

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

## Tribalism in the Middle East: A Useful Prism for Understanding the Region

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Despite entrenched views about tribes and tribalism as premodern phenomena, this form of social organization and identity is relevant today no less than in the past; in some cases, it is even more relevant. Even without exact statistics, one can safely assert that a large proportion of the Middle East's inhabitants belong to a tribe and adhere to tribal social norms and cultural values. Whereas tribe and tribalism in English have somewhat negative connotations—they refer to divisiveness, rivalries, sectarianism, and favoritism—in the Middle East the term tribe is used as a matter of fact, a part of reality. It has equivalents in the local languages (*ashīra*, *qabīla*, *tā'ifa*) and a long history, from the days before the emergence of Islam in the 7th century. It is a term used by local people, usually in a positive rather than a pejorative way; people are proud of their tribes and see them as building blocks of their societies.

This is not to say that tribes today constitute an exact replica of the tribes in the time of the Jahiliya before the emergence of Islam or even the tribes of the early 20th century. On the contrary, tribes and tribalism are dynamic and ever-changing phenomena. Their ability to adapt themselves to modern conditions is one of the reasons for their remarkable resilience. In this sense, tribes can easily be seen as a modern phenomenon rather than the more common view – a relic of the past, a burden or chain on the back of modern societies, which slows down their march toward progress and prosperity, perhaps even democracy.

Tribes have not only survived modernism and statehood, but in some cases have also enjoyed a revival. In the second half of the 20th century, ruling elites realized the value of tribes for safeguarding their own regimes and learned to manipulate and exploit tribal identities and forms of politics. Consequently, tribes and tribalism today are inherently modern phenomena, shaped by their interplay with the state and their instrumentalization by many regimes.

Although some scholars have explored the contemporary role of tribes, the study of modern tribalism has overall not gained much attention in Middle Eastern studies, whose scholars have remained skeptical towards the importance and relevance of this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Indeed old notions about tribes and their role in the modern state that have been long challenged have persisted. The questions that the participants of this roundtable were asked to address were not only meant to initiate discussion, but to also address that persistent and genuine puzzlement among our colleagues. The following overview will seek to contribute to the demystification of tribes.

### Definitions and Historical Overview

There is no scholarly agreement on how to define a tribe. Anthropologist Richard Tapper suggests that a tribe is a “localised group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organisation, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins).”<sup>2</sup> A simpler definition would be that a tribe is a local group of people distinguished from other groups by notions of shared descent, whether real or imagined. Also very useful is Dale Eickelman's suggestion to consider

<sup>1</sup>For positive examples of how tribes should be studied, see Uzi Rabi, ed., *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2016). This most recent corroborative effort draws on Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, eds., *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991). Also see the special issue of the *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1–2 (2015), “The Arab East and the Bedouin Component in Modern History: Emerging Perspectives on the Arid Lands as a Social Space.”

<sup>2</sup>Richard Tapper, ed., *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 9.

four different but interconnected notions of tribe: 1) the members' self-view; 2) an administrative unit of the state; 3) a practical but implicit conduct that informs and governs everyday life; and 4) the definition suggested by the anthropologist who works among tribespeople.<sup>3</sup>

Tribes should not be mistaken as uniquely nomads or bedouins. Today, only a tiny fraction of Middle Easterners lead a nomadic life, living in tents in the desert and raising camels and sheep. Most of those who still do simply cater to foreign or domestic tourists who wish to enjoy the desert experience. But tribes exist in the village, town, and even the big city. And tribes exist nearly everywhere in the Middle East.

For hundreds of years, the tribe served as an alternative to a state or strong central control, especially in regions where state control was nonexistent. The tribe was the relevant organization for nearly everything in its members' lives: security, livelihood, forging of political alliances, seasonal migration, and marriage arrangements. In the absence of army, police, courts of law, and prisons, the tribe provided the legal system—an elaborated protocol of conflict resolution (*'urf, faṣl*).

This state of affairs began to change at the end of the 19th century, when significant reforms in the Ottoman Empire led to the consolidation of direct Ottoman rule over the peripheries of the Arab provinces. Tribal shaykhs were incorporated into the Ottoman state structure, enjoying jobs, honorary titles, monetary subsidies, education for their sons, and direct channels to their governors. Many of them became landowners, and some nomadic shaykhs encouraged or even put pressure on their fellow tribesmen to start cultivating the land, turning them into peasants. Inevitably, these developments came at the expense of tribal autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

A new stage in the development of tribes followed World War I, with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and creation of a new state system. Everywhere tribes lost many of the functions they had performed before. Most notably, the tribe lost its autonomy and its military role, because every state established its own national army and police. Gradually, the government began to provide security and justice, new sources of livelihood such as employment and economic assistance or welfare, as well as health and education services.

The nomadic tribes, in particular, were weakened. This was partly the result of the new borders that cut across grazing areas and migration routes. Although movement across borders continued, nomads were taxed in each country they roamed. The new local governments pacified their territories and abolished the collection of protection money (*khawa*), which was an important source of livelihood for the strong nomadic tribes. More significantly still, between the two world wars the pastoral economy lost its viability, with camels and horses giving way to the train, car, and airplane.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their weakening, tribes played an important role in the creation of the new states. In many cases, they became the partners of state founders, whether local or foreign, and played an active part in the process of state formation. Their shaykhs were recognized by the governments and often played an important role as go-between for their communities and the state. This was true in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Jordan.

After World War II, the Westernized, urban, and educated national elites saw tribes as a legacy of the hated colonial era, because illiterate tribesmen were perceived as lacking nationalist sentiment. Military and revolutionary regimes saw their affluent landowning shaykhs as elements who exploited the nation's resources and had been willing collaborators of the colonizers. Moreover, tribal loyalties were seen as divisive and therefore an obstacle to progress and national unity. Tellingly, the first communiqué of the new

<sup>3</sup>Dale Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 123–28.

<sup>4</sup>Norman Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800–1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Resat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009); Yoav Alon, "Sheikh and Pasha: Ottoman Government in the Syrian Desert and the Creation of Modern Tribal Leadership," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59, no. 3 (2016): 442–72.

<sup>5</sup>Philip S. Khoury, "The Tribal Shaykh, French Tribal Policy, and the Nationalist Movement in Syria between Two World Wars," *Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 2 (1982): 180–93; Yoav Alon, "The Tribal System in the Face of the State-Formation Process: Mandatory Transjordan, 1921–46," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 2 (2005): 213–40; Philippe Pétriat, "The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 273–90.

Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 1968 and early official publications denounced tribes as backward, divisive, reactionary, and sediments of colonialism.<sup>6</sup>

This anti-tribal outlook was not only adopted by “progressive” regimes but also was commonplace in Western scholarly discourse. Historians, sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists assumed that tribes were bound to disappear in the presence of the powerful forces of modernity, capitalism, and the nation–state. Conventional wisdom had it that the newly decolonized state would create a new form of national identity, which would be inclusive of all its citizens. People would forget where they came from and just be citizens of the modern state. This was the heyday of the now-much-debunked modernization theory, the predominant paradigm in the social sciences.

### Tribalism Today

These predictions proved to be wrong. Even if tribes were weakened and lost some of their influence, and certainly their autonomy from the state, they did not disappear. Tribal values and social organization continued to be the main features of local society and culture. They proved to be compatible with modernity and carved out a place for themselves within the modern state. In fact, some ruling elites learned to manipulate and exploit tribal identities and forms of politics for their own survival. These policies of instrumentalization further entrenched the role of tribes in the modern state.

Iraq provides an excellent example of a revolutionary, nationalist, and “progressive” regime that publicly denounced tribalism but learned to exploit it effectively. As Amatzia Baram demonstrated, Saddam Hussein developed a sophisticated and comprehensive tribal policy. Being a tribesman himself and understanding that blood loyalty was stronger than party comradeship, he built the regime in circles of support, surrounding himself first with his immediate family, then his lineage, tribe, tribal confederation, and finally the larger Sunni community. He went on to revive old tribal identities that by then no longer existed in a meaningful way. For instance, from 1980 on, applicants for membership in the Ba'ath party were required to note the name of their (and their wives') tribe on the application form. To improve the government's hold on the countryside, Saddam Hussein appointed shaykhs and provided them with money and weapons in order to form local militias; they would later stage the revolt against the American military in 2003. After the 1991 War, this tribal policy became more pronounced. Hussein invited shaykhs to his palace, visited their areas, and published their appointments. He showed respect for their customs and, when appearing in public, even replaced his military gear with a long shaykhly robe (*thawb*) and the traditional Arabian headdress (*kūfiyya*, or *kaffiyeh*, and *'aqal*). In one instance, he surprised the astonished members of his party and defined the Ba'ath party as a tribe. This policy proved successful and allowed Saddam Hussein to rule Iraq firmly, surviving until the American invasion.<sup>7</sup>

With the collapse of the Iraqi state apparatus, first and foremost the army that was dismantled by the Americans, the tribe returned to fulfill its prime role before the establishment of the modern state – providing security to its members. All over Iraq, including in the big cities, tribesmen formed armed guards. Several years later, during the Arab Spring and its aftermath, this development also occurred in other collapsing states: Syria, Libya, Yemen, and the Egyptian Sinai. Similarly, many Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip turned back to their tribe for support during the first and second intifadas, with the collapse of the Israeli civil administration and the Palestinian Authority, respectively.

Although at first the American civil and military administrations in Iraq were oblivious to the role of tribes, they soon turned to rely on tribal support. The military teamed up with shaykhs and tribes who formed what became known as Awakening Councils (*Majālis al-Ṣaḥwa*) or forces, financed, armed, and trained them, and fought with them against al-Qaeda.<sup>8</sup> This strategy helped the US bring an end to the civil war and defeat al-Qaeda in 2007–9, allowing a somewhat honorable retreat in 2010–11.

<sup>6</sup>Amatzia Baram, “Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies, 1991–6,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 1 (1997): 1.

<sup>7</sup>Baram, “Neo-Tribalism in Iraq,” 1–31; Falah Jabar, “Sheikhs and Ideologues: Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Tribes under Patrimonial Totalitarianism in Iraq, 1968–1998,” in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, ed. Falah Jabar and Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi, 2003), 69–109.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Eisenstadt, “Iraq: Tribal Engagement Lessons Learned,” *Military Review* (2007): 20–29.

Ever since, tribes have constituted important political and military actors in Iraq. Sunni tribespeople joined ISIS after being left on their own to cope with the Shi'i-dominated government in Bagdad. Others fought ISIS. Today, a Department of Tribal Affairs within the Ministry of the Interior tries to enlist the support of shaykhs and tribes for government attempts to bring peace and security and to fight what remains of ISIS. The government also tries to control the spread of illegal weapons in tribal areas, so far with limited success.<sup>9</sup> Tribes remain important power brokers in today's Iraq.

Likewise in Syria, commonly characterized as ruled by the 'Alawis, a closer look reveals the role of the Assad family's Kalbiyya tribe, one of four 'Alawi tribes. Like Saddam Hussein, Hafiz al-Assad valued blood loyalties and surrounded himself with his brothers, sons, cousins, and the tribe, as well as members of his wife's extended family from another 'Alawi tribe. His son Bashar inherited this strategy. Beyond the ruling elite, Sunni tribal militias took part in fighting with or against the regime. These forces still enjoy significant power in the peripheral areas outside the Syrian government's hold and have been wooed by many – the Syrian, Turkish, and Saudi governments, the Syrian opposition and Islamic organizations, the Kurds, and Western forces.<sup>10</sup>

In Jordan, as in the Gulf states and Yemen, tribes and tribal values have always enjoyed a special status.<sup>11</sup> The entire political system is built on a balance of power between the different tribes, managed by the king, who acts as a key power broker. Ministerial and other senior positions in the government constantly rotate between representatives of the different tribes and elite families. Against the background of a weak party system and a parliament without much say in government politics, the tribes and their leaders lobby to promote their members' interests, vying for resources from the state. Prominent members of the tribe, and especially those holding office, are expected to handle all sorts of bureaucratic matters, including securing jobs or promotions and places or scholarships at a university. This system of patronage is commonly known as *wasta*. Voting for parliament follows tribal patterns, which the electoral system actively encourages. On the eve of every election, the tribes hold primaries in an attempt to agree on a single candidate, thus raising the chances of representation. Those who fail to do so run the risk of having several candidates competing for the tribal constituency and splitting the vote among them (tribal voting also exists in parliamentary elections in Kuwait and municipal elections among the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel).<sup>12</sup> The king spends some of his time hosting or visiting tribal figures to brief them on the challenges facing the country and listening to their complaints and requests. In those meetings and on other occasions, the king, much like his father before him, praises the tribes' contributions to the state and stresses the fact that he is a tribesman himself – hailing from the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad.

The tribe also is a meaningful social organization and offers a sense of community and solidarity. Most tribes keep a *diwān*, a gathering place for all male members of the tribe, where celebrations like weddings and graduation parties take place, as well as condolence sittings. In some tribes, each member pays a fee for the maintenance of the *diwān*; in others well-off people cover the costs. The *diwān* is a place at which to spend time with close relatives or to gather for consultation before issuing a public statement on behalf of the tribe. Some tribes also have a fund to support members in need. Two anecdotes further illustrate the way tribes operate. In 2012, Jordan appointed a new ambassador to Israel. Prominent members of the appointee's tribe called on him to not accept the position, to serve in what they saw as an

<sup>9</sup>Facebook page of the Department of Tribal Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, Iraq, accessed 15 June 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/clans22>; "Illegal Weapons in Iraq," video embedded in "What the US Troops Withdrawal Means for Iraq," al-Jazeera, 22 November 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/22/what-the-us-troop-withdrawal-means-for-iraq>.

<sup>10</sup>Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), 9; Haian Dukhan, *State and Tribes in Syria: Informal Alliances and Conflict Patterns* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>11</sup>The following is based on Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Andrew Shryock and Sally Howell, "Ever a Guest in our House": The Emir Abdullah, Shaykh Majid al-'Adwan and the Practice of Jordanian House Politics, as Remembered by Umm Sultan, the Widow of Majid," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 2 (2001): 247–69; and Yoav Alon, "From Abdullah (I) to Abdullah (II): The Monarchy, the Tribes and the Shaykhly Families in Jordan, 1920–2012," in Rabi, *Tribes and States*, 11–35. On the Gulf see, for example, Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995), ch. 7, and on Yemen, Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>12</sup>Kamal Eldin Osman Salih, "Kuwait Primary (Tribal) Elections 1975–2008: An Evaluative Study," *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (2011): 141–67.

enemy state. The ambassador withstood the pressure but on the day that he presented his credentials to the Israeli president, people in the villages of his tribe raised black flags.<sup>13</sup> A few weeks before the outbreak of the second intifada in the Palestinian territories in September 2000, a Jordanian student began his PhD studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The men of his tribe convened at the *diwān* in their village and after extensive deliberation lent their approval for him to continue his studies.

Tribalism in Jordan and elsewhere does not come down to politics and material interests. It is a cultural phenomenon and a central form of identity. Jordanians feel pride in their tribe, celebrating their historical heritage, and try to preserve their traditions (*al-`ādāt wa-l-taqālid*) as much as possible. Prominent among these is the tribal customary law. Although the government abolished the colonial-based tribal courts law in 1976, tribal practices of conflict resolution and customary law have continued to operate, regulating social relations and informing legal procedures side by side with the rulings of the civil courts. State officials not only allow but actively encourage this trend, and sometimes act as mediators in conflicts resolved by tribal custom. Thus, tribal customary law remains an integral part of the Jordanian legal system to this day.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Tribes have shown impressive resilience in the Middle East in the face of central governments gradually increasing their capability and determination to regulate society. Confronted with the intrusive, impersonal, abstract state structures and new institutions, the often alienated citizen needs mediating services as well as a sense of familiarity. These needs can be satisfied within the tribal community. In this way, tribes continue to play a crucial role in cushioning and smoothing out processes of rapid modernization. By doing so, they help to maintain a sense of close and intimate community (*Gemeinschaft*) – frequently lost in modernized societies (*Gesellschaft*) – and they prevent, or at least postpone, social unrest. These new functions have been beneficial for governments and have therefore been encouraged by them. In fact, many regimes seek to manipulate tribal identities and practices, thus ensuring the continuous relevance of tribes. Consequently, tribes, although very different from the social organization they were only several decades ago, have proved their importance and relevance for large numbers of people in today's Middle East. With the collapse of several states in the last few years, which left a vacuum that societies find hard to cope with, tribes have also returned to playing their basic historical role – the physical protection of their members.

I conclude with a personal anecdote. About fifteen years ago, a Palestinian-Israeli friend told me that he was thinking of getting married. He explained that his family (a clan or tribe with thousands of members) never marries into a certain family living just across the road due to an old feud, the causes of which no one remembers. He added that he would respect this social norm. Ultimately, he married a girl from another region, outside his tribal system. There can be no doubt that my friend is a “modern man.” He is a successful lawyer who studied in Italy, a member of the communist party who drives a Mercedes and always wears a suit and tie. His acceptance of the tribal norm is another clear indication that modernity did not come at the expense of primordial solidarities such as tribalism, religion, ethnicity, and regional identity. Communities and individuals do not forget their old identities and forms of organization. These forms of identity might conflict with modern national identities and citizenship, but they can also coexist with and even complement them. Instead of ignoring these solidarities, we need to come to terms with them. This seems to be one of the main challenges facing societies in the Middle East – as well as the scholars who study them.

<sup>13</sup>“Jordanian Tribe Slams New Israel Envoy,” Ynet, 10 January 2012, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4287315,00.html> (last accessed 15 June 2021).

<sup>14</sup>Ahmed Saleh Suleiman Owidi, “Bedouin Justice in Jordan: The Customary Legal System of the Tribes and its Integration into the Framework of State Policy from 1921 onwards” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1982); Muhammad Abu Hassan, *Al-Qada' al-`Asha'iri fi al-Urdunn* (Amman, n.d); Richard T. Antoun, “Civil Society, Tribal Process, and Change in Jordan: An Anthropological View,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 4 (2000): 441–63; Jessica Watkins, “Seeking Justice: Tribal Dispute Resolution and Societal Transformation in Jordan,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (2014): 31–49.