

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

## Tribes and Tribalism in the Modern Middle East: Introduction

Peter Wien\*

Department of History, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

\*Corresponding author. Email: [pwien@umd.edu](mailto:pwien@umd.edu)

This roundtable is the product of a conference on tribalism in the Modern Middle East held at the University of Maryland in College Park in early May 2019. In two days of scholarly exchange, the participants addressed questions on the reality of tribal life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and its impact on politics and society. Most of the specialists who participated in the conference are also contributors in this forum. To keep the discussion concise, the case studies focus on the Arab East – Syria, Jordan, and Iraq – as well as Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Building on the findings and reflections shared in College Park, the contributors responded to the following prompt as a point of departure for their essays:

For cultural, intellectual, political, and arguably even most social historians, tribes remain an enigma. As an ideal-type, the tribe seems to be all that the modern state is not: it defies positive law, rational administrative structures, equal citizenship based on individual rights and duties, and, still, in some cases, sovereignty based on fixed territorial boundaries. As a non-state, the tribe seems to be, on the other hand, the most enduring socio-political structure of human history. It is a kind of substrate, or a hetero-stratum of social organization at least in Middle Eastern societies. Its position as such seems even more pronounced in today's period of state disintegration and instability. *What is the place of tribes in modern society, how do they relate to the modern state? How can what is seemingly an atavism of pre-modern times still have currency in today's world?*

The responses share the perception that tribes are not the antithesis of the modern state or of progress in the region. Researchers and politicians alike should take them into account in their analyses of modernization processes. They offer meaningful identities and forms of organization across the region and enjoy influence and power.

A common theme of the essays is the protecting role of Middle Eastern tribes in the absence of state services and stability. Nadav Samin focuses on tribal genealogy as a modern practice with deep implications for a person's social standing in today's Saudi Arabia. Yoav Alon states that, rather than a mere orientalist invention, tribal sociability is a real-life regulator in socio-political conflict zones such as in Iraq or Syria as well as in comparatively peaceful countries like Jordan or the Gulf states. Nora Barakat confirms that tribes have been social groupings with a great deal of relevance and staying power for a long time. Her analysis presents them as a governmental category of the late Ottoman state. Diane King elaborates on questions of genealogy and its importance in individual identity construction in Iraqi Kurdistan. In Yemen, where tribes are defined rather on the basis of territorial belonging than through ancestry, tribal power has been synonymous with state power, in history and even more since the foundation of the modern republic(s) in the 1960s, as Najwa Adra and Charles Schmitz argue. Haian Dukhan describes the Syrian civil war as a conflict between the Assadist state and the country's tribes, as well as between sections of tribes, depending on varying levels of cooptation by the government. Melisande Genat emphasizes the resilience of tribal structures under colonial, post-colonial and contemporary regimes, pointing to concrete manifestations of interactions between tribe and state in modern Iraqi legal practice. To conclude, Andrew Shryock looks back on years of research and fieldwork and his encounters with tribes as communities of social practice.

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press

**Acknowledgments.** The participants and the guest editor would like to thank Joel Gordon and the IJMES staff for accepting this roundtable for publication and helping to prepare it. The conference took place with the support of the University of Maryland, the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS), The Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TARII), and the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC). A special thanks goes to Caroline Angle for her invaluable help in organizing the conference and reconvening the group for the present endeavor.