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The Global War on Tribes

by ZOLTAN GROSSMAN

The so-called “Global War on Terror” is quickly growing outside the borders of Iraq and Afghanistan, into new battlegrounds in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and beyond. The Pentagon is vastly increasing missile and gunship attacks, Special Forces raids, and proxy invasions—all in the name of combating “Islamist terrorism.” Yet within all five countries, the main targets of the wars are predominantly “tribal regions,” and the old frontier language of Indian-fighting is becoming the lexicon of 21st-century counterinsurgency. The “Global War on Terror” is fast morphing into a “Global War on Tribes.”

Tribal regions are local areas where tribes are the dominant form of social organization, and tribal identities often trump state, ethnic, and even religious identities. Tribal peoples have a strongly localized orientation, tied to a particular place. Their traditional societies are based on a common culture, dialect, and kinship ties (through single or multiple clans). Although they are tribal peoples, they are not necessarily Indigenous peoples—who generally follow nature-centered spiritual and cultural systems. Nearly all tribal communities in the Middle East and Central Asia have been Islamicized or Christianized, but they still retain their ancient social bonds.

Yet modern counterinsurgency doctrine only views tribal regions as festering cauldrons of lawlessness, and “breeding grounds” for terrorism, unless the tribes themselves are turned against the West’s enemies. The London Times (1/5/10), for example, crudely asserts that Yemen’s “mountainous terrain, poverty and lawless tribal society make it... a close match for Afghanistan as a new terrorist haven.” This threatening view of tribal regions is, of course, as old as European colonialism itself.

Tribes and Ethnic Nations

Tribes are distinct from ethnic groups. Ethnic group identity is based largely on language, such as Pashtun, Kurdish, Somali, Tajik, and so on. Many ethnic groups also assert a territorial nationhood, whether or not they have their own independent state. Tribal group identity is based on smaller and older regional clans and dialects—such as Zubaydi and Jibbur (Iraq), Durrani and Ghilzai (Afghanistan), Wazir and Mehsud (Pakistan), Wahidi and Zaydi (Yemen), and Darod and Hawiye (Somalia). These internal divisions are familiar to anyone who has studied ethnic nationhood. (The Lakota Nation, for example, contains seven bands such as the Oglala, Hunkpapa, and Sicangu. In most other countries, these “bands” would be termed tribes, and the Lakota Nation would not be called a tribe.)

Tribes can be viewed as the building blocks for ethnic nations, but in many countries the cement has never really dried. (Even in Europe, different local dialect regions were only recently absorbed into modern states, as Eugène Weber demonstrates in his *Peasants into Frenchmen*). Tribal regions in the Middle East and Central Asia function as a layer below ethnic and religious territories, which in turn function as a layer below modern states and their 19th-century colonial boundaries. Contemporary armed conflicts in the region can be best understood not as struggles between political ideologies, but between these different layers of collective identity.

Western society tends to portray tribes as primitive, backward peoples, and views “tribalism” as merely ignorant villagers brutally acting in their narrow self-interest. Colonial authorities often diminished the status of ethnic nations by defining them as “tribes,” and employed divide-and-conquer strategies to pit them against each other. Yet in some regions, a local tribal identity may be more inclusive of human differences than larger-scale ethnic or religious identities. For example, some Iraqi tribes include both Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, and help to transcend the tense sectarian divide. Within some tribes around the world, more than one language or dialect may be spoken. Tribal identities and boundaries are not simply fixed in the past—they can be fluid and dynamic.

Tribal Areas under Siege

Afghanistan. In southern and eastern Afghanistan, Pashtun tribes have existed for millennia, and have only nominal loyalty to the modern state. Because Pashtun tribes straddle the colonial “Durand Line” boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan, they do not recognize the authority of either country, and exhibit their traditional hospitality to Taliban insurgents. Although tribal stature has been weakened somewhat by Soviet occupation, civil war, and pan-Islamic ideologies, the NATO occupation has—perhaps inadvertently—resurrected a role for some tribal leaders. The U.S. has been paying and arming them to turn against the Taliban, with only limited success.

The New York Times (1/29/10) reports that “American civilian and military leaders are turning to some of these tribes as potentially their best hope for success.... Led by councils of elders, tribes provided their members with protection, financial support, a means to resolve disputes....Successfully turning Pashtun tribes against the Taliban... could deliver a serious blow to the insurgency.” The Council on Foreign Relations report *A Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan* (11/7/08) admits that “Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist... predicted that arming Pashtun militias in the south would renew tribal rivalries that had been dormant for years; some analysts believe that has happened.”

Pakistan. In northwestern Pakistan, U.S. drones and Special Forces raids have attacked insurgents in the Pashto-speaking North-West Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, particularly in the tribal area of Waziristan. President Bush evoked American frontier imagery when he stated in the *New York Times* (2/18/07), “Taliban and Al Qaeda figures do hide in remote regions of Pakistan. This is wild country; this is wilder than the Wild West.”

The U.S. media consistently refers to Pakistan’s Northwest as a “lawless” tribal region. But in its fascinating article “Waziristan: The Last Frontier,” *The Economist* (12/30/09) clarified that “the tribes are mostly free to decide...matters among themselves, which they do, remarkably harmoniously, through jirgas and riwaj—tribal customary law. In Waziristan, as in most of the tribal areas, there is no written land register. Nor, until 2001, was there much crime. ‘The tribal areas was lawless only in the sense that there are no laws. But they have a certain way of going about things there,’ says Major Geoffrey Langlands, 92, a British colonial officer who stayed on...”

Iraq. In central Iraq, tribal traditions and territories are somewhat more critical to Sunni Arabs than to religious Shi’a Arabs in the south or ethnonationalist Kurds in the north. Tribal sheiks serve as community leaders, mediators, intermediaries, and regional power-players, and their support has become critical to both insurgent and occupation forces. The British and Saddam Hussein earlier tried to exercise control over tribes (and larger tribal confederations)—and also attempted to curry their favor—but ended up alienating them from state power.

An article in *Military Review* (9-10/07) reports that for U.S. operations in Iraq, “Tribal engagement has played a particularly prominent role...This reflects the enduring strength of the tribes in many of Iraq’s rural areas and some of its urban neighborhoods. And tribal engagement has been key to recent efforts to drive a wedge between tribally based Sunni Arab insurgents and Al-Qaeda in Iraq in Anbar province and elsewhere.” This Sunni “Awakening” did more to weaken Al Qaeda than the U.S. “Surge,” but now it appears the tribes are dissatisfied with the weak support shown by Baghdad and Washington.

Yemen. In southern Yemen, the U.S. has launched missile attacks against what it describes as Al Qaeda targets, and assists Yemeni military raids against separatist rebels in the tribal region. Like in central Iraq, instead of the tribes giving haven to Islamist “terrorists,” their sense of independence may end up being directed against both the Pentagon and Al Qaeda.

In the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report *What Comes Next in Yemen?* (3/10), Sarah Phillips

explains, “Al-Qaeda operatives have found safe haven in some of Yemen’s tribal regions, but their goal of establishing an international caliphate conflicts with many local political realities, potentially limiting this hospitality. Tribal society in Yemen is regulated by complex rules that bind its members to one another. Much of Yemen’s periphery is without effective formal, state-administered governance, but this does not mean that these regions are ungoverned—or there for the taking, particularly by outsiders to the area” (p. 1).

Somalia. In southern Somalia, virtually all Somalis hold the same customs, speak the same language, and practice the same religion. Nevertheless, since 1991 the region has been torn by civil war along clan lines (which in a non-African context could be described as tribal lines). When in 1992 U.S. forces intervened ostensibly as “peacekeepers,” they failed to consult with tribal elders, who are the traditional decision-makers in Somali society. Instead, the U.S. took the side of some militia warlords against other clan warlords, and paid the price in the infamous Black Hawk Down battle.

In 2006, an Islamist front took control of the capital of Mogadishu, and brought a relative calm to the country, which was shattered when the U.S. backed an Ethiopian invasion. The renewed war stimulated a nationalist backlash, offshore “piracy,” and the growth of the small ultra-Islamist Al Shabaab militia. The Pentagon is now using missile strikes, Special Forces raids, and AC-130 aerial gunship attacks to help a new government retake Mogadishu from Al Shabaab rebels. The New York Times (3/5/10) reports that “Even though there is a new religious overlay to Somalia’s civil war... clan connections still matter and could spell success — or disaster.”

Nothing New

If the Global War on Tribes is as old as European colonialism, in the United States it is as old as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. In U.S. foreign policy, we can trace it back to the Vietnam War (including the tribal highlands of South Vietnam and Laos), and farther back to the Philippine-American War and the Indian Wars. In his classic *Facing West: the Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building*, Richard Drinnon connects the colonization of Native American nations in the West to U.S. overseas expansion into the Philippines and Vietnam, which used the identical rhetoric of insurgent territory as hostile “Indian Country.”

Drinnon concluded, “In each and every West, place itself was infinitely less important ... than what the white settlers brought in their heads and hearts to that particular place. At each magic margin, their metaphysics of Indian-hating underwent a seemingly confirmatory ‘perennial rebirth.’ Rooted in fears and prejudices buried deep in the Western

psyche, their metaphysics became a time-tested doctrine, an ideology, and an integral component of U.S. nationalism....All along, the obverse of Indian-hating had been the metaphysics of empire-building....Winning the West amounted to no less than winning the world” (pp. 463-65).

One of the hallmarks of American colonization is to pit favored tribes and ethnic nations against the national security threat of the moment— Crow against Lakota, Igorot against Filipino, Montagnard against Vietnamese, Hmong against Lao, Miskito against Nicaraguan, Kurd against Arab. When the minority tribal allies (with their very real grievances) are no longer needed, Washington quickly abandons its defense of their “human rights.” We love ‘em, we use ‘em, and then we dump ‘em. These divide-and-conquer strategies are being revived from Pakistan to Yemen, as the Pentagon arms tribal militias to do its bidding—often against other tribes.

The Global War on Tribes can be traced even farther back in history, to its roots in Europe—including the English colonization of Celtic tribal lands, the mass burning of women who kept tribal healing practices alive, and the suppression of peasant rebellions emerging from local clan resistance (as shown by Carolyn Merchant in her *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*). Perhaps the ultimate model is the Roman Empire, which itself emerged from three early tribes in Rome (the word “tribe” comes from the Latin for “three”), and waged wars against numerous so-called “barbarian” tribes.

Updating the War

Proponents of the “Global War on Tribes” are seemingly unafraid to connect it to past campaigns against tribes around the world. The analyst and author Robert D. Kaplan wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* (9/24/04) that “...the American military is back to the days of fighting the Indians. The red Indian metaphor is one with which a liberal policy nomenclature may be uncomfortable, but Army and Marine field officers have embraced it because it captures perfectly the combat challenge of the early 21st century....The range of Indian groups, numbering in their hundreds, that the U.S. Cavalry...had to confront was no less varied than that of the warring ethnic and religious militias spread throughout Eurasia, Africa and South America in the early 21st century.”

Kaplan brazenly compared Iraq to “Indian Country”: “When the Cavalry invested Indian encampments, they periodically encountered warrior braves beside women and children, much like Fallujah....Indian Country has been expanding in recent years because of the security vacuum created by the collapse of traditional dictatorships....Iraq is but a microcosm of the Earth in this regard.”

Tribal resistance against Western intervention and corporate globalization take different forms in different countries. In Pakistan and Iraq, tribes may fight under the green banner of political Islamism. In India and Peru, some tribal peoples have fought under the red flag of Maoist rural insurgent armies. In Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico, they have coalesced within their own self-defined indigenist movements, which have effectively intersected with socialist and environmental movements.

But to U.S. counterinsurgency tacticians, the ideology is secondary. The real primary threat is that the people retain a tribal identity and allegiance—an identity that has not been formed or encouraged by capitalism. The goal of the Pentagon and CIA is either to harness tribal loyalties to weaken their enemies, or to destroy tribal identity. Even in supporting tribal allies for their own ends, they may end up destroying the tribes in the process.

In central and northeastern India, the Indian Army has launched a counterinsurgency war against Naxalite rebels, to open up the tribal forest regions to mining and timber companies. The Naxalites are usually described as “Maoists,” but as the writer Arundhati Roy observed in *Outlook India* (3/29/10), “It’s convenient to forget that tribal people in Central India have a history of resistance that predates Mao by centuries.... Naxalite politics has been inextricably entwined with tribal uprisings.”

On *Democracy Now* (3/22/10), Roy further explained, “If you look at Afghanistan, Waziristan...the northeast states of India...the entire thing is a tribal uprising. In Afghanistan, obviously, it’s taken the form of a radical Islamist uprising. And here [in India], it’s a radical left uprising. But the attack is the same. It’s a corporate attack...on these people. The resistance has taken different forms.”

In the Americas, powerful and growing Indigenous tribal movements are increasingly being targeted by U.S. military and intelligence agencies, as a potential national security threat to U.S. interests, as explained by Naomi Klein in *The Nation* (11/4/05). The National Intelligence Council projected in its 2005 report *Mapping the Global Future 2020* that “the failure of elites to adapt to the evolving demands of free markets and democracy probably will fuel a revival in populism and drive indigenous movements, which so far have sought change through democratic means, to consider more drastic means” (p. 77).

The Army’s Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), headquartered at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, has applied this emerging doctrine to Latin America. In a *Military Review* bibliography (7-8/99), the FMSO lumped together “Insurgencies, Terrorist Groups and Indigenous Movements,” and in another article warned of Indigenous rebellions

and other “insurgencies” in Mexico (5-6/97). FMSO official Lt. Col. Geoffrey Demarest stated in his book *Geoproperty: Foreign Affairs, National Security and Property Rights* that “The coming center of gravity of armed political struggles may be indigenous populations, youth gangs...or insurgents” (p. 84) and that the Internet is increasingly being used by “Indigenous rebels, feminists, troublemakers...” (p. 243). Counterinsurgency planners are no longer simply targeting “Communists” or “narcoguerrillas” in Latin America, but also Indigenous-led social movement alliances.

Reasons for War

Whether in Mexico, India, Iraq, or the United States and Canada, the Global War on Tribes has some common characteristics. First, the war is most blatantly being waged to steal the natural resources under tribal lands. The rugged, inaccessible terrain that prevented colonial powers from eliminating tribal societies also made accessing minerals, oil, timber and other resources more difficult—so (acre for acre) more of the resources are now left on tribal lands than on more accessible lands.

Resources are not always the underlying explanation for war, but they’re a pretty good start at an explanation. In the case of Indigenous tribal peoples, their historic attention to biodiversity has also enabled natural areas to be relatively protected until now, as corporations seek out the last remaining pockets of natural resources to extract. Look no further than the Alberta Tar Sands, for instance, to see the exploitation of Native lands by modern oil barons.

Like in *Avatar*, Native peoples often resist the militarization brought by corporate invaders seeking to mine “unobtainium,” and they don’t need a white messiah riding a red dragon to guide them to victory. In his book *Resource Rebels: Native Challenges to Mining and Oil Corporations*, Al Gedicks notes, “Up until recently, the tendency in the mass media has been to stereotype native people as fighting a losing battle against the onslaught of industrial civilization. But after two decades of organizing local, national, regional and international alliances, assisted by...the Internet, native voices can no longer be ignored in powerful places” (p. 1).

Second, the Global War on Tribes is a campaign against the very existence of tribal regions that are not under centralized state control. The tribal regions still retain forms of social organization that has not been solely determined by capitalism. In her anthology *Paradigm Wars*, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Chair of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, comments that “promoters of economic globalization, the neocolonizers,

use the overwhelming pressure of homogenization to teach us that indigenous political, economic and cultural systems are obstacles to their ‘progress.’” (p. 14).

The point is not that all tribal peoples pose an egalitarian alternative to neoliberal capitalism. Some (such as Indigenous peoples) certainly do have strong egalitarian principles, but many other tribal peoples—such as in the new conflict zones—certainly do not (particularly toward women). The salient point is not that all tribal cultures are paradise, but that they are not capitalist, and neoliberal capitalism cannot stand anything other than Total Control.

Third, the collective form of organization enables tribal peoples to fight back against state control and corporate globalization. When I asked Arundhati Roy at a Seattle forum (3/29/10) why counterinsurgency wars seem to be focused on tribal regions, she answered that tribal peoples do not have a “bar-coded” view of the world. Tribes still have the social networks to defend their lands and ways of life—networks of trust anchored in deeply held values that citizens of urban industrial society generally lack.

That is why the “lawless tribal regions” have to be “tamed,” so as not to become a “festering sore,” and a source of resistance to the corporate state. The only way for tribal leaders not to be crushed by the counterinsurgency campaign is to accept its aims, its money, and its weapons. Tauli-Corpus concludes that Indigenous peoples “believe they already constitute a viable alternative to globalization, underpinned by the fundamental values of reciprocity...community solidarity and collectivity” (p. 218).

During European colonial expansion, small, tribal peoples who could not muster large military alliances were more vulnerable to conquest and occupation. In most countries, the colonization process left them divided and fighting each other. In the 21st century—just as many remaining pockets of exploitable resources are located in tribal regions—the only successful pockets of resistance may be found in the mountains, deserts and forests where tribal peoples refuse to die.

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Maps of Tribal Regions in Conflict Afghanistan

http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCS/Docs/PDF%20Maps/East_tribal_map07.pdf Pakistan

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/1/Iraq> http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/iraq_ethno_2003.jpg

Yemen <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/yemen/images/tribes-map1.gif> Somalia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Somalia_ethnic_grps_2002.jpg