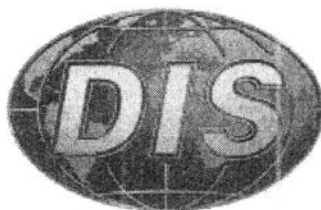


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# The Iraqi Tribes: Their Identity and Role in Internal Security

## Politico-Military Memorandum

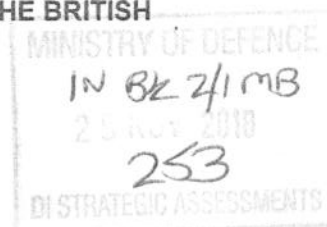


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## **FOREWORD**

### **THE IRAQI TRIBES: THEIR IDENTITY AND ROLE IN INTERNAL SECURITY**

This memorandum represents an initial attempt at understanding the complex identity of the Iraqi tribes and their importance to the security of the current regime. It does not attempt to deal in any detail with the role of Iraqi tribes in the various opposition movements (Shia or Kurdish). Comments are welcome and should be addressed to:

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Ideologically the Ba'ath conceived of tribe as an outdated form of 'colonialist' identity and indeed most early Ba'ath ideologues were urban professionals. Theoretically Ba'ath rule should have seen the Iraqi tribes wither. (U)
- Initially, Saddam Hussein suppressed overt references to the tribal or regional origins of the regime leadership. This was not because Saddam denigrated tribal and regional loyalties, but precisely because his regime relied upon them. He wished to disguise the extent to which certain familial and tribal groups dominated Iraq in particular the Tikritis and his own Al Bu Nasir tribe. (U)
- After the 1991 Uprising the regime became more explicit in its recognition of tribal loyalty. Ba'ath Party control had collapsed in certain areas of the country during the post-Gulf War uprising especially in the Shia south. The regime saw tribe as an increasingly important component in securing loyalty to the regime. While Sunni tribes continued to dominate the security forces and military officer corps, Shia tribal representation was also important. Shia with significant tribal affiliations were increasingly prominent in the Iraqi Parliament and the higher echelons of the Ba'ath

[none]

## Party. (C)

- But Saddam is also wary of tribal identity. He fears losing control of tribal loyalties. Several attempted coups by Sunni officers have been built on tribal links. Some Shia tribes are involved in insurgent activities against the regime. (U)
- Iraqi tribal identity is complex and cuts across religious belief. Most Iraqi tribes have both Sunni and Shia components as well as links across Iraqi national boundaries. Iraqi tribes typically conceive of themselves as Arab and Iraqi before they think of themselves as Sunni or Shia. Shia tribal identity is especially complex. Most Iraqi Shia only 'converted' in the 19th century and rural religiosity is not particularly deep. Amongst Shia tribal insurgents (and Shia tribes more generally) there is suspicion of Iranian claims to represent their interests. (C)
- Iraqi tribes are frequently armed - some engage in limited brigandry and infighting. But the regime is prepared to arm loyal tribes and use them as an ad hoc local security force. The regime's ability to distribute patronage (through position and material goods) to the tribes is a key component of loyalty. (R)
- The importance of tribal identity should not be overstated. Urbanisation has significantly weakened tribal control and some senior regime figures have no tribal affiliations. But, by giving largesse and filling regime security organisations with Sunni tribal groups, the regime has sustained the tribes. (U)
- Amongst the Sunni tribes Al Bu Nasir, the Jubbur, the Shammar Confederation and the Dulaim are dominant in regime security organisations and the military officer corps. Their loyalty is crucial to Saddam's continuing rule. Yet there are tensions between Saddam and elements within all of these tribes. Amongst the Shia the Khazraj and the ruling caste of the Muntafiq Confederation (the Sa'dun) are important within the Ba'ath Party. Representatives from both groups hold positions in the Regional Command of the Party (its highest body) and control the party in many important cities and governorates. (C)

## THE IRAQI TRIBES: THEIR IDENTITY AND ROLE IN INTERNAL SECURITY

### THE BA'ATH AND TRIBES

Ba'ath ideology would seem to preclude the utilisation of tribal structures for internal security purposes. Early Ba'ath ideologues viewed the tribal system as a bastion of imperialism, colonialism and 'feudalism' indeed all that was atavistic within Iraqi society. In contrast Ba'ath tenets of liberty, self-consciousness and socialism looked to the creation of a new Iraqi society based on egalitarian 'progressive' principles. In the pure Ba'ath state tribe would be swept away. (U)

In practice this did not occur. As with so many other aspects of Ba'ath ideology tribal policy was subsumed to the security needs of the state. As a result the Ba'ath regime strengthened rather than weakened the social and political power of the tribal system. (U)

In some respects this was inevitable since, no matter how it was portrayed ideologically, the Ba'ath 1968 seizure of power in Iraq and Saddam's ascent to the leadership were intimately

[none]

associated with tribal structures. Whilst the early ideologues of the Ba'ath movement (Michel Aflaq, Al Bitar and Zaki Al Arsuzi) were urban, western educated intellectuals, those who took the Ba'ath into power were grouped around regional and tribal loyalties. The 'Tikritis' became the most important regional nexus within the early Ba'ath the Al Bakr, Tulfah and Al Majid families of the Tikritis based Al Bu Nasir tribe were already prominent in the Ba'ath Party of the late 1960s. By the time of Saddam's accession to power they had become dominant. (U)

That is not to say that committed ideologues and those without tribal or regional links could not advance within the Party. Tareq Aziz and Taha Yasin Ramadhan are among the most senior Ba'athists with no such connections. And indeed throughout the 1970s and 1980s the tribal origins of senior Ba'athists were deliberately obscured. Saddam wished to disguise the extent to which the higher echelons of the Party and state security apparatus had become dominated by tribal groups from the Tikriti area and in particular from Saddam's own tribe, Al Bu Nasir. (U)

### The Shaban Intifada 1991

1991 marked a step change in regime attitudes toward the Iraqi tribes. The post Gulf War Southern Shia Uprising and renewed conflict with the Kurds in the North demonstrated the link between tribal policies and state security. In the South certain Shia tribal groups engaged in limited insurgency against regime forces and linked with urban insurrectionists. Also notable was the role that a few Southern Shia tribes and Sunni tribal groups in the North played in *defending* the regime. But, most importantly of all, large numbers of Shia tribal groups (perhaps 30-40%, though it is difficult to be sure) played no role whatsoever in the Southern uprising. Consequently the uprising remained a largely urban phenomenon, centred on Basra, Karbala, Najaf and Hillah but making less impact in the countryside. The reasons for this are diverse, from a lack of urban/rural communications and the timing of the revolt (just before the harvest) to suspicion amongst the rural tribes of Iranian influence on the urban uprisings. But paramount was the reluctance by the tribes to commit to open revolt when the result was still undecided. (C)

The neutral role of many tribes and the extent to which (had it materialised) their commitment to the opposition could have seriously threatened the regime was noted at the highest levels in the Party and by Saddam in particular. Indeed the importance of the tribes was underlined by the total collapse, during the uprising, of Ba'ath Party control in the South. For several years after the 1991 revolt relations between Saddam and the Party reached an all time low he considered that many Party structures had failed when they were really tested. (S AUS/CAN/UK/US EO)

Hence from 1991 onwards the regime began to more explicitly recognise and publicly allude to its tribal basis. Tribal origins became increasingly important in determining position and promotion in the Party and within regime security structures. Sunni tribes formed the backbone of the regime security organs (Al Bu Nasir within the SSO and SRG; Jubbburis, Dulaimis and Shammar within the RG and Regular Army Officer Corps). But Shia tribal representation was also significant, particularly within the higher echelons of the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi Parliament. (C)

### Tribe Security Asset and Threat

Saddam is aware that tribal structures represent both a security asset and a potential threat. By ensuring representation of key tribes within the highest echelons of the state and



[none]

by the careful distribution of patronage and reward Saddam has managed to co-opt major Sunni tribes and some important Shia tribes into the regime. Yet at the same time tribal affiliation represents a potentially alternative set of loyalties and behaviours. For example, the ongoing southern, Shia insurgency includes Iraqi Shia tribal groupings as well as organised Iranian backed infiltrators. And among the Sunni, coup plotting linked to tribal affiliations has posed a threat to Saddam in the past; the Juburri and Dulaim tribes have been implicated in coup attempts as have officers from Saddam's own Al Bu Nasir tribe. Indeed one might argue that tribal networks are one way for the Iraqi populace to overcome their general atomisation from each other. The tribe might provide a private sphere, outside of the all-pervasive view of the security forces, where individuals (in particular military officers) may be able to discuss anti-regime sentiments or resentments. (R)

As a result Saddam manages tribal affiliations carefully. SSO, DGS and DMI monitor tribal identity and activities (particularly within the military). Ba'ath Party officials are also utilised (particularly in the South) for liaison with local tribal groupings, to report on tribal affairs and to ensure tribal loyalty. Indeed in certain Southern areas (Najaf, Nasiriyah and Samawah environs) it would appear that Ba'ath Party heads have primacy in the running of tribal affairs, even including the distribution of weapons. (S AUS/CAN/UK/US EO)

Centrally, regime tribal policy is run through the Arab Tribal Affairs Department within the Presidential Diwan. Rukan Abd Al Ghaffur nominally runs the department though in effect Jamal Mustafa (Saddam's son in law and RG/SRG overseer Lt Gen Kamel Mustafa's brother) runs the department on a day to day basis. Both men are members of the al Majid branch of Al Bu Nasir. (S AUS/CAN/UK/US EO)

### Tribal Identity

Three key features of Iraqi tribal identity are important in shaping regime tribal policy: (U)

**Arab Identity:** The regime has consistently stressed the Arab identity of the Iraqi tribes and indeed has hailed them as the 'purest' form of Arab, in contrast to the urban populace. Such a categorisation is an attempt to fit tribal policy with Ba'ath ideology. By portraying the tribes as specifically Arab it is possible to defend regime support for them in terms of the Ba'ath tenets of Arab self-consciousness and re-discovery of Arab culture. But stressing Arab identity also serves an internal security purpose. Firstly, Arab identity is clearly intended to contrast with an alternate, in particular Persian, identity. By stressing the Arab character of the Southern Shia tribes the regime hoped to sow division between the rural Iraqi/Arab Shia and the urban (or exiled) Persian/Iranian influenced Shia opposition. In particular it is intended to undermine Shia tribal support for Iranian backed infiltrators in Southern Iraq (such as Badr Corps). (R)

This Arab identity is not simply a Ba'athist re-invention of the tribe but an identity with which many Shia tribal groups (and certainly all Sunni) would concur. It is worth remembering that the Shia faith, though dominant in Southern Iraq, is a relatively new phenomenon. The Shia conversion of the Southern Iraqi tribes was a largely 19th century project that was led by the Persian influenced (and Persian speaking) religious elite in the Southern shrine cities (principally Najaf and Karbala). Hence the identity and history of most Southern Iraqi tribes pre-dates their Shia faith - they were Arab (if not 'Iraqi') before they were Shia. Indeed such tensions frequently hamper the southern Shia insurgent movement tribal insurgents often resent interference and direction from a political movement (e.g. SCIRI) they see as intimately associated with the Iranian regime. (S AUS/CAN/UK/US EO)

**Religion:** By stressing their Arab identity as opposed to their confessional identity the

[none]

Ba'ath were able to co-opt several Shia tribes into the regime (though patronage, see below, is also vital). Iraqi tribal identity is important not only for its ability to ideologically overcome the difference between Shia and Sunni (by stressing their shared 'arabness') but also to *practically* overcome it. Many, if not most, Iraqi tribes actually bridge the confessional divide, having Sunni and Shia branches. This is largely due to the incomplete nature of the 19th century Shia conversion in the south and the fact that many large tribes had already spread over both Northern and Southern Iraq when the conversion took place. Hence the large Muntafiq confederation (based west of Basra) became Shia in the mid 19th century, but its land owning 'Sheikly' class the Sa'dun remained (and remain) Sunni. The Shammar are spread over a wide area of Iraq. Consequently the Northern branch Shammar Jarba are Sunni while the southern Shammar Toqah are Shia. Even those Sunni tribes most intimately associated with the regime (e.g. the Jubbur and Saddam's own Al Bu Nasir) have Shia branches. The security advantages of this are obvious by utilising the tribal networks the regime hoped to create a truly national system of regime loyalists capable of overcoming the traditional sectarian division of Iraqi society and co-opting Shia tribalists into a regime dominated by the Sunni. (R)

Another element of Iraqi tribal and religious identity is important here. For large numbers of the rural populace tribe was a more tangible institutional and social presence in the countryside than religion. Indeed studies of the numbers of religious institutions in the Iraqi countryside show them to be remarkably scarce there are few up to date statistics but in the early 1950s there was, in the Southern Shia provinces, only one religious institution (mosque, Madrasa or other) for every 37,000 persons. And furthermore, though much of the evidence for this is anecdotal, rural Shia religious practice was often highly unorthodox or more notable by its total absence. Because of the paucity of formal religious institutions in the countryside tribal identity was strengthened and itself subsumed religious responsibilities. It was often the tribal chiefs themselves or the tribal *Sayyids* (descendants of the prophet) who were the central religious authorities in the countryside. In fact the rise of the Iraqi Shia 'movement' (especially *Dawa*) was an urban response by the Shia clerics to coming into regular contact, for the first time, with the rural Shia classes who flooded into Baghdad in the 1960s and 1970s. *Dawa* and other movements began not only as vehicles to oppose Ba'ath repression of the urban Shia underclass, but also as spiritual movements to counter the widespread ignorance of the Shia themselves (and primarily to undermine the influence of the Iraqi Communist Party on the now urbanised, but once rural, Shia labourers). (R)

**A warrior class?:** The extent to which the regime has been prepared to arm tribal groups is also of note. Saddam himself frequently refers to the warrior qualities of the tribes and some tribal groups fought against both Shia insurgents and Kurds during the 1991 Uprising. Indeed, the carrying of personal weaponry (typically rifles) was always common among the tribes. At times of an enhanced security threat these will be supplemented with arms (assault rifles, HMGs and at times mortars and even howitzers) from government stocks. One can assume that, in the current security situation, preparations for such a distribution to loyal tribes will have been made. The regime will not intend to use such tribal forces for direct engagement with any invasion force, but rather for internal security duties. Once again this aspect of Iraqi tribal identity is both an asset and a threat. Much of the activities of the Southern Shia insurgents are based on armed tribal networks. And armed tribal forces could represent a threat to Saddam were they to turn in significant numbers against the regime. More common however is the general lawlessness and brigandry which characterises the activity of some tribal elements and occasional incidents of inter-tribal conflict (which has, according to the official Iraqi media, even involved use of artillery). Indeed one can question the extent to which many of the activities of the southern tribal insurgents really represent a political challenge to the regime and how much is simply traditional tribal activity in an area that has always resented central government rule. (C)

[none]

However the importance of tribal identity should not be overstated. In many respects regime policy in supporting the tribes ran counter to other forces in Iraqi society not least demographics. Though exact figures are difficult to ascertain Iraq's rural population had declined from 50% of the populace to around 27% by the late 1980s. How far urban Iraqis retained tribal affiliations is difficult to ascertain but one imagines that, under normal circumstances, those affiliations would have been significantly weakened and perhaps replaced altogether by alternate 'identities'. This is perhaps where the role of the Iraqi state has been particularly important, because it is within state (urban) institutions (military/state security and Ba'ath Party) that tribal identity has been encouraged and reinforced rather than allowed to wither. (U)

Finally one should also remember that tribe is only one of a range of identities that many Iraqis would subscribe to. Tribal identity does not deterministically lead individuals into certain forms of behaviour. Tribe might, in some circumstances, be a basis for collective action but at other times different allegiances (political, personal, religious and professional) might hold sway. As was noted above, religious identity has asserted itself in the Shia slums of Baghdad and the southern Shia urban centres. Among such groups tribal identity holds little sway and regime tribal policy is rendered ineffectual. Due to their difficulty in co-opting them it is no surprise that the regime regards the urban Shia populace as a central security threat. (U)

### Patronage

The regime's ability to distribute patronage to key tribal groups remains central to its ability to secure tribal loyalty. As well as ensuring the representation of tribal groups within key state institutions (representation that is itself exploited for patronage purposes) the regime ensures the flow of luxury goods to tribal elders and, presumably, infrastructure development within tribal areas. Distribution of weaponry also plays a part in the patron-client relationship. (R)

### Intelligence Gaps

Several aspects of tribal identity and tribe/state interaction remain unclear: Key questions are:

- The degree of autonomy tribes can attain and how they attain it (control over local taxation/govt. spending etc)
- Tribal sheikhs' official responsibilities. What functions do they perform for the state?
- Key Opinion formers/authority figures within tribal groups and how that relates to collective tribal 'action'. For example would the view of the tribal sheikh influence tribal members within regime security organisations?
- Tribal communication networks. How does the tribe communicate/enforce decisions/courses of action?
- Cross border tribal networks do Iraqi tribal affiliations reach across national boundaries (to Kuwait/Saudi/Jordan and Syria). How important/active are these links?



[none]

- Tribal loyalty vs. state/institutional loyalty. (C)

ANNEX A provides details of major tribal groupings linked to the regime and brief details, where available, of prominent members with security, military or party responsibilities. (R)

## ANNEX A

### Tribal 'Loyalists'

#### SUNNI

##### Al Bu Nasir

Saddam's own tribe, based in Tikrit and its environs. Most regime security organisations, but in particular those concerned with Saddam's personal security (the Himaya, SRG and SSO) are dominated by Al Bu Nasir members. Nevertheless there are tensions within the tribe. Al Bu Nasir (like all Iraqi tribes) is in effect a conglomeration of smaller sub units. Saddam has over the years fallen out with a number of these. The Al Massalat branch (that includes Saddam's half brothers Watban, Sabawi and Barzan) has a history of fraught relations with Saddam's eldest son, Udai. In addition Al Massalat includes the Tulfah family, many of whom blame Saddam for the death of Adnan Khayrallah Tulfah. There are also, reportedly, tensions between Saddam and the Al Bakr branch. (C)

Most important of all is reported tension between Saddam and elements of his own Al Majid Branch. Much of this can be traced back to the defection of the Kamils and their subsequent execution. There have been indications of ongoing tension but no firm evidence. Senior Al Majids continue to dominate the highest echelons of the regime. (C)

Prominent Al Bu Nasir:



Abd Hamid Mahmud: Saddam's private secretary. Head of the Presidential Private Office. (R)

Lt Gen Kamel Mustafa: Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard overseer. A key security official. Close to Qusai. (C)

Ali Hasan Al Majid: RCC member and Saddam's cousin. A key interlocutor and veteran Ba'athist. (R)



[none]

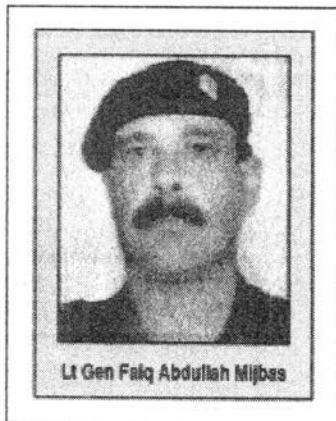
Walid Tawfiq Al Nasiri: Senior SSO official. Runs SSO on day to day basis. Close to Qusai. (S AUS/CAN/UK/US EO)

### Jubbur

A very large tribal grouping based largely around Mosul but stretching down to Tikrit. Other Jubbur branches are based south of Baghdad, with a Shia branch south of Hillah. Jubburis continue to make up a large percentage of RG officers and RA commanders. The Luhaibi are a prominent sub-branch of the Jubbur. Jubburi elements have also been linked to coup plotting, notably in 1990. Despite this and reports of periodic investigations (and executions) of Jubburri officers they continue to produce considerable numbers of officers within regime security organisations. (R)

Prominent Jubburis:

Lt Gen Faiq Abdullah Mijbas: Formerly CO Hamurrabi RG Division. Now within RG COS. A senior Jubburi tribal figure and personal favourite of Saddam. (C)



Lt Gen Ali Husain Al Luhaibi, DCOS MIRA: Close to Mijbas and other Luhaibi/Jubbur officers. An armour officer by trade. (C)

Gen Ibrahim Khalil Ibrahim al Juburi: One time head of Al Bakr Military Academy. (C)

Gen Hasan Zaidan al Luhaibi. (U)

Rashid Zaidan al Luhaibi: Brother of Hasan Zaidan. Tribal leader of Luhaibi branch in Mosul. (C)

Staff Lieutenant General 'Ali Abid Mahmud Al-Luhaibi, Commander Saddam Fedayeen: Highly respected former RG armour officer. (C)

BGen Khalil Ibrahim Khalil Al-Luhaibi, COS (Follow Up) Dept: Close to Uday Saddam Hussein and Ali Husain Al Luhaibi. (C)

### Shammar Jarbah

Northern (Sunni) branch of the Shammar confederation. A very large tribe based in the Jazirah in Northeast Iraq. Provide large numbers of military officers. (R)

[none]

**Prominent Shammar:**

MGen Ra'ad abd al Majid al Faisal: CO III Corps. A sheikh of the Shammar Jarbah. Close relatives of his within the southern branch of the tribe are reportedly related to the Saudi Monarchy. (C)

**Dulaimi**

Another large Sunni tribal confederation based west of Baghdad. Prominent among RG and Regular Officer class. Saddam's execution of a prominent Dulaimi officer led to a limited revolt by armed tribal elements (of the Al bu Nimr branch of the tribe) in 1995. There may also be small Shia branches. (C)

**Ubayd**

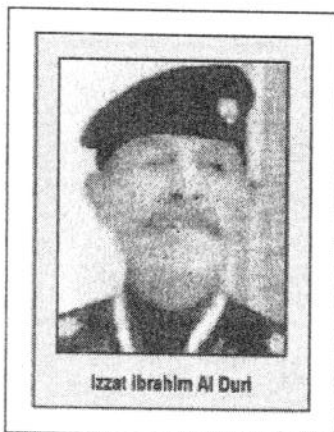
A Sunni tribe traditionally close to Al Bu Nasir. Based north of Baghdad and with a tribal area encompassing Tikrit and Sammara. (U)

**Harb**

A small Sunni tribe based around the town of Dur. Non-tribal Duris are also prominent within the regime. (U)

**Prominent Harb/Duris:**

Izzat Ibrahim Al Duri: RCC Vice Chairman and veteran Ba'athist. Ageing but remains a key interlocutor for Saddam. (C)



MGen Hikmat al Duri: DCOS Admin within AFCOS organisation. Prominent in Duri tribal affairs. His cousin is Izzat Ibrahim's office manager. (C)

**Sa'dun of Muntafiq**

A Shia tribal confederation (including the Bani Malik, Bani Said and Ajwab sub groups) based east of Basra and around Suq al Shuyukh. Their Shiekly class the Sa'dun are however, Sunni. Sa'dun are prominent within the Ba'ath Party, particularly in the south. (U)

[none]

**Prominent Sa'dun:**

Muhammad Ziman Abd al Razzaq al Sa'dun: Former Interior Minister and member of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command. Head of Ba'ath Party in Kirkuk and Nineveh Governorates. (C)

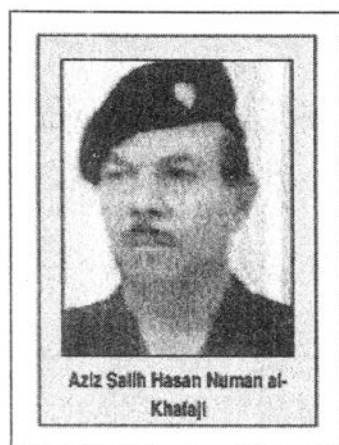
Abd al Baqi Abd al Karim Abdullah al Sa'dun: Member, Ba'ath Party Regional Command. Head of the Ba'ath Party in Dhi Qar Governorate. (C)

**Other Sunni tribes**

The 'Aqaydat (based west of Mosul) Khazraj, Al-Mushahada and Al Azza (all north of Baghdad) are among the smaller Sunni tribes linked to the regime. (U)

**SHIA****Khafaja**

A Shia tribe based south of Hilla and to the north of Nasiriyah. Armed tribal elements reportedly fought against Shia insurgents in 1991. Representation within the highest echelons of the Ba'ath Party. (U)

**Prominent Khafaja:**

Aziz Salih Hasan Numan al-Khafaji: Member, Ba'ath Party Regional Command. Party head,

[none]

Misan and Wasit Governorates. (C)

Muhsin Khudair al-Khafaji: Member, Ba'ath Party Regional Command. Party Head, Najaf/Qadisiyah. (C)

### **Bani Hasan**

A Shia tribe based south of Karbala. (U)

Numerous smaller Shia tribes are also tied to the regime. (U)

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## **MAPS**



Click on map for larger image

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