

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

## The Politics of Tribal Perseverance

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There is a short answer to the question that has been posed to the participants in this roundtable. Tribes have a great deal of currency in modern Yemen because they provide an effective means to govern and protect local society. Tribalism is a deep pool of widely accepted customary practices in Yemen that people draw upon to provide security, manage agricultural resources (Yemen's tribespeople are mostly settled agriculturalists), and resolve local disputes.

But a longer answer might point out that the perseverance of tribalism and tribes in Yemen also has something to do with broader political choices among state leaders and political parties, as well as local tribal leaders.<sup>1</sup> There is a politics of tribalism in Yemen that does not pit tribes against the state but is a broader contest over the role of tribes in Yemeni society and the nature of the Yemeni state. The relationships between tribes and the state are much more complex than a simple binary, captured in the oft repeated refrain “when the state is strong, tribes are weak, and when the state is weak, tribes are strong.”<sup>2</sup> The state itself, including the modern republic, promotes tribes and tribalism. In fact, over most of Yemen's history, state power in the north relied upon alliances with the tribes whose interests the state promoted. In the republican period since 1962, state leaders continued to promote tribal tradition and even elevated tribal leaders as part of their own regime strategy. The contest over tribes is much broader than local struggles over sovereignty between tribes and the state, it is wrapped up in wider political conflicts about being Yemeni.

In the even longer perspective of historians, those looking at tribes in Yemen do question their future for two reasons: the material basis of tribal society is disappearing and the cultural environment in which tribes flourished is being transformed.<sup>3</sup> Yemen's tribes are small kin-based social groups that, at root, manage local agricultural resources. Yemen's tribes are mostly sedentary, and agricultural land is still central to their existence. However, Yemen's economy has been thoroughly transformed over the last half century of republican government. Transport and communication infrastructure integrated the most remote villages into global markets and media. Whereas tribal identity traditionally disdained commerce precisely because of Adam Smith's observation that commerce creates dependencies—which tribesmen hate—greed overcame cultural reticence, and tribespeople have entered trade, transportation, and construction with gusto. Furthermore, Yemen's military is more capable than it has ever been in Yemen's long history; republican ideas of the state, including positive law, equality, and the idea of Yemeni citizenship in a wider world of nation-states, have changed people's understanding of themselves. Lastly, there are far more Yemenis than ever before, and the rural lifestyle of tribespeople is no longer predominant. Yemen's population in 1960 might have been four million but by 1990 Yemenis numbered twelve million and in 2020 Yemen's population is somewhere around twenty-eight million people. Meanwhile, the sparseness of Yemen's agricultural resources—only three percent of Yemen's land is potentially arable and usually only one and a half percent of land is under cultivation because Yemen has one of the lowest per capita water resources in the world—means that the economic foundation of Yemen's tribes cannot support most Yemenis any longer. The agricultural sector constitutes somewhere around thirty percent of

<sup>1</sup>Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Adil Mujahid al-Sharjabi, ed. *Al-Qasr wa al-Diwan: al-Dawr al-Siyasi lil-Qabila fi al-Yaman* (Sanaa: al-Murshid al-Yamani li-Huquq al-Insan, 2009), 47–48.

<sup>2</sup>Qa'id al-Sharjabi, *al-Shara'ih al-'Ijtima'iyya al-Taqlidiyya fi al-Mujtama'a al-Yamani* (Sanaa: Dar al-Hadatha 1998), 59.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Dresch, “Tribal Relations and Political History in Upper Yemen,” in B. R. Pridham, ed., *Contemporary Yemen: Politics and Historical Background*, (Kent, UK: Croom Helm, 1984), 171; Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Gloucestershire, UK: Clarendon Press, 1989), 387.

the total labor force today and a large percentage of these are redundant labor who often take refuge from unemployment on small family plots caused by the general economic crisis elsewhere in Yemen.

Despite these long-term threats, in the short-term tribalism thrives. While noting the broader changes afoot, Shelagh Weir in her classic study of tribes in a region of the traditionally tribal far northwest, concludes, "it would be foolhardy to predict their imminent demise."<sup>4</sup> And in the southern and eastern portion of the country that lived twenty years (1967–90) under the iron fist of the socialist vanguard where tribes were expected to wither, tribes rebounded. Former president of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and secretary general of the Yemeni Socialist Party, 'Ali Salim al-Bayd, lamented "the shaykhs have gone, the Sultans have gone, feudalism has gone, but their mentality and culture remain."<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt tribes still have a great deal of relevancy for Yemenis in rural areas. In surveys administered before the Arab Spring, at a time when the Yemeni state had more resources than ever, Yemenis seemed inclined to trust tribes more than the state, but with some caveats. When asked to choose the fairest adjudicator, Yemenis chose tribal shaykhs over state judges.<sup>6</sup> When asked who is most powerful in the local arena, Yemenis again chose tribal shaykhs in northern areas, but in southern regions local government officials maintained a slight edge of support over tribal shaykhs.<sup>7</sup> When asked who to turn to in the case of conflict, Yemenis everywhere chose tribal shaykhs or the *'āqil* (local tribal position below the shaykhs in tribal hierarchy) over local police by a large margin.<sup>8</sup> Asked more directly whether tribal traditions should be retained in the interest of social stability, Yemenis hedged. The majority answered "to some extent," indicating there was some openness to change, but only a small number said tribal traditions should be rejected.<sup>9</sup> Overall surveys indicate that tribes are strong in Yemen, but their strength varies by region, and that while Yemenis often rely upon tribal custom, they are also not averse to change. For anyone who knows Yemen, these results are not surprising.

What is interesting, though, is that tribes and tribalism survive not only because they are deep cultural reservoirs that provide means for local governance and protection of local communities in the absence of a state, but also because both tribes and tribalism are cultivated by political leaders. Tribes and tribalism are, at times, a state project, a political program in Yemen. Far from being an anathema or anachronism, tribes are nurtured and preserved precisely because they can be a source of power. But not all state leaders cultivate tribalism. There are political currents in Yemen that would like to reduce tribal influence in the state and transform tribal society from a local, lineage-based community to a common national identity of equality before the state, regardless of birth, origin, religious sect, etc. And there is also some tribal support for transforming tribalism and tribal society. Today there are often calls from tribes demanding the state fulfill its functions such as bringing criminals to justice, a function normally associated with the tribal system. Finally, political proponents of positive law and equality will draw upon tribal tradition as sources of support for the state building project. The lines of conflict between modernity and tradition as understood in Yemeni political discourse are not the same as the lines between state and tribe. We find state and tribe on both sides of the political divide between proponents of tradition and those of modernity.

Historically, the northern portion of the western highlands are Yemen's tribal zone. From Sanaa to Sa'dah in the north and Hajja in the west to the Jawf in the east reside Yemen's powerful tribes (there are other areas of powerful tribes such as the eastern tribes of Marib, but the northern tribes are the one whose relations with the state make them critical to power in Sanaa). Government troops guard checkpoints north of Sanaa that mark the end of state power and beginning of tribal sovereignty; tribes in this area are small sovereignties.<sup>10</sup> However, their political importance in Yemen stems from their historical relationship to states: the northern tribes have been cultivated for their martial abilities but left to manage their own local affairs to a large extent.

<sup>4</sup>Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 314.

<sup>5</sup>Norman Cigar, "Islam and the State in South Yemen: The Uneasy Coexistence," *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 2 (1990): 194.

<sup>6</sup>Adil al-Sharjabi, *al-Qasr wa-l-Diwan*, 157.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>9</sup>Samir al-'Abdali, *Thaqafat al-Dimuqrāṭiyya fi al-Haya al-Siyyasiyya lil-Qaba'il al-Yaman* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 2007), 174.

<sup>10</sup>Weir, *A Tribal Order*, 307.

In the beginning of the Imamate in Yemen in 898, Zaydi rule was a creation of the tribes. Tribal leaders called upon Imam al-Hadi ʿAlī al-Haqq (898-911) to mediate amongst the tribes to help overcome their destructive disputes. The imam's sole source of power was the loyalty of the tribesmen. He had no standing army independent of the tribes. His ability to impose his will depended upon his sway among the tribes and/or his ability to exploit divisions amongst the tribes. A recalcitrant tribe could be punished with the use of other tribes or a campaign against the capital Sanaa might be galvanized by the incentive of war booty, but there was no army loyal only to the imam that could be used against tribes. And there was no imperial bureaucracy to collect taxes. Taxes were raised by tribes amongst themselves. Tribes divided into fourths, fifths, or sixths the responsibility for paying tribal levies or state taxes. There was no need for a bureaucracy; local government was tribal and the state was an arbitrator between tribes rather than central power.<sup>11</sup>

The Qasimi dynasty (1598–1962) that expelled the Ottomans from Yemen in 1635 extended this model into the lower regions of Yemen in the south and east. However, the relative balance of power between the Imamate and the tribes changed in the lower regions. In the north, the Imamate relied upon the tribes for political and military means, but in the lower region of the south, the Imamate wanted to extract taxes. The Qasimi Imamate declared those outside the north to be *kuffār* (infidels) and thus their land was subject to the *kharaj* tax (additional tax imposed on non-Muslims).<sup>12</sup> The balance of power between agents of the imam and tribal leaders tilted toward the former and the imam relied upon the martial abilities of the tribes of the far north to enforce the new order.<sup>13</sup> However, in both regions, tribes remained the basis of social organization. The imams retained local tribal governance in the lower regions even while taxing.<sup>14</sup> Even in the republican period, al-Sharjabi in his study of Hujariyya south of Taiz in the 1980s found that farmers were distinguished by the crops they cultivated and those that cultivated grains were tribespeople who constituted eighty percent of farmers.<sup>15</sup> Today despite the general impression that tribes are no longer relevant in the lower regions of Taiz and Ibb, tribes and tribal leaders persist, but the relative power of tribes in the lower regions is far less than the northern tribes, a lingering legacy of the Qasimi expansion.<sup>16</sup>

The republican coup and civil war of the 1960s allowed tribal leaders to assume leadership of the state of northern Yemen for the first time. Under the Imamate, formal leadership of the state was restricted to Ahl al-Bayt and the imams relied upon the Hashemis, those that claim descent from the Prophet through Fatima and ʿAlī, to staff the state. The Hashemis lived within tribal society but maintained social exclusivity through marriage restrictions. The republican state delegitimized Hashemite preeminence, and the importance of tribal leaders and fighters during the civil war allowed tribal leaders of the far north to parlay their importance into official positions in the state for the first time.<sup>17</sup> The rise of tribal shaykhs in Yemeni politics was promoted by not only tribal shaykhs but also those opposed to leftist political currents that emphasized state building. On the other side, leaders from lower Yemen around Ta'izz and Ibb promoted a strong central state, equality, and positive law. They wanted state law and administration to extend into tribal territory and to diminish the influence of tribal shaykhs.<sup>18</sup> After the famous defense of Sanaa against royalist forces in 1968 that concluded the civil war and that depended upon these leftist fighters, a second round of fighting within the group of the republican victors in Sanaa led to the banishment of anti-tribal state builders. There was a regional and sectarian color to this conflict as well, the tribal north is predominately Zaydi whereas the lower regions are Shafi'i, the same division of Yemen as under the imams. The lower regions of Yemen remembered well the imams' tribal enforcers from the

<sup>11</sup>Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History*, 161; Hasan Khadiri Ahmad, *Qiyam al-Dawla al-Zaydiyya fi al-Yaman* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2007), 65; Muhammad Muhsin al-Zahiri, *al-Mujtama' wa-l-Dawla* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2004), 186.

<sup>12</sup>Mahmud ʿAlī Muhsin al-Salimi, *Muhawalat Tawhid al-Yaman ba'd Khuruj al-Uthmaniyyin al-Awwal* (Sanaa: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Dirasat al-Istratijiyya, 1998), 174.

<sup>13</sup>al-Salimi, *Muhawalat Tawhid*, 168.

<sup>14</sup>Adil al-Sharjabi, *al-Qasr wa-l-Diwan*, 51.

<sup>15</sup>Qa'id al-Sharjabi, *al-Shara'ih*, 200.

<sup>16</sup>Adanalghad, "Shaykh Masha'ikh al-Hujariyya Ya'lan Indimam ila al-Maktab al-Siyyasiyya al-Wataniyya," *ʿAdanalGhad* 29 March 2021 <https://adengd.net/news/536522> (accessed 1 April 2021).

<sup>17</sup>al-Zahiri, *al-Mujtama' wa al-Dawla*, 139.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 140.

north and did not want them in power but chose a state-building political project to oppose the tribal project of the far north.<sup>19</sup>

The northern pro-tribal forces won and in effect continued the imam's political geography leaving the far north to the tribes but putting tribal leaders direct into state power for the first time as members of parliament and high officials in the military. The speaker of the Yemeni Parliament from 1971 to 2007 was 'Abd Allah bin Husayn al-Ahmar, the leading shaykh of the powerful Hashid tribal confederation. Tribal shaykhs constituted over half of members of parliament.<sup>20</sup> Tribal leaders were able to assure that the balance of power between the state's military and the tribes did not tip too far towards the state. President Ibrahim al-Hamdi (r. 1974–77) interrupted the tribal project and tried to rely solely upon the state military to marginalize tribal shaykhs, but his murder marked the end of such attempts.<sup>21</sup> The 'Ali Abdullah Saleh regime (1978–2012) relied upon and promoted tribes and tribalism. Saleh managed tribal politics both at the level of individual tribes, favoring certain families over others within tribes to bolster his regime's support among the tribes and at the level of broader tribal politics, playing divisions between tribal entities to his advantage.<sup>22</sup> The power of tribal shaykhs was apparent in the creation of the official Tribal Affairs Agency that funneled funds to tribal shaykhs, in effect replicating the imam's policy of taxing the lower regions of Yemen to support the north, but without the imams. The tribes themselves, or at least their leaders, were the beneficiaries of the flow of state revenue.

In the south, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen dramatically opposed traditional society. The British had relied upon alliances with tribal leaders in south Yemen and thus supported the retention of tradition. In contrast, the revolutionary socialists wanted to remake society, and they began by attacking traditional religious and tribal leaders. Governorates were renamed numerically to wipe out allegiances to names and territories. Officials were not allowed to serve in the region of their origins in order to avoid traditional ties. After the collapse of socialism in the south, tribes began to re-emerge, for several reasons. In some areas, tribes reappeared to assert privilege over non-tribal peoples and to reclaim agricultural land that had been confiscated and redistributed by the socialist state. Tribes also reasserted themselves in more remote areas when security deteriorated and the state disappeared in the transitional period between Yemeni unification in 1990 and the war of 1994. After the north conquered the south in 1994, 'Ali Abdallah Saleh tried to reestablish tribes to extend his power into the southern regions of Yemen.<sup>23</sup> Tribes in the south became a state project of the regime in the north. The list of shaykhs in the south officially recognized by the regime in Sanaa grew rapidly.

But tribes and tribalism do not align with one faction of the Yemeni regime; tribespeople and the use of tribal tradition can be found on all sides of political debate. Tribes support state-building and demand the state help overcome tribalism's destructive qualities. Especially in the south, we find tribespeople demanding that the state fulfill its functions in ways that might be considered impingement on tribal sovereignty such as pursuing wrongdoers, but northern tribes do so as well.<sup>24</sup> Tribes demand that the security apparatus apprehend fugitives and hold them accountable to state law or tribes criticize state behavior to correct it.<sup>25</sup> Tribes want the state to stop the endless cycle of revenge and wars over land or water. Here the tribe acts like a pressure group or a community association before the state. Ironically, surveys locate the most support for the modern state in the north, in 'Amran, the origin of the state's most powerful tribal leaders.<sup>26</sup> And in the far north, tribal confederations find themselves supporting the Yemeni

<sup>19</sup>Robert Burrowes, *The Yemen Arab Republic: The Politics of Development 1962–1986*, (Boulder CO: Westview, 1986), 51

<sup>20</sup>Adil al-Sharjabi, *al-Qasr wa al-Diwan*, 50.

<sup>21</sup>al-Zahiri, *al-Mujtam'a wa al-Dawla*, 177.

<sup>22</sup>Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthis Conflict*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 54; Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*.

<sup>23</sup>Serge Elie, "State-Community Relations in Yemen: Soqatra's Historical Formation as a Sub-National Polity," *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 4 (2009): 363–93.

<sup>24</sup>Nadwa Dawsari, *Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen*. (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), 2.

<sup>25</sup>Adanalghad "Tawafud al-Mi'at min Abna' Radfan Talbiyyat lil-Da'wa Alatti Atlaqaha Qaba'il al-Da'ri fi Bayanha," *Adanalghad* 14 March 2021 <https://adengd.net/news/532747> (accessed 1 April 2021).

<sup>26</sup>Adanalghad, "al-Sultan al-'Afifi fi Bayan Muwajaha li-Qaba'il Hamayqan: Qaba'il Yafi Ghayr Radia 'Anma Jara wa Yajri," *Adanalghad* 23 February 2021 <https://adengd.net/news/527977> (accessed 1 April 2021).

<sup>26</sup>al-'Abdali, *Thaqafat al-Dimuqratiyya*, 269.

Socialist Party for tribal reasons.<sup>27</sup> But the strength of tribalism and the prominence of tribes from the far north reflect a historical geography of tribal power that was cultivated by the Qasimi state and then in the Yemeni republic, particularly under `Ali Abdallah Saleh. Tribalism perseveres not so much because it is a hetero-stratum of social organization but because it is cultivated by political leaders both tribal and non-tribal. Though today the Huthi privilege the Hashimi (*Ahl al-Bayt*) in state leadership rather than tribal leaders, they themselves command the north because they know well its tribal order and use it for to buttress their power. Undermining the tribal order would be counterproductive for them.

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<sup>27</sup>Adil al-Sharjabi, *al-Qasr wa-l-Diwan*, 49.