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Rueda, Edwin O.

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

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Op/Ed: Transforming Tribal Relationships in Husaybah—A New Paradigm for the Middle East

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by [Maj. Edwin O. Rueda](#)

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Introduction

As a military planner of the war in Iraq, I have preconceived notions of why military operations in Iraq were executed. I never looked at the Iraqi Campaign in simplistic terms of weapons of mass destruction. The origins of regime change in Iraq began the day that military planners, strategists, and foreign policy specialists saw in the post-September 11 world the requirement to affect a major paradigm change in the Middle East.

But I never quite realized the extent of the paradigm change required until I walked across a small city in Al-Anbar Province, Iraq.

From afar, Husaybah is just like any other border town. I have seen these towns throughout the Middle East and in Latin America. In Husaybah there is little doubt of the non-Iraqi influence. The market is filled with products from around the world, and particularly from Iran and Turkey. I stopped counting the number of children that I saw with blonde hair and light colored eyes—an anomaly in Iraq, but not necessarily in the countries of the Levant.

As a border town sitting in the Euphrates River Valley, this city has survived and thrived through the ages with trade, smuggling, commerce, and other business activities. The location serves to provide the city with influence over the western Iraqi province.

The uniqueness of Husaybah becomes shockingly evident when one stops to look, study and understand the complexities of the tribal make-up in the city and surrounding region.

Imagine feudalist Europe in the 16th century. When one speaks to tribal leaders there is no perception or understanding of a system where tribes and families are subordinate to the needs of the nation-state. There is no real discourse about national elections, the Iraqi Army, or any of the other subjects that deal with the bureaucracy of the provincial and national governments.

The real (and only) measuring stick for the leaders of Husaybah is simple—what can you do for me, my family, and my tribe now? That measuring stick drives people's decisions, actions, and associations.

Beyond 'Divide and Conquer'

For centuries foreigners in these lands implemented a simple and successful strategy. The Ottomans, the British, and Saddam Hussein simply divided and conquered—providing support to one tribe and allowing tribal differences to be resolved through force. Although this strategy is effective in the short-term, the positive impact is not long-lived. Feuding among tribes continues. The cycle of violence among tribes is only exacerbated. Hatred and revenge become the only means of problem resolution.

How can one affect a major paradigm change in a region with cities like Husaybah? How can democracy grow in a place where there is no concept of the nation-state, where the monopoly of violence is held by the tribes, and where there is no acceptance of any foreign intervention (foreign defined as outside the immediate tribe, clan, or extended family)?

Toward Inclusiveness

In Husaybah, the current situation allows the U.S. Marines to attempt an approach of inclusiveness. For the last couple of weeks, the tribes of the region have seen first hand the might and effectiveness of the American military. That show of force immediately placed the Marine leaders in a commanding position.

This position of power allows the military commanders on the ground to attempt a different approach to tribal relationships. Marines in Husaybah demanded inclusiveness in all talks for city reconstruction and any plans for local development. The party in power is not taking sides. The first meeting of city leaders and U.S. military commanders ended abruptly when it became obvious that only one of the major tribes was represented at the occasion.

The point is simple—either the tribal leaders learn to work together toward rebuilding the city and providing a better place and environment for their children and families, or U.S. military commanders will step aside and reconstruction of the city comes to a halt.

The approach is unique in dealing with tribal relations. It is an approach that demands inclusion of the strong and the weak. It is an approach that demands change. It is an approach that seeks to break an old paradigm. But the uniqueness of Husaybah and the particular circumstances that placed the Marines in a position of power here might be exactly what is needed to bring true change to this little border town—and ultimately to Al-Anbar province as a whole.

Maybe the time has come for the old feudalist and tribal approach to cease, and for a society to begin to learn what it means to be a nation-state.

About the Author

Maj. Edwin O. Rueda recently returned from a rewarding tour in Iraq where he worked for 2nd Marine Regiment and 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines in the western Al-Anbar Province. These observations are based on his experience there - solely from the way that he saw things on the ground.

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