

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

Situating Tribes in History: Lessons from the Archives and the Social Sciences

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The tribe presents a problem for the historian of the modern Middle East, particularly one interested in personalities, subtleties of culture and society, and other such “useless” things. By and large, tribes did not leave their own written records. The tribal author is a phenomenon of the present or the recent past. There are few twentieth century tribal figures comparable to the urban personalities to whose writings and influence we owe our understanding of the social, intellectual, and political history of the modern Middle East. There is next a larger problem of record keeping to contend with: the almost complete inaccessibility of official records on the postcolonial Middle East. It is no wonder that political scientists and anthropologists are among the best regarded custodians of the region’s twentieth century history; they know how to make creative and often eloquent use of drastically limited tools. For many decades, suspicious governments have inhibited historians from carrying out the duties of their vocation. This is one reason why the many rich and original new monographs on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq are so important.¹ If tribes are on the margins of the records, and the records themselves are off limits, then one might imagine why modern Middle Eastern tribes are so poorly conceived in the scholarly imagination.

There is also a problem of optics. Tribes are hardly atavistic; they are highly complex and dynamic social phenomena. Yet the sense that the tribal person is a retrograde person surely informs our field’s time-honored curatorial judgments about the representative narratives of modern Middle Eastern societies. The basic binary of the field privileges two classes of actors: progressives of varying stripes, and Islamists of the same. These mutually antagonistic classes are posed to engage commonly in forms of willful, intellectual action, forging the Middle East under their pen. By contrast, tribal persons are passive actors, held captive to ideologies of patriarchy, primogeniture, honor, and shame. Under the reign of such norms, the tribe is simply a less appealing, and slightly embarrassing, subject of study for the average historian of the modern Middle East. And yet, we must still contend with the fact that at least until the middle of the twentieth century, if not well beyond, the predominant social group throughout most parts of the Middle East region was the tribe. What, then, is the tribe, and how might we assimilate the study of tribes to a historical method?

Before chasing the shadows of tribes in the archives, we must first define our terms. The modern tribe is one among a number of modes of association in the Middle East, the most substantial of these being the state and its citizenry, and the least substantial being the family. Tribes occupy a middle ground in scale, comparable to political parties, labor syndicates, and social media collectives. The efficacy of these Tocquevillian comparisons diminishes in authoritarian contexts, however, since in countries such as Saddam’s Iraq and Hafez al-Assad’s Syria, among others, party and state were synonymous with one another. Yet this sense that the Middle Eastern tribe occupies an intermediate scale and position among forms of association is important for defining the modern tribe’s scope as well as its relationship to both persons and states.

Are tribes voluntary or ascriptive associations? They are both. To illustrate this point, consider the fabric of Gulf societies. Genetic policing is a growth area in the Gulf region, where tribalism is a prevalent

¹Some examples are Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); original studies by Aaron Faust, Samuel Helfont, and Lisa Blaydes; and, a number of doctoral dissertations in the pipelines.

aspect of social life. Gene policemen, or genealogists, work to identify ancient ascriptive ties between ostensible blood kin. The more aggressive among them also work to weed out pretenders to genealogical attachment, late arrivals to the tribal community whose exposure and shaming serves real world though often dubious ends. Cohabitation and close kin intermarriage (endogamy) defined the tribal community of old. With the migration of rural kinship groups to scattered urban pockets in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the proliferation of literacy and Internet media in the twenty-first, the tribe has become increasingly an imagined community, encompassing membership rolls that were previously inconceivable in scope. Among these imagined rosters can be found persons whose attachment to the tribal lineage dates back centuries, and others whose connection spans decades or mere years. Arbitrating these distinctions, even half-wittingly, is a messy task that the historian, parachuting in at intervals, would do best to keep clear from.

What might the study of tribes, as defined above, look like when assimilated to a historical method? A useful resource for establishing a baseline conception of sedentary tribal groups can be found in rural family records. Land sale and lease contracts, marriage contracts, wills, and related documents from the past two to three centuries contain helpful clues about the nature of kin relations and tribal communities in historical contexts. A valuable example is the records of the small central Arabian (Najdi) town of al-Ghat – historical seat of close cousins to the Al Sa‘ud – which were collected from a number of local families and prepared for publication by a Saudi genealogist.² While this rare rural family history project owes its existence to princely support, it can be surmised that such records exist throughout the small towns and villages of the Middle East, awaiting only mutual patron/scholar interest to uncover and interpret.

Another way one might approach the historical study of sedentary tribes and kin groups is through the prism of religion. Prosopographical works (*ṭabaqāt* or *tarājim*) from North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula contain indicators about the tribal affiliation (or non-tribal status) of religious scholars.³ More interesting and rare are studies on tribes by religious scholars. A notable work of that kind is Ibrahim b. Sa‘id al-‘Abri’s history of his Omani tribe, which was first identified and discussed by Dale Eickelman.⁴ It remains to be seen whether this history is *sui generis* or replicated in other Middle Eastern contexts.

Nomadic (bedouin) tribes pose a greater problem for the historian. The late Irfan Shahid (d. 2016) made memorable use of a polyglot array of classical sources to draw out insights about the nomadic tribes of late antique Arabia.⁵ Leaping forward in time but also back somewhat on the tree of scholarly lineages, the great scholar Alois Musil (d. 1944) took his interest in tribes to the field, cohabitating with the Rwala section of the ‘Anaza bedouin confederation for several decades at the turn of the twentieth century, and recording memorable insights into their politics, language, and social life.⁶ Classic histories on nomad-state relations by Gene Garthwaite and more recent works by Yoav Alon and Nora Barakat commence exploration of the key concern in the modern political history of the tribe: its unsteady integration into the politics of centralizing modern states.⁷ Collectively, these approaches provide many tools for contemplating the problem of bedouin history. Yet mapping the interior contours of that history, because unwritten, will depend on imaginative linguists, archaeologists, and historical anthropologists.

The latter confront a plethora of self-published tribal histories by clan hobbyists that deserve careful mining, perhaps more for what they reveal about the positioning of tribal identities in modern societies than for the veracity of their historical accountings. In conversation, an official with the Saudi Ministry of Information equated the customs enforcement policy toward tribal histories with that for illegal drugs, in

²Watha‘iq min al-Ghat, ed. Fa‘iz b. Musa al-Harbi (Riyadh: Mu‘assasat ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sudayri al-Khayriyya, 2010).

³E.g., ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Bassam, *‘Ulama’ Najd Khilal Thamaniyat Qurun* (Riyadh: Dar al-‘Asima li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi’, 1998).

⁴Ibrahim b. Sa‘id al-‘Abri, *Tabsirat al-Mu‘tabarin fi Tarikh al-‘Abriyin* (Muscat: Dhakirat ‘Uman, 2015).

⁵Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, multiple volumes (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984–2010).

⁶Alois Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1928).

⁷Gene R. Garthwaite, *Khans and Shahs: A Documentary Analysis of the Bakhtiyari in Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Yoav Alon, *The Shaykh of Shaykhs: Mithqal al-Fayiz and Tribal Leadership in Modern Jordan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Nora E. Barakat, “An Empty Land? Nomads and Property Administration in Hamidian Syria” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015).

that both were manufactured outside of the kingdom and considered dangerous contraband when intercepted at its borders. The tribe, and thus tribal history, are today almost wholly captured by the cultural (and criminal justice) politics of authoritarian Arab states. This is less a problem in a country like the United Arab Emirates, where the greatest proportion of the population claims nominal attachment to the nation's dominant tribe, the Bani Yas, than in a place like Saudi Arabia, where scores of tribes and their individual citizen members cohabit and compete, often uneasily, for entrepreneurial opportunity and state largesse.⁸

Transformations are afoot in the nature of tribalism, however, that might have bearing on the tribe's relationship to modern politics and conflict. Inter-tribal warfare was historically a limited affair. Economic scarcity and codes of blood vengeance meant that there was never much surplus to extract from rival tribes, nor benefit from large-scale bloodletting. From time immemorial, tribal groups have been mobilized by sedentary rulers as auxiliaries in their campaigns to conquer rival settled towns. But after the early Islamic period, conflict between Arab tribal groups, though celebrated in poetry, does not seem to have translated into widespread violence, at least nothing close to the scale of modern interstate warfare.

However, in the contemporary Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, tribalism has been reshaped into an ideology of lineal purity that transcends individual tribal groupings and forms the basis for a common public discourse. This new concept of identity, based in part on racial notions, informs the new muscular Gulf nationalism that has transformed the politics of the Middle East. The adaptation of tribalism into a key pillar of nationalist thought in the Arab Gulf states helps explain these countries' break from their traditionally quietist foreign policy and embrace of military intervention in conflicts throughout the Middle East and Africa. The embrace by Gulf rulers of the symbols and rhetoric of tribal heritage, and the propagation of these qualities by their diverse media arms, has lent historical depth and texture to a providential narrative of Gulf Arab preference, one that helps to justify military interventions in the Horn of Africa, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Yet older imprints of the tribal collective continue to exist and indeed are being revitalized by state collapse and civil conflict in the region. The tribes and clans fighting today in Libya and Yemen among the ruins of those states are still robustly traditional in many respects – they are lineal cohabitants, waging territorial battles against diverse rivals, some religiously zealous, and others less so. If the Middle East region continues to fracture, then old-style tribes may continue to ascend in new-fangled conflict zones, and the center of gravity of our scholarly understandings could well shift away from the Andersonian paradigm of an imagined tribal national community to one still yet to be conceived, though possessing a flavor of the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's long obsolete model for stateless micro-polities.⁹

The tribe is an integral element of modern Middle Eastern societies. And yet it is hardly ubiquitous as a major force throughout the region. Systems of government help determine how and whether tribes matter. In the revolutionary secular republic of Ba'athist Iraq, for instance, tribal belonging was, until the sanctions period of the 1990s, not a privileged mode of association.¹⁰ The premier association was the Ba'ath Party, even if the tribal kin group continued to serve as a source of authority and counterweight to the forces of bureaucratic consolidation. By contrast, in the conservative religious monarchy of Saudi Arabia, the tribe has long been a dominant if not the dominant form of social collective, in part because practically all other forms of meaningful association are unlawful.

Tribes persist arguably for two reasons. The modern tribe endures, firstly, because it is a refigured expression of the fundamental form of social organization in the pre-modern Middle East. For centuries, the tribal confederation was the basic organizing principle of nomadic populations, encompassing sub-branches or clans (the nomenclature is not important, but the sense of scale is) and then families.

⁸Nadav Samin, "Da'wa, Dynasty, and Destiny in the Arab Gulf," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no. 4 (2016): 935–54; Nadav Samin, *Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1940).

¹⁰I thank Peter Wien for his clarifying comments here.

The smallest of these kin units, like their sedentary counterparts in thousands of oases, towns, and villages, were organized according to specific tendencies: a preference for close cousin marriage, a keen sense of genealogical attachment to larger extended families, and a willingness to come to the aid of the larger kin group when called upon. Modern revolutionary movements from Baʿthism to ISIS have sought to degrade the purchase of the tribe, only to see themselves absorbed and refashioned by its logic. This logic is embedded in the *farāʿid*, the inheritance laws adduced in Muslim scripture, and expressed in numerous other more mutable yet still influential ways in contemporary Arab societies.

The tribe remains influential, secondly, because the states of the Middle East have failed to provide their citizenry with civic associations more attractive than their extended kin group. Just as there is today among many members of that public a widespread nostalgia for a pristine Islamic past, there is also an affection for the romance, chivalry, and humble circumstances of the historical tribe. Yet the intense gaze toward the past that is characteristic of modern Arab societies is more than just a celebration of heritage and history; it is a pronouncement of judgment on the strictures of the present day, among which are the fact that the quintessentially autonomous Arab social group, the tribe, has been rendered almost wholly dependent on the modern state.

The shift from largely rural, monarchical states into urbanized republics throughout the world has failed to induce comparably neat or linear processes of social transformation. So, the assumption that urbanization, mass education, or the efflorescence of democracy in the Middle East might lead to the extinction of the tribe is unfounded. The tribe is not the enemy of progress, but rather, a key element of the fabric of social change in the Middle East, whatever its direction and texture. A tribal ethos shorn of regressive aspects, freed from authoritarian manipulation, and embodying the ideals of generosity, humility, and egalitarian governance for which it was historically known could in fact form the basis for a renewed civic vitality in the region. A great number of men and women in the Middle East are surely counting on that.