

Blood Thicker Than Water

Author: [Adnan K. Karim](#)

Policing the south is close to impossible as corrupted tribal practices take over.

In the power vacuum of southern Iraq, traditional Arab tribal networks are being abused to allow extortion and organised crime which threaten security and reconstruction in impoverished Shia areas.

Traditional family networks tied into larger tribal groupings have been strengthened in recent years. But in the lawless post-war environment, these relationships and the customary rules which govern them have been corrupted by criminals using intimidation and violence to cover their tracks.

The level of crime - and the lack of adequate law enforcement to counter it - raises questions about the credibility of local and international policing in the south.

Khadr al-Obaydi was contracted to build a new police station near a southern village. When local tribesmen threatened to blow up the building, Al-Obaydi reported it the British authorities, who promised him protection. He kept working - but the construction site was destroyed by a bomb.

The police report, however, stated that the building collapsed due to faulty building materials. "The police changed their statement so as to avoid running into problems with the tribes by searching for the culprits," said Al-Obaydi. "Thus, the village succeeded in stopping a police station being built."

Other crimes are on a larger scale, and often revolve around specific tribes. In Basra, a number of government-owned ships docked on the waterfront have been commandeered by tribesmen, dismantled and sold for scrap metal.

The thieves operate in broad daylight, but local police are unable to stop them as they are well armed. Police officers also fear retaliation from other tribal members if they arrest suspects.

Another gang was involved in looting copper electricity wires servicing the national grid in Basra. The copper was then sold in Iran, said Basra resident Jafer al-Ali. Several arrests were made, but the city's electrical authority denied that the wires belonged to them, fearing reprisals.

The traditional system of arbitration is also being exploited for financial gain. When a crime is committed, tribal leaders are supposed to mediate between the families of the victim and the perpetrator. Most of the time, the offending family is told to pay compensation - usually money. "Tribal arbitration is based on the principal of diyya [blood money] set out in the Koran," says Sheikh Jaze al-Rekabi, a tribal leader in Nassiriya.

Sheikh Malek al-Mojafar, a wealthy tribal leader who lives near Basra, says he has been swamped by false claims against members of his tribe, made by people who are trying to earn a few dollars.

He recently complained to a neighbouring tribal leader about a particularly outrageous claim against him. His neighbour told him the man was no good, and that his own tribe didn't want him. Yet he still advised Al-Mojafar to pay him off, "to keep him quiet".

And, says Al-Mojafar, he was warned, "if you try to harm or kill him, we will retaliate harshly". The sheikh is now considering moving away from the area.

Although the authorities and the various political parties in the area are well aware of such crimes and abuses, little effort is made to stop them for fear of the consequences. Even questioning a tribal leader could invite reprisals.

Local people say the coalition forces in the area do not interfere either. "As long as the problems do not directly threaten them, the British are unwilling to interfere with problems raised by the tribes," said an Iraqi translator with the coalition forces, who asked not to be named. "They throw the ball into the Iraqi police's court."

"The British forces and the local parties are indifferent," says Sheikh Faleh al-Malki from Qorna, north of Basra.

Al-Malki, a tribal leader, says that the root of these problems lies in Saddam Hussein's regime, under which Shias suffered "oppression, ignorance, poverty and inequality".

This legacy of deprivation, he says, coupled with the post-war political vacuum and the easy availability of weapons, has "pushed some people to exploit tribal arbitration for illegal financial gain, to commit organised crime, and to steal state funds - all in blatant disregard of the security authorities".

Tribally-based criminality has become a hot topic of discussion in southern Iraq - hampering efforts to establish security and undermining confidence in the authorities. Many tribal chiefs are openly concerned at the damage it is having on their own communities. Many people fear that the only answer will be to move out of the area to escape the crime wave.

Saddam's regime paid off the Arab tribes in return for their support, although it persecuted them if they appeared to offer potential for opposition. The Shia tribes were regarded as particularly suspect.

Under more normal circumstances, the tribe would offer its members protection and support - especially when the central state was weak, hostile, or simply unconcerned. In return, the tribe, led by its sheikh, required loyalty. A basic premise of tribal affiliation is that members are obliged to assist, defend and even seek retribution for fellow members accused of wrongdoing - regardless of whether they are guilty. Blood ties take precedence over other obligations, and it is not unheard of for family members to kill someone they accuse of a misdeed against one of their own.

Tribal structures began breaking down in the 20th century as urbanisation, centralised government, and enforcement of civil law took hold. But the Ba'ath regime encouraged a resurgence over the past two decades, as a means of political patronage and extending the authority of the state, especially in rural areas and in Shia south, where opposition was strong.

As Sheikh al-Rekabi explained, Saddam had a special department handling relations with the tribes. The office ranked tribes as "A" or "B", depending on how many members they had. The bigger "A" tribes were allocated much more money, and other rewards such as weapons. In exchange, sheikhs had to sign an agreement that they would report all dissident activity and keep their people in line. As a result, the power and prestige of privileged "A" tribes increased through the Eighties and Nineties.

According to another sheikh, Sultan al-Asadi of Basra, these arrangements caused a "distortion of traditional tribal values".

At the same time, rank-and-file members of all tribes, whether large or small, suffered the same problems - impoverishment and oppression - as the rest of the Shia population.

This environment - where traditional morals were traded for personal advancement in a harsh political climate - lies at the heart of the present crisis in the tribal south.

Adnan K. Karim is a former rear-admiral in the Iraqi navy.

Location: [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iraq](#)
[Iran](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/blood-thicker-water>