

Arabian Peninsula Background Notes

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Tribes and Politics in Yemen

Yemen's government is not a tribal regime. Yet tribalism pervades Yemeni society and influences and limits Yemeni politics. The 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih regime depends essentially on only two tribes, although it can expect 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 shaykhs also serve as officers but their control over their own tribes is often suspect. Many tribes oppose the government in general on grounds of autonomy and self-interest. The Republic of Yemen (ROY) government can expect to face tribal resistance to its authority if it moves aggressively or inappropriately in both 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 ROY politics as other constituencies and political parties do. Tribalism is a strong force but not a monolithic one with a universal point of view.

The Tribal Nature of Yemen

Yemen, perhaps more than any other state in the Arab world, is fundamentally a tribal society and nation. 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 sayyids and the qadi families, or they are inferior, such as the muzayyins and the akhdam. 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'izz and in the Tihamah coastal plain - consists of a more peasantized society where tribal ties and reliance is muted. Nevertheless, the "detrribalized" peasantry still possess tribal names.

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,

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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.¹

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 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. “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.”²

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.

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’ah* 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

1. Paul Dresch, “The Tribes of Hashid wa-Bakil as Historical and Geographical Entities,” in Alan Jones, ed., *Arabic Felix: Luminous 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.

2. Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 88.

disputes.”³

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 and providing labor for local “public works.” Even where the population has been “detrribalized” into peasantry, it acts collectively to meet emergencies and some maintain common property.⁴

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, LDA). 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 LDAs throughout northern Yemen in the 1970s. Typically these cooperatives built schools, roads, drinking-water systems,⁵ and other locally required improvements.⁵ 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, shaykhs emerge from established shaykhly families although it is not required. 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.⁶

There are some exceptions, which are generally the paramount shaykhs 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.⁷ 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

3. 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.

4. Carapico, *Civil Society*, p. 64.

5. Carapico, *Civil Society*, p. 109.

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

7. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History*, p. 102.

even in order of precedence. Indeed, the number of shaykhly families is indeterminately large. At any given time, the extent of the unit with which each is identified seems arbitrary, and as we have already seen, it is not the rule for a higher-order section or for a tribe to reorganize a single shaykh. Where one is recognized he is referred to as 'the shaykh of shaykhs' (*shaykh al-mashāyikh*), a title which for convenience we can gloss as paramount shaykh. His position is expressed in a document which his brother shaykhs in the tribe all sign."⁸

Traditionally there were four main and permanent tribal confederations in Yemen. The most important of these are the Hashid and the Bakil. The Madhhaj lost importance in the twentieth century (in part because elements were absorbed by the Bakil) and the fourth confederation 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 subsidiary tribes. Their total population has been estimated at more than 500,000.⁹

Part of the reason for the ascendancy of Hashid has been the long-time effective leadership provided by Bayt al-Ahmar, of the Humran section of al-'Usaymat 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 'Abdullah 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, he 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-'Usaymat, Kharif, and Bani Suraym – remained such a cohesive unit was the steady leadership of Shaykh 'Abdullah.

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. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Shayif (from the Dhu Husayn) was unable to command much influence over his own tribe, let alone allied ones, and consequently 'Abdullah al-Ahmar possessed the ability to summon Bakili tribes to war.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Abu Luhum family 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

8. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History*, p. 102.

9. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History*, p. 24.

10. 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.

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 shaykhs. 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 shaykhs 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 thus membership is hereditary. Historically, the sayyids played a key role in Yemeni politics, particularly in the north. The Zaydi imams had to be of sayyid descent and they generally appointed members of other sayyid families as their lieutenants and provincial governors. More generally, sayyids served as neutral arbiters between tribes and religious scholars. Their villages were considered *hijrah*, i.e. protected places. The revolution of 1962 and demise of the royalist cause during the ensuing civil war severely impacted the status and role of the sayyids. The Hamid al-Din family, from whose ranks the last four imams came, was banned from the country. Many other sayyids were killed in the 1960s and their property confiscated. Their position among the tribes suffered as well, an effect exacerbated by the ouster of sayyids from their countryside homes and emigration to the cities where they entered commerce and government administration.

Nevertheless, a number of prominent

sayyid families have continued to play a political role. Examples of prominent sayyids in the previous Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the present ROY would include the following. Yahya b. Muhammad al-Mutawakkil (Bayt al-Mutawakkil of Shaharah), an army officer during the 1960s civil war, member of the Revolutionary Command Council that seized power in 1974, and subsequently an ambassador and government minister. ‘Ali b. Qasim al-Mu’ayyad (Bayt al-Mu’ayyad of Sa’dah) was an ambassador and member of the Consultative Council. Ibrahim al-Kibsi (Bayt al-Kibsi of al-Kibsi in Khawlan al-Tiyal) ran the royalists’ office in Jiddah during the 1960s civil war and later served as Deputy Foreign Minister. Members of the Sharaf al-Din family (of Kawkaban) have served in lesser government positions.

The Bayt al-Wazir (of Wadi SIRR in Bani Hushaysh) sought to overthrow the Hamid al-Din imam in 1948 and named their own imam. Later, they formed a “Third Force” between royalists and republicans during the 1960s civil war. Isma’il b. Ahmad al-Wazir served as the longtime YAR and ROY minister of justice and legal affairs. Ibrahim b. ‘Ali, mostly based in the United States and married into the Abu Ra’s shaykhly family, has continued to be a thorn in the side of Yemeni governments, frequently accused of forming political/religious groups seeking to advance Zaydi and family causes. He was a primary founder and head of the Union of Popular Forces.

In the south, the sayyid families saw their position imperilled by independence and many fled the country. Their subsequent role in ROY politics largely has been one of opposition to the Sanaa government. The al-Jifri family provides a good example. Muhammad al-Jifri played a traditional

mediatory role in 'Awlaqi from the 1930s but is better remembered as president of the South Arabian League, formed in 1951. His son Yahya served as the minister of trade and industry in the short-lived Democratic Republic of Yemen (DRY) government. Just as prominent as Muhammad is 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Ali al-Jifri, who moved to Saudi Arabia after Aden's independence and allegedly gained Saudi citizenship. After unity, he founded the Sons of Yemen League in Yemen, an small independent conservative party, and became a member of parliament. Not surprisingly, 'Abd al-Rahman threw his lot in with the southern secessionists and was rewarded with the position of vice-president of DRY. Escaping into exile, he took advantage of a 2006 amnesty to return to Yemen. 'Ali b. Zayn al-'Abdin al-Jifri has attracted attention as a strict Islamist and supporter of al-Islah. Another Jifri, 'Adnan b. 'Umar, serves as the ROY minister of justice.

The sayyids of the Hadramawt played more of a regional role during the Protectorate period and their families were well represented in the Hadrami diaspora across the Indian Ocean. In the absence of powerful tribal leaders, the British supported Hadrami sayyid families in their quest for "state-building" in the region, who worked in alliance with the Qu'ayti ruler. The 'Attas family not only provided a descendant who served as Indonesia's foreign minister but Haydar b. Abu Bakr al-'Attas, an engineer, was elected to the Politburo of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) of South Yemen. In the aftermath of the January 1986 bloody infighting for control of the YSP, Haydar was selected as President of South Yemen because of his neutral, technocratic status. He also served as the first Prime Minister of the united ROY until joining the secessionist south during the 1994

civil war (which named him the DRY Prime Minister). Mention might also be made of Bu Bakr al-Kaf, a Hadrami sayyid who made a fortune in Singapore but spent all of it on public and charitable works in the impoverished Kathiri State during the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹

Similarly, the qadi families have played significant historical roles in northern Yemen. Unlike the sayyids 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 sayyids after the revolution, in part because they had tended to oppose the Hamid al-Din imams well before 1962.

Perhaps the most prominent qadi family is that of al-Iryani. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani served as President of the YAR from 1967 until 1974 and his cousin 'Abd al-Karim was the longtime Prime Minister during much of President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih's tenure. Muhammad, from another branch of the family, served as ambassador to the United States and provincial governor. Other Iryanis have been YAR and ROY ministers. The widespread al-'Ansi family has also provided government officials and ministers, both during the time of the imams and in the YAR and ROY governments. Because they have been unable to protect their qadi status adequately, the family has made an

11. It might also be mentioned that some Hadrami sayyid families migrated over the centuries across the border into the Dhufar region of Oman and from there to the eastern Omani port of Sur. The present Omani foreign minister, Yusuf b. 'Alawi b. 'Abdullah, and former minister of trade and commerce Salim al-Ghazzali are contemporary representatives of these families.

arrangement with the Ahmad b. Kūl faction of the Dhu Muhammad tribe, which has effectively made them tribesmen.¹² (Al-'Ansi should not be confused with al-Anisi, i.e. from the prominent tribe of al-Anis.)

Another long-important family is al-'Arashi. The best-known family member in recent times was 'Abd al-Karim b. 'Abdullah whose father represented Imam Yahya in Aden. 'Abd al-Karim became a trusted subordinate of Ibrahim al-Hamdi and then Ahmad al-Ghashmi. Upon the latter's assassination, 'Abd al-Karim served as acting President and many felt that he should assume the office permanently since he was in the mold of former president 'Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani. Although 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih managed to snare the presidency, 'Abd al-Karim continued in public service as speaker of the Majlis al-Shura, vice-president of the YAR, and member of the ROY presidential council at unity. Other members of the family included Mahmud b. 'Abdullah and Yahya b. Husayn, both of whom served as ROY ministers of tourism. In the end, it could perhaps be concluded that qadi families, although still important in rural areas, now play only a relatively marginal role on the national scene.

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, imams were forced to call upon tribal levies to defend the region, defeat rivals, and impose order. To ensure compliance of the tribes, the Imams kept sons of shaykhs hostage in Sanaa, where they received their education. Thus, when Imam Yahya was 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'izz 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 shaykhs 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 and the area of the Radfan mountains, north of Aden and abutting North Yemen, was continually challenging British authority. The Royal Air Force (RAF) 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

12. 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.

1949 against the Subayhi tribe, the Mansuri (a section of Subayhi), and the Qutaybi on at least five occasions each.¹³

Again, tribes in the north and south were instrumental in the replacement of these two regimes. The failure of the assassination of new Imam Muhammad al-Badr in September 1962 provoked a long civil war between republicans and royalists. 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 20th 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 to the Imamate of these shaykhs cost them considerable standing within their tribes.

Many of the shaykhs and sultans who had enjoyed treaty relations with the British joined in the attempts to create the South Arabian Federation and/or joined the conservative South Arabian League seeking British withdrawal. 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 1966-1967 period were killed by the National Liberation Front (NLF) and by the Front for the Liberation of Occupied Southern Yemen (FLOSY). Many retired to comfortable lives in Jiddah and only a few continued to intrigue against the new government in Aden.

Strenuous efforts were made to paint the resistance to the PDRY 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 PDRY 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 members of which 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 DRY 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

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

as part of the old order that had been eliminated. Nevertheless, the NLF party leadership and the ranks of the officer corps and civil servants not surprisingly included a high proportion of tribespeople. As the NLF'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. 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 Afghans 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. Bakil tribes, presumably desirous of acting against Sanaa and loosely allied with the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP, descended from the NLF) stayed out of the fray as did those of al-Madhhaj.

Tribes in the ROY State

The ROY government 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 or 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 ROYG presence. This is nothing new. The imams confronted considerable and stubborn resistance to their control, as did the Ottomans, the British, and the Egyptians.

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 religiopolitical-based opposition.

In truth, the regime has chosen 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 shaykhs, including incorporating their participation in the system as well as securing through them the cooperation of their tribal units. The regime also has 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 has resurfaced in fighting against the Huthi group in the far north.

It is obvious that President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih has a tribal background. It is also obvious that he has created an inner web of support from members of his family, his clan, and his fellow Sanhani tribesmen. Furthermore, he has co-opted some prominent non-Sanhani Hashidis, as well as the Hashidi tribe of Hamdan San'a'.

But it should not be assumed from this that Salih's rule is tribally based. The idea that the regime is a condominium of Zaydi and Hashidi interests is misleading. While tribes as a whole and certain tribes - or sections of tribes - have some affinity with the present regime, they are 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 - what to

call it? - urbanization, nationalization, globalization of major shaykhs. Many of these now live in Sanaa, some have positions in the government or military, and most are engaged in commerce.

'Ali 'Abdullah Salih's authority rests most fundamentally on three concentric rings of support.¹⁴ The first is that of immediate relatives. These would include his brother Muhammad as head of Central Security, his half-brother 'Ali Salih as head of the Republican Guard, his nephew Yahya Muhammad 'Abdullah Salih as head of Central Security, and most importantly his son Ahmad, who most Yemenis believe is being groomed to replace his father in the manner that Bashshar al-As`ad replaced his father Hafiz. The inner circle also includes the president's eldest daughter Bilqis, who enjoys considerable influence despite not having any significant position, and his son-in-law Muhammad Duwayd, head of the Presidential Palace. The web is commercial as well as political: the president assumed a partnership role in Hayl Sa'id Enterprises, Yemen's largest company, his nephew Tawfiq took over the tobacco and matches company, his maternal cousin 'Abdullah al-Qadi began running the pharmaceutical monopoly, and a son-in-law, 'Abd al-Khaliq al-Qadi, headed the national airline.

The second circle consists of members of the president's Bayt al-Ahmar clan. Perhaps the most prominent of the broader clan is 'Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, commander of military forces in the northwest of the country and the prosecutor (many say the instigator) of the war against the Huthi group in Sa'dah province.

14. A good exposition of the relationships, ties, and offices is given in Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, pp. 189 and 201-203.

The third circle involves two tribes, the president's own Sanhan and the allied Hashidi tribe, Hamdan San'a'. 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 San'a' with the regime derives from it being the tribe of President Ahmad al-Ghashmi, who succeeded and may have ordered the killing of President Ibrahim al-Hamdi. During Ghashmi's brief presidency (1977-1978), 'Ali 'Abdullah 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, using 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).¹⁵

Rather than being a tribally based system of rule, the Yemeni regime seems 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, 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih has been 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 shaykhs – into the system. Salih relies upon tribes for armed manpower at times and major shaykhs have been co-opted into the system through payments, government and officer positions, seats in parliament, and commercial opportunities. But Salih does not exert the same level of control across the state that Saddam did. The tribes of Yemen have not been integrated into the political system under Salih's control. Instead, they constitute one sector of players or constituencies in the grand game of Yemeni politics. Salih does not control them: he deals with them, he prods them, he contests them.

Rather than there existing another level of allied tribes supporting the regime – even amongst Hashid – Salih has cultivated allied shaykhs. The most important of these was Shaykh 'Abdullah Husayn al-Ahmar. Shaykh 'Abdullah played various roles on the national scene since the civil war of the 1960s, 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 YAR. 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

15. Paul K. Dresch, "The Tribal Factor in the Yemeni Crisis," in Jamal S. al-Suwaidi, ed., *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 1995), pp. 41-42.

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 'Ali 'Abdullah 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 (YSP) of the south, becoming junior partner in an alliance with Salih's General People's Congress (GPC). When Salih determined that he could do without the alliance, al-Islah was jettisoned into the opposition. This does not indicate a break between Salih and 'Abdullah, 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 has frosty relations and a major reason why Saudi Arabia quietly supported the south in the 1994 war.

Other shaykhs have been co-opted into the Sanaa web, both in politics and in commerce. Some have served as ministers in various governments. Mujahid Abu Shawarib of the Kharif tribe, a relative (and rival) of 'Abdullah Husayn al-Ahmar, rose from a minor tribal position answering to Shaykh 'Abdullah to a prominent military career and head of the Yemeni Ba'thi 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.

Another larger-than-life figure from the time of the 1960s civil war was Sinan b. 'Abdullah 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 YAR, he opposed President 'Abdullah al-Sallal and supported the "third force" leading 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-'Ayni, a self-described Ba'thist, 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 'Ali, 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 'Ali 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 shaykhs of Dhu Husayn for generations and several shaykhs in the last

century or two have died opposing the Ottomans and the imams. Shaykh Najji b. 'Abd al-'Aziz was elected paramount shaykh of the Bakil about 1981 but he was soon suborned by 'Ali 'Abdullah 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 shaykhs, 'Abdullah b. Husayn al-Ahmar, died on 29 December 2007. Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Ahmar's death prompts several key questions. First, can his position and influence within the regime be replicated by someone else, most notably one of more of his sons? Four of 'Abdullah's sons have held parliamentary positions (two with the GPC 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 (JMP). In recent years, he has become increasingly critical of the president and the GPC. 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 JMP into a coalition government.

Husayn is a former GPC member of parliament, who hinted at creating an alternative party in 2005 when he was not elected to the GPC's General Secretariat. This idea evolved into the National Solidarity Council (NSC), created in 2007, consisting of shaykhs (largely Hashid?), businessmen, and academics, with Husayn as its chairman. Not a real party, the NSC 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 was elected head of Hashid upon his father's death. In addition, Himyar, a GPC MP, is Deputy Speaker of Parl. and Midhaj is a members of parliament under the Islah banner.

The temptation to answer the question of whether Shaykh 'Abdullah can be replaced is no, that he was *sui generis*. 'Abdullah 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, 'Abdullah made his reputation during critical and unique periods in Yemen's evolution: the early years of the reconciled YAR, 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. Both Hamid and Husayn have chosen to oppose the government and

presumably could achieve greater influence or position only if the government fell or they were co-opted. Sadiq may be head of Hashid but, as pointed out elsewhere in this paper, the title of shaykh al-mashayikh does not carry the same resonance that it did in times past, even when 'Abdullah b. Husayn was still the shaykh. More broadly, factors mitigating against a smooth continuation of strong al-Ahmar influence in the present regime are (a) the variable qualities of the sons (who have been involved in at least several shoot-outs with security personnel in Sanaa), (b) the president's declining need for a figure of 'Abdullah's unique status, and (c) the decreased importance of tribal blocs to underpin the regime.

It could be argued that Yemeni circumstances remain fluid enough for someone else to rise to prominence. But from where? Secular, "liberal," politicians in Sanaa have insignificant power bases and the army has been molded to serve 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih's purpose. Mujahid Abu Shawarib, 'Abdullah's fellow Hashidi and brother-in-law, would have dearly liked to supplant 'Abdullah and even 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih but never succeeded and, in addition, he had the misfortune to pass from the scene before 'Abdullah. His son Jubran, although now head of Kharif, does not have the standing of his father. 'Abd 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 the 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).

The second question is there any other figure with a shaykhly background who can rally the tribes either in support of or in opposition to the regime? The sons of other key shaykhs from an older generation, such as

Jibrān and Yahya b. Muhammad Abu Shawarib, Saba b. Sinan Abu Luhum, and Muhammad b. Naji al-Shayif, have found it difficult to follow in their father's footsteps 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 at the turn of the 21st century,

Shaykh 'Abdullah 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)."¹⁶

At this point, succession to 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih would most likely be from someone within the clique he has established. Most notably, he has been pushing his son Ahmad to succeed him but it could well be someone else close to him. The name of 'Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar has been advanced but it may well be that 'Ali Muhsin is too confrontational, too Islamist, and too tainted by his imbrolios in

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

the war against the Huthis. The essential point for the purposes of this paper is that succession is most likely to lie within the narrow base fashioned over the past thirty years. While that base has a very strong tribal component, "tribal" in this context means the superior position of just two tribes, Salih's own Sanhan and the allied Hamdan San'a', not even the rest of Hashid and certainly not the Bakil. 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 ROY government and socialization into a wider Yemeni context makes their tribal affiliation almost incidental in a political context.

While tribal shaykhs may entertain lofty ambitions and tribespeople chafe paradoxically at the intrusion and the weakness of the central government, it seems clear that the capability – or unity – of the tribes en masse to alter the course of Yemeni politics has become severely limited. This is not to say that tribes are unimportant but just that they create nuisances for the government and are no longer corporate actors beyond the local level.

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 (GPC) 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 shaykhs and sons of shaykhs occupy a number

of GPC seats in parliament. But, after all, tribespeople constitute a significant number, if not a majority, 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 ally themselves with the GPC, the most powerful party in Yemen and the party of the president.

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, 'Abdullah b. Husayn al-Ahmar and 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani. 'Abdullah 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, 'Abd 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 'Ali 'Abdullah 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 GPC.

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 would 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 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. 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, even 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.¹⁷ 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.

A striking effect of changes in the 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih period has been the transformation of many major shaykhs 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, these shaykhs no longer reside in their tribal territories but in the capital. Their interests are geared toward business and political concerns are often to secure and defend a seat in parliament, often as a member of the GPC.

One of the early prompts for this transformation was the emergence of so-called "youth shaykhs." 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 cooperatives (also known as local development associations or LDAs). Indeed, 'Abdullah 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.

The most prominent example of this sea-change undoubtedly was 'Abdullah al-Ahmar. Details of his transformation and of his career are given above. While his death has left a vacuum in national affairs and in effective leadership of al-'Usaymat as well as Hashid, his emergent role and status as part of the Sanaa scene probably will mean that his son Sadiq will not replace him as a paramount shaykh in the same way.

Another alternative for the ambitions of "youth shaykhs" was a career as an army

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

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

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 (tribal law), and, in one case, another attempt to frame larger tribal concerns within a Bakili framework. As one observer has put 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.¹⁸ The formation of the National Solidarity Council in 2007 may be seen in a similar light: although a coalition mostly of tribes and shaykhs, 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, if not 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. In addition to being subjected to socioeconomic and political change that has occurred during the Salih era, the Hashid have also seen their paramount shaykh, 'Abdullah b. Husayn al-Ahmar transformed from a leader and representative of the Hashid party to a government insider with his political and financial interests centered in Sanaa and less with his tribesmen. His own al-'Usaymat tribe has not benefitted materially from his presence on the national scene. In general, individual tribes are on their own, resulting in severe limitations of influence or power, and attempts to resurrect alliances or confederations do not produce much.

18. Dresch, "Tribal Factor," pp. 49-54.

Tribes vs. the ROY State

Some observers have postulated that there has been a major change in the nature of tribes and tribalism in Yemen since the 1990s, driven in part by the distancing of shaykhs from their tribes – i.e. the shaykhs have been drawn to the center, leaving their constituents to fend for themselves economically and psychologically.¹⁹ At the same time, the greater mobility of tribespeople, including labor migration abroad, reduced tribal loyalty.

This 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. ‘Abdullah 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 relying on tourists that 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 ‘Abidah tribe has a thorough history of kidnappings, the smuggling of drugs, and providing sanctuary to extremist groups. Special forces searching for extremists in ‘Abidah 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 ‘Abidah 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

19. Dresch, “Tribal Factor,” pp. 35 and 38.

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 ROY 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-YAR. An al-Madhhaj/Bakil alliance was actively sought by some, even in conjunction with the sayyid-organized Union of Popular Forces or the YSP. 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.²⁰

Given the weakness of the state and its inability to improve the standard of living of its people, tribes and tribespeople have become increasingly exasperated with the government and the now-urban-based officer and businessman shaykhs. 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 shaykhs from neighboring regimes while well-heeled Islamists in the Gulf fund religious institutes and charities, fueling a growth in Islamist sentiment in the countryside.

Tribal unrest in the south most likely will grow for two almost inevitable reasons. First, northern domination of the south will 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 ROY government (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 YSP 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 imams and sayyids, and more extremist tendencies. Neither al-Qa'idah nor the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army has seemed to garner extensive public support.

Tribes provide many of the foot soldiers for Islamist opposition in Yemen but few leaders or ideologues. Tribal connection with

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

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 ‘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 Afghans, not surprisingly, include tribesmen.

Of course, appeals to tribal honor may cause a tribe to provide assistance to an Islamist tribal member and some shaykhs, 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 has drawn closer to the GPC, allegedly to advance his chances of regaining family property and his own prosperity. 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 GPC candidate than one from al-Islah.²¹

The operations against the Believing Youth 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 heavyhanded 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 peripatetic 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

21. 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.

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 take advantage of Sanaa's unpopular connection to the United States. 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 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.

Tribal Aspects of Yemen's International Relations

The connections of Yemeni tribes to Saudi Arabia are long and complex. Yemenis nearly unanimously hold the opinion that the provinces of Najran, 'Asir, and Jizan were stolen by the Saudis in the 1934 war. Tribal, sectarian, and cultural linkages still abound. The populations of those lost provinces may be overtly Sunni but many appear to harbor Zaydi backgrounds. There is a very close connection between the Isma'ilis of Najran and those of Yemen. The Najrani tribe of Yam, an Isma'ili tribe, has maintained close relations with Yemeni Isma'ilis. The Yam asserted their control over the Isma'ili Jabal Haraz region west of Sanaa in the eighteenth century, and more recently served as soldiers in the army of

Imam Yahya. The Hashidi Hamdan and Bakili Wa'ilah tribes also straddle the border.

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 shaykhs. Shaykh 'Abdullah Husayn al-Ahmar was always regarded as the Saudis' man in Sanaa (or at least one of them). 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.

At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia has long cultivated a penchant for shooting itself in the foot when it comes to Yemen. In 2000, poverty amongst the Isma'ilis, resentment of Al Sa'ud greed in the region, and the invasion of a mosque by mutawwi'in in Najran set off a major disturbance resulting in dozens of Isma'ili deaths at the hands of Saudi police. The government accused those arrested of practicing witchcraft and sentenced

seventeen of them to death (their sentences were later reduced). Another incident in 2008 stoked Yemeni anger more strongly. Eighteen Yemenis who had illegally entered the kingdom near Khamis al-Mushayt were captured by Saudi border guards and set on fire. After interrogation and medical treatment, they were deported to Yemen. The Saudi government denied the reports and claimed that they had been rescued from a fire in a garbage dump. Additionally, the Saudi decision a few years ago to build a large-scale barrier wall between the kingdom and Yemen not only aroused the ire of Yemeni nationalists but in particular incensed the Wa'ilah since it threatened to split the tribe completely in two.

Although the Dhufar war of the 1960s and 1970s was an internal rebellion, the Popular Front received sanctuary and material assistance from South Yemen. While Dhufari tribes naturally were in the thick of the war on both sides, Yemeni tribes were only marginally involved in the fighting. However, the territory of the Mahrah nation spans the present border between Yemen and Oman. A number of Mahri tribes or sections of tribes defected from Yemen to Oman, in large part because life on the Omani side was more promising than poor austere PDRY. There are also several Mahri and other South Arabian tribes residing astride the border. Furthermore, since the three main clans of Salalah, one mountain tribe, and the largest of the badu tribes inland are Kathiri, there are ties to the Yemeni Kathiri although these are not thought to be close.

The reaching of a border agreement between Yemen and Oman in the mid-1990s opened the border up to freer crossings and trade. One unanticipated effect was a certain amount of banditry by Yemeni tribesmen inside Oman. This, however, has remained a

criminal problem without political consequences. Almost paradoxically, Oman's history of hostility with South Yemen dissipated after Yemeni unity and in the 1994 Yemeni civil war, Oman tilted carefully towards the secessionist south. A prominent businessman in Oman, Ahmad Farid al-'Awlaqi, pleaded the southern case to the sultan and after joining the fighting was named DRY governor of Shabwah. He returned to Oman afterwards to resume concentration on his business empire. In the following 14 years, there were few issues to mar Yemeni-Omani relations and no serious issues arose with tribes from either state's border regions.

There are at least two different reasons why Yemeni tribes may have a broader impact on Yemeni foreign policy. The first is their innate conservatism. On the local level, this translates to suspicion of the government and its local representatives, as well as foreigners connected to the government. On a more national level, perceptions of government are ambivalent. The government can provide benefits but also it can restrict freedom and, especially through the corruption of local and national officials, can act capriciously. Encouragement by foreign powers, including or especially the United States, of more government intrusion in tribal areas and affairs in furtherance of counter-terrorism activities may well provoke a tribal backlash and, given the proliferation of arms in the country, violence.

The second reason derives from the impact of international media. While newspapers and satellite television may be restricted to the better educated and more prosperous sectors of the population, radio broadcasts and word of mouth keeps people in remote areas abreast of news regarding their country, the Arab world, and the West. As long ago as the 1930s and

1940s, Western visitors to Yemen were frequently quizzed over events in Palestine, Communism, and the progress of World War II. In a more globalized world, it should not be surprising that Yemenis of all varieties, including the average tribesperson in Razih or Radfan, will be aware of American activity in Iraq and support for Israel. But the consequent hostility to the United States it provokes is not a “tribal” phenomenon as such

attitudes can be observed throughout Yemen society. It can be reliably postulated that collective tribal action against a foreign threat is possible only in the event of foreign/ROY action against the tribe, its allies, or its members.