The Islamic State and the Arab Tribes in Eastern Syria

https://www.e-ir.info/2014/12/31/the-islamic-state-and-the-arab-tribes-in-eastern-syria/

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In a recent book written by Akbar Ahmed titled *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Ruthven, 2013), the author explained how tribal identity was a crucial factor in the recruitment of the planes' hijackers during the events of 9/11. "Bin Laden," he states, "was joined in his movement primarily by his fellow Yemeni tribesmen," ten of whom came from the Asir tribes, including Ghamed, Zahran, and Bani Shahr (Ahmed, 2013). Tribal groups that live on the borders between states were often overlooked by many in the discussion about Islamic extremists and their relationship to other groups. These groups forge tight relations with other militant Islamist groups, providing them with protection and support. One can see that in many places, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and recently Syria. In the former, al-Qaeda members received the protection and support from local tribal members of the Mehsud and Wazir tribes, many of whom had been serving with the Taliban in the country since the 1990s (Gunaratna & Nielsen, 2008). In Iraq, after the American invasion, al-Qaeda (Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islāmīyah, "Islamic State of Iraq," ISI) [1] has existed in the eastern part of Syria – where the desert and the tribes straddle the border with Iraq – for almost a decade (Abdul-Ahad, 2012). When the Syrian uprising started, ISI sent Syrian jihadists who were already in Iraq, in addition to Iraqi experts in guerrilla warfare who sneaked into the country. It is clear by this pattern of behaviour that al-Qaeda-affiliated groups seek safe haven in border regions, typically inhabited by local tribes, where the prevailing sentiment is a strong apathy toward the state. Such example regions are Waziristan in Pakistan, the province of Shabwa in Yemen, the province of al-Anbar in Iraq, and recently the Syrian dry Steppe.

By March 2013, fighters of ISI were able to take the city of Raqqa, one of Syria's heavily tribal regions. After a few weeks of capturing the city, the group released a video that showed what it called swearing an oath of allegiance to the state by more than a "*dozen tribes in the province of Raqqa*[2] ISIS As .(2013 , [illegible]) " continued its march in Deir ez-Zor and seized control of its towns and villages, tribal leaders started issuing statements of loyalty to the Islamic state. This was the beginning of an allegiance of one tribe after the other in the whole Syrian Steppe. This article seeks to examine the factors influencing the relationship between ISIS and the tribal community east of Syria. It argues that shared economic and political interests and common foes (mainly Bashar al-Assad's regime) are enabling the group to build foundations within the tribal community of Syria. It ends by concluding that the longer ISIS keeps control of Syrian territory from its de facto capital in Raqqa, the more deeply embedded it will be within the tribal community of Syria, which will complicate US efforts to fight the group because, as airstrikes expand, ISIS will dig into civilian areas and more people of the tribal community will be killed.

How It All Started

The central element in tribal formation is the establishment of kinship groups. Each member of the group is responsible for each and every other member and the group's 'acts' are called "collective action" (Salzman, 2008). When attacked, group members are obliged to unite to defend themselves; when members sustain injury or loss, group members unite to gain compensation or seek vengeance. When applying these dynamics to the tribal community of Syria, we will be able to understand that the taking up of arms by the Syrian tribes against the Syrian regime came as a response to the regime's violence (Dukhan, 2014). This behaviour corresponds with the concept of

intiqaam, which means revenge for real or perceived offenses committed against one's kin. Members of the Arab tribes in Syria are bound by honour to take vengeance upon the aggressor, which, in this case, are the Syrian security forces who are deemed hostile towards the members of the tribe.

As the conflict escalated, tribal militias composed of many Syrian army defectors were formed in different parts of the Syrian Steppe, which constitutes 55% of Syrian land. Their mobility, combined with their loyalty to their kin groups and their military capacity due to the arms bought during the American invasion of Iraq and the chaos that followed it, gave them the ability to drive the Syrian regime army out of many of their villages and towns. Not all tribes fought against the regime, however. Some tribal leaders who have close links to the security services in Syria have remained loyal to the regime [3]. At a later stage, these militias have pursued longstanding rivalries between themselves by aligning with ISIS or its adversaries – including the Assad regime and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) – for controlling oil fields or gaining more war plunder. Despite ISIS's strict adherence to Islamic law, which is unwelcomed by the more moderate tribal society, ISIS was able to get more tribes to stand by its side against Jabhat al-Nusra. During their conflict over the territories of the Syrian Steppe, both groups formed alliances with certain tribes, creating a coalition of tribes which routinely issue statements of threat to opposing tribes. By capturing Jabhat al-Nusra's nerve-centre in Deir ez Zor, if not all of Syria, Shuhail [4], it could be said that ISIS has won the tribal warfare that it waged against JN for a few months over the Syrian Steppe. With these alliances of convenience with the tribes, ISIS has bolstered its social control not only with direct coercion or with mass expulsion of uncooperative tribes, but also by restoration of public services and other manifestations of the central state (Sayigh, 2014).

Factors Influencing the Alliance of Convenience between ISIS and the Tribes of the Syrian Steppe

The complex nature of the relation between the tribes in Syria and ISIS can be explained through three main arguments. The first argument emphasises the rational factors that govern this relationship. These factors include economic benefits and protection. The second argument highlights the fear factor, skilfully exploited and mastered by ISIS. The last argument focuses on the grievances, which make the tribes accept or tolerate ISIS in the face of a common enemy.

To understand the rational argument that explains the allegiances of some tribes to ISIS, one needs to consider the development of events not only since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, but also before it. During the rule of Hafez al-Assad, tribes were co-opted and used as tools for indirect rule through the use of official appointment and subsidiaries (Dukhan, 2014). They were used to check the expansion of Muslim Brotherhood in Hama and the Kurds in the North Eastern part of the country. Tribes were part of the formidable populist powers that shored up the regime. However, after opening the economy to the world market, the Baathist ideology was abandoned and the presence of the state and its services started to diminish among tribal communities in the peripheries (Hinnebusch, 2012). In Syria, ISIS attempted to fill the gap formed by the withdrawal of the state. It provided an alternative structure of clientelism and patronage. It is thought that ISIS co-opts tribes and supports some of their leaders by providing them with the opportunity to be influential in return for allegiance (Salama, 2014). This explains the fact that many of the tribes who were previously loyal to the Syrian regime in exchange for little power have switched their allegiance and opted to support ISIS. Moreover, ISIS's ability to gain substantial funding after controlling large reserves of oil and gas in Syria has enabled it to provide services and start development projects, such as fixing bridges, providing clean water, and establishing irrigation projects (Hassan, 2014). During Bashar al-Assad's reign, the tribes in al-Badia have been marginalized and impoverished. They saw that the natural resources in their region are being siphoned off by the president, his grandiose projects, and the elite, and not in the interests of their local communities. When trying to protest against those policies, Bashar al-Assad used massive force against them. The Syrian regime's tyranny forced many tribes to accept that ISIS might equally distribute their wealth over Bashar al-Assad, who has not acknowledged their demands and forced them to take up arms.

Other tribes that refuse to be co-opted by ISIS would be intimidated to do so. This leads us to the fear argument, which attempts to explain some aspects of the relation between ISIS and the tribes. The former uses fear as a weapon of war. In this regard, Dr. Fawaz Gerges (2014), from the London School of Economics, explains that while brutality and savagery might seem senseless to the vast majority of civilised human beings, they constitute a rational

and conscious choice that impress and co-opt new recruits. Indeed, publishing videos of atrocities such as decapitation or crucifixion of the members of the Shaitat clan that tried to revolt against ISIS [5] aims to demonstrate the invincibility and ruthlessness of the militia and to spread fear among its enemy. It subtly invites recruits either to choose the winning horse or die.

The theological pretext that justifies the harsh conduct of ISIS is derived from al-Hiraba law, which is a Muslim law concerning organized crime and highway robbery (Legal Reference, 2014). This law depends on a particular verse in Quran that rules harsh punishment against rebels who rage war against the state or conduct armed robbery. The punishment is not only killing, but also crucifixion and amputation. Portraying itself as a state, ISIS uses this verse and considers all those who stand against its goal as conspirators liable to be treated according to it. ISIS is very keen to spread this message everywhere; hence the web is replete with gruesome images and videos of execution and crucifixion taking place in areas controlled by ISIS. While discussing terror techniques, it is worth noting that these are by no means exclusive to the Islamic State. Amputation was used extensively in many civil wars, such as in Sierra Leone. However, ISIS has clearly excelled in spreading its messages of terror using high-tech means and cutting-edge technology, making these techniques more useful.

The final group of factors that can explain the relation between ISIS and the tribal society in Syria is the context of civil war and the grievances it produces. These grievances endured by the tribes may well explain their inclination to tolerate – or even cooperate with – ISIS. The latter capitalises on these grievances to gain recruitment and allegiance.

Grievance has played an important role in the engagement of tribes in the Syrian uprising as it has provided the necessary push for public mobilisation. Many writers question how a society becomes engaged in rebellion against a government. Some writers, such as Paul Collier (2000), believe that there must be an economic incentive that convinces people to take part in a rebellion. Grievances according to such writers are not enough to mobilise people to rebel. In a sense, justice and relief from grievance are considered to be public goods which suffer from the problem of free-riding, in which individuals are reluctant to act, considering the high cost of participation, and they tend to wait for others to act to benefit from them once successful. This problem sabotages political collective action in dictatorships where the cost of participating in a rebellion is very high (such as being jailed or even killed). In such conditions, people tend to be reluctant to initiate a rebellion because the rational choice for an individual is not to put oneself in danger, to wait for the movement to succeed, and then to benefit from the outcome. On this basis, Collier argues that there must be an economic benefit that convinces people to engage in a rebellion, otherwise rebellion will not take place. However, the tribal society provides a counterargument to Collier's ideas as kinship, which is the dominant idiom of organisation for tribes, motivates individuals to mobilise in defence of their fellow tribe members. Tribal bonds between the families of the Syrian Steppe have been very important in organising the first protests in the region (Dukhan, 2014).

The Syrian regime intentionally targeted community leaders who expressed views against the regime. While this meant to terrorise the society and show the government's ruthless face, it has fanned the flames of opposition and resistance. One of the humiliating techniques used is arresting a community leader or an opposition public figure and making them confess on TV about their alleged crimes, or forcing them to announce their detachment from the opposition. An example of this practice is the arrest of Nawaf al-Bashir, the chief of the al-Bagara tribe. His arrest and humiliation have created uproar within the tribal society. With all these grievances, many tribal leaders may find ISIS a natural reaction to the brutality of the regime, or less harmful than it, at least. Indeed, in an interview with one of the most influential tribal leaders in Iraq, Sheikh Hatem al-Suleiman downplayed the role of ISIS and considered the Iraqi government to be more dangerous (Ali, 2014). ISIS and similar militias excel in the presence of grievances because they provide them with the most needed legitimacy.

Conclusion

The article has laid some of the factors that influence the relationship between ISIS and the tribal community in Syria. Identifying these factors plays an important role in predicting the outcomes of efforts to counter ISIS in the region. This is particularly relevant to the coalition attacks on ISIS both in Syria and Iraq.

Initially, by increasing outreach to the local tribes, ISIS plays a similar role to the 'populist' authoritarian regime of Hafez al-Assad. While the organisation is using coercive means of power towards the tribes, it is also providing them with the basic needs which make them dependent on it as a distributive agency. Additionally, ISIS can be seen as the outcome of the Sunni alienation in the region. According to Hassan (2014), Sunnis, although the majority, act as a minority in the region: constantly feeling insecure, paranoid, and under siege. In this context, ISIS has become appealing to many tribes sharing the Sunni grievances. ISIS can be perceived by the tribes simply as an ally of necessity, essential for responding to the aggressions of a sectarian government perceived as an Iranian-backed occupation force (Harling, 2014).

Now with the coalition waging a war on ISIS and other Islamist groups, it seems that this will further alienate the Sunni communities in the peripheries and inevitably provide ISIS with the needed legitimacy. By overlooking the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which has ignited the Syrian uprising and led to the death of thousands of Syrians in Syria generally and the Syrian Steppe particularly, the air strikes leave the local people in no doubt about the international coalition's indifference to their welfare or survival. Achieving the coalition's objective of destroying ISIS will depend on not only hitting the right targets at the right time, but reaching out to Arab tribes as well (Tabler, 2014). It is unlikely that the tribes will cooperate with the coalition against ISIS rule because the tribes are fearful of the return of a vengeful regime.

Notes

[1] The group had a number of different names. In 2004, the group leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden. On 13 October 2006, the establishment of the Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah, "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) was announced.

[2] In April 2013, al-Baghdadi released an audio statement in which he announced that al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) were merging under the name "Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham" (ISIS).

[3] Sheikh Mohammad al-Fares of Tay tribe has established a militia as part of a national defence force that belongs to the Syrian regime.

[4] It is believed that Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, the founder of JN, comes from this village.

[5] The whole story of this uprising against ISIS can be found at the Global Post.

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