far as some tribal leaders are concerned. So there is a cultural barrier, and a natural difference in outlook, between the tribes and the terrorists.

These differences need not have been fatal – indeed, for years the tribes treated the terrorists as "useful idiots", while AQI in turn exploited them for cover and support. One person told me that AQI's pitch to the tribes was "we are Sunni, you are Sunni. The Americans and Iranians are helping the Shi'a – let's fight them together". But this alliance of convenience and mutual exploitation broke down when AQI began to apply the standard AQ method of cementing alliances through marriage. In Iraqi tribal society, custom (*aadat*) is at least as important as religion (*deen*) and its dictates, often pre-Islamic in origin, frequently differ from those of Islam. Indeed, as one tribal Iraqi put it to me, "if you ask a Shammari what religion he is, he will say 'I am a Shammari' " – the Shammari being a confederation which, like many Iraqi tribes, has both Sunni and Shi'a branches.

Islam, of course, is a key identity marker when dealing with non-Muslim outsiders, but when all involved are Muslim, kinship trumps religion. And in fact, most tribal Iraqis I have spoken with consider AQ's brand of "Islam" utterly foreign to their traditional and syncretic version of the faith. One key difference is marriage custom, the tribes only giving their women within the tribe or (on rare occasions to

cement a bond or resolve a grievance, as part of a process known as *sulha*) to other tribes or clans in their confederation (*qabila*). Marrying women to strangers, let alone foreigners, is just not done. AQ, with their hyper-reductionist version of "Islam" stripped of cultural content, discounted the tribes' view as ignorant, stupid and sinful.

This led to violence, as these things do: AQI killed a sheikh over his refusal to give daughters of his tribe to them in marriage, which created a revenge obligation (*tha'r*) on his people, who attacked AQI. The terrorists retaliated with immense brutality, killing the children of a prominent sheikh in a particularly gruesome manner, witnesses told us. This was the last straw, they said, and the tribes rose up. Neighboring clans joined the fight, which escalated as AQI (who had generally worn out their welcome through high-handedness) tried to crush the revolt through more atrocities. Soon the uprising took off, spreading along kinship lines through Anbar and into neighboring provinces.

Other tribesmen told me women weren't the only issue. The tribes run smuggling, import/export and construction businesses which AQI shut down, took over, or disrupted through violent disturbances that were "bad for business". Another factor was the belief, widespread among the tribes (and with at least some basis in fact) that AQI has links to, and has received funding and support from, Iran. In their view, women were simply the spark – AQI already "had it coming". (Out in the wild western desert, things often tend to play out like *The Sopranos*… except that AQI changed the rules of the game by adding roadside bombs, beheadings, murder of children and death by torture. Eventually, enough was enough for the locals.)

Current Situation

Several major tribes are now "up" against AQ, across all of Anbar, Diyala, Salah-ad-din, parts of Babil and Baghdad (both city and province). Some in Anbar and Diyala have formed "Salvation Councils", looking to well-known leadership figures like Sheikh Sittar ar Rishawi, or to community leaders. In other provinces things tend to be quite informal, based on local elders. In Anbar the movement has acquired the name "the awakening".

The uprising against AQI has dramatically improved security. In Ramadi, Hit, Tikrit, Fallujah and other centers the rate of civilian deaths has dropped precipitously, and overall attacks are down far below historic trends, to almost nothing in some places. For anyone familiar with these places from earlier in the war, it can be quite disorienting to watch Iraqis walking safely and openly in streets which, a year ago, would have required a major operation just to traverse. This change seems to have passed some observers by, but it is one of the truly significant developments in Iraq

this year. For example, a recent *Washington Post* article begins with a Staff Sergeant who was not expecting combat, "after many uneventful months in Iraq's Anbar province, as he jostled over the rough terrain of brush, fields and irrigation ditches in the lead Humvee of a routine patrol on the night of June 30". Many uneventful months in Anbar? Not expecting combat? A routine patrol – at night? This is not the Anbar we think we know, a media byword for constant pointless violence.

Other provinces are experiencing similar patterns: in one farming district south of Baghdad, a treaty between an enterprising company commander and community elders has dramatically reduced bombings: by late May, one road that was attacked twice a day last year had not seen a single IED attack since the agreement was established in March. The locals have formed a neighborhood watch, are policing their own community, and are enrolling in the Iraqi police under government control and cooperating with local Iraqi Army units. And recently Shi'a tribes in the south have approached us, looking to cooperate with the government against Shi'a extremists.

Of course, this is motivated primarily by self-interest. Tribal leaders realize the extremists were leading them on a path to destruction, and have seized the opportunity to dump the terrorists and come in from the cold. They are also, naturally, looking forward to the day when coalition forces are no longer in their districts, and want to ensure that they, nor AQI, are in charge once we leave. And many of the tribal leaders have realized for themselves what our Army, Marines and Special Forces commanders have been telling them for years: "If you don't like having us around, and you want us to get off your backs, the solution is staring you in the face: just get rid of the extremists, reduce the violence and cooperate with the government to stabilize your area, and we're out of here".

Internal tribal dynamics also play a part. Many older leaders, who consider themselves the true heads of clans or tribes, fled Iraq in 2003 because they were implicated in dealings with Saddam, and are now in exile in Syria or Jordan. The on-the-ground leaders are a younger generation, concerned to cement their positions *vis-à-vis* the old men in Damascus, who may one day want to return. By joining forces with the government, these leaders have acquired a source of patronage which they can re-direct to their people, cementing themselves in power and bolstering their personal positions.

Again, this is utterly standard behavior for tribal leaders pretty much anywhere in the Arab world: you can trust a tribal leader 100% – to follow his tribe's and his own interests. And that's OK. Call me cynical, but I tend to trust self-interest, group identity and revenge as reliable motivations – more so than protestations of

aspirational democracy, anyway. In Iraq these motivations have proven very robust, especially when reinforced by bonds forged in fighting a common enemy alongside our forces and the government. Provided they are under Iraqi government control (a non-trivial proviso), "neighborhood watch" groups motivated by community loyalty and enlightened self-interest are not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, since the uprising has so far resulted in a significant drop in violence and a substantial increase (on the order of 30,000 people) in the number of Iraqis actively lining up with the government and the coalition to defend communities against extremists, it may turn out be a very good thing indeed.

The Baghdad Variant

An interesting variation on the general theme has arisen in Baghdad city. Baghdad, of course, is not tribal as such. But urbanization in Iraq is a relatively recent phenomenon, occurring mainly over the past 20 years or so – for example, around half the people living in Baghdad today belong to families that came to the city since the 1980s. This means many urban Iraqis still have close kinship relationships with rural tribes, and still have relatives living in their ancestral villages with whom they keep in touch. In several districts, community leaders (often the Sunni imams of local mosques) have turned against AQI in their areas. In these districts, which include Ameriya, Ghazaliya, Abu Ghraib and others, communities have formed neighborhood watch organizations, established access controls to prevent people from outside the district coming in without proper authorization and driven out terrorist cells. They are now providing information to the Iraqi and Coalition security forces, protecting their own families and conducting joint patrols and operations alongside the Iraqi army and police, both by day and night. This has happened most often in Sunni-majority districts, and locals have partnered with Shi'a dominated security forces in most cases (somewhat giving the lie to assertions that Sunni populations won't ever work with Shia-dominated security forces: they often will, but the conditions – primarily some kind of honest broker, a relationship of trust between key individuals, or formal safeguards – have to be right). Coalition forces have provided support to the community and to Iraqi forces operating in the area, and hence tend to play the role of honest broker.

In Baghdad the revolt is based on informal district power structures that evolved through the intense period of sectarian cleansing that so damaged the city and its people in 2006. Having said that, we often find leaders who are acting in a community capacity but also have family ties or other links to the tribes who have rebelled against AQI. In one district Sunni imams were constantly being targeted for intimidation and violence by AQ – there was a spate of mosque bombings in May and June, for example, targeting imams deemed too moderate by the *takfiri* terrorists. These imams, working with local elders, banded together to drive out

AQ. But to do so, they brought in a military advisor from another district, known to one of them through his tribal connections, who was also connected to one of the main tribes currently fighting AQI outside Baghdad. So while the surface level of activity in Baghdad is not so obviously tribal, clan connections, kinship links and the alliances they foster still play a key underlying role.

For its part, the Government of Iraq has chosen to work closely with these groups as a means to secure key districts and build partnerships with communities. This took a great deal of political courage, since many of those now fighting AQI are former adversaries of the government, or even current political opponents of the Da'wa Party and the Maliki cabinet. Part of the government's motivation was almost certainly a desire to take credit for security progress, and there is still a degree of suspicion among some Iraqi political leaders (for good reasons discussed below). But in practical terms, on the ground, the Government's policies have resulted in fewer civilian casualties, a drop in numbers of attacks, a much less permissive operating environment for terrorists, and the freeing up of Iraqi army and police units who would otherwise have been tied down in static guard duties. So on balance, the results are positive so far in my view.

Prospects

Having said all that, it is clear that the tribal revolt could still go either way.

The strategic logic, from our point of view, is relatively straightforward. Our dilemma in Iraq is, and always has been, finding a way to create a sustainable security architecture that does not require the "coalition-in-the-loop", thereby allowing Iraq to stabilize and the coalition to disengage in favorable strategic circumstances. But taking the coalition out of the loop and into "overwatch" requires balancing competing armed interest groups, at the national and local level. These are currently not in balance, due in part to the sectarian bias of certain players and institutions of the new Iraqi state, which promotes a belief by Sunnis that they will be permanent victims in the new Iraq. This belief creates space for terrorist groups including AQI, and these groups in turn drive a cycle of sectarian violence that keeps Iraq unstable and prevents us disengaging. (There are several other drivers of violence, of course, but this one of the most significant ones).

AQI's "pitch" to the Sunni community is based on the argument that only al Qa'ida stands between the Sunnis and a Shi'a-led genocide. The presence of local Sunni security forces – which protect their own communities but do not attack the Shi'a – gives the lie to this claim, undercuts AQI's appeal, and reassures Sunni leaders that they will *not* be permanently victimized in a future Iraq. It may thus make such leaders more willing to engage in the political process, functioning as an informal

confidence-building measure, and it may help marginalize al Qa'ida. This might represent a step toward an intra-communal "balance of power" that could potentially be quite stable over time. On the Shi'a side, AQI represents a bogey-man that extremist groups like *Jaysh al Mahdi* (JAM, Muqtada al-Sadr's group) exploit to gain public acquiescence: their pitch is "we are all that stands between you and AQI". By reducing the AQI threat, the tribal uprising also therefore undercuts JAM's appeal. And as mentioned, Shi'a tribes have recently begun to turn against JAM and other Shi'a extremists also, with the potential to further reduce the level of intra-communal violence and bring non-sectarian Shi'a into the political process, marginalizing extremists and Iranian agents.

All this means that correctly handled, with appropriate safeguards, and in partnership with the Iraqi government, the current social "wave" of Sunni communities turning against AQI could provide one element in the self-sustaining security architecture we have been seeking. And if the recent spread of the uprising into the Shi'a community continues, we might end up with a revolt of the center against both extremes, which would be a truly major development. On the positive side of the ledger, some benefits of the tribal uprising are that it:

• Relieves coalition and Iraqi forces of garrison and local security requirements, freeing up forces for maneuver against insurgents and terrorists, and thus redresses to a significant extent our lack of coalition force troop numbers in Iraq;

• May help create a self-regulating security architecture, making population groups "self-securing" and thus providing a stable platform for redeployment of coalition forces out of these districts with less risk that insurgents might re-infiltrate into them once we leave;

• Provides the Sunni population with a security guarantee that helps marginalize AQI, while deterring Shi'a extremist groups that may seek to attack Sunni districts; and

• Taps into traditional approaches based on social and political structures that many Iraqis are comfortable with – it goes with, rather than against the grain of Iraqi society.

But there are also clear risks. The process may create armed groups outside Government control, which might engage in human rights violations that could be blamed on the government or coalition forces (though, in fact, we have yet to see any significant human rights violation by tribal forces) – indeed, they typically apply a very measured approach, probably because the people they are securing are their own families, and their local knowledge allows them to get things done without having to apply force, as an outside force might need to. Nevertheless risks remain,

including the fact that:

• Some government ministries oppose arming the Sunni population, sometimes on sectarian grounds but also through legitimate concerns about future government control over Sunni-majority areas, and some Iraqi Army commanders have expressed concern about the potential for regional warlordism;

• There is an outside chance that tribes which have "flipped" from supporting AQI could simply flip back – especially if they believe the government is not effectively supporting them or taking their interests into account; and

• Unless re-integration measures are formally established, some tribes may come to see their security forces as a permanent entitlement, which would make control over their areas more difficult for any future central government.

Having watched this thing develop at close hand over several months, I believe the risk mitigation measures that we and the Iraqi government are currently putting into place stand a better-than-even chance of preventing major negative side-effects from the uprising. The risks are still significant, but with appropriate mitigation they are probably manageable. Such mitigation measures include:

• Developing programs, up front, to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate tribal forces in Iraqi society (a so-called "DDR" plan);

• Ensuring the government does not provide weapons to any group until its loyalty is demonstrated and members have sworn allegiance to the new Iraq;

• Conducting biometric registration of tribal fighters, and registering their weapon serial numbers (to discourage side-switching, detect infiltrators and reassure the Iraqi government of its control);

• Linking tribal loyalty to local governance structures, and then directly to the central government, through traditional tribal control mechanisms such as *deera* (tribal boundaries; tribal forces could not work outside these without an agreement with the neighboring sheikh) and *Sulh* (traditional tribal reconciliation processes, leading to compacts within and between communities);

• Vetting and training tribal security forces as a pre-condition for their enrolment into paid, government-sponsored organizations like the Police and Army; and

• Providing advisers, liaison officers and support infrastructure (ideally from the Iraqi government with our help) to prevent human rights abuses and enforce appropriate operational standards.

Implications

The implications of the tribal revolt have been somewhat overlooked by the news media and in the public debate in Coalition capitals. In fact, the uprising represents very significant political progress toward reconciliation at the grass-roots level, and major security progress in marginalizing extremists and reducing civilian deaths. It also does much to redress the lack of coalition forces that has hampered previous counterinsurgency approaches, by throwing tens of thousands of local allies into the balance, on our side. For these reasons, the tribal revolt is arguably the most significant change in the Iraqi operating environment for several years. But because it occurred in ways that were neither expected nor accounted for in our "benchmarks" (which were formulated before the uprising began to really develop, and which tend to focus on national legislative developments at the central government and political party level rather than grass-roots changes in the quality of life of ordinary Iraqis) the significance of this development has been overlooked to some extent.

One obvious outcome of the uprising is the political band-wagoning effect we are currently seeing: tribal leaders see the benefits other tribes have gained from turning against terrorists, and want the same benefits themselves, so they too turn against extremists in their own areas. At the same time, the Government of Iraq sees benefits in terms of grass-roots political reconciliation and reduced violence, and is keen to take control of, and credit for, the process. Provincial governments also see the benefits of self-securing districts, freeing up police and military forces for other tasks. This has the potential to help coalesce Iraqi society around competent, non-sectarian institutions (albeit informal ones).

From my point of view, the strongest positive implications are the possibility that the revolt might help create a self-sustaining local security architecture, and what we might call the "re-blueing" effect on the police. One of our problems all along has been that some police officers have behaved in a sectarian manner, a few have engaged in outright sectarian atrocities, while sectarian extremists have intimidated or coopted others. Police bias and partiality is a standard problem in counter-insurgency: it occurred in campaigns as different as Palestine, Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Malaya and Vietnam. But it typically takes a long time to remedy (almost ten years in the case of the Royal Ulster Constabulary). The tribal forces being created as a result of the uprising could accelerate police reform, by changing the police recruiting base from a heavily Shi'a orientation to a more balanced structure, as Sunni tribal recruits join the Iraqi police. "Weeding out" bad sectarian actors in police services is a slow and difficult process; changing the recruiting base, as the uprising has done, can help move the process along more quickly.

There are also economic benefits. Enlisting tribal fighters into police units creates employment beyond the 90-day CERP model of the past. It also reduces the

manpower pool for the insurgency, and is thus a form of "soft DDR". Increased security in rural areas boosts agricultural and market activity (by making fields safe enough to cultivate crops, and making roads and markets safe enough to transport goods). Salaries earned by newly-enrolled auxiliary policemen inject capital into the goods and services economy, while vocational and educational training under DDR programs diversifies the labor pool and builds the absorptive capacity of local economies. Assistance to families channeled through tribal Sheikhs helps re-start the traditional patronage system, and although this involves risks of smuggling or black marketeering these can be mitigated through proper oversight. And such programs provide a "safe" outlet for CERP funds without corroding Iraqi government budget execution processes, as has sometimes happened in the past.

Another key implication is for force ratios and coalition troop numbers. It has become a truism to argue that we have too few troops in Iraq for "proper" counterinsurgency. This claim is somewhat questionable, in fact – there is a base level of troops needed for effective counterinsurgency, but this is a threshold: once you reach the minimum level, what the troops do becomes the critical factor, more so than how many there are. And as Robert Thompson pointed out more than 40 years ago, force ratio in counterinsurgency is an indicator of progress, not a prerequisite for it. You know things are starting to go your way when local people start joining your side against the enemy, thus indicating a growth of popular support, and changing the force ratio as a result. Merely adding additional foreign troops doesn't make up for lack of local popular support – the British lost the Cyprus campaign with a force ratio of 110 to 1 in their favor, while in the same decade the Indonesians defeated *Dar'ul Islam* with a force ratio that never exceeded 3 to 1, by building partnerships with communities and employing them as village neighborhood watch groups, in cordon tasks and support functions. So we could deploy many more U.S. troops to Iraq and it wouldn't necessarily fix the problem. On the other hand, the fact that 30,000 former insurgents and tribal fighters are now on our side and fighting the enemy is worth a great deal, because it indicates that more Iraqis are lining up with the government and against extremism. It simultaneously increases our forces, improves our reach into the population, reduces the enemy's recruiting pool and active forces, lessens the number of civilians who need to rely on protection from coalition troops (and hence cuts the demand for our security services), and erodes the enemy's ability to intimidate and control the population. All these things have a positive effect on the overall correlation of forces in theater.

The negative implications are easy to state, but far-reaching. For one thing, we have spent the last four years carefully building up and supporting an Iraqi political system based on non-tribal institutions. Indeed, the Coalition Provisional Authority

deliberately side-lined the tribes in 2003 in order to focus on building a "modern" democratic state in Iraq, which we equated with a non-tribal state. There were good reasons for this at the time, but we are now seeing the most significant political and security progress in years, via a structure outside the one we have been working so hard to create. Does that invalidate the last four years' efforts? Probably not, as long as we recognize that the vision of a Jeffersonian, "modern" (in the Western industrial sense) democracy in Iraq, based around entirely secular non-tribal institutions, was always somewhat unrealistic. In the Iraqi polity, tribes' rights may end up playing a similar role to states' rights in some other democracies. They will remain a competing power center to the religious political parties, and hence will probably never be popular with Baghdad politicians, but if correctly handled they have the potential to actually enhance pluralism in Iraq over the long-term, by restraining the excesses of any central government or sectarian faction.

The other implication is that, to be perfectly honest, the pattern we are seeing runs somewhat counter to what we expected in the "surge", and therefore lies well outside the "benchmarks". The original concept was that we (the Coalition and the Iraqi government) would create security, which would in turn create space for a "grand bargain" at the national level. Instead, we are seeing the exact opposite: a series of local political deals has displaced extremists, resulting in a major improvement in security at the local level, and the national government is jumping on board with the program. Instead of coalition-led top-down reconciliation, this is Iraqi-led, bottom-up, based on civil society rather than national politics. And oddly enough, it seems to be working so far. This does not necessarily invalidate the "surge" strategy: we are indeed seeing improved security and political progress, but at the local not national level. This was not what we expected, and probably will cut little ice with domestic opponents of the strategy, but the improvement in daily lives of Iraqis and willingness to talk rather than fight is a substantial real-world improvement nonetheless.

Tentative Conclusions

As we all know, there is no such thing as a "standard" counterinsurgency. Indeed, the basic definition of counterinsurgency is "the full range of measures that a government and its partners take to defeat an insurgency". In other words, the set of counterinsurgency measures adopted depends on the character of the insurgency: the nature of counterinsurgency is not fixed, but shifting; it evolves in response to changes in the form of insurgency. This means that there is no standard set of metrics, benchmarks or operational techniques that apply to all insurgencies, or remain valid for any single insurgency throughout its life-cycle. And there are no fixed "laws" of counterinsurgency, except for the sole simple but

difficult requirement to first understand the environment, then diagnose the problem, in detail and in its own terms, then build a tailored set of situation-specific techniques to deal with it.

With that in mind, it is clear that although the requirements for counterinsurgency in a tribal environment may not be written down in the classical-era field manuals, building local allies and forging partnerships and trusted networks with at-risk communities seems to be one of the keys to success – perhaps this is what T.E. Lawrence had in mind when he wrote that the art of guerrilla warfare with Arab tribes rests on "building a ladder of tribes to the objective". Many excellent recent posts and discussions here at the *Small Wars Journal* have explored these issues. Marine and Army units that have sought to understand tribal behavior in its own terms, to follow norms of proper behavior as expected by tribal communities, and to build their own confederations of local partners, have done extremely well in this fight. But we should remember that this uprising against extremism belongs to the Iraqi people, not to us – it was *their* idea, they started it, they are leading it, it is happening on their terms and on their timeline, and our job is to support where needed, ensure proper political safeguards and human rights standards are in place, but ultimately to realize that this will play out in ways that may be good or bad, but are fundamentally unpredictable. So far so good, though….

David Kilcullen has just completed a tour in Iraq as senior counterinsurgency adviser to the Multi-National Force. These are his personal opinions.