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Innovation in the Battlefield in Iraq

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Writing good strategy is hard but time well spent because learning is expensive on the battlefield. This has always been the case. Writing and implementing a good strategy in the Middle East is exponentially more vexing due to culture and language nuances. Many nations have learned this lesson the hard way. The US is learning—or re-learning—this lesson now, and it has been expensive.

As the US attempts to find a strategy that works, let us attempt to look at the elements of national power (for this article we will use DIME—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) as a framework. To date it appears we have relied predominantly upon the “M” element—there is little proof otherwise. But the question needs to be asked, how successful has this been? If success has not been reached, are there other elements (D, I, & E) that could be used? Have they been tried? Were they integrated with “M?”

Up front, let me be totally clear: This missive does not advocate abandoning military action. There are times that the military option is required. But there are times military presence represents the US in a negative manner due to perception, collateral damage, or reasons we as Americans do not comprehend. Former United States Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni was fond of saying, ‘when the world sees the US, they see someone in uniform. When they see other countries, they see a businessman.’ Said another way, our weapon is a rifle; theirs is a checkbook. Also, the elements of DIME are like levers; sometimes you push one while pulling another. The combination of pulling and pushing the DIME levers together is an art-form, not science. This point is imperative when analyzing solution sets

MES Notes

On Wednesday, 11 September 2019, Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU) Brute Krulak Center (KC) will host LtGen Lawrence D. Nicholson (USMC ret), Commanding General 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade, Afghanistan May 2009-April 2010; LtGen John A. Toolan (USMC, ret.), Commanding General II MEF (Fwd), Afghanistan March 2011-March 2012; MajGen Julian D. Alford, Commanding General TF-SW Rotation 3, Afghanistan 2018-2019; BGen Benjamin T. Watson, Commanding General TF-SW Rotation 2, Afghanistan 2017-2018; and Dr. Amin Tarzi, Director of MES, for the MES Symposium “Evolving Security Challenges in Afghanistan”.

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcu.edu/mes, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcu.edu.

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as those who view the solution as a “cookbook” and just following a recipe will be woefully disappointed.

Along with our preeminent global military capabilities, the US possesses the largest and most powerful economy in the world. As we have leveraged our military strength, this begs the questions, “has the economic strength of the US been leveraged?” and “has our military strength been a crutch?” If so, how has it been leveraged or how could it be better leveraged? We will attempt to make the case that the “E” is the crucial element of national power that has not been properly explored.

Iraq’s al-Anbar Province in 2003-2007 is a great study to examine the application of DIME. In the following example, the depth of action and interfaces could never be adequately covered in this short space. Additionally, the perception of what occurred and the impacts of actions can and will be interpreted differently after the politics have eventually worn off.

As we begin to discuss al-Anbar, the starting point is the human terrain as organized and manifested within individual Anbar tribes. One cannot over-emphasize the influence of tribal life, loyalty, allegiance, and deep history. In areas of al-Anbar Province, there are centuries of loyalty and clearly understood rules that bind and guide tribal members in almost every aspect of their daily lives and to the grave. The loyalty factor cuts deeper than most US citizens could ever adequately comprehend. Anbaris can instantly identify a person by their look or by minute habits. Once conversation ensues, dialect further differentiates those who belong there and those who are different. Of course, a name obviously denotes an affiliation. Some do not believe this, but I have witnessed this first hand. We have been inundated with and convinced of the importance of religious differences as the driving factor in the Middle East, but this tribal affiliation must be addressed first. For starters, all tribes have a unique identity but with varying alignment based on the land, activity, and, of course, neighbors. This is tantamount to assessing nuclear family attitudes in different US voting districts to find that families in the Northeast are slightly different from the Mid-Atlantic but significantly different from those in Southwest. Similar—yes—but with potentially very different views and understandings of many things such as the current debates on immigration and the wall across our southern border. So Madison Avenue leveraging big data has learned that the key to understanding, predicting, selling, or persuading families in such different areas is to drill down on the nuances of that family/household in that particular area. In al-Anbar, it is similar, but the nuclear family gives way to the tribe. How many tribes are there in al-Anbar? I was schooled that there were 88 tribes with 15-18 prominent tribes and the rest being smaller in stature. Seemingly not too big of a task, but quickly one big problem—no rulebook, no cookbook, and no data. Additionally, in an environment where each tribe knows their stature and changes in stature occur slowly, and you did not get the hundred years’ oral tradition to know that, mistakes were made. Cultural cues are subtle. What was noticeable in driving this home was a meeting I went to where sheikhs were sitting around the table. When a certain sheikh entered, all moved to accommodate as they understood the pecking order and proper seating arrangement around the table. There was no discussion. They knew it and were well-drilled, while for those Americans less curious they only saw a meeting interruption.

How important are tribes though? Very important and former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein knew this better than anyone, which was his key to controlling al-Anbar and keeping his grip on power after two bad wars and crippling sanctions. Saddam also knew that diluting power across tribes by feeding (empowering) varying tribes at different times with economic incentives kept them loyal to him and at each other’s throats. As the US came to al-Anbar, we were the dominant tribe due to our military might, but we were slow to understand and assume the role that the tribes actually expected of us. After some expensive learning, we finally figured it out but then overlooked the fact that the “might” existed only as long as we were present or were willing to

influence in an unambiguous manner. Iran understands and appreciates this point better because they live in the neighborhood. So when then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, an Iranian-controlled asset, would not endorse a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the US threatened to depart in accordance with international law and respect for the authority of Iraq's government with the belief that forces of democratic institutions had transformed Iraq to be like any other state. But they were not, he did not, and we left, and this was exactly what Iran wanted (and manipulated). Immediately, the Iranian-controlled forces in Iraqi uniforms, and with all the power of state authority, began to target the tribes and tribal leadership as the only threat to a sectarian-controlled government and, by extension, the last obstacle that might be willing to resist a Tehran-controlled region. Pundits reduced this to an inevitable "Shi'a vs Sunni" political rebalancing that would eventually work out like every other multi-plurality democracy.

Looking back further, when the US attacked in 2003, the CIA was actively engaged with the tribes in al-Anbar. The sheikhs were minimized though during our invasion and the subsequent occupation in 2004. We had a chance to leverage economics and tribes initially but failed. We went "M," and they went underground and fought the US in the name of al-Qaeda and various other splinter efforts. The time was ripe to side with the sheikhs to leverage the "E", but we missed it—or most did. It was almost by word of mouth that we found this out-of-fashion information and reconnected it to our battlefield from 2004-2007. The Civil Affairs Group (CAG) Marines saw this opportunity and were the first to ask questions as they made "non-M" in-roads in subtle ways. In 2004, they convinced the MEF Commander LtGen James T. Conway to go to Bahrain and sit with sheikhs to discuss econ-to-econ to rebuild al-Anbar. General Conway understood the limits of military power and economy of force and that you could not kill everybody, so why not try something different? With this rebuild, stability and semblance of peace would be the reward for the participants. How: The sheikhs would control their individual tribes because a deal was made that would give them economic benefit and bring regional peace. One might say at this, impossible. It required imagination to envision how the elements of national power could solve this problem. The CAG reservists activated to serve were accustomed to the transitions between military and civilian cultures and perhaps more attune to the gray areas of civil life. They saw the problem looking through a more obscured lens. Many of these CAG Marines saw this solution set immediately. It was difficult for them to articulate and staff this solution set to their active duty counterparts, especially as matters were getting more kinetic. The CAG Marines were advocating a contrary less-kinetic approach via engagement and attempting to pull the economic lever with a limited checkbook. This was counter-intuitive to many but, ironically, totally logical to the sheikhs and also to many of our commanders. Without doctrine or strategy, we stumbled onto the informal system that defines how the sheikhs and tribes have worked for centuries—rewards and gains as well as expectations because nothing is given freely unless it has no value.

The best example of this can be illustrated in al-Qaim Region in al-Anbar Province in 2004/2005. Al-Qaim is located where the Euphrates River crosses from Syria into Iraq. This has been a crossing point for centuries. At crossing points, economic activity occurs. There is money to be made by those who control the border: taxes, local fees (these local fees can be legal or illegal in US eyes, but that is not the point—it is the control), or any other form of revenue. During this time, the US was looking to engage with a tribal entity that would assist in countering al-Qaeda. One tribe stepped up to align with the US and together rid al-Qaim of al-Qaeda, but they had an expectation. In return, that tribe wanted to be empowered to run the border. Running the border meant economic gain for the tribe and peace in al-Qaim. That tribe knew their prosperity relied on their maintaining peace and doing business with the American Marine Tribe. So, recall they can recognize someone from outside their tribe—they would not allow anyone in or out who would endanger matters. And when someone broke protocols, they came down HARD—everyone knew this. Retribution against offenders was swift and unmerciful.

This is a simple example. It was only the beginning. If this sounds like something you may

relate to in the *Godfather*, *Sons of Anarchy*, 1940s New York Docks, or any other politically or economically inspired fiefdom, it is not too far off. Except that the tribal element is far more influential and powerful than any Corleone family, motorcycle gang, or 1940s union machine. This point was woefully unappreciated at all levels and turned out to be a decisive factor in the elimination of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The power of the tribe cannot be overstated. It all started with playing to the economic aspirations of prominent sheikhs who profited, but also who understood the need to trickle down within the tribe to reward and bind. A smart sheikh knows that even at his own expense his tribal members must benefit if the tribe is to excel over other tribes and for him to rise in prominence. This has been the unwritten rule and means of consensus for centuries.

As a practical lesson learned, within the economic pillar of DIME, there are many elements that require better coordination for faster and less expensive learning. You cannot have a “black-ops” raid taking out a portion of the tribe that has been incorrectly painted as insurgents when you are talking to them the next day about participating in some aspect of stability ops. Also, elements of the State Department (DoS) need to be similarly aligned. In Baghdad, the integration of USAID and DoS efforts was in need of coordination with regional and area coalition forces. In the case of al-Qaim, it should have been an early priority to fix the railroad terminal in the area that enabled the phosphate plant to get “up-and-running” and to support local micro-finance loans needed by the right people in-and-around al-Qaim so that they could buy the things to do the contract work. Even more strategically obvious were the gas and oil reserves in the western portion of al-Anbar (the Akkas fields) that needed to be opened and developed. This was the crown jewel of al-Anbar. Significant development was required, but Akkas could be the center of gravity of economic development and regional prosperity. Oil and gas experts in the Middle East knew Akkas was one of the potential feeders to the proposed Nabucco pipeline that would reduce European reliance on Russian gas on a scale of the strategic goals for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Unfortunately, there was little effort to use this lever to generate positive local and regional stability effects.

Clausewitz stated that war is a continuation of politics by other means. But that does not mean that the other elements of national power are suspended when you are fighting. The intent is to create the conditions when dealing with any adversary that will cause them to retreat or fight under unfavorable conditions. Today, America’s well-trained and well-funded military that is dominant in every domain has not effectively linked to the concept of economic levers, especially in unconventional battlefields. The result: every challenge appears a nail so a hammer is used. But what if the solution had an economic look (think here China’s One Belt, One Road initiative) that did not require a hammer in the form of uniformed forces? The United States is now being contested in a multi-polar world and cannot rely on one tool alone. We need to start seeing other solutions that are visible and available. In October 2006, a very senior CIA lead stated to me, “You have won in Iraq.” We had not seen it yet, but he was exactly correct. The economic element of DIME was the impetus that brought the Sunnis to the table to counter al-Qaeda, but we failed to follow through with substantial economic growth to provide an enduring economy of force measure to preserve stability after our departure. Levers must be pushed and pulled, and we failed strategically. But all is not lost; opportunity will always exist. Winston Churchill once famously observed, “Americans will always do the right thing, only after they have tried everything else.” It is time to think differently and harder about strategy because we do not have the luxury of American lives and unlimited borrowing against future American generations.



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