

## **How to Work With Tribesmen**

**RESPECT (Ihtiram in Arabic) is the key to working with tribesmen anywhere in the world.** Whether they are Arab Bedouin, Afghan Pushtuns, Laotian Muong or Somali herdsman, it is always RESPECT that tribesmen look for from outsiders who come to their lands seeking their help and friendship. This is true whether tribesmen are nomads or villagers. Many tribal peoples have been encouraged by their governments to settle and take up farming agriculture as a way of life. In many cases money and construction inducements have been provided in an effort to “tame” the tribesmen and make them easier for the governments to deal with. As a result, many tribal groups who were once nomadic are now living in villages. In some cases, parts of the tribe are now villagers and others of their relatives still follow the rains and grass with their flocks. Some other tribes, like the mountaineers in Yemen, have always been villagers. Nevertheless, in all cases, tribesmen prefer their own folk ways to those of the peoples of the cities in the countries in which they live. Usually the tribal peoples look down on non-tribal city dwellers considering them to be no more than servants of the government. Carlton Coon in his excellent book, “Caravan, the Story of the Middle East,” tells the story of the meeting of a Bani Sakhr Jordanian Bedouin with a Palestinian at a market place outside Amman, Jordan. According to Coon, the Palestinian city dweller lectured the Bedouin about his backwardness and lack of modernity. The Bedouin listened for a while with the courtesy natural to his kind and then responded by saying that it was clear to him that “modernity” had cost the Palestinians their homeland and that God had cursed the Palestinians for their abandonment of traditional life. With that he walked away.

### **Some guidelines for living and working with tribesmen:**

**Do not assume that they want to be like you.** People who live within a tribal social structure usually have chosen to do so and continue to live this kind of life because they find it satisfying and protective. If they had wanted to stop living within the tribal community, they would have done so. There is almost always a de-tribalized urban area available to them into which they could have disappeared to become taxi drivers or some such thing. They often could have joined the local military if they wished and some do so.

The important thing is that you understand that they are living in accord with ancestral traditions because they want to.

**Do not reject their ways as primitive or backward.** Tribesmen you mix with will watch you for indications that you hold them in disdain, that you think yourself better than them. Accept their customs as yours while you are among them as their guest and perhaps one day as an assimilated member of the group. To become that is quite possible, but that kind of status must be earned in the eyes of folk who expect to be treated badly by city dwellers and foreigners (ajanib in Arabic). Stay away from their women except to thank them for their hospitality if you are invited to do so. Do not openly praise their children. They will think you envy them for having children. Watch them closely to see how they conduct themselves. Imitate them and if you have doubts about some behavior ask them if it is appropriate for you to act the same way. Remember that tribesmen are warrior peoples. Be the warrior that you are. Never show fear. Never show fear. Do that and they will sing songs about you. They will fight for and with you.

**Do not mistake a rural lifestyle for one of desperate poverty.** People living in the country sheltered within the structures of family, clan and tribe are provided a lot more in goods and social support by tribal members and especially leaders than often appears to be the case to casual outside observers. “I am a river to my people,” said the great Howeitat Chief Auda Abu Tayi to T.E. Lawrence and he meant it. It is a very strong tradition among tribal leaders that they must provide well for their people. If they do not, they will not long be chief. Mud huts, concrete-block houses, simple dress and a simple diet do not necessarily add up to a self-perception of poverty.

**Understand and Respect Their Traditions.** Tribesmen often operate within at least two sets of rules. These are the dictates of tribal customary law (“Urf” in Arabic) and also of whatever kind of religious belief they subscribe to. In the case of the Sunni Arab tribes of Anbar Province, their religion is Islam observed according to the Shafa’i school of Shariah law. The tribes of Anbar Province are sections or sub-tribes of the Dulaim tribe. Dulaim has such a large group of sub-tribes that it might well be called a tribal confederation. In Dulaim all claim descentance from a common ancestor. This is the essence of tribal membership. Sometimes such descentance is genuine and in other cases it is not and “memory” is shaped according to need for unity. These peoples have a powerful oral tradition

and a lot of analysis of the character of the foreigner will be based on his willingness to sit and listen patiently and appreciatively to the elders who will tell him the truth of tribal belief in their situation.

**Tribal Customary Law.** Among the tribal Arabs, ‘Urf consists of the practices and traditions of behavior, ownership, personal status, recompense for an injury done and most of all HONOR that have grown up in the tribal group over many years. They are specific adaptations to environment and the harsh necessities of life in difficult rural conditions. In any tribe there will be elders whose main function is to be repositories of the usually unwritten ‘urf. These men have a respected and revered status as judges whose collective judgment and consensus govern tribal life. These men were often great warriors or poets in their youth and by a general acclamation they have taken up the status of customary law judge in middle age or later in life. The opinions of such men carry a great weight within the tribe and chiefs defy them at their own risk. Often the judges of ‘urf are the authority who choose the tribal chieftains. The kinds of cases in which ‘urf governs are things like; the shame induced in a family by the lack of chastity of a daughter. Tribesmen (and some town dwellers) will often feel so strongly dishonored by this that the girl’s brothers believe that they must kill her to erase the shame, and they often do. Another example would be a matter of the division of the profits from some tribal commercial transaction such as the sale of livestock. There is no sanction in Shariah law for either of these things any more than there is for the seclusion of women, but it is the customary law that determines what happens. It is often maintained by Islamic religious authorities that judgments in ‘urf leads to modifications of Islamic religious jurisprudence through the application of community consensus (ijma’ in Arabic). This may be true in some cases but in many more cases ‘urf directly governs tribal life in matters completely outside religious law. Because of the central role played in tribal life by ‘urf and its judges, one must always remember that the traditions of the tribes (taqaliid in Arabic) are always present in the background and that knowledge of these traditions and respect toward its practitioners will pay rich dividends.

**Religion.** Tribesmen are usually devoted to their ancestral explanation of the universe and to the power or powers that rule the universe. The tribesmen of Anbar Province have long been devout Muslims of the Shafa’i Mathab (path) of Islam. Understand that they truly believe in God, as only some of us believe. They are Shafa’i Sunnis. This refers to the legal school whose precepts their Qadis (judges) follow in making decisions based on the

roots of the law (Shariah). These are; Qur'an, (Holy Scripture), Hadith (stories accepted by the Shafa'i school of the practice of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Islamic community), Qiyas (analogy from case law) and Ijma' (consensus of the scholars). The Shafa'i school has always been a relatively moderate school of law and the tribesmen's understanding of Islam has been that of reverence without fanaticism. The Al-Qa'ida and associated movements (AQAM) follow forms of Islam based on acceptance of a consensus of belief among AQAM of the opinions of Muslims far more extreme than any the tribesman of Anbar Province have ever followed. AQAM believes that ANY cooperation with non-Muslims is religiously impossible and that only war to the death is possible between Muslims and infidels. AQAM extends this attitude toward Shia Muslims and any Muslims who do not accept their views. This is an opportunity for Americans or other foreigners to align themselves with moderate Muslims of the kind found among the tribesmen of Anbar. In their interactions with the tribesmen the Jihadis have often over-played their hand by attempting to force the tribesmen into acceptance of puritanical interpretations of Islamic law and practice which are alien to them. Moderate Islam, like that of the Shafa'i School, accepts Jesus and the story of the Gospels as a sincere but distorted rendition of the story of one of God's (Allah's) prophets. They believe Jesus to have been a semi-divine being who though not truly divine was beloved by God. This belief and the abuse that the Jihadis have inflicted on the tribesmen in the attempt to force them into extremism provide the opportunity for non-Muslim foreigners to associate themselves with the tribesmen in their resistance to Jihadi religiosity. An additional opportunity is provided by the tribesmen's belief in a common identity that they share with many of us as members of one or another of the "Three Divine Religions" (Al-Adyan as-Sammawiyah at-Thalatha) (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). To take advantage of this opportunity, American soldiers must accept their common theological patrimony with Muslims. The view which is sometimes elucidated in the United States that the God of Islam is not the God of Christians and Jews is a serious obstacle to ever finding workable bonds between our forces and those of Muslims anywhere. Soldiers who find that they can not accept this should consider requesting other duty. American soldiers should not be afraid to show their own religiosity. They will be RESPECTED for it so long as they do not seek to proselytize.

**Work With Their Traditional Leaders.** One of the most common errors made by American soldiers in trying to work with tribesmen is to adopt the

idea that traditional leaders are “dinosaurs” who are an outdated relic of the past. Part of our (American) heritage is the notion that the past is dead and that the future leads onward and upward in a linear path in which we Americans are the model of future humanity. In order to work successfully with tribesmen we have to abandon that idea or at least temporarily suppress it. Why? These people, especially the Bedouin Arabs, live in history and legend. For them the past is not dead. “It is, in fact, not really past.” (William Faulkner) The Arabic language lacks tenses and in so much as language shapes thought, Arabs have a difficult time focusing on how long ago things happened. For them the people of the past are not dead. Saladin (Yusuf Salah ad-Din al-Ayoubi) lived only yesterday in their minds. For them, the opinion of the Muslim chronicler of the Crusades, Usama ibn Munqidh, that “The Franks (us) are mighty men, may God curse them,” is a judgment on us that the skilful among us can make good use of. If we are “mighty men,” let us show them that we are also men who can be trusted and relied on. Accordingly, we should understand that the notion that these desert fighters and tribal brothers will give up their ways for ours is illusory. Their leaders were chosen by them according to ‘urf and by the ijma’ (consensus) of the people. We should not imagine that they would allow us to appoint leaders more to our taste. Saddam tried that in Iraq as did the Hashemite kings. They all failed. In entering into relations with tribesmen we should understand that one must begin by dealing with their own leaders. Without RESPECT paid to the elders we can never expect to penetrate the tribes as friends and allies.

**Bring them the help they need.** The tribesmen want to be the authors of their own destiny, “Ma Sha Allah” (What God wills be so) is understood to be the limit of their ability to govern their fate, but, they still want to improve their security and to improve the material circumstances of their lives if that can be achieved without giving up their way of life. If American soldiers succeed in insinuating themselves into the confidence of tribesmen, the tribesmen will then depend on their new friends completely to bring them both the military help (fire support, supply, medical support, etc.) that they will need in doing what the U.S. will urge them to do (and which they want to do) and also in bringing them infrastructure improvements (through their traditional leaders) that will make them a better life and our friends forever. If Americans prove to be faithful friends, they will take the tribesmen away from the Jihadis forever. If the tribesmen end by believing that they were betrayed by false friends, they will curse our memory.

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