



**Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive**  
**DSpace Repository**

---

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

---

2007-03-01

**Cultural Understanding within Context as a  
Tool for Countering Irregular Threats and as a  
Force for Peace; Strategic Insights, v. 6, issue  
2 (March 2007)**

**Meilahn, Kathleen M.**

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

---

Strategic Insights, v.6, issue 2 (March 2007)  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/11307>

---

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

*Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun*



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School**  
**411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle**  
**Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

## Cultural Understanding within Context as a Tool for Countering Irregular Threats and as a Force for Peace

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 2 (March 2007)

by [Kathleen M. Meilahn](#)

*Strategic Insights* is a bi-monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Due to USG failure to respect, implement or integrate cultural understanding as a war fighting tool (other than rhetorically), we have entered a world of shadows. In 2006 General Abizaid said, "The curse of the 21st Century is undoubtedly going to be getting diverse people of diverse religions to live together."<sup>[1]</sup> The broader implication is that the challenge facing the United States is getting people living in diverse cultural contexts to live along side each other peacefully. This is exemplified by the Arab-Israeli crisis, within Iraq, Lebanon, and innumerable other states currently wrought by conflict and violence. In order to be successful at this task, it is imperative that the U.S. Government (USG) understand those cultures and their cultural context in order to effectively promote and achieve peace. After all, achieving a better peace is the end goal of Grand Strategy, is it not?

In 2006, I proposed integration of cultural context enablers *Strategic Insight, Influence and Ideology Management* (SIIM) in the USG Strategy for Iraq.<sup>[2]</sup> In this proposal, Strategic Insight is cultural understanding within context; Strategic Influence is achieving USG Will and is changing (winning) the hearts of the people; while Strategic Ideology Management is changing (winning) the minds of the people. SIIM was a concept intended to bring awareness within DoD and the USG to the cultural factors that must be considered when making policy, strategy and plans decisions, and indeed must be integrated on a tactical level when countering the varied and multiple irregular threats that plague coalition forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and to other areas of strategic interest to the United States.

The USG and Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) will not succeed in Iraq until policy, strategy, plans, and operations are informed by understanding of the cultural context in Iraq, the multi-faceted groups and individuals with varied goals who are both stabilizing and destabilizing influences, and the people whose hearts and minds must be won over in order to gain support and remove support for irregular threat elements. It is useless for the DoD and USG to attempt to identify one single threat as "the primary enemy in Iraq," but rather all of the threats must be countered. This will not be easy, quick, nor uncomplicated. Furthermore, understanding of Islamic Conflict Resolution in a culturally appropriate context as well as of Iraqi tribes, the heart and soul of Iraqi civil society, would aid in understanding the playing field. As with all efforts to counter irregular threats, the solution stems from largely non-military means.

### **The Threat**

Today, unmanaged irregular threats challenge the Government of Iraq's (GOI) capacity to provide basic services due to lack of security (both the purview of the state), which reduces the legitimacy

of the state's authority in the eyes of the people. The Kurds have been semi-autonomous and out of central GOI control since implementation of the No Fly Zone, an indicator of a failed state. The Sunni community feels marginalized and increasingly left out of the government apparatus, further decreasing perception of the GOI as the legitimate authority. Thus, large numbers of Iraqis look to traditional cultural authorities such as tribal chiefs, clerics and militia leaders rather than to the GOI for leadership.

Long-standing power struggles now undertaken under the auspices of sectarianism result in large scale civil violence which is no longer even under the control of militia leaders such as Muqtada al Sadr whose rogue elements refuse to honor his calls to lay down arms. Paramilitary violence is carried out by Shi'ia against Shi'ia, by Shi'ia in revenge against Sunnis for Saddam Hussein's abuses and in turn by Sunni against Shi'ia as a response, against coalition forces in revenge and also in resistance to the occupation, and simple tribal power struggles and revenge killing activity is ongoing. These power struggles cannot be effectively countered unless the motivations behind them and historic grievances are understood and dealt with in a culturally appropriate manner.

Iraq's former Ba'athist regime elements are executing a reverse-phase of classic insurgency and guerilla warfare wherein they are striving to re-gain political power. "The strategic direction of the insurgency's movement was in reverse, not into power but out of power,"<sup>[3]</sup> and the ousted government was pushed underground. Iraq's multifaceted insurgent activity is further characterized by other elements such as Sunni resistance groups (who are at the same time actively engaged in an undeclared war against al Qaeda), disaffected Sunni individuals, and common criminals who have been bought off to carry out kidnappings and other violent activity.

Add into the mix Iranian influence in Iraq: provision of IEDs, equipment, training, funding and other capability to Shi'ia elements and militias such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) Badr Organization. This support results in enhanced capability to counter not only Sunnis but also other Shi'ia elements, coalition forces and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), as various Shi'ia leaders lose control of their own paramilitary elements. In this case, an understanding of Iranian motivations and cultural context would inform policy making, strategy, plans and operations to counter this influence in Iraq. Understanding of the motivations and cultural context of the proxy elements could prevent such cooperation with Iran and activity which is destabilizing for the GOI.

Although Counter-Terrorism is a separate military operation and distinct from Counter-Insurgency (COIN), terrorists are an irregular threat that must be countered unconventionally. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and associated networks are highly active in Iraq, both transnational elements and Iraqi extremist elements. These groups pose a separate and distinct ideology which is greatly misunderstood in the West. Recruitment of terrorists can only be countered effectively via Information Operations informed by cultural (to include religious) understanding and insight. Even today, debates wage in the halls of the Pentagon and U.S. Central Command regarding the basic views of extremists, tenants of their ideology, whether or not there is such a thing as a "moderate" Muslim, and whether it is even possible to engage moderate Muslim religious leaders and people in an effort to counter extremist groups such as al Qaeda.<sup>[4]</sup>

Iraq today is a failed state undergoing crisis due partly to USG and MNF-I attempts to execute democracy-centered-development following Phase III primary combat operations. This was hampered by high security costs, insurgent sabotage, and other management difficulties. As a result, use of funds was inefficient and infrastructure redevelopment remains inadequate while the GOI continues to face a crisis of legitimacy due to these issues and lack of security. Thus, today MNF-I finds itself conducting Peacekeeping and Stability Operations (PKSO) at the same time as kinetic and irregular warfare.

Contextual cultural insight is central to PKSO as it enables management of conflict (mediation and arbitration intra- and inter-culturally) which will enhance security, and it can aid in bridging

sectarian gaps toward formation of a central unity government that is seen by the Iraqi populace as legitimate. Such insight is intimately tied into Information Operations activities such as PSYOPS and military deception, and can inform Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB).[5]

During this ongoing Iraq crisis, there is a need to know and understand local cultural values, thereby be able to effectively make assumptions, and forecast potential intended and unintended consequences of MNF-I or USG actions and reactions, diplomacy and even international efforts in the region. Contextual cultural insight can prevent policy decisions formulated on erroneous assumptions as a result of viewing the world through ones' own (Western context) lens rather than understanding the impact USG actions will have on another due to his/her point of view point. It would be useful for USG actors consider the strategic Iraqi and broader Middle Eastern environment as cultural anthropologists do and ask, "What does this look like from the other culture's point of view?"

## Problems

The U.S. approach tends to focus on cultural, ethnic and religious differences instead of family ties that bind and opportunities for reconciliation and rapprochement.

During Jay Garner's administration in 2003, a "conference" of prominent members of society was held wherein many *sheikh* were invited. They were asked for assistance and support in building a democratic Iraq. Although many *sheikh* had lost family members to U.S. air strikes (one of the unintended consequences of firepower), they reportedly agreed to assist if it would help move Iraq forward, but with one stipulation: they required a time table by which the coalition forces would leave, otherwise, they could not ask their tribes to cooperate with the coalition. It is significant that they would be willing to do this despite good reasons for taking revenge, or *intiqam*. Some tribal leaders reportedly wanted to contribute politically. They were told that there were no promises, no time tables, and that they had no input into the situation...which infuriated them.

"Many of the attacks against the occupying forces are acts of revenge for assaulted family members, or people who were killed during raids, demonstrations or checkpoints." [6] Adding to anger over family deaths, public humiliation caused to *sheikh* as coalition forces raided their homes and acted toward them in a culturally inappropriate manner considered to be disrespectful increased reasons for *intiqam* especially among the Sunni tribes. This had direct consequences on the civilian population's attitudes toward coalition forces and willingness to cooperate with irregular threat elements.

Through Tribes and tribal leaders, there is a tremendous, previously ignored, capacity for activation of the populace to support the new Iraqi government, eliminate support for irregular threats and reduce sectarian strife. Tribes can play a role as an element of state power or as a destabilizing influence for the GOI as their leaders expand their authority via distribution of state services and security. Tribal alliances can support the state via utilization of existing institutional structures to deliver infrastructure services and security to the populace, or lead local activities that challenge GOI authority. With their standing armies, tribes can rise up overnight if the *sheikh* gives the word. According to some analysts, [7] clan traditions provide more stability and support than Western institutions. Yet, the more educated and urbanized the more likely are Iraqis to support and adopt Western values.

## Strategic Cultural Insight: A Brief History of the Iraqi Tribes

Most Iraqis identify strongly with a tribe (*'ashira*), and according to some estimates, nearly half of Iraqis are more loyal to their clans or tribes than to the national government, more strictly bound by family ties and the honor code than by ethnicity or religion. Tribes are grouped into federations

(*qabila*). Below the level of the tribe, there are the clan (*fukhdh*), the house (*bayt*) and the extended family (*khamis*). Tribes act as somewhat of a mini-state and fulfill primary functions of conflict and resource management for their members.

During the Ottoman period, tribes were primarily nomadic and engaged in trade, raiding and collecting tribute. The *shaikh* historically was a militaristic leadership position intended for tribe protection, and over time it mutated into an hereditary position. Tribes, as extensions of a family group, occasionally brought in other tribes, sometimes dominating them via their nomadic expeditions, raids and counter-raids. The rank of *shaikh* was patriarchal from its inception, and eventually became associated with class position. Social division came through the warrior spirit as fighting nomads superseded agrarian tribes in the realm of power, and class structures were created. Camel-breeding tribes (the *ahl-il-abl* or People of the Camel) or mounted Kurdish tribes were at the top followed by sheep-herders, peasants, then marsh dwellers. Among the agrarians, rice-growers were at the top followed by vegetable growers and manual workers.

Settlement policies and land reform measures of the Ottomans in the mid-19th century provided *shaikh* with additional power and economic means. Title, rank and land were passed down to heirs and the ruling family selected the most qualified individual to take on the position. Over time, tribal bonds became less patriarchal and the relationship transitioned into a more economic one.

Following World War I, the British united three Ottoman provinces of Basra, Mosul and Baghdad into the state of Iraq. *Shaikhs* that did not take part in the Iraqi uprising of 1920 became landed upper classes and the legitimacy of their authority was legalized as they became part of the administration within the political structure. Thus their position was reinforced via "election" to Parliament as well as via economic means, including land tenure policies, impunity from property taxes, subsidies and cash presents. Many smaller *shaikhs* in the south led the resistance of the 1930's and remained landless. Tribes continued a trend of settling into village communities, which took on the name of the tribes.

Under the monarchy, the tribes began to lose power as urbanization further weakened tribal ties. Following the 1968 Ba'athist coup, under President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr (1968-1979), tribal chiefs were given weapons, land, money and authority over their tribes as well as tribal autonomy which caused tribal law and practices (*'urf*, *'adah*) to prevail in the countryside. Blood feuds and peacemaking (*sulha*), blood money, "honor crimes" and other traditional judiciary issues or practices took precedence to state law.

Saddam Hussein, a Sunni and member of the Albu Nasir tribe, identified Iraqi *sheikhs* as a source of power for him outside of Baghdad. They were a combination of mercenary army, local government and loyalty club. He encouraged tribal identity, however he was hesitant to allow tribal chiefs too much power, should they become his competition (in fact a number of coup attempts were made by various tribes, and he fought down Kurdish and Shi'ia insurgencies for years). He encouraged re-establishment of tribal councils to supervise economic activities, resolve conflicts, and police their local areas.

Tribes received economic power by funding from Baghdad from the smuggling trade formed around trade sanctions, which then in return supported the enabling clan or tribe militias.

Sunni-Shi'ia tensions mounted following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. At this time, tribal connections were further encouraged as tribal Arabs were considered to be more trustworthy against the Persians, and also to have retained tribal values such as communal spirit, honor and valor.

Military and government service were soon seen by impoverished tribes as a means for upward mobility and economic stability, and tribes often supported the government in order to obtain state

services that could not be provided widely throughout the state. Tribal leaders were sources for employment, economic subsidies and conflict management.

Tribal society provides protections to the members, although it is a paternalistic structure that can violate human rights such as women’s rights and children’s rights. Historically, so-called “honor crimes” were not punishable by Iraqi law and were carried out by tribal judgments to punish women for ruining the honor of the family. Women could not decide whether or not to work or in what profession or whom to marry. If a woman refused to abide by the tribal or family decisions, it is considered to be “immoral” which thereby ruins the honor of the family. Children could be punished by any means the family decided which could result in exorbitant punishment.

Tribal members, when loyal, refer to themselves as the leader’s “sword”—and when rebellious, they say his “grip is slipping.”

Today’s *sheikh* is the mayor, judge and social worker. As judge, he gives verdicts that are not the “law” but any member who goes against his decision does so without the support of the tribe. He is responsible for the well-being of poor tribal members, orphans and those in need. The populace has a deep respect for wisdom as well as origin (tribes) and it is considered an honor to have a strong family support structure. Tribes have been acting in semi-independence and *sheikh* must be incorporated into the new Iraqi political authority structure, whether administratively or via other means.

**Figure 1a: Distribution of Ethnoreligious Groups and Major Tribes in Iraq**

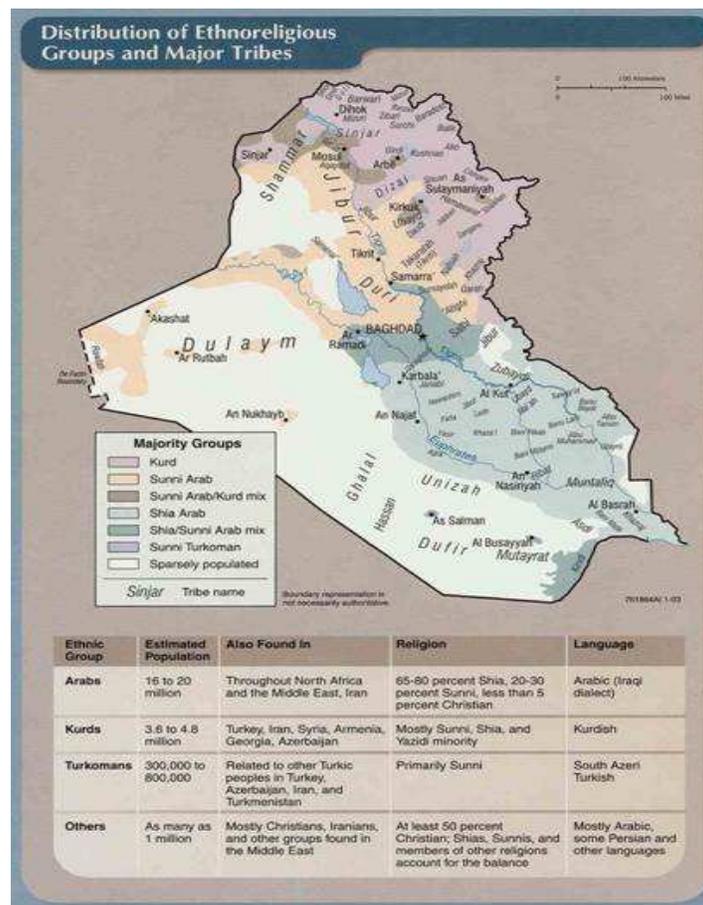
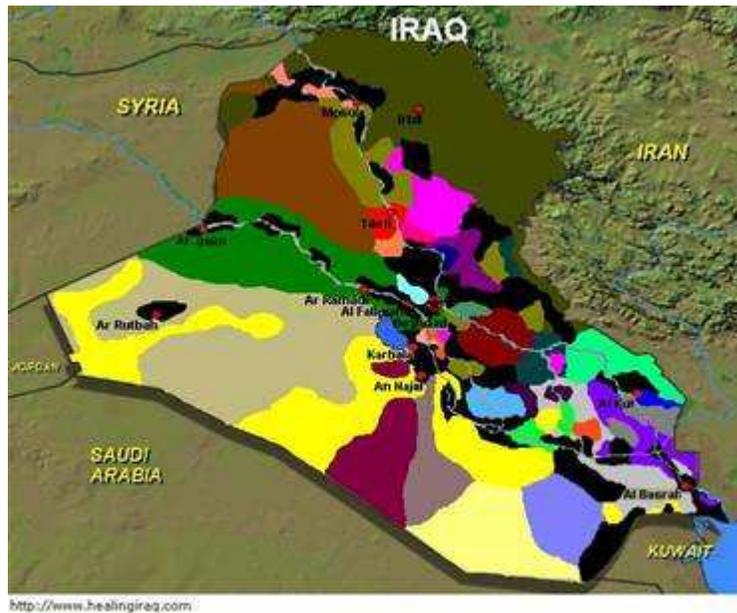


Figure 1b: Distribution of Ethnoreligious Groups and Major Tribes in Iraq



## Opportunities

Should the United States and coalition capitalize upon the leadership of the tribal *sheikh* and religious leaders, tribes can play a role as an element of state power, and tribal alliances can support the state. *Sheikhs* are a potential conduit through which the populace can receive resources from the central government as a distribution network. Utilization of existing institutional structures could deliver infrastructure services and security to the populace. However, loyalty must be secured via official recognition of administrative authority of the *sheikh*. This would allow the *sheikh* to maintain traditional authority, but within the political or administrative central government structure. Integrating traditional authorities into the government apparatus, thus obtaining their cooperation, allows them continue acting in their leadership role yet strengthens and builds up state governance by providing access to, and control within, currently challenged provincial and local areas. Such utilization as channels for state services can be an effective reinforcement for rule of law and the legitimacy of the Iraqi central government.

MNF-I could seek to obtain political support and “buy in,” or at least tactical collaboration from religious leaders, tribal leaders, militia leaders (who are seen by the populace as legitimate authorities). Good targets for this Strategic Influence effort include Sunni elements who are struggling to maintain control in al-Anbar Province against AQI, former Ba’athists, Muqtada al Sadr (a nationalist) and al Sistani or other honorifics. Unfortunately a number of tribal leaders, especially Sunni in al Anbar Province, have defected to Syria and other states. It would be necessary for the GOI to undertake efforts to bring them back into the fold, literally and figuratively. This would require increased efforts against AQI and the elements cooperating with the insurgent activity in order to create a situation secure enough that the exiled tribal leaders would be willing to return.

Revision of the de-Ba’athification process is the most critical aspect required to assure Sunnis that the current Shi’ia leadership will govern in accordance with nationalistic values rather than sectarian ones. As part of this, former elements of the Ba’ath Party who were not “active members” (within the four most senior ranks of the party, *‘adhu ‘amil*), and who do not have a record of crimes against humanity or serious corruption could be considered for integration into the GOI (MOI, MOD, etc) and into the new Iraqi political society.

A number of currently non-cooperating tribes largely comprising the Sunni resistance movements could be brought into political society as well as into the counter-insurgency fight, and in some cases can be brought out of the insurgency. To do this, it is necessary to identify individuals or elements for potential collaboration that are disgruntled or seeking to gain (or maintain/re-gain) political or economic power.[8]

A number of Iraqi tribal elements were disgruntled under the Saddam Hussein regime, including houses (*bayt*) within his own federation (*qabila*) called al-Takarita and within his Albu Nasir tribe, and could be brought into political and civil society as well as into the fight against irregular threats. These tribal elements could be brought into political and civil society as well as into the fight against irregular threats. Since the insurgency largely consists of former Ba'athists and members of the regime, elements that were alienated for one reason or another may be willing to aid the coalition and the new Iraqi government in opposing other irregular threats if they can be provided with incentives to cooperate—if it is not too late. In early 2006, Khalilzad reportedly engaged in direct negotiations with armed groups representing the majority of Sunni resistance, but no agreement was made due to Sunni demands for a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. forces to which the Administration would not concede, as they had refused to since 2003.[9] According to reports, much of the Sunni leadership has fled to Jordan or Syria, but should these tribal *sheikhs* return to Iraq, the United States may have an opportunity to come to agreement with them—although they will require inclusion in the political process and official recognition as legitimate authorities within Iraq, as well as likely economic incentives in order to cooperate. De-Ba'athification reform will be a critical precursor to their inclusion and cooperation.

Tribal *sheikhs* who have turned into “warlords” of sorts such as Muqtada al-Sadr can be integrated into the unity government and convinced to cooperate, although this will require GOI concurrence and the influence of honorifics such as Grand Ayatolla al-Sistani during such negotiations. It is imperative that the USG to remain out of the picture in this case as the GOI continues with such efforts. Al-Sadr is a nationalist who is against foreign troops in Iraq, and his movement has already joined the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a good first step toward political integration. He is considered a religious leader (although some claim him to be a religious student, or *talib*) but his authority stems from traditional means. He is a *sheikh* who has capitalized on family and tribal honor (his father was a Grand Ayatollah, and his uncle is a former leader), and his status as a *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet Mohammed). These combined sources of legitimacy make him an authority figure that must be addressed in a constructive manner, or he and his followers will continue to be a force for instability in Iraq. Additionally his ability to provide basic services to his followers is the critical, basic survival mechanism of his influence. If the GOI could capitalize on this talent to provide for the people and extend it into greater Iraq, it would mitigate the problems that motivate the populace to participate in sectarian violence or insurgent activity.

The USG could encourage the GOI to consider senior *sheikh* who currently lead tribes or tribal federations (*qabila*) for governmental administrative positions such as City Manager, Provincial Advisor, etc. Tribal leaders can be encouraged, through GOI channels, to participate in reconstruction efforts, thus providing employment and ensuring constructive activity. Alternatively MNF-I and GOI should hold Tribal Leaders accountable for the disruptive activities of their members and ensure it is in the tribe's best interest to cooperate with the coalition. For example, a certain level of security in tribal geographic area should be required prior to continuing reconstruction projects that would benefit the tribe.

## Islamic Conflict Management

As previously discussed, one key aspect of the irregular threats that must be addressed is the fact that the coalition is currently experiencing tribal revolts for reasons of revenge (*intiqam*). “Many of the attacks against the occupying forces are acts of revenge for assaulted family members, or people who were killed during raids, demonstrations or checkpoints.”[10] There is

anger over tribal or family deaths caused by coalition operations but also due to what is seen as public humiliation of *sheikh*. As coalition forces raided *sheikh* homes due to lack of information on insurgent identities, forces would push *sheikh* to the ground and place a booted foot on them at gunpoint (as happened to many others in the populace during raids). This type of activity appears normal to MNF-I forces, but in the cultural context it is seen as an insult to the leader and the tribe. This has provided the basis for *intiqaam*, especially among the Sunni tribes, since this was viewed as a blatant act of disregard and disrespect for such a respected member of society to be treated in such a manner. Additionally homes, businesses and other property have been damaged by coalition activity. Cultural conflict management practices dictate that there should be a settlement following death, insult, or destruction of property via payment of *diyya*. And apologies would be appropriate.

To be successful in Iraq, U.S. authorities must reach outside of Western conflict resolution tradition and theory to understand and utilize Islamic and cultural methods of managing conflict. *Sulha* (the peace-making tradition) and *musalaha* (reconciliation) can be utilized to manage conflict between the coalition forces and tribes or families that seek revenge. It can also be enacted on an international level to settle emerging diplomatic crises, on inter-Arabic or inter-Islamic sectarian levels using a legitimate authority as a third party.

In Islam, the *ummah* (Islamic community) takes precedence over the individual who is recognized to have a role in the community, but the public good and rights of the community come first. There is a focus on repair and healing of relationships, on restorative justice (public apologies, compensation, etc), and the culture is "high context" (meaning that there is a recognition of feelings and emotions, and there is an emphasis on face saving). The *Qur'an*, *Hadith* and *Sunnah* are religious sources for the concepts of Islamic conflict resolution and exemplify values such as *tawhid* (oneness of God and the unity of all being), *fitrah* (every human being has dignity), *adl* (justice), *afu* (forgiveness), *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim* (mercy and compassion) and peace (*salam*).

*Shura*, the peace-making tradition, consists of consultation and collective deliberation. Conflict is viewed as harmful to society and there is a focus on bringing back harmony, resolution and reparation of broken relationships. This is done through social justice which emphasizes linkages between people, and which is a redistributive (meaning that public apologies and compensations are made, forgiveness and compassion are given) form of reconciliation, cultural legitimate authorities enable the process.

*Tahkim* is the process of arbitration, and arbitrators are chosen by their wisdom, justness/fairness, knowledge of customs and traditions, knowledge of genealogies and good rhetoric. Parties bring in *bayinah* (proof or evidence), and must make an oath or swear by their word (*yamin*). Each party to the conflict will have an arbitrator, and the two arbitrators collectively decide the outcome. Their decisions are binding.

Often, a *wasta*, or third party mediator is brought in to obtain a resolution to interpersonal conflicts. Normally to be perceived as a legitimate intervener or intermediary, the mediator should be an older and/or wiser person respected in the community hierarchy, such as a political, military or religious leader. The mediator should come from within the community, know the parties and their history, family relationships, etc and have a vested interest in the outcome. Decisions are not binding.

Often a *Kadi* (judge operating in accordance with *sharia*) is the mediator or arbitrator. The third party "...is perceived not as a mere facilitator, but rather as someone who has all the answers and solutions..."<sup>[11]</sup> Precedents for judgments are set by previous courses of right action (best exemplified by the *sunnah*, deeds of the Prophet Mohammed), but these precedents are not as binding as in U.S. courts. They are utilized by *jaha* or *wasta* for guidance in their own decision-making process.

*Sulha* is peace-making and *musalaha* is reconciliation. *Sulha* is a ritualistic conflict management process that can be used privately (inter-communal or inter-personally) or publicly (between governments or at high political levels). It is face-saving, meaning that the process aids in preservation of the social aspect of identity—the image presented to the world as a window of personality—in order to prevent shame. The *Jaha* or delegation of mediators, (*wujaha* is delegates, plural) are the people who try to help the parties get to a truce, and act on the behalf of the offender to request consent for the process.

## Conflict Management Opportunities

To mediate ongoing civil conflicts in Iraq, the United States should attempt to reinvigorate al Maliki's National Reconciliation and Dialogue Project. Look to legitimate authorities within Iraq (leaders such as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani) to act as capable third parties. Regional or international religious or political leaders such as Saudi King Abdullah, Bahraini, Kuwaiti, Malaysian or Indonesian leaders would also be acceptable and appropriate Third Parties. Emphasis on Islamic values of *salam* (peace), *al-Rahim* (compassion) and tolerance to address traditional ideals such as the *ummah* (Islamic community), *tawhid* (unity), consideration for the next generation, and the tradition of forgiveness and dignity can help re-establish harmony and solidarity in Iraq.

On a grass-roots level, an Iraqi *Reconciliation Commission* would be helpful to alleviate conflict between coalition and Iraqis, intra-Iraqi and intra-Muslim groups. Assistance for this endeavor can be obtained via subject matter experts such as Muslim/Arab academics in the Peace and Conflict Resolution field who specialize in both Western and Middle Eastern conflict management and mediation. Due to the role of memory in shaping culture, Iraqis will need to develop a mechanism specific to their own customs and traditions (i.e. *musalahah*) for 'truth telling', healing, and reconciliation."<sup>[12]</sup>

Public perceptions and expectations should be managed via media, communications with Iraqi *sheikh*, and other resources to mitigate the United States' image as an occupying power, build consensus for a unified government and democracy, and provide honest discourse that lets Iraqi people know the repercussions for continuing to disrupt stabilization and reconstruction efforts. The average Iraqi should understand in clear terms that they are the key to stability and success, and that their cooperation is central to coalition disengagement and re-establishment of Iraq's sovereignty.

On a broader strategic level, the USG should work to assuage or at least address popular Iraqi concerns as well as regional ones. According to a World Public Opinion poll,<sup>[13]</sup> the majority of Iraqis favor setting a timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal, believe the USG intends to establish permanent bases in Iraq, approve of attacks on coalition forces, and believe their lives will improve once coalition forces leave Iraq. While Iraqis view the parliamentary elections as valid, believe the country is going in the right direction and that the overthrow of Hussein was worth the cost, Sunnis predictably take the opposite stance. While Iraqis clearly prefer a coalition military disengagement, they are uncertain whether ISF are prepared to stand alone. They would support presence of non-U.S. foreign security forces, and accept nonmilitary U.S. assistance, prefer UN leadership on reconstruction, would support an international conference of regional and international states to assist in defining and addressing Iraq needs, and would support engagement of the Arab league. Such information should inform USG policy, strategy, plans and operations in Iraq as well as inform diplomatic discussions with other states and organizations toward obtaining support for Iraq that would be accepted widely by the Iraqi populace.

In countering religious fanatics in Iraq, the region and the world, the USG should work to establish relationships with the silent majority of moderate Muslims worldwide. This extremist element of irregular threat can be countered via winning hearts and minds as well as by following counter-

terrorism precepts on the ground. In order to do this, an understanding of the religious, historical, cultural and current events context is required. Many policy makers and decision makers in the USG on all levels in all agencies are guilty of assuming that Islam is inherently more violent than other religions. Some are concerned that extremist ideology exists not on the fringe of Islam but at its center. Education about Islam and further analysis would allow for an understanding that there are practical reasons for widespread discontent in the Muslim world, and identification of the issues would aid the USG in offering practical solutions. Countering extremist ideology should be a major arm of USG counter-terrorism efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan and world wide. Such understanding should be integrated into diplomacy (to include cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy), economic assistance projects via USAID or Department of State Iraq reconstruction efforts, as well as DOD non-kinetic efforts.

*Sulha* can be utilized publicly on an international level to settle emerging diplomatic crises, on inter-Arabic or inter-Islamic sectarian levels using a legitimate authority as a third party. To mediate ongoing civil conflicts in Iraq, the United States should look to legitimate authorities and leaders such as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani to act as capable third parties. Emphasis on Islamic values of *salam* (peace), *al-Rahim* (compassion) and tolerance to address traditional ideals such as the *ummah* (Islamic community), *tawhid* (unity), consideration for the next generation, and the tradition of forgiveness and dignity can help re-establish harmony and solidarity in Iraq. On an institutional level, an Iraqi institution of *Reconciliation Commissions* may be helpful. Due to the role of memory in shaping culture, Iraqis will need to develop a mechanism specific to their own customs and traditions (i.e. *musalahah*) for 'truth telling', healing, and reconciliation."<sup>[14]</sup>

From an Islamic basis, as one example, emphasis by intermediaries on the following Qur'anic sura may be useful to alleviate sectarian strife:

*Qur'an 5:48*: ...if Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute...

## Conclusion

Many culturally appropriate means and methods are available to the USG and Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), if the cultural context is understood. Such Strategic Insight would inform policy, strategy, plans and operations as well as diplomacy on all tracks. In facing a large number of irregular threat elements, the DoD and USG must counter each in a culturally appropriate manner. As with all efforts to counter irregular threats, the solution stems from largely non-military means. This will require political solutions largely from Iraqi leadership, although USG support must be given with Strategic Insight in mind in order to avoid creation of negative unintended consequences. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki should be encouraged to push toward national reconciliation with assistance from appropriate regional leaders. Other activities such as revision of the constitution, a hydrocarbons law, addressing federalism, de-Ba'athification, targeting of extra-legal militias as well as eliminating militia members from official ISF ranks are important steps toward Iraq stability and unity.

Three things must be defeated in the Iraqi people to gain cooperation against irregular threats: fear, apathy and empathy.<sup>[15]</sup> Each advance toward ensuring security and providing state services will alleviate their fears regarding safety and livelihood. Apathy and empathy for irregular threat actors can be defeated via culturally appropriate communications, diplomacy, negotiation, conflict management, and relationship building—all activities critical to "winning the hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people. To be successful, the USG must understand those sub-cultures and the cultural context in which it maneuvers to effectively promote and achieve peace. USG success or failure in getting people living in diverse cultural contexts to live along side each other

peacefully in Iraq could inform and indicate future success or failure of USG efforts in the Arab-Israeli crisis, Lebanon, Somalia, and other areas of strategic interest.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page. To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox, please email [ccc@nps.edu](mailto:ccc@nps.edu) with subject line "Subscribe." There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

## References

1. "[Troop Drawdown In Iraq A Delicate Balance](#)," *Associated Press* article in *The New York Times*, March 7, 2006.
2. Presented in August 2006 at the Army War College's Proteus Management Group annual workshop titled "Analyzing Future National Security Challenges."
3. James Gavrilis, "Understanding Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq: Context Counts," draft, forthcoming publication, Spring 2007.
4. My personal argument is that yes, there are moderate Muslims and yes, we can engage them—but that is a topic of discussion appropriate for another article.
5. Contextual cultural insight additionally lends itself to Network Centric Warfare (NCW) and the supporting Operational Net Assessment (ONA) concept as it enhances the situational awareness at the heart of these concepts, expanding upon the current doctrinally limited view provided by traditional intelligence gathering and analysis.
6. Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2005).
7. Such as Ihsan M. al-Hassan, a sociologist at the University of Baghdad.
8. Elements for potential collaboration: *bayt*: 'Abd al-Mun'im, of Major General Umar al-Haza', The Albu Latif *bayt*, The al-Shaya'isha *'ashira* (tribe), elements of the large Sunni Arab tribal federation of the Dulaym west of Baghdad (in the Sunni triangle)—the Shammar Jarba and the Jazira, Al-Jaburi tribe factions, Bani Hasan tribe, Al-Dulaimi tribe. Elements of likely Regime Allies: The Jubbur in Sharquat, the 'Ubayd in al- 'Alam and Tarmiya, the Mushahadah in Tarmiya, the Luhayb in Sharquat, the al-'Aza in Balad, the Harb in ad-Dur, the Tayy in Mosul, the Khazraj from south Mosul, the Maghamis from Khalis, the large Sunni Arab tribal federation of the Dulaym west of Baghdad (in the Sunni triangle)
9. Gareth Porter, "[Challenges 2006-2007: Bush Iraq Policy Murky on the Real Enemy](#)," *Inter Press Service News Agency*, December 28, 2006.
- 10 *Baghdad Burning, Op. Cit.*
11. Irani, George and Nathan C. Funk, "Rituals of Reconciliation: Arab-Islamic Perspectives," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 20, No. 4 (Fall 1997), 58.
12. Said, Abdul Aziz, "[Unity in Diversity: The Cultural Mosaic of Iraq](#)," for *The First Cultural Forum on Iraq UNESCO Headquarters*, Paris, 26-27 May 2004.

13. "[What the Iraqi Public Wants](#)," *WorldPublicOpinion.org* poll, January 31, 2006, conducted by the Program on International Public Policy Attitudes (PIPA).

14. Said, [Op. Cit.](#)

15. Interview by author with General Zinni, November 2005.