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Tribe and State in the Arabian Peninsula

J. E. Peterson

The term "tribe" has acquired a negative and often archaic connotation in much of the world. In the Arabian Peninsula, however, tribes are not relics of the past but a vital component of society exercising varying impacts on state policy. The concepts of "tribe in *the state" and "tribe* versus *the state" are useful in explaining the range of relationships between tribes and states. Regional variations around the peninsula play a key role in determining the applicability of one concept over the other.*

It is easy to become enmired in attempts to define or justify the use of the term *tribe*. The question "What is a tribe?" is certainly debatable, going back at least to 20th century French sociologist Jacques Berque.[1] Well before that, the 14th century polymath 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun articulated the concept of *'asabiyya* — variously translated as "group feeling" or "solidarity" — which he believed enabled tribes, held together by blood ties, to live in the harsh desert.[2]

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1. Jacques Berque, "Qu'est-ce qu'une 'tribu' nord-africaine?" ["What is a North African 'tribe?'"] in *Maghreb: Histoire et sociétés* [Maghrib: History and societies] (Gembloux, Belgium: Duculot, 1974), 22–34; Jacques Berque, *Structures sociales du Haut-Atlas* [Social structures of the High Atlas], second edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978). Berque's question reflected historian Ernst Renan's famous 1882 essay "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" ["What is a nation?"], with the latter's conclusion that the determinants of a nation were based not on racial, ethnic, or language affinities as much as shared memory and forgetfulness. See Dale F. Eickelman, "New Directions in Interpreting North African Society," in *Connaissances du Maghreb: Sciences sociales et colonisation* [Understandings of the Maghrib: Social sciences and colonization], ed. Jean-Claude Vatin (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984), 279.

2. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History, Volume I*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 261–65. Ibn Khaldun extended the idea of *'asabiyya* beyond tribes to entire civilizations. Few Arabic sources have been cited for this article, since relevant Arabic publications tend to consist of tribal compilations or dictionaries, histories, and genealogies of individual tribes, rather than analytical treatises. Notable compilations include Hamad al-Jasser, معجم قبائل المملكة العربية السعودية [Dictionary of the tribes of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] (Riyadh: Dar al-Yamama, 1400 [1980]); 'Umar Rida Kahhala, معجم قبائل العرب القديمة الحديثة [Dictionary of the Arabs' ancient and modern tribes], fifth edition (Beirut: Resalah, 1985); Hamza 'Ali Luqman, تاريخ القبائل اليمنية [History of the Yemeni tribes] (Sana'a: Dar al-Kalima, 1985). Of course, much relevant material can be gleaned from classic broader histories, such as Nur al-Din 'Abdullah

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Genealogy, or at least the "myth of common ancestry,"[3] is often regarded as the quintessence of tribalism. Despite this, tribes are often composed of mixed lineages, and subgroups within a tribe may associate for economic, ideological, and political reasons. Many tribes in the Arabian Peninsula are not *badw* (nomadic or bedouin), and many have both *badw* and *hadar* (settled) elements, so nomadism and pastoralism are not essential components either. Territorial domain, as rapid urbanization in the Gulf region makes clear, is also not a key attribute of tribalism. Above all, while tribes may be tradition-based (even that is debatable), they are deeply characterized by fluidity.

Tribes in the Arabian Peninsula constitute a fundamental component of life in the region. This reality bears little or no relation to the largely anthropological opinion that tribes, as in Africa, are a creation of the colonial legacy or, even more recently, the view that Western politics are polarized because of "tribalism."[4] In the Arabian Peninsula, the concepts of tribe (*qabila*) and tribalism (*qabaliyya*) represent a major form of social organization and self-perception. As an anthropologist working on Yemen recently put it:

> I see little sense in translating the African context into South Arabia, since in many parts of Arabia, among them northern Yemen, "tribe" (*qabila*) is a historically rooted, emic concept of social representation, and "being tribal" is a matter of local agency, local authority, and a source of individual and collective honor.[5]

There is a danger in trying to define tribes in isolation, and an alternative phenomenon may be worth considering. One of the key theorists and intellectual critics of nationalism, Ernest Gellner, argued that, while nationalism is the consequence of a shared culture emerging on a larger scale beyond the local cultures of specific groups, "It is

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bin Humayd al-Salimi, تحفة الأعيان بسيرة أهل عمان [Gem of the notables in the saga of the people of Oman] (Cairo: Matba'at al-Shabab, 1347–50 [1928–31]); 'Abd al-Wasi' bin Yahya al-Wasi'i, تاريخ اليمن [History of Yemen] (Cairo: Al-Matba'a al-Salafiyya, 1928); Khayr al-Din al-Zirkali, شبه الجزيرة في عهد الملك عبد العزيز [The peninsula in the era of King of 'Abd al-'Aziz] (Beirut: Resalah, 1970).

3. Albert Hourani, "Conclusion: Tribes and States in Islamic History," in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, ed. Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 303–11. Dale F. Eickelman noted that "tribes are composed of people who *claim* descent from a common male ancestor," see his "Tribes and Tribal Identity in the Arab Gulf States," in *The Emergence of the Gulf States: Studies in Modern History*, ed. J. E. Peterson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 225. On the ways in which tribal identity is created, see also Eickelman's *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, third edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 124–25.

4. As Richard Tapper said recently, "Tribalism has a bad press. Commonly presented as a dark, destructive, primeval force — the antithesis of rational modernity — tribalism is anathema to those who defend civilisation — supposedly law-bound, egalitarian, human rights-based." See "Tribalism in Middle Eastern States: A Twenty-First Century Anachronism?" London School of Economics Middle East Centre blog, ed. Jack McGinn, July 11, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/11/tribalism-in-middle-eastern-states-a-twenty-first-century-anachronism/.

5. Marieke Brandt, review of *Destroying Yemen*, by Isa Blumi, *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (Autumn 2018): 712. Similarly, Tapper suggested that a tribe "is rather a state of mind, a construction of reality, a model for organization and action." Richard Tapper, "Anthropologists, Historians, and Tribespeople on Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East," in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, ed. Khoury and Kostiner, 56.

nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round."[6] Thus there can be no nations unless a concept and age of nationalism has emerged. Similarly, there can be no tribes without a tribal framework. Absent a tribal world, the concept of *tribe* is meaningless, but all members of this world, where it exists, innately know what a tribe is. Questions of what kinds of tribes exist, what they do, where they come from, how they relate to one another, and so on are incidental. The emphasis on genealogy as cited above may have little practical significance in day-to-day life: tribesmen might know their grandfathers and perhaps even great-grandfathers but not beyond that.[7] Ironically, the importance of genealogy seems to be accentuated by modern, "detribalizing" life in the Arabian Peninsula, when determining (or constructing) one's origins becomes key to situating the individual in a transforming society.[8] As historian Paul Dresch wrote with 19th century Arabia in mind, "Tribes (*qaba'il* or *'asha'ir*) were important in most regions. Much analysis has been incautious, but the crux of tribalism is a simple assumption that people are related of their nature; divisions among them are God-given, and relatedness implies responsibility."[9]

I base these initial thoughts on a reexamination of two of my previous articles, 40 years apart, which reflected my thinking and understanding when each were published: "Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia" (1977) and "Yemen: Tribes, the State, and the Unravelling" (2016).[10] This article encompasses the entire Arabian Peninsula, with the proviso that significant differences exist between the four groupings of the smaller Gulf states (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates), Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen. Consequently, the interrelationship between tribes and the state in these groupings varies considerably. This is most true for Yemen compared to the rest of the peninsula. The differences are perhaps best illustrated by comparing and contrasting the nature and recent experience of Yemen with the smaller Gulf states in some detail, which I do toward the end of the article.

As the title indicates, my focus is on the multifaceted relationships between tribes and the state. I have found it useful in this regard to employ the related concepts of "tribes *in* the state" and "tribes *versus* the state." Insofar as a tribe may be regarded as

6. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 54.

7. Nevertheless, elucidation of a lineage of many generations back to a tribe's origins may be required in defense of its status and rights vis-à-vis neighboring tribes. See Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

8. Nadav Samin, *Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

9. Paul Dresch, "Arabia to the End of the First World War," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 5: The Islamic World in the Age of Western Dominance*, ed. Francis Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135. My thanks to Dresch for suggesting the substance of this paragraph. Berque alluded to this idea when he cited his earlier work: "I came to view the North African tribe as a compromise between social groupings and contemporary history, between a certain form of logic and the data of the *milieu*. The same compromise can be seen there in detail between agnatic ancestrality and relationship by marriage, between consanguinity and topography, status and contract." Jacques Berque, *French North Africa: The Maghrib between Two World Wars*, trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 12.

10. J. E. Peterson, "Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia," *The Middle East Journal* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 297–312; J. E. Peterson, "Yemen: Tribes, the State, and the Unravelling," in *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, ed. Uzi Rabi (London: Hurst, 2016), 111–43.

possessing a corporate identity and its members as sharing a collective responsibility, the "tribes *in* the state" conception regards tribes politically as a component of the state, an identity subservient to and dependent on government. The "tribes *vs.* the state" conception, on the other hand, sees tribes in certain circumstances seeking to preserve their independence and freedom of action vis-à-vis centralized control. These conceptions should be seen as the theoretical end points of a spectrum. In neither case can it be assumed that the tribe in the Arabian Peninsula (if not the broader Middle East) is a relic of the past, a social and political construct left over from the pre-state era, or a dying phenomenon in a world of nation-states.

THE TRIBAL ETHOS

The predominant and state-promoted national myths in the smaller Gulf states are centered on Arab tribal *badw* origin and background. While the prevailing norm of previous centuries may have been that of pure or noble tribes of *badw* origin (most of which are no longer nomadic), political power in the more recent past was increasingly concentrated in small settlements, whether along the Gulf littoral or in the interior. Gulf society in the pre-oil era was multifaceted and constituted a variety of communities, such as recognized and respected tribes, others of non-tribal but presumably Arab descent, "townspeople," and merchants often of Iranian or Indian origin. Technically, *badw* means nomadic. But in the oil era and before, *badw* heritage was shared by sedentarized elements of *badw* tribes. As a consequence, in practice, *badw* does not have to mean nomadic.

Furthermore, it should be realized that tribes are flexible both in their constituent elements and their practical status over time. Tribes emerge and recede in strength and influence and may disappear or appear entirely. Sub-tribal elements may change their affiliation to a different tribe or even establish themselves as separate tribes. In addition, tribes may acquire clients, which can be either tribal or non-tribal as well as groups or individuals. Tribes may grow more powerful or weaker depending on the vitality and competence of their leadership. Typically, the shaykh of a tribe was very un-kingly, and a weak shaykh could lose his position with the tribe gravitating to a more capable shaykh. As wealth typically was not generated from within the tribe, an effective shaykh successfully secured external income or patronage. While shaykhs were typically chosen from within a shaykhly family, the fortunes of families could change over time as well, and there is evidence of some tribes recruiting shaykhly families from other tribes.[11]

Most tribes possess both *badw* and *hadar* elements. These elements may or may not be contiguous; even *badw* sections of the same tribe may be scattered across regions. Thus, tribal allegiances may be split between rulers of different polities. Tribal migration (distinct from nomadism) between regions was also a feature of the pre-oil

11. Shaykhly leadership could also diminish as a result of a breakdown of the established order, leading to tribal infighting and challenges to tribal authority by younger and more aggressive shaykhs. This was illustrated in the evolution of the "Anbar Awakening" in Iraq from 2006 to 2008, although the roots of the decay in the tribal order can be traced back to the Ottoman, monarchical, and republican periods. Myriam Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall," *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 126–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00477.x.

era. Historical ties might lead tribes to join linked tribes elsewhere. Dissatisfaction or a dispute with a particular ruler or tribe might cause a tribe to move to a neighboring state. While the rivalry between *badw* and *hadar* may be mostly a relic of history, it does retain some current significance. The balance has dramatically shifted to the latter's advantage since the mid-20th century. There has been a natural impulse for *badw* to become settled in order to access employment, educational opportunities for children, and state-provided social services. States have tended to support this change because it is easier to control settled populations and to provide services to them (not to mention avoiding the political headaches posed by nomadic pastoralists roaming regularly across national borders).

The process of state formation in the Gulf states and how the role of the prevailing *badw* ethos applies is based on various fundamental assumptions. The first and perhaps most important is the *badw/hadar* dichotomy. The centuries-old state of contention between the nomadic and pastoralist *badw*, on one hand, and the sedentary *hadar* population of settlements, ports, and oases, on the other, has deep cultural connotations in addition to opposing ways of life. Not all *hadar* of tribal origin were from *badw* stock. In its literal sense, the distinction applies mostly to the pre-oil era but not entirely. The *hadar* were settled in fixed places, tethered to agricultural areas by property and crops, or resident in urban settlements in order to pursue trading, pearling, or seafaring. As a consequence, they were more easily controllable by rulers. The *badw* on the other hand were, by definition, nomadic. The roaming territory of a *badw* tribe was and is generally defined by a distinct tribal territory (*dira*), even if sometimes contested or not defined precisely. At the same time, however, a *badw* tribe may have owed allegiance to or have links with the ruler of a coastal settlement. Therefore, there were often limitations on its area of activity and a linkage to the territory of a particular state.

The matter is additionally complicated by the fact that even nomadic *badw* tribes possessed connections to fixed points on the map. Livestock required access to wells and grazing territory that were not contested with other tribes. Tribal members often owned date palm gardens, which required periodic attendance to harvest the dates. Many tribesmen undertook seasonal employment in the pearling industry. These ties also served to bring them under the purview or control of local rulers.

For the majority of people in most parts of Arabia, tribal membership has been central. Nevertheless, there has always been a simultaneous presence of non-tribal communities.[12] These included the Baharina, agriculturalists in Bahrain and in the oases of Ahsa and Qatif in present-day Saudi Arabia as well as elsewhere. Baharina were presumably indigenous inhabitants with later absorptions, and their descendants identify today as Arab and Shi'i. The merchants of the settlements, both on the coast and

12. The notion of a solely tribal Arabia was challenged in Donald P. Cole and Soraya Altorki, "Was Arabia Tribal? A Reinterpretation of the Pre-Oil Society," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 4 (1992): 71–87. On the distinction between *'asil* families of "pure" descent and the *khadir* population of menial descent among *hadar* tribes in Najd, see also Abdulaziz F. Al-Fahad, "The *`Imama* vs. the *`Iqal*: *Hadari*-Bedouin Conflict and the Formation of the Saudi State," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 58n7; Uwaidah M. Al Juhany, *Najd before the Salafi Reform Movement: Social, Political and Religious Conditions during the Three Centuries Preceding the Rise of the Saudi State* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002).

inland, constituted another amorphous group. Some *hadar* were not even Arab, tribal, or Sunni. Among these groups, ethnicity in particular and religion to a certain extent (often the two were intermingled) generally indicated a geographical origin beyond the Gulf states: Persians from Iran, Shiʻa from either Iran or Iraq, Baloch from Pakistan and Iran, Banians and Lawatis from India, and, later, "Zanzibaris" from East Africa. In contrast to today, these groups were not regarded as "foreigners," "expatriates," or having a national origin or identity elsewhere. Some of the important merchants in the port towns were (and are) Huwala, Sunni Arab families immigrating (or returning, as some insist) from the Persian coast of the Gulf. The *hadar* population also included groups of uncertain origin, such as the Bayasira community engaged in occupations of low status, the enslaved, and their descendants (though they might often be associated with tribes or be tribal clients). On top of it all, ethnicity and sectarian identity were fluid.[13]

TRIBES AND THE PROCESS OF STATE FORMATION

The tribal role in state formation was more pronounced in the smaller Gulf states. It may be said that there were two primary factors in this process. The first of these involved the emergence of dominant leaders and tribal elements. The more powerful tribal groups along the Arab littoral of the Gulf were largely from the Najd region of present-day Saudi Arabia. They moved to the coast for unknown reasons; possibly because of famine, population pressure on scarce resources, or ambitious leadership. At the beginning of the 18th century, the dominant force along the littoral was that of the mixed *badw* and *hadar* Bani Khalid tribe, whose center was at the Ahsa oasis. The writ of the Bani Khalid eventually extended from Qatar in the south to the Iraqi city of Basra and beyond to the Nafud Desert in northern Saudi Arabia, as well as inland to parts of Najd.[14]

Also in the 18th century, sections of the Bani ʻUtub tribe, itself thought to be part of the larger ʻAnaza tribe, moved from Najd into the Gulf littoral and established permanent settlements along the coast, a pattern replicated by other tribes. The Bani Khalid's domain could be described, in loose terms, as more empire than nation. In contrast, these new settlements and their hinterlands were more local and based on more durable tribal alliances. By these movements, as well as other migrations into the southern part of the littoral, including Qatar, what is now the United Arab Emirates, and parts of Oman, the scene was set for the contemporary tribal composition of the Arab littoral of the Gulf and the inception of what may be discerned as nascent national identity in the various regions of the Gulf.

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13. Lawrence G. Potter (ed.), *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Abdulaziz H. Al-Fahad, "From Exclusivism to Accommodation: Doctrinal and Legal Evolution of Wahhabism," *New York University Law Review* 79, no. 2 (May 2004): 485–519; Carina Jahani, "The Baloch as an Ethnic Group in the Persian Gulf Region," and Ahmed al-Dailami, "'Purity and Confusion': The Hawala between Persians and Arabs in the Contemporary Gulf," in *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 267–97, 299–326.

14. Ahmad Mustafa Abu Hakima, *History of Eastern Arabia, 1750–1800: The Rise and Development of Bahrain and Kuwait* (Beirut: Khayats, 1965), 38–41, 121–44; J. G. Lorimer (ed.), *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Oman, and Central Arabia, Volume 1* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1908), 630–1,178.

In the lower Gulf, the dynasty of al-Qawasim based in Julfar (now Ras Al Khaimah in the UAE) flexed its power in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, followed by the expansion of Bani Yas tribal leadership throughout what is now Abu Dhabi in the latter part of the 19th century. Although Bani ʻUtub groups also moved into what is now Qatar in the mid-18th century, their focus shifted to Bahrain, and it was left to the Al Thani family to deal with the Ottoman presence and eventually to sign a treaty with the British-controlled Government of India that placed Qatar under its protection. The Al Khalifa family, part of the Bani ʻUtub, captured Bahrain from Iran in 1783 and has headed the Bahraini state ever since. But Bahrain also provides a partial exception to the pattern because of the agrarian nature of its indigenous society and the ruling family's claims to leadership through invasion. Nevertheless, Bahrain was a party to maritime truces and treaties, and tribes could migrate elsewhere while the tribal nature of the regime itself was reinforced by the recruitment of Najdi tribal allies.[15]

During the same time frame, a second factor — British imperial involvement — also played a formative role. While the Portuguese and the Dutch were the first European empires to enter the Gulf, the British achieved dominance by the late 18th century. The British-imposed Government of India at this time was particularly concerned with trade, which required unhindered maritime passage for British and Indian vessels. Accordingly, Britain sought to bring various chieftains along the Arab littoral into a network of treaties that forbade warfare by sea; these culminated in the General Treaty of Maritime Peace in 1853. The treaties were signed with the leaders of the ports where armed ships were based; the leaders were the shaykhs of dominant tribes at that point in time.[16]

Accordingly, the political order of eastern Arabia became fossilized: British recognition of these prominent shaykhs gave them initial standing as supra-tribal leaders and their positions gradually transformed into rulership of proto-states. Subsequent formal treaties of protection, whereby Britain assumed responsibility for foreign affairs and defense, made most of these political entities protected states within Britain's informal empire and further solidified the rule of the same shaykhly families. As a consequence, the leader of each littoral settlement was assumed to have authority over people. The eventual consequence was the extension of supra-tribal authority in coastal settlements to recognition of a ruler of territory, however loosely defined, in addition to being a ruler of people.[17]

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15. Lorimer (ed.), *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, 630–786, 836–946; Abu Hakima, *History of Eastern Arabia*, 91–124, 165–70; Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman*, revised edition (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998), 115–21; Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition*, new edition (London: Longman, 1996), 68–91; Sultan Muhammad Al-Qasimi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*, second edition (London: Routledge, 1988).

16. J. E. Peterson, "The Age of Imperialism and Its Impact on the Gulf," in *The Emergence of the Gulf States*, ed. Peterson, 127–58; James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007); James Onley, "Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms, 1820–1971: The Politics of Protection," Georgetown University, Center for International and Regional Studies, occasional paper no. 4 (2009); J. B. Kelly, "The Legal and Historical Basis of the British Position in the Persian Gulf," in *St. Antony's Papers* 4, no. 1 (1958): 119–40.

17. Peterson, "Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia"; J. E. Peterson, "Tribe and State in the Contemporary Arabian Peninsula," London School of Economics Middle East Centre blog, ed. Jack McGinn, July 12, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/12/tribe-and-state-in-the-contemporary-arabian-peninsula/.
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While Saudi Arabia and Oman share many aspects of social and tribal culture, they are significantly distinctive from the smaller states. The Saudi state fundamentally derives its legitimacy from the tribal-backed leadership allied with religious authority. The Al Sa'ud family hailed from the small southern Najdi settlement of Dir'iyya and thus were *hadar*. While they claimed tribal origins, their success lay in mobilizing *hadar* participation as well as harnessing *badw* tribes in support.[18] The religious authority derived from the 18th century religious reformer Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab, who, driven from his home in nearby 'Uyayna, was welcomed by Imam Muhammad bin Sa'ud, the progenitor of the Al Sa'ud dynasty. It is likely that the writ of the Al Sa'ud would never have extended much beyond Dir'iyya had it not been for this fortuitous alliance with what has since become known as the Wahhabi movement after Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. The complementary forces, temporal and spiritual, created the impetus enabling the establishment of the First and Second Saudi States (1744–1818 and 1824–91, respectively).[19]

It is the Third Saudi State (1902–) that embodies the transformation from a more transitory movement based on *hadar* and tribal alliances imbued with religious fervor to the beginnings of a state that exercised unmistakable authority over the tribes. Following his success in retaking Riyadh in 1902, Imam 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'Abd al-Rahman Al Sa'ud (known as Ibn Saud in many Western sources) began a process of consolidation and expansion. A military force known as the Ikhwan (literally "brothers"), drawn from *badw* tribes newly relocated to tribal settlements and propelled into battle by Wahhabi passion, was important in 'Abd al-'Aziz's successful advances through Najd and east to the Gulf, as well as his conquest of Hijaz in the west. Britain played a key role here too in eventually subsidizing the Najdi ruler and restraining him and his warriors when they threatened British-controlled territories. It was perhaps a pivotal first step in the creation of a state when 'Abd al-'Aziz found it necessary to observe boundaries and confront and defeat the Ikhwan when they continued to act against his orders.[20] From

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This process in the Gulf seemed to reflect a larger pattern of European colonial identification of pliable indigenous leadership with whom colonial administrations could work. As a consequence, sociocultural realities and colonial administrative structures were often in conflict and resulted in fractured states upon independence.

18. Abdulaziz Al-Fahad contended that the Saudi state was "an exclusively *Hadari* endeavor with profound anti-tribal and anti-Bedouin tendencies, and circumscribed roles for the Bedouins and their tribes." Al-Fahad, "The `*Imama* vs. the `*Iqal*," 36. The Al Rashid dynasty of Jabal Shammar in what is now Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, relied on both *badw* and *hadar* backing because of the ruling family's tribal origins. This, Al-Fahad argued, gave the Al Sa'ud an advantage because they could appeal to all social groups, see pp. 46–49.

19. The history of the Saudi state is covered comprehensively in Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, trans. P. A. Seslavin (London: Saqi Books, 2000); Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

20. Al-Fahad, "From Exclusivism to Accommodation," 513. See also John S. Habib, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Sa'udi Kingdom, 1910–1930* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1978). In the 1960s, Saudi Arabia was active in deliberately seeking to sedentarize its *badw* population, as detailed in Ugo Fabietti, "Sedentarisation as a Means of Detribalisation: Some Policies of the Saudi Arabian Government towards the Nomads," in *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Tim Niblock (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 186–97; Ugo Fabietti, "State Policies and Bedouin Adaptations in Saudi Arabia, 1900–1980," in

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that point, ʻAbd al-ʻAziz — as first imam, then sultan, and finally king from 1932 — was clearly becoming the head of a nascent state. The tribes that had been "tribes *vs.* the state" were in the process of becoming "tribes *in* the state."

In contradistinction to the rest of the Gulf, tribes in Oman were principally *hadar* and long settled in their own *dirat* (plural of *dira*). Oman's great *badw* tribes — the Duruʻ, the Wahiba, and the Janaba — were marginal to the ebb and flow of the country's politics. For most settled tribes, residence in recognized territories had been established centuries ago. Oman's history over the past thousand years centered on the institution of the religious imamate of the Ibadi sect of Islam. While Ibadi doctrine specified that imams were to be elected by the community, all too often dynasties emerged: the most recent being the Yaʻariba in the 17th century and the Al Bu Saʻid in the 18th. Imams depended on the support of the tribes to maintain control and to resist invaders, but the tribes remained mostly autonomous and developed a patchwork quilt of alliances. When the imamate was strong, the situation was generally one of "tribes *in* the state"; when it was weak, it reversed to "tribes *vs*. the state." By the early 20th century, Oman had bifurcated into a British-supported sultanate on the coast and a resurrected imamate in the interior, dependent on the tribes and principal shaykhs. It was not until the 1950s that Sultan Saʻid bin Taymur Al Saʻid was able to exert his control over the interior and bring the tribes back *in* to the state.[21]

TRIBES, SHAYKHS, AND THE GENESIS OF MODERN STATES

Until well into the 20th century, territoriality was not an important element of sovereignty, which was based instead on control over people. Because leaders relied on strength of personality or the use of force or both to exert their sovereignty, the territories they controlled were extremely fluid, apart from strategic points such as ports or oases. In essence, the territorial extent of their sovereignty was measured by the *dirat* of tribes that pledged allegiance to them. But this did not imply sovereignty. Tribes could, and did, change allegiances; *dirat*, especially those of *badw* tribes, were contested and often shifted over time.[22]

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The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East, ed. Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 82–89. It should also be noted that the Ikhwan were only one, even if a major one, component of the Saudis' consolidation of territory and power. *Hadar* were also prominent in military forces and battles, while the merchants of Najd's various towns provided the funds that allowed ʻAbd al-ʻAziz to finance his campaigns.

21. J. E. Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century: Political Foundations of an Emerging State* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman Under Saʻid Bin Taymur, 1932–1970* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2006). This brief description does not apply to Dhofar in the sultanate's south. Oman really only exerted dominion over the region in the 19th century, and it was not fully integrated into the sultanate until after the Dhofar War of the 1960s and 1970s. On the region's social structure and tribes, see Jörg Janzen, *Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman: Tradition and Development in Dhofar* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986); J. E. Peterson, "Oman's Diverse Society: Southern Oman," *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 254–69. https://doi.org/10.3751/58.2.15.

22. J. C. Wilkinson, "Nomadic Territory as a Factor in Defining Arabia's Boundaries," in *Transformation of Nomadic Society* , ed. Mundy and Musallam, 44–62. In addition, it should be noted that the
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Borders in the Gulf, and therefore territorial sovereignty, were left unsettled until the establishment of air routes (which required the security of airfields and emergency landing grounds along the coast) and, soon after and more importantly, oil concessions.[23] It became necessary to define territorial boundaries in order to permit oil companies to identify the limits of their concessions.[24] Geographic features, such as mountains and deserts, were important criteria for the delineation of boundaries, but geometric projections influenced by European conceptions and mostly initiated by the British (i.e., arbitrary lines drawn on maps as a compromise between competing claims) were even more prevalent. Still, the claims over territory, and therefore boundaries, were dependent on tribes. Consequently, the classification of tribes (or at least sub-tribal groups) as belonging to one ruler or another was required.

Into the 1930s and even the 1940s, state authority remained minimal. Shaykhs were still in the process of evolving into rulers or hakims.[25] The creation of states in a fuller sense followed as oil income began to transform the region.[26] Gradually, shaykhly families were transformed into ruling castes and dependence on tribes was steadily reduced.[27] A notable reshaping started in what became Saudi Arabia in the 1920s and 1930s as Sultan/King ʻAbd al-ʻAziz consolidated his rule and subordinated the tribes in the Ikhwan to his authority. A similar process took place in Oman from the 1950s to the 1970s as Sultan Saʻid, with essential British help, reasserted his control over the interior, a transformation then completed more thoroughly under his son, Sultan Qaboos.

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regional balance of tribal power also was subject to shifts over time, as when the rise of the Al Thani dynasty in Qatar challenged the position of both the Al Khalifa in Bahrain and the Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. The friction between the three groups over the past century and a half may be said to be an underlying factor in embargo of Qatar by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt from 2017 and after. Similarly, the balance of power in what is now the UAE has seen shifts: in the 19th century when the locus of al-Qawasim power shifted from Ras Al Khaimah to Sharjah and in the latter part of the 20th century, when the natural dominance of the coast by the Al Maktum dynasty in Dubai was supplanted by the Al Nahyan because of oil. The balance may well shift back, as the importance of oil diminishes, with the smaller emirates realigning themselves more naturally with the Al Maktum.

23. J. E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), especially chs. 2 and 3.

24. Richard Schofield (ed.), *Territorial Foundations of the Gulf States* (London: University College of London Press, 1994); J. E. Peterson, "Sovereignty and Boundaries in the Gulf States: Settling the Peripheries," in *The International Politics of the Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 21–49.

25. This can even be said of Saudi Arabia, where ʻAbd al-ʻAziz maintained power as much as a traditional shaykh as the ruler of a unified state, despite being styled a king. "When World War II broke out, [ʻAbd al-ʻAziz] worried that he might not be able to subsidize the tribes with food, clothes and cash, because the Pilgrimage revenue, along with his first oil royalties, more or less dried up. Without money he feared that he could not hold his kingdom together, for it was a personal rule, not an institutional state." Wilkinson, "Nomadic Territory," 60. At this time, Oman was of course different with a British-supported sultan who had no control over the interior of the country.

26. Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*; Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Allen Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017); Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century*.

27. Frauke Heard-Bey, "Six Sovereign States: The Process of State Formation," in *The Emergence of the Gulf States*, ed. Peterson, 289–322.

Steffen Hertog noted that, as ruling shaykhs consolidated their position, they co-opted tribes and especially lesser shaykhs into their patronage networks, allowing them to act as intermediaries between the state and their tribes, or they were given administrative functions such as attesting to the status of tribal members.[28] The tribal shaykhs' role in the state enterprise gradually declined as the state apparatus grew in size and function. As ruling shaykhs became monarchs, they tended to rely most closely (beyond members of their own families) on advisers and lieutenants who either had no tribal connections or came from small or loosely organized tribes since they could pose no threat to the ruler. Many were outsiders, either from other Arab countries (such as the Syrian Yusuf Yasin and the Egyptian Hafiz Wahba in Saudi Arabia) or not even Arab (such as the British Sir Charles Belgrave in Bahrain).

TRIBAL ADAPTATION TO THE MODERN STATE

Reference to tribal heritage is at the heart of the creation and maintenance of national myths in the modern Gulf states despite the long presence of significant non-tribal and even non-Arab communities. Tribal descent is what makes the great majority of nationals of these states distinct today from the overwhelming expatriate Arab, Asian, African, and European populations. The enduring myth of tribal membership signifying or guaranteeing citizenship in the state is based on the idea that tribes form the foundations of a pyramidal hierarchy that is the state. For the sake of symmetry, even non-tribal citizens can be brought into the tribal matrix. In Oman, for example, the state appoints a shaykh for the non-Arab Lawatis, who is invested with responsibility for his community as if it were an Arab tribe.

At the highest level, the emphasis on tribal heritage is undeniable in terms of leadership and ruling families. The myth of the ruler as father of the nation is an expansion of the relationship between the shaykh and his tribe. The ruling family represents, even if only in an idealized sense, the apex of the tribal-cum-national system. The result is, in the words of Joseph Kostiner, a "state-tribe symbiosis" that carried through into the oil era and persists today.[29] Equally important is the myth of tribal alliances being responsible for the emergence of the state. A pertinent example is the formative role of Shaykh Zayid bin Khalifa Al Nahyan in the creation of the modern Emirate of Abu Dhabi.[30]

The emphasis politically (at least in the 21st century) is that tribes form subordinate units to the national government. Kinship is less important than relations with and strength of loyalty to ruling families. This, of course, might mean that a particular tribe may claim common origin with a ruling family, but loyalty more often seems to be expressed in terms of alliances created or built upon in the 19th or (pre-oil) 20th centuries.

28. Steffen Hertog, "The Political Decline and Social Rise of Tribal Identity in the GCC," London School of Economics Middle East Centre blog, July 25, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/25/the-political-decline-and-social-rise-of-tribal-identity-in-the-gcc/.

29. Joseph Kostiner, "The Nation in Tribal Societies: Reflections on K. H. al-Naqib's Studies on the Gulf," in *Tribes and States*, ed. Rabi, 227.

30. Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. This Shaykh Zayid should not be confused with his grandson Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan, who founded the United Arab Emirates.

It should be mentioned here that the term *citizen* might be used with some caution. The Arabic *muwatin* more closely translates as "national" or "compatriot," i.e., "of the nation" in the territorial sense. There is little real concept of a citizen in the Gulf in the republican sense: the people belong to the nation or state, and the state is *not* the organ of and for the people as citizens entitled to fundamental rights and participation in civil activities. This supports national myths of the tribe or tribes embracing a collective entity that the state, as personified in the ruler, defends and controls.

Nevertheless, despite the emergence of states, tribalism continues to play a social role. As Nadav Samin demonstrated, genealogy — and particularly descent from noble tribes — is not only employed by the state in Saudi Arabia to organize and control its nationals but is also prized by individuals to indicate their status within society.[31] While tribes have not been able to act effectively against the state in a politically organized sense in the Gulf for a half-century or more, they remain a primary source of identity and a touchstone for social interaction, such as connections (*wasta*) and marriage. Tribal discussion boards exist online in Saudi Arabia, where tribe members can exchange information and ideas about "topics with tribal importance: *nasab* (descent), history, marriage, religion and of course current events in their area."[32] Persistent distinctions between *hadar* and *badw* are more problematic in some states than others. These distinctions are particularly important in Kuwait, but both *hadar* and *badw* are Kuwaiti nevertheless.[33]

This is not to say that there are no political ramifications to tribes in the Gulf. The creation and maintenance of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) has been based on recruitment from Najdi tribes and is widely considered to serve as a praetorian guard for the royal family.[34] Throughout the Gulf, there has been a conscious balance of senior government positions amongst major tribes; this has been particularly apparent in Oman. But these are functions of or within the state; they are not oppositional in nature — although it can be argued that Kuwait's strategy of manipulating tribes to maintain greater control has been transformed into a type of tribal "loyal opposition" to the government.

Tribes have also been innovative in the electoral process. For example, "tribal primaries" to ensure that a particular tribe is represented by its preferred candidate have been a feature in elections for the Kuwaiti parliament for years. Similarly, groups organized along tribal lines and formed tribal alliances to deepen their presence in elections

31. Samin, *Of Sand or Soil*.

32. Sebastian Maisel, "The New Rise of Tribalism in Saudi Arabia," *Nomadic Peoples* 18, no. 2 (2014): 100–122. https://doi.org/10.3197/np.2014.180207.

33. Anh Nga Longva, "Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise: The Discourse on Hadhar and Badu in Kuwait," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (May 2006): 171–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743806412307; Farah al-Nakib, "Revisiting *Hadar* and *Badu* in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing, and the Construction of a Dichotomy." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (Feb. 2014): 5–30. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743813001268.

34. Regimes may feel they cannot invariably rely on tribal loyalty as more powerful security apparatuses develop with a broad composition of personnel. Notably, command of Saudi units, including the SANG, was traditionally restricted to *hadar* officers. Fahad, "The `*Imama* vs. the `*Iqal*," 74n118. Furthermore, loyalties within these units — even when tribally centered — may be compromised by ideology or religious extremism. Witness the violent occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 with Juhayman al-ʻUtaybi leading a neo-Ikhwan group.

to the United Arab Emirates' national council and in elections for municipal councils in Saudi Arabia.[35] In Oman's southern region of Dhofar, non-elite tribes and lower social groups formed inter-tribal coalitions to challenge elite tribes' representation in elections to the national consultative council.[36]

It should be kept in mind that while Saudi Arabia, and Najd in particular, under the Al Sa'ud dynasty demonstrates many similarities to the smaller Gulf states with reference to tribes, it is a more complex country with many distinctive regional patterns. Hijaz is definitely tribal in rural areas, but the cities — Mecca, Medina, Jidda, and Ta'if — have been demographically and socially transformed after a millennium of pilgrims settling there and eventually becoming Hijazis themselves. The Eastern Province is home to several million Shi'a who are non-tribal and traditionally were overwhelmingly cultivators. While the far south of the country is decidedly tribal, the historical orientation was to Yemen and the assimilation of tribes and communities into the Kingdom is still continuing. Even in Najd, the core of Saudi Arabia, variations apply with the existence of many old *hadar* settlements.

Since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, the Gulf states fundamentally remain to a very large extent traditional, small, and largely closed societies. Tribal or family background is an important aspect of assessing an individual's qualifications or worthiness. To assure loyalty throughout all important constituencies, various tribes must be represented throughout government positions or appointments (ministers, civil service, military, police). This calculation is combined with suitable appointments from other major constituencies, such as prominent merchant families or religious notables. Tribal affiliation or identification and connections fulfill needs that the state cannot, particularly in the absence (or weakness) of other sub-state institutions such as political parties or labor unions. In the past, tribes were the principal source of coercive power for rulers. Today, this still matters in terms of retainers and royal guards. The SANG is still largely organized around Najdi tribal personnel. But the nexus of military power has been relocated to professional armed forces that recruit throughout the nation. Internal control, both in terms of coercion and intelligence, is exercised typically by interior ministries. The staffing of state infrastructure increasingly has relied on personal ties (not always tribal) to rulers and ruling families and on elements of meritocracy (including education, intelligence, and political ability). In a practical sense, "kinship" identification (or loyalty) is more and more restricted to extended families. The traditional shaykh's function of looking after the needs of members of the tribe has given way to the state's direct provision of services.[37]

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35. Sultan Al-Qassemi, "Tribalism in the Arabian Peninsula: It Is a Family Affair," *Jadaliyya*, February 1, 2012, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25199.

36. Alice Wilson, "From Revolutions to Elections: When Tribes Transform State Power," London School of Economics Middle East Centre blog, ed. Jack McGinn, July 17, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/17/from-revolutions-to-elections-when-tribes-transform-state-power/.

37. These points are discussed in many sources, but representative treatments may be found in: Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*; Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*; Khaldoun Hasan al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula*, trans. L. M. Kenny (London: Routledge, 1990).

TRIBAL PERSISTENCE AND AUTONOMY IN YEMEN

The multifaceted and disastrous war in Yemen since 2015 makes any analysis of the status of tribes there problematic.[38] Perhaps the most fundamental division of Yemen in modern times was in the 19th and early 20th century between the country's northern half under the Zaydi Shi'i imamate (and kingdom after 1918), which later became the Yemen Arab Republic (or North Yemen), and its southern half under British rule and later the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (or South Yemen). Tribes dominated in both halves even though their relationships with the state differed. The North Yemeni government was not a tribal regime, yet tribalism pervaded much of Yemeni society. The South Yemeni government sought to eliminate tribalism but, as was shown after 1990, simply forced it underground.

Yemen, perhaps more than any other state in the Arab world, largely remains a tribal society and nation.[39] Tribal affiliation in many areas is the norm of large parts of society. Other Yemenis either hold a roughly equal status to the tribespeople, for example, sayyid families, qadi families, and the urban population; or they hold an inferior status, such as the *muzayina* and *akhdam*.[40] Tribes in Yemen hold far greater importance vis-à-vis the state than elsewhere and continued to challenge the pre-2015

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38. The war, ostensibly a revolt against the "internationally recognized" government headed by 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, continues to rage into 2021. Recent assessments of the situation include: Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of a State* (London: Saqi, 2017); Lamya Khalidi, "The Destruction of Yemen and Its Cultural Heritage," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (Nov. 2017): 735–38. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743817000691; Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2017); Isa Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us about the World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Martha Mundy, "The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial Bombardment and Food War," World Peace Foundation (October 9, 2018); Jonathan D. Moyer et al., "Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen," United Nations Development Programme, April 22, 2019; Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Jillian Schwedler (eds.), Special Issue: The Fight for Yemen, *Middle East Report* no. 289 (Winter 2018).

39. For a dissenting view of Yemen as a quintessentially tribal country, see the interview with Yemeni analyst Abdulghani al-Iryani, "Yemen: 'Chaos by Design,'" *Al Jazeera*, March 17, 2011, https://aje.io/7akyl. Iryani stated, "I define tribal as being those whose primary identification is tribal, i.e. if the sheikh calls them to war, they come to his aid. And that applies to about 20 per cent of the population. The other 80 per cent are either urban or peasants, and they are non-tribal. So the over-exaggeration of the tribal nature of Yemen is misplaced." This may be an oversimplification of the definition of *tribal* and more of an city dweller's view; various anthropologists have demonstrated that tribal societies have multiple peaceful values and roles. On the changing nature of tribes and their relations with other social groups, see Helen Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The Transformation of Tribal Roles in Recent Decades," Durham Middle East Papers, Luce Fellowship Paper no. 17 (June 2016).

40. Sayyid families claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad and included the imams of North Yemen and their principal lieutenants. While *qadi* means "judge" in Arabic, it is a semi-hereditary social status in Yemen. *Muzayina* (singular, *muzayyin*) are a sub-class in rural Yemen, relegated to certain "unclean" occupations; while *akhdam* (singular, *khadim*) are a separate lower class who traditionally have swept the streets and similar occupations. See Peterson, "Yemen: Tribes, the State, and the Unravelling," 248n5.

state on various levels. At the same time, a broad swath of central Yemen below the divide between Zaydis and Shafi'i Sunnis — including the highlands around Ta'izz and in the Tihama coastal plain — consists of a more peasantized society where tribal ties and reliance are muted.

Tribalism not only assures membership in a collective unit but defines the tribal member in relation to the world and provides protection and assistance whenever necessary. The family, the clan, the tribe, and the confederation all comprise levels in the individual's identity 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 defines not only membership and status but also territory, since much of the country is finely detailed into a complex tribal geography that has long remained almost unchanged. Therefore, tribal identity is also territorial identity.[41]

While territorial boundaries in Yemen have been generally fixed for centuries, tribal and intra-tribal alliances may change with great rapidity depending on the situation, location, and leadership decisions. Paul Dresch noted, "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."[42] It is tempting to regard shaykhs 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 shaykhs 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.

Tribes provide protection for their members and require members' assistance for their own protection. Especially through shaykhs, tribes 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 shari'a and secular authority have played varying roles in shaping behavior, Sheila Carapico observed that the combination of *qabaliyya* as a code of ethical behavior and *'urf* (common or tribal law) have traditionally "provided both ethical codes and mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes" between and among

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41. Paul Dresch, "The Tribes of Hashid wa-Bakil as Historical and Geographical Entities," in *Arabicus Felix: Luminosus Britannicus; Essays in Honour of A. F. L. Beeston on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Alan Jones (Oxford: Ithaca Press, 1991), 11. There are significant regional variations in the role and structure of tribes. Illustrations of this point in the far north of the country are made in: Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007); Marieke Brandt, "Inhabiting Tribal Structures: Leadership Hierarchies in Tribal Upper Yemen (Hamdan and Khawlan b. 'Amir)," in *Southwest Arabia across History: Essays to the Memory of Walter Dostal*, ed. Andre Gingrich and Siegfried Haas (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2014), 91–116.

42. Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 88. Another explanation observes that "tribes are not fixed, static groups with essences inhering in them." Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 173–74.

small groups in Yemeni society.[43] Many Yemenis continue to prefer tribal justice and shaykhly mediation to the inefficient and often corrupt formal judicial system. The tribe has also served as an economic unit. And even where the population has been "detribalized" into peasantry, it acts collectively to meet emergencies, and sometimes groups maintain common property.[44]

Traditionally, there were five or more main and permanent tribal confederations in the northern half of Yemen, with the most important of these being the Hashid and the Bakil.[45] Part of the reason for the ascendancy of the Hashid was the long-time effective leadership provided by the Ahmar clan of the Humran section of the ʻUsaymat tribe. The other large confederation, the Bakil, did not enjoy the same prominent political role on the national level as the Hashid, although its shaykhs remained influential in their tribal constituencies. With the downfall of the Ahmar clan, Bakil shaykhs again wielded considerable political power under the Zaydi militia Ansar Allah ("supporters of God," known as the Huthi movement after founder Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi).[46]

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. Among northern tribes, the effect of decades of labor migration to Saudi Arabia upset the traditional pecking order, as tribesmen came back with savings and were less inclined to follow the shaykhs. At the same time, many shaykhly families took up residence in towns and cities, loosening their ties to the tribes and thus their influence. This made a potential opening for the government to interfere in what used to be regarded as tribal matters.

In the south, Britain gradually forged treaties of protection with petty rulers and shaykhs in order to protect its control of ʻAden in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The resultant ʻAden Protectorate was a patchwork system of indigenous control and British "supervision." The shaykhs and sultans who had treaties with the British were relegated to the sidelines during the independence struggle in the 1960s. With the success of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in forming an independent government in ʻAden, the tribes went "underground" — and a number of their shaykhs and sultans went into exile in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

The Marxist regime in independent South Yemen promoted nationality as the common identity, not tribalism. The use of tribal names was abolished and party leaders effectively took over the tribal roles that had belonged to shaykhs. Nevertheless, tribal and regional identities defined significant divisions within the ruling party. This was particularly true for schisms between tribes in Lahj and those in Abyan, personified by rivalries within senior NLF ranks of politicians from those areas. Tribesmen from other

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43. Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 64.

44. Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, 63–64.

45. Other confederations are the Madhhaj, which has diminished greatly in influence, the Zaraniq, which has disintegrated, and Khawlan bin ʻAmir in the far north. These confederations are widely discussed in the literature, but see especially Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*; Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

46. Personal communication to the author from Marieke Brandt, September 25, 2019.

areas were relegated to lesser roles or, in the cases of the governorates of Hadramawt and Mahra, often distanced themselves from power struggles in ‘Aden. With the demise of the Marxist government and the unification of Yemen, the south's tribal foundations came back to the fore, and long-standing tribal divisions and cooperation continue to define the political landscape of southern Yemen.[47]

The government of the united Republic of Yemen, formed in 1990 and led until 2011 by ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Salih, pursued contradictory goals. On one hand, it wished 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. The state's fitfully growing reach reduced tribal freedom of action in many areas. On the other hand, Salih worked closely with tribes. After his family, his principal support came from two minor Hashid tribes (one of them his own). Beyond that, he engaged with the entire panoply of northern tribes and especially relied on Hashid support. Salih had little choice but to rely on the tribes for tangible support against a skeptical and growing urban population, southern discontent, and al-Qa‘ida and like-minded religiopolitically based opposition.[48]

As I previously wrote, “After unification, and especially after the 1994 civil war, Salih governed the south in much the same way he had governed the north: with a policy of divide and rule.”[49] Stephen Day observed that “since the Yemeni civil war [of 1994,] Saleh's régime has tried to create an entirely new hierarchy among the southern tribes, appointing relatively insignificant sheikhs to positions of power and influence.”[50] Rather than strengthening his hold over the south, Salih's policy simply reinforced divisions within southern society.

The fall of the Salih regime and the catastrophic war since 2015 have highlighted tribes' continued central political role.[51] But the conflict between the skeleton government of ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Huthi movement is not the only factor in Yemen's disintegration — and not the only one with tribal dimensions. Islamist extremism continues to exist in remote parts of Yemen — Jawf, Ma'rib, and Shabwa — partly because of alliances with some tribes on either practical or ideological grounds.[52] The

47. The situation was additionally complicated by the presence of key political but non-tribal figures of either north Yemeni origin or sayyids from Hadramawt. On the tribal aspects of South Yemen, see Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 215–217.

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

49. Peterson, “Yemen: Tribes, the State, and the Unravelling,” 138.

50. Stephen W. Day, “Power-Sharing and Hegemony: A Case Study of the United Republic of Yemen” (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2001), 446. See also Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Noel Brehony, “From Chaos to Chaos: South Yemen 50 Years after the British Departure,” *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 3 (Nov. 2017): 428–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2017.1361249.

51. As Marieke Brandt wrote, in addition to tribal aspects, “[t]he many other narratives of the Houthi conflict sometimes complement each other, sometimes compete: the sectarian narrative, the domestic political narrative, the boundary narrative, the proxy war narrative, and so on.” Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 4.

52. Extremist objectives, such as that of establishing a jihadist territorial entity, generally run counter to tribal goals and reduce tribes to an extraneous and subordinate status. Sarah Phillips and Rodger Shanahan, “Al-Qa‘ida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen,” Lowy Institute for International Policy analysis

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apparent hardening of belief among many southerners that independence or at least autonomy is necessary and inevitable brings its own tribal and regional dimensions.

COMPARING TRIBES IN YEMEN TO TRIBES IN THE GULF

By and large, while Yemen over the last half-century has been exemplified by both "tribes *in* the state" and "tribes *versus* the state," the Gulf states mainly experience the former, while the latter is overwhelmingly present in Yemen today. The easy explanation for the difference between the Gulf and Yemen might be oil income — the abundance in the Gulf and its inadequacy in Yemen — but perhaps this is too facile. Part of the reason can be ascribed to Yemen's challenging terrain, which hampers communications, localizes the economy, obstructs government intrusion, and engenders isolation. These challenges all strengthen the practical and ideological primacy of the tribe. Differences in the regional environment and the negative effect of external intervention also play a significant role. In this regard, the formative British role in the Gulf can be contrasted with, first, the disruptive impact of North Yemen's civil war in the 1960s (which was an Egyptian-Saudi proxy war to a large extent) and Saudi Arabia's manipulative policies later on.

The distinction is also due to the weak nature of the central government in Yemen. No single tribe or family has exerted any paramount authority since the demise of the northern imamate. Even then, imams tended to exercise a minimalist role for a limited duration. Tribes were never brought under the full control of the state. A significant consequence of the civil war of the 1960s was increased influence and power exercised by the tribes, with both royalists and republicans dependent on tribes to carry out their aims. While leadership after the war was vested in the country's most respected statesman, Qadi 'Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani, he was unable to unify Yemen despite his moral standing. The result was military leadership and weak attempts to exert state authority over a highly fragmented country, large sectors of which were, when left alone, largely self-governing.[53] The tribes remained heavily armed and financially independent in part due to stipends to the shaykhs paid by Saudi Arabia. This situation culminated in 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih's patronage system.

Yemen's decentralized environment does not obtain in the Gulf where oil wealth allowed a peaceful transition, in Philip Salzman's formulation, from the collective responsibility of the tribe to the hierarchical power of the state.[54] As stressed previously, the dominant role of certain tribal families was largely accepted more than a century ago. Gradually over the course of the oil era, socioeconomic change and education, among other factors, worked to decrease effective dependence on the tribe for protec-

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(Nov. 2009: 6–7. See also Sarah Phillips, "What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Program no. 107 (Mar. 2010); Marieke Brandt, "The Global and the Local: Al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," in *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, ed. Virginie Collombier and Olivier Roy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105–30.

53. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*.

54. Philip Carl Salzman, "Tribes and Modern States: An Alternative Approach," in *Tribes and States*, ed. Rabi, 208.

tion and advancement and to increase the state's role. In the Gulf, the role of tribes is largely relegated to genealogical and social aspects, whereas tribes in Yemen retain much of their independence, political relevance, and even armed power.

Still, it remains true and relevant that reference to, and even deference to, tribes in the Gulf as well as Yemen continues to be necessary in disputes or conflicts, both within a single state and especially between neighboring states. Referred to as *bidun* ("without"), stateless people in Kuwait consist of members of tribes who cannot prove their families' presence in the state prior to a stipulated time before the processing of oil. As a consequence, *bidun* have been denied Kuwaiti citizenship and its benefits.[55] There is also the case of some sections of the Al Murra, a major tribe of *badw* background that is present in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The nationality of these particular sections was never conclusively established and serious contention was revived when the so-called Quartet of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt sought to isolate Qatar in June 2017, precipitating an ongoing (though largely dissipated) regional crisis.[56]

Elsewhere, tribes are split between Bahrain and Qatar, and jockeying for their loyalty has been a feature of Bahraini-Qatari politics for decades. Attempts to suborn Omani tribesmen and tribal elements into accepting UAE citizenship have hampered relations between the sultanate and both Abu Dhabi and Ras Al Khaima. Finally, cross-border intrigues and immigration from Yemen's Mahra region into Oman's Dhofar region began during the war there in the 1960s and 70s and continued well after it, gaining more attention with the disintegration of Yemen.

Apart from these cases, "tribes *vs*. the state" is hardly an issue in the Gulf. While "tribes *in* the state" has remained important as shaykhly power and authority evolved into dominance by ruling families. Fossilized leadership has been underpinned by a supposed social contract exchanging political voice for economic prosperity. Furthermore, the experience of the Gulf states in removing the issue of "tribes *vs.* the state" was also shaped by a supportive regional and international environment. For the smaller states, recognition by the British led to a consolidation that saw shaykhs become hakims and dynasties become regimes. Saudi Arabia and Oman followed slightly different patterns later, but all transformation was aided immensely by the advent of oil income and advisory roles by Britain (and then by the United States in the case of Saudi Arabia). The six Gulf states constitute a group of similar monarchies with increasing power and status in a chaotic Arab world. Yemen, though, has encountered enemies on its borders and beyond who interfered with and complicated politics at all levels. Saudi Arabia in particular plied Yemeni governments with cash but simultaneously undercut them with substantial handouts to shaykhs throughout the country, who then resisted subordination to the center. The Gulf states have enjoyed the umbrella support of Britain and the US, cemented by economic and political alliances: Rulers are able to act

55. For more about *bidun* in Kuwait, see Claire Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017). There are *bidun* in other Gulf states as well, but they tend not to be tribal populations. For more, see Noora Lori, *Offshore Citizens: Permanent Temporary Status in the Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

56. Justin Gengler and Buthaina Al-Khelaifi, "Crisis, State Legitimacy, and Political Participation in a Non-Democracy: How Qatar Withstood the 2017 Blockade," *The Middle East Journal* 73, no. 3 (Autumn 2019): 404, https://doi.org/10.3751/73.3.13.

with unchallenged authority on a one-on-one basis with outside powers. Their enemies have been contained and even defeated by the West. Since the 1960s, on the other hand, Yemen has been a battlefield for influence and power by neighbors and outside powers. The present conflict continues the pattern.

In short, tribes in the Gulf states have not disappeared, but their influence on high policy has been greatly minimized. In Yemen, there is no effective state as of the time of writing, and the late Republic of Yemen was a shaky edifice propped up by little more than international recognition and an ability to monopolize rents. As a result, tribes remain essentially independent and are a vital mode of self-identification for many Yemenis. In both cases, tribes remain a vital component of society while exercising varying impacts on state policy.

CONCLUSION

Tribes and tribalism no longer define the states in the Arabian Peninsula. Rather, they — with the possible exception of Yemen after its collapse — tend to underpin states' legitimacy. The tribe provides a principal foundation of the state in Arabia. Tribal ties constitute a subordinate identity that, generally but not always, sustains national identity. Tribes were a major factor in state formation, and they remain an indispensable element of society while exerting varying degrees of leverage and consideration in politics. States not only continue to rely on tribes for support and legitimacy but also employ them as a way of organizing and controlling their nationals. The social and cultural impact of the tribe essentially remains unaltered, and tribal identity continues to be a key marker for most nationals of the peninsula's states. This will not disappear in the foreseeable future, and there is no reason to suppose that tribalism will grow weaker — whether in fragmented Yemen, the supra-tribal monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Oman, or the urbanized smaller Gulf states. Future change may alter the balance between tribe and state, but tribes are not going away any time soon, if ever.