



CRS Report for Congress

Iraq: Tribal Structure, Social, and Political Activities

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Summary

For centuries the social and political organization of many Iraqi Arabs has centered on the tribe. Socially, tribes were divided into related sub-tribes, which further divided into clans, and then into extended families. Seventy-five percent of Iraq's estimated 26 million people are a member of a tribe. They are more strongly bound by these tribal ties and a strict honor code than by ethnic background or religion. This report describes the political orientation of several Iraqi Arab tribes, including the Shammar, Dulaym, and Jibur tribes. This report will be updated as warranted. For further information on Iraq and U.S. policy, see CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Background

Iraq is home to approximately 150 tribes that are composed of about 2,000 smaller clans, with varying sizes and influence. The largest tribe numbers more than one million people; the smallest a few thousand.¹ Seventy-five percent of the total Iraqi population are members of a tribe or have kinship to one.² Scholars believe that, despite the country's many political divides, including religion, ethnicity, and region, one of the least understood is the country's tribalism. Iraq has thousands of tribal groups to which various people pledge their loyalty, ranging from extended family clans that may number just several hundred people to broad confederations of clans that claim the loyalty of a million or more. Some experts argue that concern for family and clan, factionalism, and intense individualism — that does not easily tolerate interference from central authority — are among the legacies of tribalism in Iraq.³

¹ Neil MacFarquhar, "Unpredictable force awaits U.S. in Iraq Storied tribes of the Middle East Devout, armed and nationalistic," *International Herald Tribune*, January 7, 2003. p. 2.

² Ibid.

³ "The historical importance of the tribes of Iraq can scarcely be exaggerated. In 1933, a year after Iraqi independence, it was estimated that there were 100,000 rifles in tribal hands, and 15,000 in the possession of the government. The settled village community with its attachment to the land — the backbone of social structure throughout most of the Middle East — has been (continued...)"

Tribal Origin

Many Arab tribes in Iraq are believed to have migrated from the Arabian Peninsula, moving north in search of water. Some are from the lands that constitute present-day Iraq. Others pre-date Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, who lived in Arabia in the sixth and seventh centuries and was himself a member of the Quraysh tribe. Irrespective of their shared religion of Islam and a general feeling of “Arabness,” Iraqi tribes did not have a sense of common identity. The livelihood of the tribes came from herding animals, trade, raiding, and collecting tribute. Because of such diverse tribal structures and origins, it is common to see some of the major tribes in Iraq having related branches in Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, and other Gulf states as well as Turkey. Religious divisions were not always clear-cut, and often seemed to be a fusion between the different groups. Some tribes such as Jiburi and Shammar have both Sunni and Shiite members.

Tribal Structure

The most basic unit of Iraqi tribal structure is called the Khams or extended family. Khams consist of all male children who share the same great-great grandfather. Of all the levels of tribal organization, the Khams remains the most vital. Once the Khams structure is broken, a tribal society is no longer in place. In a family unit, before a woman gets married, she is a member of her father’s tribe. If a man’s daughter marries outside the clan or tribe, he no longer has the benefit of her or her sons, who could one day increase the clan’s strength. This explains why marriages between first cousins in traditional tribal society are common.

Other levels of the tribal organization consists of the following:

A biet, or “house” is similar to a Khams. It can resemble a single, vast extended family with hundreds of members. A number of “houses” form a clan, or fakhdh.

A group of clans form an ‘ashira, or tribal organization. For example, in Falluja, the tribe named for the town (i.e., the al-Fallujiyyin) has 16 clans, according to Iraqi genealogical charts from the 1980s. Tribes can vary widely in size, ranging from a few thousand to more than a million members.

A group of tribes forms a confederation, or qabila. Saddam Hussein’s Al-bu Nasir tribe was part of a federation named after his native town, of Tikrit (al-Tikriti).⁴

Tribal Confederation

Iraq was under the Ottoman rule until 1918, and the nomadic tribes formed the majority of Iraq’s population. Some experts argue that the tribal sheikh was at once a

³ (...continued)

a missing link in Iraq’s social fabric.” Dr. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Westview Press, 1985).

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, “Iraq: The Role of Tribes, Council on Foreign Relations,” at [<http://www.cfr.org/publication/7681/iraq/html#12>].

political leader, military general, chief educator, and manager of foreign affairs. These tribes did not follow a sophisticated religious code. However, because of weak Ottoman rule throughout the country, Iraq's loose tribal confederations prevailed, with each tribe acting as a sort of mobile mini-state. Furthermore, in the absence of a strong central authority, the tribal framework fulfilled the primary functions of conflict and resource management. Some of the most important tribal confederations in Iraq include the Shammar, Dulaym, Jiburi, Albu Nasir, Anizah, Zubayd, and Ubayd.

Around the mid-19th century, the Ottoman Empire increased its control over Iraqi tribes through settlement policies and land reform measures.⁵ The result was an erosion of the sheiks' traditional source of power and a disintegration of the traditional tribal system. Following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the British decided to unite the three Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra into one nation-state called Iraq (a name borrowed from the medieval history of the region), despite the significant religious, linguistic, ethnic, and tribal divisions running through Iraqi society. Britain took over in 1918 and restored power to the tribal sheiks, thereby helping to preserve and reinforce Iraq's tribal structure. At the same time, the British colonial state gradually appropriated former tribal functions like control of land, water distribution, and law enforcement. Nomadic tribes settled in village communities based on extended families or sub-clans. These communities often retained their tribal names, but they were linked to the agricultural market, rather than to the subsistence economy. Tribes continued to lose power under the modernizing monarchy and later under the republican regime.

Tribal Role During the Ba'ath Period

Initially, when the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1968 with Saddam Hussein as the second highest leader of the regime, the party viewed the tribal role as outdated and even banned the use of tribal names.⁶ The regime enacted and began to implement agrarian reform measures. At the same time, massive migration from rural areas to major cities further diminished the remaining tribal units and ties. That, however, changed in the 1980s when Saddam's regime needed soldiers to fight Iran. The tribes were tapped to contribute manpower to fight Iran. Saddam also rewarded the villages of loyal tribesmen by providing roads, electricity, and water systems. He delegated more power and autonomy to tribes after the Gulf War in 1991 when he lost control of large sections of the country. He reached out to tribal leaders, allocating specific sectors of the country for them to supervise in exchange for more autonomy over tribal affairs. For instance, Sheikh Talal, who was one of the strongest tribal leaders and claims to have about 100,000 armed men all over Iraq, was allotted a 116-kilometer (72-mile) section of highway in southern Iraq to protect at night.⁷

⁵ Global Security, Military: "Tribal Structures" at [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/tribes.htm>].

⁶ Neil MacFarquhar, "Unpredictable force awaits U.S. in Iraq Storied tribes of the Middle East Devout, armed and nationalistic," *International Herald Tribune*, January 7, 2003, p. 2.

⁷ Neil MacFarquhar, "Tribes pose wild card if U.S. fights Saddam; America feeling out Iraq's powerful clans," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2003, p. A1.

Major Tribes and U.S. Authorities

As the Ottoman Turks and the British who ruled Iraq did in the past, U.S. authorities continue to seek the cooperation of the tribes with varying degrees of success. For instance, in 2004, Iraq persuaded the U.S. authorities to accept the appointment of Sheik Ghazi Ajil al-Yawar, nephew of the paramount chief of the extensive Shammar tribe, as the country's interim president. The interim Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) named Yawar, as the country's first president of the post-Saddam Hussein era. The UN special envoy Ibrahim Brahimi, later confirmed his appointment.

Awakening Councils

As the Iraq war enters its sixth year, the role of the Iraqi Awakening Councils (which consists largely of Sunni groups financed by the United States to fight Al-Qaeda and other militants in the country) has become vital for the stability of Anbar province. The Awakening Councils started in Anbar Province more than a year ago in late 2006, but became stronger after the surge in spring 2007 and now scores of groups have effectively taken responsibility for law and order in their neighborhoods.⁸ The province was formerly one of the most restive areas within the Sunni triangle.

Experts argue that the troop surge and new tactics of holding areas after insurgents were expelled brought a measure of calm to parts of Baghdad and other areas of Iraq. They also believe that one reason for the decline in attacks is that many former Sunni fighters have turned against Al-Qaeda and are helping U.S. forces maintain security. In reference to the creation of the Awakening Councils and Al-Qaeda mishaps, they assert in a recent interview with Anthony Cordesman, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that:

We capitalized on a spontaneous tribal uprising against Al-Qaeda. That allowed us to create the "Sons of Iraq," a force that now has some 90,000 men, about three times the size of our surge. Al-Qaeda helped us immeasurably. I think we have to give credit to our enemy. They did so much damage to themselves in alienating tribal groups and Sunnis, in driving former insurgents to work with U.S. troops, that oddly enough one of our strongest allies in making this work was our enemy.⁹

Tribal Groups

The following are some of the major confederation and tribal groups followed by a map (**Figure 1**) with the location of these tribes and others in Iraq.¹⁰

⁸ Bruno, Roeber, "Former Insurgents Join the U.S. Effort, but Questions Linger About Their Future," ABC News, January 9, 2008, at [<http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=4109560>].

⁹ Bill Rodgers, "Iraq War Enters Sixth Year," VOA News, March 17, 2008, at [<http://www.voanews.com/english/2008-03-17-voa29.cfm>].

¹⁰ Mohamad Bazzi, "On Their Terms U.S. soldier reaches out to understand Iraqi Tribal System," *Newsday*, December 21, 2003; and *Arab Tribes of the Baghdad Wilayat*, issued by the Arab Bureau, Baghdad, July 1918.

The **Shammar** claim to be Iraq's biggest tribal confederation, with more than 1.5 million people. Like other big confederations, it has tended to be unified only when threatened from the outside, as in wartime. Shammar member tribes include the Toqa (historically settled in central Iraq) and the Jarba (centered in the north). Shammar tribes cover vast territories, from south of Baghdad to the Syrian border in the northwest. They include Sunni and Shia groups and their reach extends from Yemen to the United Arab Emirates.

The **Dulaym** belong to a large group of tribes of Zubaydi origin and are connected the Jannabiyyin, Ubayd, and other confederations. They claim to have originally migrated from Central Arabia. (*Arab Tribes of the Baghdad Wilayat*, issued by the Arab Bureau, Baghdad, July 1918.) Many prominent Iraqis carry the last name "Dulaym," signaling they belong to this broad tribal confederation. Many Dulaymi tribes and leaders were among the most important in supporting Hussein during his rule. Dulaym tribes reside mostly in the western province of al-Anbar, around Ramadi. The Dulaym reportedly orchestrated a failed coup attempt against Saddam Hussein in July 1992.

The **Jibur** are one of the largest tribes and are scattered along the rivers as far north as Mosul and Khabur. (*Arab Tribes of the Baghdad Wilayat*, issued by the Arab Bureau, Baghdad, July 1918.) They claim to have come from Khabur. The Jiburi tribe includes both Sunni and Shia branches. Their relationship with the late Saddam Hussein was more complex. In the 1980s, Hussein gave money and powerful jobs to Jiburi tribal leaders, and in exchange, they recruited thousands of men from their tribe to fight against Iran. But the relationship fell apart after a group of prominent Jiburis reportedly plotted to assassinate Hussein in 1990. He purged the tribe's leaders, and Jiburi leaders now cooperate with U.S. forces, notably in helping rule the northern city of Mosul.

Tikriti-al, the late General Ahmad Hassan Al-Bakr, former president of the republic, former commander-in-chief of the armed forces, command member of the Ba'ath party from 1973-1977, and Saddam Hussein came from a section of the Albu Nasir Tribe, the group of tribes usually called al-Takarita (or the Tikritis.) The Albu Nasir tribe is believed to have more than 350,000 young men. In July 2003, Abdullah Mahmoud al-Khattab, leader of Saddam's section of the tribe, was gunned down in Tikrit, a few weeks after he publicly disavowed Saddam.

The **al-Khaza'il** are an important family from Najd. A considerable number of them are known to have been nomadic. The Khaza'il proper, apart from tribes of different origin who may still be reckoned in the confederation, are all of one family and named after their respective ancestors in the sheikhly house. Khaza'il tribe can be found in Baghdad area. The Khaza'il are divided into Al Shallal and the Al Salaman.

The **Anizah** confederation is numerically believed to be the largest group of nomad Arab tribes. They occupied a triangle of Syrian desert, near today's Iraq-Syria border, to the east bank of the Euphrates. The hereditary foes of the Anizah are believed to be the Shammar. According to published reports, the history of nomadic Arabia has been dominated for the last 150 years by the rivalry between the Anizah and Shammar.

The Banu **Hushaim** are one of the tribal confederations on the Euphrates. They are mostly of Shammar origin and are believed to have settled in Iraq for a long time.

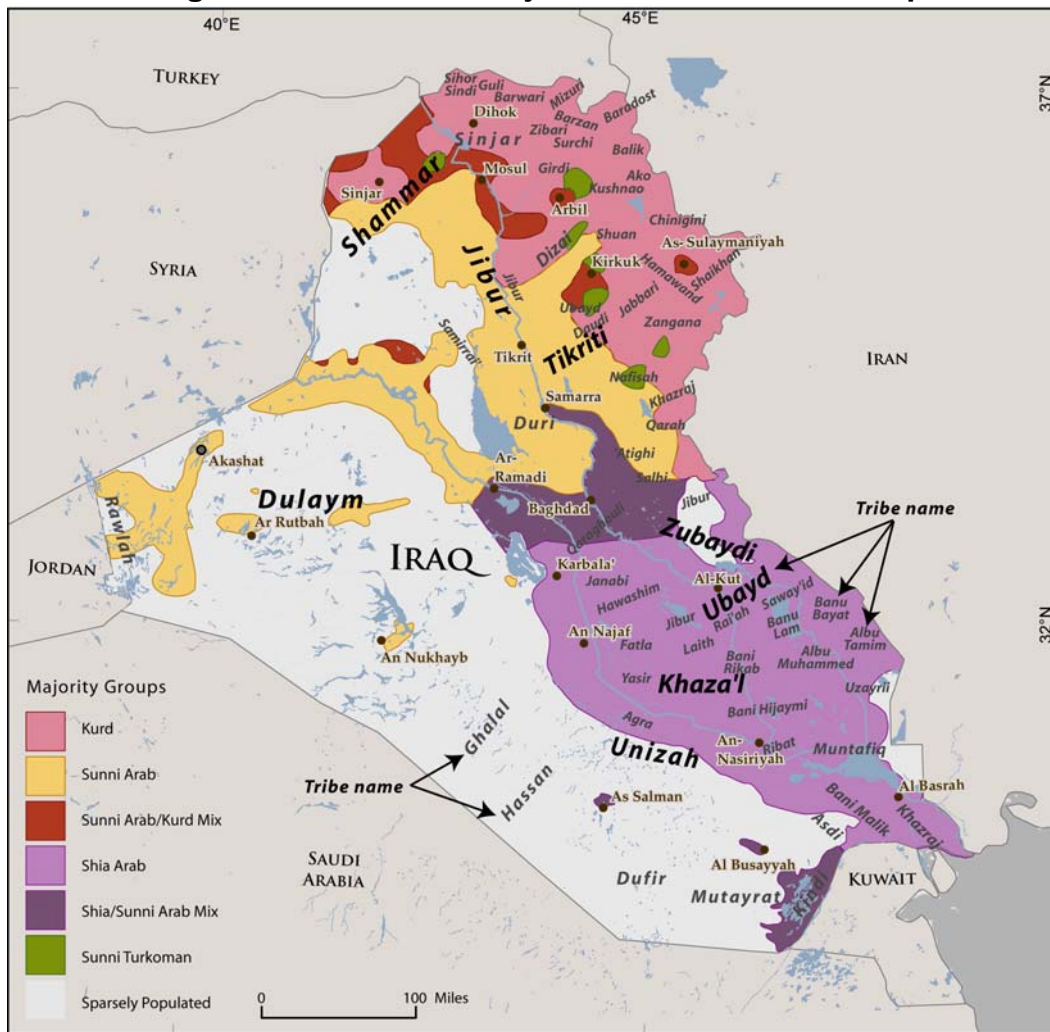
Historically, the Banu Hushaim were small independent tribes not connected to one another but formed for many generations a single political unit.

Al-Aqrah is a group of tribes of Shammar origin. They are known to have been independent and acknowledge no paramount chief but form a loose confederation. The Aqrah group consisted of both cultivators and sheep breeders. The al-Aqrah group lies a long the Shatt al Dagharah to about a few miles from Shatt al Hillah.

The **al-Zubayd** are believed to have migrated from Yemen. They came from the south probably in the late 17th century, and like all early migrants are very scattered. They have a wide kinship. The Dulaymi, Jibur, and Ubayd albu Amir are of the Zubaydi stock.

Ubayd, this Sunni Arab tribe migrated into Iraq in the sixth century A.D. and settled on the river bank of the Tigris, between Mosul and Baghdad.

Figure 1. Tribes and Major Confederations in Iraq



Source: CIA Iraq Country Profile Inset: Distribution of Ethnoreligious Groups and Major Tribes
 Map: Congressional Cartography, Library of Congress, 2007