Yemen: Tribes, the State, and the Awakening

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It is difficult at any time to make any sensible evaluation of the importance of tribalism and the role of tribes within the Yemeni state. But the turmoil of 2011 and 2012 has meant that this is a particularly challenging moment to attempt such an exercise. Yemen's government has not been a tribal regime. Yet tribalism pervades Yemeni society as it influences and limits Yemeni politics. The ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih regime, over its third of a century, depended for its core support essentially on just two minor tribes, although it expected to rely on the tribally dominated military and security forces in general. But tribesmen in these institutions are likely to be motivated by career considerations as much or more than tribal identity. Some *shaykh*s also serve as officers but their control over their own tribes is often suspect.

The post-Salih era inevitably will reduce regime reliance on tribes for support even as it must grapple with a lack of control over them. Many tribes oppose the government in general on grounds of autonomy and self-interest. "The relationship between the tribes and the state is … often contradictory with each at times increasing and at times diminishing the other's power, but both reinforcing traits in the other that provide considerable obstacles to state building."[1] The Republic of Yemen Government can expect to face tribal resistance to its authority if it moves aggressively or inappropriately in either north and south. But it should be stressed that tribal attitudes do not differ fundamentally from the attitudes of other Yemenis and that tribes often seek to operate within Yemeni politics as other constituencies and political parties do. Tribalism is a strong force but not a monolithic one with a universal point of view.

There are two antithetical – yet simultaneously complementary – prisms that provide insight in examining the relationship of tribes with the state. The first is the role of tribes in the state, i.e. how they cooperate with the state, contribute to the state's authority, and provide support if not legitimacy for the regime. The other is the diametric counterbalance between the two: the tribes vs. the state. This paper, after briefly introducing the phenomenon of tribalism in Yemen, focuses on each of these prisms in turn before drawing some very tentative conclusions regarding what tribalism may mean in the post-Salih era. But the first task is to provide a brief summary of the momentous changes sweeping Yemen in 2011-2012.

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1. Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 90.

Yemen's Awakening

Conclusions about the significance of the role played by tribes in Yemeni politics has become far murkier as a result of the events of 2011-2012. The emergence of popular protests, first in Sanaa and then spreading across the country, in January-February 2011 was inspired by popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. These protests quickly exposed the fragility of the Yemeni political system and over the next year inexorably created newly emergent foci of opposition to the *status quo* and strengthened the position of existing opposition forces even as they weakened the social, economic, and political fabric of the state.

Prior to 2011, President ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih faced a myriad of challenges to his three decades of rule. In part, these derived from the historical difficulty of governing a topographically demanding territory populated by firmly independent-minded inhabitants, particularly in the majority of the country that still owed primary allegiance to tribes. Adding to this daunting environment was the constant pursuit of power from within the military-dominated regime and those on its fringes, including legally recognized opposition parties. Not surprisingly, Salih was given to describing his situation as "dancing on the head of snakes."

At the same time, however, the president faced three distinct, organized, threats to his political survival – and that of the Yemeni state as it existed. In large part, these threats were of his own making. Chronologically, the first was his ambivalent attitude toward the so-called Afghan Arabs – those Yemenis who had made their way to Afghanistan to fight with the mujahidin against the Soviet invaders. Many were consequently radicalized and devoted their efforts to creating an Islamic state in Yemen upon their return. Salih seems to have regarded them as allies against other opposition he faced, even though their eventual goal was his replacement. But his strategy was double-faceted. While accepting Islamist groups as tacit allies, he also made sure he was seen taking action against them when it meant support from the United States and Western countries for his counter-terrorism efforts.

The second threat comes from al-Shabab al-Mu'minun (Believing Youth), commonly known as al-Huthis after their founder.[2] The Huthis originally seemed to be a revivalist movement for the restoration of the position of the Zaydi subsect of Shiʿism and its role in the state – provoked in part by the success of Salafi proselytization in the northern Saʿdah province of Yemen. In 2004, the army moved against the Huthis in their stronghold of the western mountains of the province but the offensive was both ineffective and monumentally destructive of villages and human life. The Huthis managed to hold their own and the following years saw stalemate, followed by renewed fighting and renewed cease-fires. The Yemeni army was unable to achieve any notable success, despite its extensive use of air power and artillery. The subsequent narrative is confused but it seems that in late 2009, Yemeni armed forces secured Saudi permission to move through Saudi territory to strike

2. The most comprehensive treatment of the Huthi rebellion is in Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 2010; prepared for the Defense Intelligence Agency).

at the Huthis from the rear. This provoked Huthi attacks on Saudi armed forces and Saudi forces were able to regain control of Saudi territory by the application of superior firepower if not efficiency.

Active fighting was suspended with the signing of a Qatari-brokered cease-fire in February 2010. Although punctuated by incidents, the uneasy cease-fire has continued to hold, probably to the Huthis' advantage as they have increased their funding, arsenal, and support. It is debatable whether the Huthis were cultish from the beginning or they have adopted their anti-government, anti-American, and anti-Jewish stances over the years of conflict. Much has been made of Iranian support for the Huthis, particularly by the government, in a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is little evidence for substantial Iranian support, however, and even less for the contention that the Huthis have converted from Zaydi Shi‹ism to the Ja‹fari strain practiced in Iran.

The third major threat to the Salih regime was the intensification of disaffection in the half of Yemen that was independent South Yemen prior to 1990. The dissatisfaction with what turned out to be northern domination of the south provoked the civil war of 1994 in which the south unsuccessfully sought to secede. Although the Salih regime was able to regain administrative control over the south, popular resentment festered. By 2007, opposition was loosely organized under the banner of the Southern Movement (Harak) and demonstrations began to occur with some frequency, long before those of 2011 elsewhere in Yemen. Goals of southern dissidents varied between a desire for autonomy and agitation for outright independence. No coherent leadership had emerged by mid-2012.[3]

Yemen's political situation was always precarious. But since February 2011, the country has slid even further towards anarchy. The sources of opposition were magnified and further fragmented with the emergence of new actors. Prominent among them were the demonstrators themselves, the "*shabab*" (youth), who camped out at Taghyir (Change) Square in Sanaa and Hurriyah (Freedom) Square in Ta‹iz, as well as in other cities around the country. After months of sustained opposition, a loose and informal leadership of these predominantly young protesters emerged. The most prominent among them was Tawakkil Karman, who eventually received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her role. Taking their cue from the Egyptian revolution that toppled President Husni Mubarak, the populist demonstrators demanded the ouster of President ‹Ali ‹Abdullah Salih and the institution of a democratic government, untainted by the existing prominent political figures and opposition parties.

Organized legal opposition had been led for years by al-Islah, a mixture of Islamists and tribal forces, and a coalition of ideological parties gathered together as the Joint Meeting Parties. The Yemeni Socialist Party, one component of the Joint Meeting Parties, and al-Islah had each served as partners in the government with Salih's General People's Congress, but both had been forced out as Salih sensed his strength without them. As the demonstrations in 2011 took hold, the Joint Meeting Parties began to change its demands to include the replacement of President Salih and the General People's Congress with its own leadership. While this was a credible approach and, indeed,

3. On the Southern Movement, see Stephen Day, "The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement" (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010), Carnegie Papers, "Yemen on the Brink," Middle East Program, No. 108.

proved effective when it provided the interim prime minister after Salih's resignation, neither al-Islah nor the Joint Meeting Parties were supported by the populist movement, which tarred them as being part of the same old corrupt system.

The struggle for power grew more complicated in March 2011 when Major General ʿAli Muhsin Salih al-Ahmar, a close relative of the president and commander of the 1st Armored Division, defected from the regime. As commander of the northwest military district, ʿAli Muhsin had headed the government offensive against the Huthis and there has been speculation that he carried out the initial attacks because of his Salafi orientation. It was also widely believed that he had hoped to succeed Salih as president and had become increasingly disillusioned as ʿAli ʿAbdullah seemed to be maneuvering his son Ahmad to succeed him. Thus, it perhaps was not surprising that ʿAli Muhsin declared his opposition to the president. Nor should it be surprising when he announced that he would provide protection for the demonstrators in al-Taghyir Square against government forces, as this would seem intended to boost his standing amongst the populist forces in addition to his formidable military might in his quest for the presidency.

The free-for-all escalated farther when Shaykh Hamid b. ʿAbdullah b. Husayn al-Ahmar joined his brothers, including Sadiq, the head of the Hashid tribal confederation, in demanding that President Salih step down. While ʿAli Muhsin's move into opposition threatened the president's military support, the actions by the Ahmar brothers threatened the president's tribal base. The presidential ambitions of Hamid al-Ahmar had been common knowledge for some time and his influence within the Joint Meeting Parties was seen as one means to that end. His alliance, at least tacitly, with ʿAli Muhsin seemed to be part of a collective effort to oust their common rival from the presidential palace. Salih and some of his top officials were wounded by an explosion in the palace on 3 June 2011, and the regime was quick to blame Hamid al-Ahmar and ʿAli Muhsin for the attack.

At the same time, southern dissidence increased, emboldened by events in other Arab countries and the example of protesters in Sanaa and Taʿiz. But the situation was confused by a simultaneous increase in activity by Islamist fundamentalists under the banner of Ansar al-Shariʿa, a movement allied to, if not actually controlled by, al-Qaʿidah in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The Ansar occupied various southern towns, exercised considerable power in Aden, and even briefly occupied Radaʿ, a significant town between Sanaa and Taʿiz. Salih's opponents charged that he had pulled security forces back, deliberately allowing Ansar al-Shariʿa to expand its base of operations in order to demonstrate that continued unrest led to chaos that only he could control.

While a new "national unity" government was created in December 2011, with Joint Meeting Parties politician Muhammad Salim Basindawah as prime minister, Salih continued to prevaricate about resigning, thus infuriating his opposition in Yemen, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the West. Presumably increasingly strong external pressure was the deciding factor in forcing him to resign in February 2012. His weak vice-president, ʿAbd Rabbuʿ Mansur Hadi, was overwhelming elected in a single-candidate poll to serve as interim president for two years. Nevertheless, Salih continued to reside in Yemen and retained leadership of the General People's Congress. Many of his close relatives – including sons, nephews, and cousins – remained in their positions in the military, adding an additional layer of complication to Yemen's descent into chaos.

The Tribal Nature of Yemen

Yemen, perhaps more than any other state in the Arab world, is fundamentally a tribal society and nation.[4] To a very large degree, social standing in Yemen is defined by tribal membership. The tribesman is the norm of society. Other Yemenis either hold a roughly equal status to the tribesman, for example, the *sayyid*s (or *sadat*), the *qadi* families and the urban population, or they are inferior, such as the *muzayyin* and the *akhdam*.[5] The tribes in Yemen hold far greater importance *vis-à-vis* the state than elsewhere and continue to challenge the state on various levels. At the same time, a broad swath of central Yemen below the Zaydi-Shafi‹i divide – including the highlands north and south of Ta‹iz and in the Tihamah coastal plain – consists of a more peasantized society where tribal ties and reliance is muted. Nevertheless, the "detribalized" peasantry still possess some tribal identity.

The emphasis on tribes in Yemen is socially and politically important because it forms the fundamental reference point for a great majority of Yemenis. Tribalism, *qabaliyah*, not only assures membership in a collective unit but defines the tribesman in relation to the world and provides protection and assistance whenever necessary. The family, the clan, the tribe, the confederation all comprise stages in the definition of the individual and the delineation of the political landscape. While tribes putatively consist of common descent groups, the genealogy is far less important than the existence and workings of the interlaced web. This not only defines membership and status, but also territory since much of the country is finely detailed into a complex tribal geography. In tribal terms, their territory has always been the same. Therefore, tribal identity is also territorial identity.[6]

The tribesman enjoys rights and benefits from tribal membership but also bears responsibilities, among them answering "summons" when the position or territory of the tribe is threatened. The

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4. The wide-ranging debate about the nature and definition of tribes lies outside the scope of this chapter. The emphasis here is on political interactions of a tribal nature rather than ethnography. Tribes exist in Yemen because Yemenis understand them to do and the concept of *qabaliyah* or tribalism is recognized and referred to throughout Yemeni society. For a dissenting view of Yemen as a quintessentially tribal country, see the interview with Yemeni analyst ‹Abd al-Ghani al-Iryani on AlJazeera.net, 17 March 2011. Iryani states that "I define tribal as being those whose primary identification is tribal, i.e. if the shaikh calls them to war, they come to his aid. And that applies to about 20% of the population. The other 80% are either urban or peasants, and they are non-tribal. So the over-exaggeration of the tribal nature of Yemen is misplaced."

5. *Sayyid*s are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad who provided the *imam*s of North Yemen and their principal lieutenants. *Qadi* means judge but in Yemen the social status of *qadi* is semi-hereditary. The *muzayyin* are a subclass in rural Yemen relegated to certain "unclean" occupations while the *akhdam* are a separate lower class who traditionally have swept the streets and been responsible for similar activities.

6. Paul Dresch, "The Tribes of Hashid wa-Bakil as Historical and Geographical Entities," in Alan Jones, ed., *Arabicus Felix: Luminosus Britannicus; Essays in Honour of A.F.L. Beeston on his Eightieth Birthday* (Oxford: Ithaca Press for Oxford University, Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, 1991), p. 11. It should be noted also that the role and structure of tribes, as well as their relations with state authority, does not remain the same throughout Yemen; there are significant regional variations. An illustration of this point in the far north of the country is made in Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

fluidity of tribalism should also be kept in mind. While territorial lines have been fixed for centuries, the alliances between tribes and between components of tribes may change with great rapidity. Much depends on the situation, the proximity of a particular tribe to the crisis situation, and on the leadership of the tribal unit. Tribal units who respond in one way to a particular situation may well respond in a different or even diametrically opposite way in a subsequent similar one. As Paul Dresch notes, "There is no convention of solidarity, however, no permanent coercive structure, and no standing authority coincident with a section or tribe; so the relation is problematic between the sets of men defined by shared 'ancestors' and the groups of men who actually form on a given occasion."[7]

It is tempting to regard *shaykh*s of tribes as wielders of considerable power. This may be true in some cases, due to either the strength of personality of the individual *shaykh* or the dominant position of the shaykhly family, or both. Yet it is far more common that *shaykh*s are less potentates or even chairmen than they are simply notable figures who have been entrusted with certain authorities on specific occasions and in limited ways.

The tribe in Yemen retains much of its essential social and cultural role. The tribe is a corporate unit. In the absence of strong central authority, an adequate national economy, and countrywide socialization of Yemenis as citizenry, tribal identification and allegiance remains paramount for tribal members. The tribe provides protection for its members and requires the assistance of its members for the tribe's protection. The tribe, especially through its *shaykh*, may provide something of a welfare system for members in need. Tribes have traditionally organized their own affairs, both individually and collectively, with minimal interference from the state. While the *shari'a* and secular authority played varying roles in shaping behavior, the combination of *qabaliyah* (tribalism, i.e. a code of ethical behavior) and *'urf* (common or tribal law) "provided both ethical codes and mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes."[8] Many Yemenis continue to prefer tribal justice and shaykhly mediation to the inefficient and often corrupt formal judicial system.

The tribe also serves as an economic unit. It has been estimated that about three-quarters of Yemenis were originally tribal and engaged in cereal- and livestock-based agriculture. Households were not self-sufficient but banded together in tribal communities to organize and share common use of water supplies and irrigation, harvesting requirements, and grazing lands, as well as disaster relief

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7. Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 88. Another explanation observes that "'tribes' are not fixed, static groups with essences inhering in them. The term, moreover, denotes a conceptual category, in some ways not unlike religious denomination, subject to changing definition and used in different contexts for a variety of political purposes. This is not to argue that tribes and religious denominations operate in an identical manner, and the differences are also instructive." Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 173-174.

8. Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Cambridge Middle East Studies, No. 9), p. 64.

and providing labor for local "public works." Even where the population has been "detribalized" into peasantry, it acts collectively to meet emergencies and some maintain common property.[9]

In more recent times, individual tribes created more extensive common self-help schemes, the *ta'awun* or cooperative (more frequently called a local development association). Increased expectations, low government capability to provide assistance, and the remittances sent or brought back by tribesmen who had gone to work in Saudi Arabia and farther afield, spurred the widespread adoption of local development associations throughout northern Yemen in the 1970s. Typically these cooperatives built schools, roads, drinking-water systems, and other locally required improvements. Government assistance was minimal, consisting for example of arranging for a foreign development agency to loan a bulldozer for a road mainly built by local labor.

Many of these economic activities were supervised by the tribal *shaykh*, who served as well as the focal point of interaction with other tribes and *vis-à-vis* the government. For the most part, *shaykh*s emerge from established shaykhly families although this is not a requirement. Within the family, there is no hard and fast rule of succession, which largely depends on personal qualities. But the position of *shaykh* generally gives little or no authority over tribesmen. It often denotes less a rank than a function: the *shaykh* is the one who carries out the wishes of the tribe, who solves internal disputes, and who speaks for the tribe in dealings with other tribes or the outside world.[10]

There are some exceptions, which are generally the paramount *shaykh*s (*shaykh al-mashayikh*) who often wield great influence within their tribe and their confederation and whose power is enhanced by their wealth and ownership of land in areas outside tribal territory. Their position and status has been augmented by their incorporation into the state system and resultant opportunities to acquire more wealth and influence. Prominent examples include the Bayt al-Ahmar of Hashid, Bayt Abu Ra's of Dhu Muhammad, and Bayt al-Shayif of Dhu Husayn. Nevertheless,

> "The few great shaykhs are exceptional. The influence of such men can rise and fall freely without changes in the tribes' formal structure and without major changes in group alignments, while their own position is made more difficult by the fact that in all but the smallest unit there are numerous shaykhs, not arranged in a hierarchy or even in order of precedence. Indeed, the number of shaykhly families is indeterminately large."[11]

Traditionally there were four main and permanent tribal confederations in the northern half of Yemen. The most important of these are the Hashid and the Bakil. A third, the Madhhaj, lost importance in the twentieth century (in part because elements were absorbed by the Bakil) and the fourth confederation, al-Zaraniq, has disintegrated. Technically, Hashid and Bakil are tribes, both deriving from the Hamdan, Yemen's preeminent tribe of the medieval period. Both occupy much of northern Yemen to the north and east of Sanaa and both are constituted by a large number of

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9. Ibid., p. 64.

10. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History*, pp. 89 and 102.

11. Ibid., p. 102.

subsidiary tribes. Their total population has been estimated at more than 500,000.[12] Members of the three confederations include the following subunits:

Ḥāshid	al-ʿUṣaymāt, ʿIdhar, Banī Ṣuraym, Khārif, Hamdān, Sanḥān, Bilād al-Rūs.
Bakīl	Khawlān Ṣaʿdah, Āl ʿAmmār, Āl Sālim, al-ʿAmālisah, Dhū Muḥammad, Dhū Ḥusayn, Banī Nawf (the last five form part of Dahm), Wa'ilah, Sufyān, Arḥab, Murhibah, Nihm, ʿIyāl Yazīd, ʿIyāl Surayḥ, Banī Ḥushaysh, Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl.
Madhḥaj	Murād, ʿAns, al-Ḥadā, Qayfah, but the category seems still to be re-forming.[13]

Part of the reason for the ascendancy of Hashid has been the long-time effective leadership provided by the Bayt al-Ahmar of the Humran section of al-ʿUsaymat tribe. Nasir al-Ahmar served as paramount shaykh in the early 20th century, his son Husayn succeeded him and remained head of the tribe/confederation until his death at the hands of Imam Ahmad in 1959. Husayn's son ʿAbdullah then took up the position, which he exploited as his power base to play a significant role on the national scene until his death at the end of 2007. An important figure in the republican cause during the 1960s civil war in North Yemen, ʿAbdullah subsequently served as speaker of the legislature and a founder of al-Islah Party, and it could be said that he was the only player to remain a force nationally from the early 1960s until 2007. It can also be assumed that one reason that Hashid – particularly the tribes of al-ʿUsaymat, Kharif, and Bani Suraym – remained such a cohesive unit was the steady leadership of Shaykh ʿAbdullah.

The other confederation, Bakil, has not enjoyed the same cohesion and its shaykhs have paled in comparison with the Bayt al-Ahmar. It was noted in the 1980s that the paramount shaykh of the Bakil at that time, Naji b. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Shayif (from the Dhu Husayn) was unable to command much influence over his own tribe, let alone allied ones, and consequently ʿAbdullah al-Ahmar possessed the ability to summon Bakili tribes to war.[14] Nevertheless, the Abu Luhum family of the Nihm tribe of Bakil has been prominent on the national scene since the 1962 revolution, as described below.

As in most other countries of the Middle East, the cohesion and influence of tribes has weakened in Yemen over the last few decades – although perhaps not to as great an extent as elsewhere, in part because of the weakness of the government. There are a number of reasons behind this. Amongst the northern tribes, the effect of decades of labor migration to Saudi Arabia has upset the traditional pecking order, as tribesmen come back with their savings and less inclination to follow established

12. Ibid., p. 24.

13. Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 215.

14. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History*, pp. 103-105. Dresch also notes as an example of the difference between the two confederations that "identity cards and army pay-books used to have a space to record the man's tribe (qabilah) and, while Bakilis would usually put Arhab or Nihm or whatever was apt, men from at least the three Hashid tribes mentioned would almost always put simply Hashid." *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

*shaykh*s. At the same time, many shaykhly families have taken up residence in the towns, loosening their ties to the tribes and thus their influence. This has made a potential opening for the government to interfere in what used to be regarded as tribal matters.

While the tribe serves as the "norm" of Yemeni society and the *shaykh*s animate and sometimes guide the tribes, note should also be made of the importance of families from two other sectors of Yemeni society. The *sayyid* families constitute the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and historically they played a key role in Yemeni politics, particularly in the north. The Zaydi *imam*s had to be of *sayyid* descent and they generally appointed members of other *sayyid* families as their lieutenants and provincial governors. More generally, *sayyid*s served as neutral arbiters between tribes and as religious scholars. However, the revolution of 1962 and the demise of the royalist cause during the ensuing civil war severely impacted the status and role of the *sayyid*s. In the south, the *sayyid* families saw their position imperilled by independence and many fled the country. Their subsequent role in Yemeni politics largely has been one of opposition to the Sanaa government.

Similarly, the *qadi* families have played significant historical roles in northern Yemen. Unlike the *sayyid*s who form a hereditary caste, anyone can become a *qadi* through personal merit and religious studies. More often, however, *qadi* status is passed down through particular families. Furthermore, the *qadi* families did not suffer the fate of many *sayyid*s after the revolution, in part because they had tended to oppose the Hamid al-Din *imam*s well before 1962. Perhaps the most prominent *qadi* family is that of al-Iryani. ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Iryani served as President of the Yemen Arab Republic from 1967 until 1974 and his cousin ʿAbd al-Karim was the longtime prime minister during much of President ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih's tenure. The widespread al-ʿAnsi family has also provided government officials and ministers, both during the time of the imams and in the Yemen Arab Republic and Republic of Yemen governments. Because they have been unable to protect their *qadi* status adequately, the family has made an arrangement with the Ahmad b. Kul faction of the Dhu Muhammad tribe, which has effectively made them tribesmen.[15] (Al-ʿAnsi should not be confused with al-Anisi, i.e. from the prominent tribe of al-Anis.)

Tribe *vs.* State in Yemen: Background

Tribes and states have co-existed uneasily in Yemen for innumerable centuries. Tribes played contentious roles *vis-à-vis* four states in Yemen over the past century, resisting the expansion of state control over their domain and, seemingly paradoxically, being instrumental in the overthrow or support of recent state systems.

The Hashid and Bakil tribes were known as the "wings of the imamate" in pre-1962 North Yemen. Without a standing army until the 1950s, *imam*s were forced to call upon tribal levies to defend the region, defeat rivals, and impose order. To ensure compliance of the tribes, the *imam*s kept sons of *shaykh*s hostage in Sanaa, where they received their education. When Imam Yahya was

15. Gerd-R. Puin, "The Yemeni Hijrah Concept of Tribal Protection," in Tarif Khalidi, ed., *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1984), p. 488.

assassinated in 1948, his son Ahmad was forced to travel throughout the northern countryside to rally the tribes behind him. As a result, he was able to regain control of Sanaa but the price paid was giving the tribes leave to sack the capital. This was one reason why Imam Ahmad chose to reside in Ta'iz and why Sanaa backed the republicans during the 1960s civil war.

Tribes were also important in the south. Britain occupied the port of Aden in 1839 and declared it a crown colony in 1932. To protect Aden, Britain gradually forged treaties of protection with petty rulers and *shaykh*s in the hinterland. The resultant Aden Protectorate was a patchwork system of indigenous control and British supervision. While some areas, particularly in the Western Aden Protectorate, easily accepted protected status, less control was exercised over the east. In addition, the area of the Radfan mountains, north of Aden and abutting North Yemen, was continually challenging British authority. The Royal Air Force was entrusted with responsibility for security in Aden and the Protectorate and employed air power to keep what were regarded as recalcitrant tribes and rulers in line. Thus action was taken between 1919 and 1949 against the Subayhi tribe, the Mansuri (a section of Subayhi), and the Qutaybi on at least five occasions each.[16]

Again, tribes in the north and south were instrumental in the replacement of the respective regimes. The failed attempt to assassinate the new Imam Muhammad al-Badr in September 1962 provoked a long civil war in the north between republicans (the Egyptian-backed revolutionaries) and royalists (the defenders of the imamate). Despite the direct involvement of Egyptian troops in support of the republicans and the strong indirect support of Saudi Arabia for the royalists, the ebb and flow of the war on the battlefields depended heavily on the shifting allegiances of the tribes. Hashid's support for the Republic was the consequence of Imam Ahmad's dispute with Bayt al-Ahmar. Shaykh Nasir b. Mabkhut al-Ahmar, the paramount shaykh of Hashid, was significant in the election of Yahya Hamid al-Din as Imam in the early twentieth century. But Shaykh Nasir's son Husayn, who had succeeded him as paramount *shaykh*, ran afoul of Imam Ahmad in 1959. In anger, the Imam ordered the execution of Shaykh Husayn and his son even though they were under his protection. As a consequence, the Bayt al-Ahmar and the Hashid supported the republicans against Ahmad's son Muhammad al-Badr.

The Bakil also tended to side with the republicans. The execution by Imam Ahmad of a number of the Abu Ra's, the shaykhly family of the Dhu Muhammad, resulted in their support for the republicans for the same reasons as Bayt al-Ahmar. Another prominent Bakili *shaykh*, Sinan Abu Luhum of the Nihm tribe, had fled to Aden to escape Imam Ahmad and returned north to support the republicans during the civil war. The opposition of these *shaykh*s to the Imamate cost them considerable standing within their tribes.

In the south, many of the *shaykh*s and *sultan*s who had enjoyed treaty relations with the British joined in the attempts to create the South Arabian Federation or joined the conservative South Arabian League seeking British withdrawal.[17] As the struggle against the British intensified during the mid-1960s, they were increasingly relegated to the sidelines. Those who did not flee in the 1966-

16. J.E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (London: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 35 and 82.

17. A recent and comprehensive treatment of events in the PDRY and after is in Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

1967 period were killed by the National Liberation Front and by the Front for the Liberation of Occupied Southern Yemen. Many retired to comfortable lives in Jiddah and only a few continued to intrigue against the new government of the south in Aden.

Strenuous efforts were made to paint the resistance to the new People's Republic of Southern Yemen (renamed the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1970) as a broad anti-Communist front. But the very nature of the resistance movement militated against tribal solidarity. Nationality was promoted as the common identifier, not tribalism. Those tribes that did oppose the southern Yemen government en masse tended to be the nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes from the interior fringe of the country, the marginal region that shaded into al-Rub' al-Khali. They included elements of Sa‹ar, al-Manahil, and al-Mahrah, many of whose members moved to the Gulf. The anti-PDRY movement survived on donations and recruitment from tribesmen working in the Gulf and on largely Saudi subsistence. While a few significant raids were made in the first few years after Aden's independence, they gradually faded into insignificance. Tribal support for the secessionist Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1994 was of only marginal importance.

Officially, and in many ways practically, the new regime in Aden was anti-tribal. Tribes, along with religion and "feudalism," were seen as part of the old order that had been eliminated. Nevertheless, the National Liberation Front party leadership and the ranks of the officer corps and civil servants not surprisingly included a high proportion of tribespeople. As the National Liberation Front's solidarity dissolved into internecine struggles, tribal members rallied to the defense (or the avenging) of fellow tribesmen in leading positions. The ‹Awaliq, who had been heavily recruited for the army and the police, were caught in the middle of this. Many senior officers and policemen were ‹Awlaqis but were purged in the early days of independence. Still, the preponderance of ‹Awlaqis in the ranks continued for years.

Although tribalism had little to do with the circumstances that produced the 1994 civil war, it did play diametrically opposing roles on the two sides. The energy of tribalism in the south seems to have been sapped during the PDRY period. Although the ex-southern army included many tribesmen in its ranks, tribes as such played little role in the actual fighting. The tribes in the line of fire, notably al-‹Awaliq, Yafi‹, and the tribes of Radfan, simply exercised prudence and stayed out of the fighting. Efforts to engage the tribes of the Hadramawt and east just fizzled.

Northern tribes, however, were opportuned by the Sanaa government to provide assistance. While no tribes as collective units took place in the fighting, a large number of tribesmen, using their own rifles and vehicles, turned out along the battle front and poured into the south. Northern victory provided them with an age-old tribal privilege: looting. In addition, there seems to have been some tribal mingling with Islamists and Afghan Arabs in the destruction of property in the south including the brewery and the domestic trading corporation. It is rather unlikely that tribesmen who were not also Islamists had anything to do with the widespread destruction of mosques and tombs. Bakili tribes, presumably desirous of acting against Sanaa and loosely allied with

the Yemeni Socialist Party (descended from the National Liberation Front) stayed out of the fray as did those of al-Madhhaj.[18]

Tribes *in* the Republic of Yemen State

The government of the Republic of Yemen faces a paradoxical dilemma. On the one hand, it wishes to extend central authority throughout the country through such measures as assuming responsibility for law and order, the provision of social services, and enhancement of tax collection. On the other hand, much of Yemen is a very tribal society with a strong history of self-reliance and autonomy. Any government presence is problematic in certain areas of the country – either because of formidable tribal resistance to outside interference (particularly in the north and west) or because of resentment over government policy – especially in the south as a result of the 1994 war and economic dissatisfaction. Considerable swatches therefore maintain strong resistance to government presence. This is nothing new. The *imam*s confronted considerable and stubborn resistance to their control, as did the Ottomans, the British, and the Egyptians. Under ‹Ali ‹Abdullah Salih's rule in particular, the *shaykh*s were said to "exist in a circular relationship with the state, negotiating with it on behalf of their tribes, extracting benefits, and thereby representing the state in their local regions. There has been a marked tradeoff between the wealth of the political relevant sheikhs and the cohesion of their tribes."[19]

In dealing with tribes, the government has a choice of directions to take. It can actively work to reduce tribal independence through force (reducing autonomy or crushing resistance), blandishment (providing direct financial or development assistance), or encouragement (extolling the benefits of closer integration into a national community). Alternatively, the narrowly based regime could chose to rely on the tribes for tangible support against a skeptical and growing urban population, southern discontent, and/or al-Qa‹idah and like-minded religio-politically based opposition.

In truth, the Salih regime chose elements of both strategies. The growing reach of the state has reduced tribal freedom of action in many areas. Government supervision/presence has been strengthened through southern Yemen to pacify the region. At the same time, the general (and especially economic) weakness of the state requires it to co-opt *shaykh*s, including incorporating their participation in the system as well as securing through them the cooperation of their tribal units. It has been asserted that some 4,500 *shaykh*s received monthly salaries from the government during the

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18. On the war, see Chuck Schmitz, "Civil War in Yemen: The Price of Unity?" *Current History*, Vol. 94, No. 588 (January 1995), pp. 33-36; Fred Halliday, "The Third Inter-Yemeni War and Its Consequences," *Asian Affairs* (London), Vol. 26, No. 2 (June 1995), pp. 131-140; Jamal S. al-Suwaidi, ed. *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 1995; Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research); and Joseph Kostiner, *Yemen: The Torturous Quest for Unity, 1990-94* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996; Chatham House Paper).

19. Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, p. 91.

Salih regime as a way of controlling them.[20] The regime also had a history of relying upon individual and corporate units of tribesmen to back up the armed forces. This was clear in the 1994 war and the strategy resurfaced in fighting against the Huthi group in the far north. Furthermore, the ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih regime sought deliberately to encourage the re-emergence of tribes and tribal leaders in the south as a component of its efforts to weaken southern opposition.

While the fall of the Salih regime has transformed and diminished the state's extreme dependence or reliance on tribes, it has not eliminated their central political role. It is obvious that former President Salih has a tribal background. It is also obvious that he created an inner web of support from members of his family, his clan, and his fellow Sanhani tribesmen. Furthermore, he co-opted some prominent non-Sanhani Hashidis, as well as the Hashidi tribe of Hamdan Sanʿaʾ.

But it should not be assumed from this that Salih's rule was tribally based. The idea that the regime was a condominium of Zaydi and Hashidi interests is misleading. While tribes as a whole and certain tribes – or sections of tribes – had some affinity with the Salih regime, they were just as likely to jostle for advantage within a larger set of political actors and chafe at or resent government and particularly regime actions and policies. In part, this set of circumstances derives from both socioeconomic changes in the country over the past several decades and the urbanization, nationalization, globalization of major *shaykh*s. Many of these now live in Sanaa, some have positions in the government or military, and most are engaged in commerce.

ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih's authority rested most fundamentally on three concentric rings of support.[21] The first was that of immediate relatives. These included his brother Muhammad as head of Central Security, his half-brother ʿAli Salih as head of the Republican Guard, his nephew Yahya Muhammad ʿAbdullah Salih as head of Central Security, and most importantly his son Ahmad, who most Yemenis believe was being groomed to replace his father in the manner that Bashshar al-Asad replaced his father Hafiz. The inner circle also included the president's eldest daughter Bilqis, who enjoyed considerable influence despite not having any significant position, and his son-in-law Muhammad Duwayd, head of the Presidential Palace. The web was commercial as well as political: the president assumed a partnership role in Hayl Saʿid Enterprises, Yemen's largest company, his nephew Tawfiq took over the tobacco and matches company, his maternal cousin ʿAbdullah al-Qadi began running the pharmaceutical monopoly, and a son-in-law, ʿAbd al-Khaliq al-Qadi, headed the national airline.

The second circle consisted of members of the president's Bayt al-Ahmar clan. Perhaps the most prominent of the broader clan was ʿAli Muhsin al-Ahmar. The third circle involved two tribes, the president's own Sanhan and the allied Hashidi tribe, Hamdan Sanʿaʾ. Members of these two tribes occupy key positions throughout the civil government and the military/security apparatus. A good number have married into the president's family. The president's tendency to rely on fellow Sanhanis is obvious. The connection of Hamdan Sanʿaʾ with the regime derives from it being the tribe of

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20. Ibid., p. 104.

21. A good exposition of the relationships, ties, and offices is given in Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, pp. 189 and 201-203. See also April Longley Alley, "The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Summer 2010), pp. 385-409.

President Ahmad al-Ghashmi, who succeeded and may have ordered the killing of President Ibrahim al-Hamdi. During Ghashmi's brief presidency (1977-1978), ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih served as his right-hand man and, in the eyes of many Yemenis, was the actual assassin of the Hamdi brothers.

Before and after the assassinations, the two worked hand-in-hand, employing members of their two tribes, to diminish the influence of Hamdi and his fellow, relatively reformist, officer colleagues in the Revolutionary Command Council – as well as to consolidate their own positions by enlisting and promoting Sanhani and Hamdani tribesmen in the officer ranks of the military. Although the two tribes historically were small and unimportant, their rise to ascendancy at this time was probably helped as well by their proximity to Sanaa and therefore their ability to defend the capital against internal threats. Yemenis and in particular tribal members have been more apt to characterize this structure of ruling as *mahsubiyah* (patronage) than as *qabaliyah* (tribalism).[22]

Rather than being a tribally based system of rule, the Yemeni regime seemed to resemble the structure of Saddam Husayn's Iraq in terms of concentric circles of trust and support from immediate family, clan, and tribe. Because tribes were a more powerful component of politics in Yemen than they were in Iraq, Salih was far more careful regarding the impact of his policies and actions on tribes than Saddam needed to be. At the same time, it can be noted that with the deterioration of his control over events in the 1990s, Saddam took increasing steps to bring tribes – or at least tribal *shaykh*s – into the system. Salih relied upon tribes for armed manpower at times and major *shaykh*s were co-opted into the system through payments, government and officer positions, seats in parliament, and commercial opportunities. But Salih did not exert the same level of control across the state that Saddam did. The tribes of Yemen were not integrated into the political system under Salih's control. Instead, they constituted one sector of players or constituencies in the grand game of Yemeni politics. Salih did not control them: he dealt with them, he prodded them, he contested them.[23]

A striking effect of changes in the ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih period was the shifting of many major *shaykh*s away from their traditional role as heads or chairmen of their own and allied tribes and as the spokesmen for their tribes in their dealings with other tribes or the state. Increasingly, their interests are geared toward business while political concerns have been often to secure and defend a seat in parliament, frequently as a member of the General People's Congress.

One of the early prompts for this transformation was the emergence of so-called "youth *shaykh*s." They, along with fellow tribesmen, had gone abroad to work and returned with wealth and newfound standing amongst those who had had their horizons broadened. Many of these used the local development associations. Indeed, ʿAbdullah al-Ahmar and Mujahid Abu Shawarib together founded the Hashid cooperative. Even Ibrahim al-Hamdi saw involvement with and promotion of LDAs as a route to advancement. Another alternative for the ambitions of "youth *shaykh*s" was a

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22. Paul K. Dresch, "The Tribal Factor in the Yemeni Crisis," in al-Suwaidi, *The Yemeni War of 1994*, pp. 41-42.

23. "Salih is skilled at balancing a complicated array of tribal, family, and regional interests, and individuals are often pawns in a larger strategy of divide-and-rule politics. From a tribal perspective, the President distributes patronage after considering the relationship between various confederations, tribes within confederations, and individual members within prominent tribal families. Alley, "Rules of the Game," p. 397.

career as an army officer. Mujahid Abu Shawarib provides a good example, as do a number of the Abu Luhum from the Bakil.

Instead of there existing another level of allied tribes supporting the regime – even amongst Hashid – Salih cultivated allied *shaykh*s. One aspect of this approach was "the region's co-optive relationships with the tribal sheikhs as mediators between state power and social forces."[24] The most important of these was Shaykh ʿAbdullah Husayn al-Ahmar and undoubtedly most prominent example of the transformation mentioned above. ʿAbdullah played various roles on the national scene since the civil war of the 1960s.[25] His original power base was as paramount *shaykh* of the Hashid, which served him well during the 1960s war and the early years of the reconciled Yemen Arab Republic. But eventually he transformed into a Sanaa politician. To be sure, he still was highly influential among the Hashid, the leading tribal *shaykh* in the country, and one of the most important arbiters or mediators in tribal affairs large and small.

But, more importantly, he and his sons took up residence in Sanaa and they became involved in lucrative commercial enterprises. He struck an early alliance with ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih, which won him the position of speaker of parliament and he served as the regime's point man in relations with Saudi Arabia. Supporters in Saudi Arabia encouraged and perhaps assisted him in the founding of the Yemeni Reform Grouping or al-Islah (discussed below). Al-Islah was used at first to bolster Salih against the Yemeni Socialist Party of the south, becoming junior partner in an alliance with Salih's General People's Congress. When Salih determined that he could do without the alliance, al-Islah was jettisoned into the opposition. This did not indicate a break between Salih and ʿAbdullah, however, although there may have been friction. The *shaykh* was instrumental in rallying the northern tribes behind the regime during the 1994 civil war and he remained an important liaison between the Saudis and Salih, with whom Riyadh had frosty relations – a major reason why Saudi Arabia quietly supported the south in the 1994 war. While his death left a vacuum in national affairs and in effective leadership of al-ʿUsaymat as well as Hashid, his changing role and status as part of the Sanaa scene most likely means that his son Sadiq will not replace him as a paramount *shaykh* in the same way.

Other *shaykh*s were co-opted into the Sanaa web, both in politics and in commerce. Some served as ministers in various governments. Mujahid Abu Shawarib of the Kharif tribe, a relative (and rival) of ʿAbdullah Husayn al-Ahmar, rose from a minor tribal position answering to Shaykh ʿAbdullah to a prominent military career and head of the Yemeni Baʿthi Party. Although he had some support from Hashid for the presidency following the 1978 assassination of Ahmad al-Ghashmi, he failed in his quest and had to settle for the relatively empty title of deputy prime minister and later personal adviser to the president. While a tribal *shaykh*, Mujahid's prominence and standing derived as much, if not more, from his military career and participation in the 1974 coup that put the Command Council in charge with Ibrahim al-Hamdi at its head.

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24. Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, p. 90.

25. See a biography of ʿAbdullah on the family's website, www.alahmar.net.

Another larger-than-life figure from the time of the 1960s civil war was Sinan b. ʿAbdullah Abu Luhum, *shaykh* of the Nihm tribe and sometime paramount *shaykh* of the Bakil. Intriguer against Imam Ahmad, republican defender and even briefly a member of the presidential council and a minister in the new Yemen Arab Republic, he opposed the republic's first president, ʿAbdullah al-Sallal, and supported the "third force" that led to the Iryani government. His reward was long-time governorship of al-Hudaydah, which he ran as a virtual fiefdom. Sinan was regarded as a maker and breaker of governments. Although decidedly conservative, his daughter was married to frequent prime minister Muhsin al-ʿAyni, a self-described Baʿthist, and Sinan often supported his son-in-law in the government. Yet his leadership of the Bakil was compromised by his support of the republic in the 1960s while much of the confederation remained royalist. Two brothers, Dirham and ʿAli, both army officers and cousins of Sinan, became members of the Command Council in 1974, although they were soon purged. Indeed, a number of Bayt Abu Luhum pursued military careers, including two of Sinan's brothers. But from the beginning of the Salih presidency, the family seemed to fade into the background. Another family member, Muhammad ʿAli Abu Luhum, took an active part in the creation of the United Bakil Council in the early 1990s.

Firm leadership of the Bakil has long been a problem. The Al al-Shayif family have provided the *shaykh*s of Dhu Husayn for generations and several *shaykh*s in the last century or two have died opposing the Ottomans and the imams. Shaykh Naji b. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz was elected paramount *shaykh* of the Bakil about 1981 but he was soon suborned by ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih into leading a quiet life in Sanaa. Another al-Shayif, Muhammad, subsequently claimed leadership of the confederation.

The Abu Ra's family of the Dhu Muhammad have been equally prominent in Bakili and national contexts. Shaykh Amin rallied the Bakil to the republican cause in the 1950s and then was an influential figure in the "third force" that helped engineer the Iryani government. He served as a minister of state until his death in 1978. His son Sadiq used his work with the local development associations as a stepping stone to ministerial portfolios of agriculture, civil service, and local administration, but never figured highly in the national political scene or amongst the Bakil.

The most important of all these *shaykh*s, ʿAbdullah b. Husayn al-Ahmar, died on 29 December 2007. ʿAbdullah's death prompts several key questions. First, can his position and influence in national politics be replicated by someone else, most notably one of more of his sons? Four of ʿAbdullah's sons have held parliamentary positions (two with the General People's Congress and two with al-Islah) and are well-known and powerful in Sanaa. In Yemen, as elsewhere in the Middle East, it is not unknown for sons to take up their fathers' mantle upon the latters' deaths.

One of the best known of them is Hamid, who has been prominent in al-Islah and the Joint Meeting Parties. In recent years, he has become increasingly critical of the president and the General People's Congress. In June 2006, he predicted a peaceful popular revolution would overthrow the military-family alliance dominating the regime, as well as the businessmen who supported the system, and weapons dealers and smugglers. In that context, he proposed postponing presidential elections for two years and the formation of an interim government to carry out constitutional reforms and bring the Joint Meeting Parties into a coalition government. Hamid supported Faysal b. Shamlan and the Joint Meeting Parties in the 2006 presidential election and later promoted al-Islah from

within the Joint Meeting Parties. This included calling on the president to resign in 2009.[26] Shortly after the outbreak of mass demonstrations in 2011, Hamid voiced his opposition to the president and called upon him to resign. The bad blood between the two men escalated into the fighting around the house of Hamid's brother Sadiq in al-Hasabah neighborhood of Sanaa in late May 2011. Not long afterward (3 June), an explosion in the presidential palace severely wounded Salih. The regime blamed it on Hamid and General ʿAli Muhsin al-Ahmar.

Husayn b. ʿAbdullah al-Ahmar is a former General People's Congress member of parliament, who hinted at creating an alternative party in 2005 when he was not elected to the General People's Congress's General Secretariat. This idea evolved into the National Solidarity Council, created in 2007, consisting of *shaykh*s (largely Hashid?), businessmen, and academics, with Husayn as its chairman. Not a fully developed party, the National Solidarity Council claimed it would utilize the organs of civil society to bring about development that the regime is unwilling or unable to do. Another son, Sadiq, has stayed away from state institutions and, as the eldest son, was elected head of Hashid upon his father's death. He was also outspoken on the ouster of Salih from office. In addition, Himyar, a General People's Congress MP, has been deputy speaker of parliament and Madhhaj is a member of parliament under the Islah banner.

The temptation to answer the question of whether Shaykh ʿAbdullah can be replaced is no, that he was *sui generis*. ʿAbdullah arose to prominence when the tribes were paramount and victory in the 1960s civil war depended on which way the tribal winds were blowing. Now the tribes form just one of a number of constituencies in Yemeni national politics. Furthermore, ʿAbdullah made his reputation during critical and unique periods in Yemen's evolution: the early years of the reconciled Yemen Arab Republic, the Hamdi period of consolidation, and the 1994 civil war. Such opportune circumstances for another self-made individual may never reappear.

His sons may have the ambitions but not the opportunities. More broadly, factors mitigating against a smooth continuation of strong al-Ahmar influence in the post-Salih regime are (a) the variable qualities of the sons (who were involved in at least several shoot-outs with security personnel in Sanaa well before 2011), (b) any president's declining need for a figure of ʿAbdullah's unique status, and (c) the decreased importance of tribal blocs in underpinning the regime.

It could be argued that Yemeni circumstances remain fluid enough for someone else to rise to prominence. Is there any other figure with a shaykhly background who can rally the tribes either in support of or in opposition to the regime? Mujahid Abu Shawarib, ʿAbdullah al-Ahmar's fellow Hashidi and brother-in-law, would have dearly liked to supplant ʿAbdullah and even Salih but never succeeded and, in addition, he had the misfortune to pass from the scene before ʿAbdullah. His son Jibran, although now head of Kharif, does not have the standing of his father. ʿAbd al-Majid al-Zindani undoubtedly would like to exert the same level of influence but his side of al-Islah, i.e., the radical Islamist party, never controlled al-Islah and Zindani does not have a natural standing with the tribes. No one can command a pan-tribal leadership, least of all a non-Hashidi (i.e. no Bakilis need apply).

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26. Alley, "Rules of the Game," pp. 401-402.

The sons of key *shaykh*s from an older generation, such as Jibran Mujahid Abu Shawarib, Saba b. Sinan Abu Luhum, and Muhammad b. Naji al-Shayif, have found it difficult to follow in their father's foodsteps because of changed circumstances from the early years of the independent states. The tribes remain vitally important in Yemen but tribalism no longer means the same thing. As one observer put it as early as the turn of the twenty-first century,

> Shaykh ʿAbdullah used to be referred to as *shaykh mashayikh al-yaman* (paramount shaykh of Yemen). That is not a phrase that is heard any more. A decade ago, within that form of common knowledge, Hashidis used to boast that their tribes, unlike others, were united 'like an army unit'. That is not a boast I have heard from a Hashid tribesman for a long time: indeed many of them seem demoralized. Although it is hard to imagine tribes ever acting against the Shaykh – he is held in great respect, and rightly – it is just as hard to imagine tribes (Hashid included) acting with him in the way they used to even twenty years ago. The Shaykh's undoubted influence has little to do with traditional '*asabiyyah* (solidarity based on tribe)."[27]

Could there still be any long-term succession from the Salih clique? Most notably, Salih was pushing his son Ahmad to succeed him but it could well be someone else close to him. The name of ʿAli Muhsin al-Ahmar had been advanced for some years and his defection from the Salih clique was probably opportunistic. ʿAli Muhsin undoubtedly is seen as too confrontational, too Islamist, and too tainted by his imbroglios in the war against the Huthis. Even his defection from Salih's ranks and self-assumed role as protector of the protesters did not advance his standing amongst most Yemenis. The essential point for the purposes of this paper is that it is possible that succession will derive from the narrow base fashioned over the past thirty years. That base had a very strong tribal component, with "tribal" in this context meaning the superior position of just two tribes, Salih's own Sanhan and the allied Hamdan Sanʿaʾ, not even the rest of Hashid and certainly not the Bakil. It would seem difficult for these two tribes to maintain their importance in the future, even in support of a successor from the Salih clique. In addition, while the armed forces and security apparatus provide a vital bulwark for the regime, they are really only tribal in the above sense. That is, while most of the soldiers and many of the officers belong to tribes, their identification with and loyalty to the government of the Republic of Yemen and socialization into a wider Yemeni context makes their tribal affiliation almost incidental in a political context. It is the military and security apparatus that seemingly will have the most influence on Yemen's next president and these institutions will not necessarily act according to tribal norms and solidarity.

The unification of north and south also produced a renaissance in southern tribalism and a renewed role for southern *shaykh*s.

> In the aftermath of unification, many southerners began to speak of 'retribalization'; juxtaposing the PDRY's stated commitments to a modern 'state of law and order' with the purportedly primitive or traditional ways of the disorderly North. There is evidence to suggest that areas of the South have experienced the revitalization of structures that Yemenis call tribal, in parts of Yafiʿ, Abyan, Shabwa, and the Hadramawt. Appointments to high public

27. Dresch, "Tribal Factor," p. 40.

> office since the civil war of 1994 register the emergence of a new elite composed mainly of leaders who carry the title of tribal shaykhs. These men enjoy discretionary powers that are largely above the law.[28]

It is wide of the mark to assert that there is a collective tribal political consciousness. Instead, the tribes and tribespeople constitute constituencies within broader political aggregations. In this respect, they are perhaps analogous to "working class white men" or "evangelical Christians" in US politics. Certainly tribal interests are represented in the General People's Congress but much in the same way as tribal interests are represented in the security forces. Tribesmen pursue political or military careers the same as other Yemenis. As pointed out above, prominent *shaykh*s and sons of *shaykh*s occupy a number of GPC seats in parliament. One estimate is that the proportion of *shaykh*s in the Majlis al-Shura elected in 2003 was about one-third of the total, with the majority from the General People's Congress.[29] But, after all, tribespeople constitute a significant number, if not a majority by some definitions, of Yemen's population and so it is no surprise that a member of a particular tribe should be elected to parliament in his tribal district. Furthermore, it is not surprising that ambitious individuals, whether tribal or not, should have allied themselves with the GPC, the most powerful party in Yemen and the party of President Salih.

The tribal aspect of al-Islah has been more strongly stressed. But to say it is the organ of tribalism is as inaccurate as contending that it is the Islamist party. In many respects, its genesis and continuation owes much to a partnership of two men, ʿAbdullah b. Husayn al-Ahmar and ʿAbd al-Majid al-Zindani. ʿAbdullah had played a role in the formation of the Islamic Front in 1979, which emerged as an armed force supporting the government in its efforts to extinguish the National Democratic Front in southern North Yemen. Not long after that, ʿAbd al-Majid began flexing his muscles as (briefly) minister of education and by creating multitudes of religious institutes, allegedly financed with Ministry of Education and Saudi money. While the two men, and their respective followers, had some interests in common (for example, their opposition to ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih), their cooperation in formation of al-Islah seemed to be principally a marriage of convenience. The merged network and resources was stronger and more able to contend with Salih's General People's Congress.

Paradoxically, however, the relegation of al-Islah to ineffectual opposition in electoral terms perhaps has been the reason behind its longevity: if al-Islah had been swept into power, divisions between the tribal and Islamist camps may have quickly deepened and doomed the alliance. While both wings tend to be conservative in social and political terms, the tribes are less accepting of a strict Islamist state than they are of a weak and corrupt secular state. Furthermore, the generic, Sunni, Salafi, "Wahhabi" emphasis of the Islamist wing directly threatens the Zaydi tribes of the north. This seems to be a contributing factor to the Huthi rebellion and the government's response.

It is perhaps paradoxical to speak on the one hand of President Salih's reliance on fellow and allied tribesmen in the military for the maintenance of his position while, on the other, refuting the

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28. Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, p. 175.

29. Ibid., pp. 85-86.

notion that the security forces are tribal in nature. To repeat from above, the construction of Salih's power depends on the loyalty of a clique, not tribal Yemen. The fact that tribesmen are sprinkled liberally throughout the security forces and at all ranks is not because Salih and his associates have inserted them there so much as the army has long served as a positive avenue of employment and advancement. One source puts the proportion of tribesmen in the military at 70-80%.[30]

Only the two tribes in alliance with Salih can be said to have benefitted from close political relationships. Even most Hashidi tribes have not been favored, although Kharif and Bani Suraym are said to have done fairly well. It perhaps can even be said that the domination of Sanhan and Hamdan San‹a› in the army has provoked resentment and even coup attempts by other tribes, including Hashidi ones. Tribesmen in the armed forces, rather than being tribal supporters of the president, are more likely to be Islamists and therefore closer to Zindani and perhaps other even more extremist figures.[31] It almost goes without saying that southern tribes play no significant role in the military or security services. They are more likely to pose a threat to the regime than be supporters of it, especially since southerners in the army have been said to have been used as cannon fodder in the Huthi fighting outside Sa‹dah.

The foregoing should demonstrate that the tribal role in Yemeni politics has been impacted by a number of social and economic developments. The LDAs provide an example of how improvements in tribespeople's standard of living can be achieved outside of, or at least in parallel with, traditional tribal ways. Furthermore, tribal loyalties face competition from emerging political parties and both pan-Arab and Islamist ideologies.

None of this has passed unnoticed to either the average tribesperson or his or her *shaykh*. Numerous attempts were made to rally groups of tribes behind banners of common or confederal interests. During the 1960s civil war, important conferences at ‹Amran and Khamir were held to try to resolve the divisions created by the war. ‹Abdullah al-Ahmar sought to form a tribal conference for all Yemen and there were several subsequent conferences aimed at restoring the Bakil to their rightful prominence.

At least four conferences were held during the years between unity in 1990 and the outbreak of civil war in 1994. Matters discussed at these conferences included the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the expulsion of Yemeni workers from Saudi Arabia, the protection and preservation of *‹urf*, and, in one case, another attempt to frame larger tribal concerns within a Bakili framework. As one observer explained it, the wide-ranging, and not necessarily tribal, nature of concerns expressed at these conferences led to other national conferences and together these constitute expressions of civil society instead of narrow attempts to preserve a mythical tribal past.[32] The formation of the National Solidarity Council in 2007 may be seen in a similar light. Although a coalition mostly of tribes and

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30. Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, p. 95, citing the head of a local NGO.

31. Dresch, "Tribal Factor," pp. 41 and 107n22.

32. Dresch, "Tribal Factor," pp. 49-54. Stephen Day mentions the holding of tribal conferences in the south in the late 1990s in order to resolve peacefully disputes between tribes. Stephen W. Day, Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 177.

*shaykh*s, the council expressed its commitment to using instruments of civil society to reform Yemeni politics held captive by a bad regime and to advance development.

Given the factors outlined above, it is problematic to think of a tribal cadre supporting the regime or forming a unified "loyal opposition." In the first place, the collective power of the tribes in former North Yemen has ebbed markedly over the past quarter century while the tribes in the former South Yemen were neutralized and marginalized during the period 1967-1990. Any previously existing tribal power base has become more restricted and more fragmented. Secondly, the tribal bloc that long provided the "natural" backing of and influence within Yemeni governments, i.e. Hashid and to a lesser extent Bakil, has disintegrated as a bloc.

Tribes *vs.* the Republic of Yemen State

The major changes in the nature of tribes and tribalism in Yemen since the 1990s – driven in part by the distancing of *shaykh*s from their tribes as well as the greater mobility of tribespeople – has produced at least three effects. The first has been a growing atmosphere of "lawlessness." Severe damage has been sustained by the system and code of tribalism. Incidents of theft and banditry have mushroomed. Shaykh Sadiq b. ʿAbdullah al-Ahmar, at the ceremony investing him with leadership of Hashid after his father's death, felt compelled to beseech tribesmen to stop committing revenge killings, highway robberies and wars that he regarded as creating incurable crises, weakening the national economy, and destroying development.

A second effect has been a tendency to rely on one's own means to deal with or pressure the government. This can be seen most clearly in the emergence and spread of kidnapping of foreigners. Formerly strictly off-limits, this practice has become almost routine, particularly by tribes of al-Jawf and Ma'rib who have boldly snatched foreign hostages off the streets of Sanaa as well as tourists who have strayed into their territory. Many of these kidnappings, as well as a related practice of sabotaging the oil pipeline, have been directed at gaining more employment for tribes in whose territory oil is being extracted, as well as forcing the government to release tribesmen in official custody. Nearly all these kidnappings have been brief and hostages have been released unharmed, often after the alleged payment of ransoms. Notably, the Murad tribe has carried out the kidnapping of foreigners, in part to get financing for local development projects, and the Murad took action against government forces to secure the removal of the corrupt head of a military battalion stationed in the region. The Jahm tribe has also been involved in the kidnapping of foreigners and other tribesmen – notably from Sanhan during a dispute.

But a third effect has involved the development of alliances with – and/or conversions of tribesmen by – Islamist extremists on either practical or ideological grounds. This has produced violent outcomes to kidnappings. The Bani Dabyan were implicated, at least at first, in the kidnapping of 16 tourists by the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army in December 1998 and the subsequent deaths of four of the tourists. Sinan al-Harithi and his associates, killed by an American Hellfire missile, had been enjoying refuge with the tribes of al-Jawf. The ʿAbidah tribe has a thorough history of kidnappings, the smuggling of drugs, and providing sanctuary to extremist groups. Special forces searching for extremists in ʿAbidah tribal territory in December 2001 clashed with tribesmen,

resulting in deaths on both sides. About the same time, eighty foreign students and teachers at the Dar al-Hadith religious institute in ʿAbidah territory were expelled from Yemen. Tribal connivance would have been necessary in the extremist operation at Ma'rib in July 2007 when seven Spanish tourists and accompanying Yemeni drivers and guards were murdered. There must have been tribal knowledge of at least the possibility of a similar operation at Shibam in January 2008 in which a number of Belgians were killed or wounded. It is probably impossible to tell to what degree tribal involvement was for reasons of practical alliance or was the result of the conversion of individual tribesmen to extremism.

One seemingly paradoxical reaction to the Sanhani/Hamdani (and by extension Hashidi) domination of the Republic of Yemen state was the re-emergence of two weakened tribal confederations. A number of attempts had been made at resurrecting Bakili cohesion, including by various competing shaykhs. More intriguing has been the reappearance of the nearly moribund al-Madhhaj in the southern part of the ex-Yemen Arab Republic. An al-Madhhaj/Bakil alliance was actively sought by some, even in conjunction with the *sayyid*-organized Union of Popular Forces or the Yemeni Socialist Party. The south has seen some growth in tribal expression as well, not in opposition to the state but for bargaining power with the state. Certainly, one reason for these developments has been to challenge Hashidi dominance. In addition, the reappearance of al-Madhhaj owed something to unity and the restoration of traditional ties with tribes south of the previous border.[33]

Given the weakness of the state and its inability to improve the standard of living of its people, tribes and tribespeople have become increasing exasperated with the government and the newly urban-based officer and businessman *shaykh*s. Accordingly, they have resorted to pursuing alternative means of earning money. Smuggling of narcotics, currencies, and weapons across the border with Saudi Arabia has proven lucrative for the tribes of the north and east. These activities have been supplemented by hijackings and kidnappings for ransom. In addition, money flows into the tribes through the *shaykh*s from neighboring regimes while well-heeled Islamists in the Gulf fund religious institutes and charities, fueling a growth in Islamist sentiment in the countryside. This seemed to be a major factor why tribesmen poured into Sanaa in 2011 to join the demonstrations against a corrupt and ineffective government and especially its leader.[34]

Meanwhile, Salih approached the south after unification, and especially after the 1994 civil war, in much the same way he had governed the north: with a policy of divide and rule. "Since the Yemeni civil war Saleh's regime has tried to create an entirely new hierarchy among the southern tribes, appointing relatively insignificant sheikhs to positions of power and influence."[35] Rather than

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33. Carapico, *Civil Society*, pp. 203-204; Dresch, "Tribal Factor," pp. 45-56.

34. Northern tribal opposition to Salih was not just from ordinary tribesmen as it was reported in April 2011 that a hundred Hashidi and Bakili shaykhs issued a statement calling for Salih's ouster after meeting with other opposition groups. Associated Press, 16 April 2011.

35. Day, "Power-sharing and Hegemony: A Case Study of the United Republic of Yemen" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2001), p. 446. See also the same author's "Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could

strengthening his hold over the south, the policy simply re-emphasized divisions within southern society.

Tribal unrest in the south probably will grow for two highly significant reasons. First, northern domination of the south is likely to continue, stoking resentment amongst most southerners, the tribes included. Second, economic deprivation will also continue, especially as oil production begins to run down. The amount of water available for cultivation and animal husbandry is expected to decline rapidly and tribe-against-tribe and tribe-against-government fighting is almost inevitable.

Given the relative strength of the government of the Republic of Yemen (as demonstrated in 1994), it seems unlikely that southern tribes will unite against it. Should insurrection break out, tribes may take part or sit aside as they did in 1994. However, since the 1994 secession attempt broke the back of southern Yemen's existing leadership – both the Yemeni Socialist Party and the broader coalition of exiles that were recruited – it is difficult to see where leadership for another attempt will emerge. Perhaps the only possibility will be through Islamist movements. At present, however, there are deep divisions between the existing, essentially *status quo* Muslim leadership, as represented by state *imam*s and *sayyid*s, and more extremist tendencies. Neither AQAP nor affiliated groups such as Ansar al-Shari‹a and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army has seemed to garner extensive public support. These organizations have sought to curry tribal support, as in supporting the claims of tribes in oil-producing areas to a greater share of the revenues and in upholding tribal honor. Still, extremist objectives, i.e., establishing a *jihadi* extremist territorial entity, generally run counter to tribal goals and reduces tribes to an extraneous and subordinate status.[36]

Tribes provide many of the foot soldiers for Islamist opposition in Yemen but few leaders or ideologues. Tribal connection with Islamist figures and movements tends to be based on factors other than zealotry, such as common dissatisfaction with government corruption and direction. For example, it has been said that prominent Islamist figure ‹Abd al-Majid al-Zindani has little standing – and thus little appeal – amongst the tribes. The involvement of tribesmen in the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, which kidnapped a group of Western tourists in 1998, some of whom were subsequently killed in a shootout with the army, seems to be for the same reasons that apply to urban and peasant individuals. The ranks of the Afghan Arabs, not surprisingly, include tribesmen. As some observers put it, "The key to AQAP's future in Yemen lies with the tribes. If the tribes can be co-opted then AQAP's future security is compromised – if they cannot then the West faces a longer-term threat from al-Qa'ida."[37]

Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 417-436.

36. Sarah Phillips and Rodger Shanahan, "Al-Qa'ida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen" (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, November 2009), pp. 6-7. See also Sarah Phillips, "What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building." (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010; Carnegie Papers, "Yemen on the Brink," Middle East Program, No. 107).

37. Phillips and Shanahan, "Al-Qa'ida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen," p. 9.

Of course, appeals to tribal honor and the code of hospitality may cause a tribe to provide assistance to an Islamist tribal member and some *shaykh*s, such as Tariq al-Fadli, may use their position or status to rally tribespeople around them. But Tariq's commitment to the Islamist cause has been questioned in recent years as he drew closer to the General People's Congress, allegedly to advance his chances of regaining family property and his own prosperity, and then publicly opposed Salih. It also may well be that supporting Islamists is seen as being counter-productive. If a tribe wants representation in parliament, for instance, its chances are much better with a General People's Congress candidate than one from al-Islah.[38]

The operations against the Believing Youth (al-Shabab al-Mu'minun) group in Sa‹dah, better known as al-Huthi group, have magnified the attention, appeal, and tenacity of this group. The government has charged the group with seeking to overthrow the government and to restore the Zaydi imamate. But it also seems reasonably clear that the group was singled out for attack by the government and specifically by ‹Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, allegedly because of Wahhabi/Salafi zeal. There are no reliable estimates of the numbers of committed members of the group but a series of summer camps centered on Zaydi traditions exposed thousands of young men to al-Huthi beliefs. It is reasonable to assume that many Huthis belonged to local tribes and as government operations killed local tribespeople, their tribes joined the Huthis in resistance.

The extent to which the affair, particularly the heavy-handed actions and the incompetence of the government, has engendered sympathy throughout the country cannot be gauged accurately. However, the ability of this group to continue the fight in Sa‹dah province against sustained military action, supported by pro-government tribes, indicates that it has managed to gather additional support. More puzzling is its ability to engage in heavy fighting against troops at ‹Amran and especially in Bani Hushaysh territory on the outskirts of Sanaa. Whether Bani Hushaysh tribesmen joined Huthi forces is unknown, as is the relevance of Bani Hushaysh being the seat of al-Wazir *sayyid* family, itself involved in periodic anti-government agitation.

The Huthi affair points to possible, even likely, ramifications for the broader Yemeni situation. The ability and effectiveness of Huthi indoctrination in rural summer camps leads to the possibility of similar activities in other areas, whether Zaydi or especially Sunni. Disaffection with the government – its corruption, its domination by a small clique, and its inability to carry out necessary development and social services – is widespread and is accentuated by the country's dismal economic situation, endemic poverty, and lack of opportunities for young Yemenis. These grievances can easily be played upon by extremist groups in the same way as al-Huthi.

While the regime may feel that it needs to keep Islamists such as ‹Abd al-Majid al-Zindani at least partly placated, it is unlikely to have any influence with extremist groups. These regard the government as being beyond the pale and seek to take advantage of Sanaa's unpopular connection to the US. It would take little to recruit significantly among disaffected youth. It may be surmised that urban youth are more susceptible to this type of recruitment but as the Huthi affair and the inter-connection of extremists with tribes in al-Jawf, Ma'rib, and Shabwah indicate, rural youth are

38. Elizabeth Mechelle Langston, "The Islamist Movement and Tribal Networks: Islamist Party Mobilization Amongst the Tribes of Jordan and Yemen" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2005), pp. 203-204.

also recruitable. In fact, the ties and tribal codes that constrained aberrant behavior amongst tribespeople have deteriorated in the last decade or two, leaving the door wide open for alienation and recruitment.

Finally, it should be remembered that tribes have connections and repercussions beyond Yemen's borders. The connections of Yemeni tribes to Saudi Arabia are long and complex. Yemenis nearly unanimously hold the opinion that the Saudi provinces of Najran, ʿAsir, and Jizan were stolen in the 1934 Saudi-Yemeni war. Tribal, sectarian, and cultural linkages still abound. Over the last thirty or forty years, literally millions of Yemeni men have emigrated to Saudi Arabia to work and of course many were expelled because of their government's stance after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Cross-border ties between tribes have strengthened because of cooperation in smuggling. This presents a serious problem for the Yemeni government because it erodes what little control it has in peripheral areas. It is even more serious for Riyadh because of the imports of arms and covert entry by Islamist extremists. While government-to-government relations have often been strained, Saudi relations with Yemeni tribes have often been very close. It has been a Saudi policy since 1962 to keep Yemeni states weak and providing largesse to the tribes was welcomed by the tribes and their *shaykh*s. Shaykh ʿAbdullah Husayn al-Ahmar was always regarded as the Saudis' man in Sanaa (or at least one of them).[39] At the same time, Salafi proselytization has quickened in tribal areas throughout Yemen but particularly in the north. Whether facilitated by the Saudi secular administration (in contrast to its Islamist foreign-policy apparatus) or not, the perception in Yemen is that the Saudis are deliberately spreading Wahhabism across the country.

Tribal relations with Oman have been equally significant. While Omani tribes naturally were in the thick of the fighting during the war of the 1960s and 1970s in Oman's southern Dhufar province, Yemeni tribes were only marginally involved. Some tribes of the Mahrah nation defected from Yemen to Oman, in large part because life on the Omani side was more promising than poor austere PDRY. There also ancient ties between the Kathiri tribes on both sides of the border.

The Impact of the Yemen Awakening on the Role of the Tribes

The political situation in Yemen underwent a dramatic transformation since early 2011, yet it remained volatile and chaotic as of mid-2012. The country's tribes retain their social importance, particularly in terms of identity if not dependence on the tribe for assistance or protection. Tribes still exert at least some degree of autonomy – and events of 2011-2012 probably have increased their autonomy even more, at least in the mid-term.

The impact on "tribes *in* the state" is likely mean a more restricted role for the tribes, but the final effect depends upon unknowables in the present atmosphere. There may well be positive developments in reducing tribal influence, but it should be noted that the weakness of state militates against this. Two factors underpin this conclusion. First, tribesmen increasingly act as individual

39. The Saudis paid ʿAbdullah a monthly subsidy of $1.87 million in the early 1990s. It was severed as a result of the 1994 civil war but later restored at $800,000 a month. Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, p. 100.

political actors – as citizens not as tribesmen. Second, the role of the *shaykh*s as tribal leaders undeniably has diminished.

The impact on "tribes *vs.* the state" may well remain unchanged. Continued tribal actions against the state can be expected for some time to come, including kidnappings, attacks on the pipeline, the retention of arms, and the continued existence of territory in which government forces and officials do not go. Furthermore, tribal alliances with Islamist extremists can be expected to continue as long as extremism maintains a presence in the country. As explained above, this has less to do with tribal conversion to extremist views than traditional codes of hospitality and a practical alliance against perceived interference in tribal matters and territory by the Republic of Yemen's government and its external partners, particularly the United States.

From the perspective of 2012-2013, it would require a crystal ball to predict the future of Yemen. The political importance of tribes in the post-Salih era depends on the interaction of a myriad of developments in the near future. Broadly speaking, there are two alternative paths. In the first, ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih remains in Yemen interfering in politics. The situation regarding the Huthis, the south, and extremists remains volatile and unresolved. The presidential election of 2014 does not produce a democratic government. In such a chaotic atmosphere, it seems reasonable to assume that tribalism will remain an important identifier and component of many tribal members' lives. There may even be a slight return to emphasis on tribal identity in the face of a perceived hostile atmosphere.

On the other hand, it is possible that Salih and his relatives and allies will be neutralized to an effective extent, that major power brokers – such as Hamid al-Ahmar, ʿAli Muhsin al-Ahmar, ʿAbd al-Majid al-Zindani, the General People's Congress and the Joint Meeting Parties, various southerners, and the Huthis – will find themselves deadlocked and, in order to block their rivals, will accept an election for president that is not predetermined and is followed by the institution of a relatively neutral government. Such a power vacuum would seem to put tribalism back on its path of steady assimilation into the larger panoply of society.

It would be logical to assume that some combination of the two alternatives described above will result. Such a scenario would seem to leave the tribes in much the same circumstances as they find themselves today, and probably on the sidelines in any national power struggle. Only a strong central government with the capacity to provide social services and security, as well as an ability to govern, is likely to have an effective impact on the political role of tribalism.