

YEMEN, THE TRIBE AND THE STATE

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1. Introduction

Republic of Yemen, founded in May 1990, represents the only democratic country on the Arabian Peninsula. It is still facing serious political, social, and economic challenges. Because the primary social unit of the Yemen's social structure is the tribe, scholars exploring Yemeni politics have often assumed that tribalism plays a negative role in the political life, thus exacerbating the problems the country faces. This essay is an attempt to explore the relationship between the state and the tribe in Yemen and to assess the constraints, if any, that the tribal structure puts on the country's political process. By doing so, I will first touch on primary issues pertaining to the historical background of Yemen and its tribal structure. I will then go on to describe the relationship between the tribes and the state before and after the unification, and conclude with some implications of the state-tribe relations on statehood and nation-building. The paper, nonetheless, does not claim to have any theoretical connotation. It is an attempt to understand the reality of the state-tribe relations in Yemen during different periods.

2. Historical background of the tribal role in Yemen

The primary social unit of Yemen and, more generally, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula is the tribe. The Qahtan tribal confederation -believed to be the descendants Qahtan of Noah's sons -are common in the south of the Peninsula, especially in Yemen and parts of Oman.¹ Their life style is different from their nomadic counterparts in the northern parts of the Arabian peninsula. They are peasants who settled and established themselves in certain areas -a feature that allowed them to create the ancient agricultural civilization of South Arabia.

In fact, the tribes in ancient Yemen constituted the structural foundation of the state, at the time in the form of kingdoms. These kingdoms, such as Ma'ien, Shiebah, and Himiar, were not only named after certain tribes. Some historians have even

asserted that in certain cases the leaders of particularly powerful tribes were able to unify the tribes into a confederation and could become kings themselves. Over time a functional separation between the ruling monarchy and the tribal institution was nonetheless evident. For example, the kingdom of Ma'ien which dates back to the 14th century BC, was founded based on a tribal and monarchical alliance.

Accordingly, the country was ruled by two establishments: the king or the queen and a tribal council composed of the tribal confederation. However, the king or the queen had limited power and was required to consult the council in state's affairs, taxation land ownership, and agricultural

regulations. The tribe in this framework was a positive factor that enabled its members to settle in designated areas, organize economic activities, and while at the same time further the ability of the state to control a particular area and extract resources.²

The collapse of this ancient state characterized the beginning of the tribal independence of the state. It also designated the difference between the role of the tribe in the Southern part of Yemen and its counterpart in the North. The most dominant tribes in the South belong to the Himiar and Madhhij confederations. The presence of fertile lands in this area encouraged the inhabitants to maintain their economic activities and to work as farmers, at the time of the central state's disintegration. Agriculture helped to dissolve to a certain degree the tribal roots of these groups and led to the creation of semi-feudal separate entities in the region. In the mountainous and less fertile lands of the North, by contrast, the Hashid and Bakil confederations are most prevailing. The diminishing role of the state deprived these territories from the economic resource base, given that because of the relative infertility of the land agriculture was not an available option. War, consequently, was the new tool to extract resources for the residents of these areas. In doing so they resorted to their tribal origins for protection. As a result, the role of the tribal institutions was accentuated and they gained strong hold in the social structure of the northern part of Yemen.³

The resulting tribal divisions in these areas, and the weakness of the central state, facilitated the interference of foreign powers and the country was divided along tribal lines. Even when Yemen was integrated in the Islamic state starting around 615-619 AC, its remoteness and mountainous topography provided subsequently refuge for deviant Islamic sects and the north continued to be shaped by constant stability and war.⁴

The Southern part of Yemen, during the same period, was divided into small political entities ruled by Sultans, Sheiks, and Princes. These rulers were actually heads of tribal confederations. However, the semi-feudal character of the region and the balance of power between these entities effectively weakened the individual power of the tribes and were, thus, more prone to accept the hegemony of their leaders⁵

It was against this background of political fragmentation that the country by the mid-19th century was divided between the Ottoman empire in the North and Great Britain in the South.

3. The Tribes in North and South Yemen before Unification

3.1. North of Yemen

Two distinct periods of Yemen's contemporary political history may highlight the relationship between the state and the tribes in the North of Yemen: the period before and after the 1962 watershed. The character of this relationship ranged from the state's confrontation with the tribes to incorporation. As further discussed below, during the Mutawakkilīat rule, the state was, generally speaking, strong enough to control the tribes. Its methods in dealing with the tribes, however, were insufficient to effectively integrate the tribes into the political system. Only the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962 marked the beginning of the state's embodiment in the tribes, but tribal influence enhanced political instability of the system.

First, the Mutawakiliat Kingdom 1911-1962

The move towards independence in North Yemen took place during the early twentieth century. Imam Yahia -a Zaydist -was able to temporarily unify the divided tribes and took military action against the Ottoman rulers. As a result, the Ottoman government in 1911 was forced to sign a treaty acknowledging his sovereignty in the area. In 1918, Imam Yahia declared the creation of the Mutawakiliat kingdom -a theocratic state -but basic tribal divisions and resistance to the central government persisted.⁶ Consequently, in dealing with the tribes, Imam Yahia and his successor Ahmed, between 1918 and 1962, tried to implement a carrot and stick approach. They resorted to this method because they needed the tribes to fight rivals to their personal power, but they were also determined to keep the tribes weak enough so they could not become a threat to the Imamate authority. In order to ensure the tribes' compliance, the Imams applied two techniques, the first being the Hostage System: the Imam held the sons and brothers of tribal leaders (Sheiks) as hostages in the capital Sana'a. If a tribe attempted to oppose the Imam's authority, its members, held as hostages, were killed. The second technique followed the old principle "divide and rule". The Imam undertook deliberate efforts to create constant conflicts and wars between the tribes and played one off against the other. The carrot was offered in the form of monthly financial stipends paid to the Sheiks of the Hashid and Bakil confederations. In addition, tribesmen were recruited as soldiers and were then relocated to the agricultural areas whose inhabitants were forced to provide them with free food and shelter. Finally, as a reward for supporting the Imam against a rival, he would allow also the supporting tribes to enter the insurgent city for three days to loot and plunder. Such was the case in Sana'a in 1948 after an attempt by Yemeni reformers to overthrow Imam Yihia.⁷

Needless to say, the situation during this period was far from stable. However, one can conclude that though the tribes were used as a means to political ends, there were tangible boundaries that separated the institution of the state and that of the tribes. They continued to be independent entities led by their Sheiks. They may have joined forces with the central government, if deemed opportune or necessary, but the fact remains that they owed their loyalties to their tribes. The state was merely a source of economic earnings.

Second, the Yemen Arab Republic 1962-1990

In 1962, mainly because of the kingdom's extreme isolationist policy and encouraged by Nasser in Egypt, a military coup overthrew the Imamate regime and the Yemen Arab Republic was established. The newly born state was by all definitions weak and remained unstable. It was surrounded by hostile neighbors who did not appreciate its republican character, and it was torn by the ensuing breakdown of a bloody civil war between royalists, supported by Saudi Arabia, and the republicans, aided by Egypt. Eventually, the war ended in the late 1960s the republicans being victorious. The major outcome of the war, however, was that the previous separation between the state and the tribal institution no longer existed. In fact, the state became virtually an embodiment of the tribes. During the civil war, some tribes aligned with the royalists against the republicans while others supported the republicans against the royalists. Again, the war was seen primarily as an opportunity for financial gains. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who had a strong political stake in this war, were more than willing to pay the tribes, in money and weapons, to secure their support. As a result, the war continued for years because the tribes readily switched sides for profit.⁸ By the end of the war, the tribes, having large sums of money and weapons, emerged as an economically independent social force, powerful enough to actively influence the political system.

Accordingly, although the central government tried to penetrate society and to break the resistance of the tribes, it was the tribes and their leaders who effectively penetrated the state and were overwhelmingly represented in the bureaucracy, its army, legislative and executive bodies, and the political system as a whole. For example, Ibrahim Al Hamdi, president of the former Yemen Arab Republic between 1974-1977, was the first political leader who attempted to create a modern state in

Yemen. To do so, he tried to break tribal power and instill state's sovereignty .Al Hamdi paid his efforts with his life⁹ and his successors never tried to follow his lead. Thus, as Abu Ghanim contends, "the attempt to control the tribal society through modern bureaucracy (...) led to the consolidation of tribal influence though in modern forms."¹⁰ This situation had repercussions to the detriment of the country's political system.

On the one hand, as mentioned before, the influential tribes resisted any attempt to create a strong state. On the other hand, tribal role in the political system facilitated external interference in Yemen's political affairs. North Yemen for the last twenty years was considered by some observers a mere satellite state of Saudi Arabia. As the most populated country on the Arabian Peninsula and because of its strategic location at Saudi Arabia's backdoor, North Yemen was said to play a significant role with regard to the security of the Saudi and the Gulf states' regimes more generally. In fact, while the republican structure of its political system was perceived a potential challenge to the conservative nature of the monarchical systems in Riyadh and other Peninsula states, it was, at the same time, a welcome buffer to the Marxist regime in South Yemen. The Saudis, therefore, pursued a two-dimensional policy vis-a-vis North Yemen. On the one hand, they wanted it to be strong enough to prevent a spread of the Marxist ideology dominant in the South. On the other hand, however, they were utterly afraid of a strong enough neighbor to chart its own foreign policy, and thus potentially posing a threat to Saudi Arabia. In order to achieve both goals, the Saudis sought to make North Yemen financially dependent : on Riyadh. Starting from 1971, Saudi Arabia began what have become the two pillars of Riyadh's financial assistance to North Yemen: The first one being an annual budgetary aid to help out the central government to pay its functionaries and armed forces personnel; the second and more important one consisting of side payments to the influential tribes in the country , thereby encouraging their autonomy from the state. Hence, by virtue of their financial (and political) support to influential individuals and tribal groups, the Saudis were able to both affect the character of the republican government that emerged after the civil war in the 1960s and to penetrate the decision making process in the country .¹¹

Perhaps the most revealing element in the tribe-state relations is that the tribes never hesitated to accept Saudi side payments. They had a strong conviction that they were 'free' in their decisions and alliances. They might support the Yemeni state or they might choose to have intimate relations with the Saudis. In any case, there were no pre-determined preferences because the sense of political obligation or allegiance to the state was not fully developed.¹²

3.2. South Yemen

Starting from 1839, the British colonized the South of Yemen. Under the British rule, the role of the tribes in the political system was different compared to that in the North. Mainly among left wing scholars exploring the political history of the pre independent South, there was a tendency to merge the concepts of feudalism and tribalism in a unified unit of analysis and to criticize the tribal structure of the society claiming that it was the main source of the South's problems.¹³

In reality, however, this perception is farfetched. According to Paul K. Dresch "ethnographically that is simply wrong. Those areas that are, or were, in any way feudal are not very tribal. The tribal areas are not feudal. What sense the equation made derived solely from the modernist assumption that both are 'backward'.¹⁴ A clarification the tribal role in the South in my opinion requires the differentiation between (a) Aden and the Hinterland and (b) the social structure and the political .structure of the Hinterland.

In fact, the presence of the British in the region not only marked the formal separation of the South from the North but also the division of the South itself into two entities: Aden -a port town and because of its strategic position vital to the British interests -and the Hinterland which was mainly seized by the British to create a buffer zone protecting Aden. The British focused their attention on Aden and undertook considerable efforts to modernize the city. Physical infrastructure and social

services were provided and small industries started to emerge. The hinterland, on the other hand, was largely ignored and its internal affairs were left to the local rulers.¹⁵

Accordingly, in Aden the tribal role was virtually non-existent. Education, the media, and commerce facilitated the emergence of an influential and substantial middle class. It was this segment of the society which provided the seeds for the development of political parties and labor unions, and later led the opposition movement against the British occupation. The tribal role in the Hinterland, by contrast, was more apparent, in that the social structure was based on the tribal unit. However, the various tribes did not exercise political influence as in the North. In fact, the Hinterland was itself divided into several Emirates and a Sultan or an Emir ruled Sultanates each of which. These rulers practically owned their region. They were feudal landlords who possessed between 70% to 80% of the fertile lands of their territory. The inhabitants of these areas were either working as farmers for the landlords and their families or they were owning their individual small farms. And both were subject to the often brutal command of the ruling families. It was those Landlords who had most of the political power, which derived mainly from their feudal economic basis.¹⁶

Strong tribes did exist in certain areas such as in Hadramawt, though their strength was enhanced considerably due to the British policy of signing treaties with the tribal Sheiks to secure its control in the area. Thus, like tribes (...), in return for protection against outside attack and regular subsidies, undertook to refrain from correspondence with foreign powers to whom they were not to cede any territory without approval.¹⁷ In any case, the point is that tribalism was not a significant political factor in the South nor was the political instability in the Hinterland caused by tribalism. The wars that often occurred between one Sultanate/Emirate and another were primarily due to the political ambition of the rulers and their desire to expand their territory.

Yet, this perception was hardly accepted by the Yemeni authorities after South Yemen declared independence from Britain in 1967. Because of several factors beyond the scope of this paper, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology, with the support of Moscow, and was thus the only communist regime in the entire Arab World. In line with the state's ideology, tribalism was severely condemned and was perceived as synonymous to feudalism. As a result, "village headmen, who owned no more than anyone else, were murdered by the state as 'feudal landlords', and in later years a person was likely to be 'disappeared' for tribalism as for other sins."¹⁸

Paradoxically, although the regime continued to denounce tribalism in its propaganda, the political crises that often occurred were worsened by Manatikiah, which can be described as the individual's strong emotional bond to his birthplace (i.e. a person is more likely to be identified as coming from Abyan or Hadramawt than by his tribal origins). The socialist regime was based on a one party system which firmly controlled the state's affairs, but, nonetheless, the contemporary political history of South Yemen is characterized by a whole series of disputes among the socialist elite. Although these ideologically founded power struggles were the main source of sometimes-armed conflicts¹⁹ the feuding factions ultimately split over their home origins, thereby triggering civil wars. This mechanism became clearly apparent in the 1986 'events' in Aden which resulted in an estimated 13,000 civilian casualties.

3.3. Conclusion

As we have seen, the state in the former North and South could not have been more different. In the South the state was ideologically oriented, controlled by one party, and can be described as a strong state (regardless of the nature of the methods it used to enforce its policies). Its strength was evident in its ability to (a) disarm the tribesmen in rural areas as well as cities; (b) regulate social behavior through strict laws and their enforcement and; (c) effectively extract resources from the state's periphery though it was hardly able to use them competently. However, the state was at the same time barely able to adequately penetrate the society. For although it did regulate social behavior, it was unable to change the system of ideas and beliefs that was underlying it. It is understandable, therefore,

why whenever a conflict erupted, the parties involved readily summoned their traditional ties of geographical origins.

In the North of Yemen, by contrast, the state's capabilities were far more limited. The state was hardly able to maintain social control nor to regulate or penetrate the , society , let alone extracting resources from the periphery .

4. The Tribe and the State in Unified Yemen

4.1. Introduction

Ignoring the stark contrast between the two political entities, president Ali Abdullah Salih of the North and Ali Salim Al Baid of the South in 1990 moved for a quick agreement on unification. Their hurry was: (a) a reaction to the economic crisis , facing South of Yemen after the collapse of the Soviet Union; (b) an attempt to avoid Riyadh's efforts to prevent Yemeni unification and (c) a way to encounter the internal opposition to the new state led by hard-line communists in the South and religious and tribal groups backed by Saudi in the North.²⁰ The Country adopted pluralism and the two major parties, the People General Congress (PGC) -a mass organization established by Ali Salih in the early 1980s -and the Socialist party of the south shared the power equally during a transitional period.²¹

However, after a short period of congenial alliance, the relationship between the two parties started to deteriorate. The tension was caused by the economic crisis as a result of the Yemeni stance in the Gulf War, the clashes of the strong personalities of the president and the vice president, the difficulties of integrating two different systems, and the unfavorable outcome of the free parliamentary elections of 1993 for the Socialist Party .Consequently, a civil war erupted in 1994 and Al Baid and some members of the Socialist party declared independence with the backing of Saudi Arabia. The war ended in July of the same year with the preservation of the unification.²²

4.2. The Tribe-State Relations in the Unified Yemen

How did these developments on the political front affect the tribe-state relations? Mainly because of the surfacing tensions between the two major parties and the rising conflict between the president and the vice president, a breakdown of law and order was evident starting from 1991. Assassinations of and bomb attacks aimed at members of the Socialist party , and later of the GPC, became common as well as riots and union strikes in the streets of the major cities.²³ Uncertainty clouded the atmosphere during that period in spite of the thriving democratic practice in the media and politics. Against this background, a revival of tribal identity combined with a "self-preservation" tendency took place.

In the southern parts, tribes who were subdued previously, started to meet again i prompting the Socialist party to warn of 're-tribalization'. However, quite contrary to this claim, the underlying motive was limited "to mediate the disputes of others and, as with the northern tribes (though in a different setting), to preserve themselves from dangers produced by non-tribal politics."²⁴ There was a growing belief among Southern as well as Northern tribes alike that the state was setting one tribe against another.²⁵ Although this can hardly be true given the chaotic political situation in the center, this conviction facilitated the organizing of formal tribal conferences between 1990 and 1994. The objective was to set their differences aside, and more importantly, to emphasize the tribal identity of Yemen." Yemen is the Tribes and the Tribes are Yemen "²⁶ said the slogan of one conference.

Though some may consider such statement as mere rhetoric, in my opinion it reveals much about the question of tribalism in contemporary Yemen. Tribesmen, and Yemeni people in general, rarely question their national identity .Being a Yemeni is strongly entrenched in their perception of themselves. It is, perhaps, a result of the long history of the country where its people were invariably identified as 'Yemenis', and the constant attempts of foreign powers to invade Yemen which further

solidified the belief of 'us' against 'them'. However, Yemenis find it difficult, Especially in tribal and remote areas, to accept the concept of a Sovereign State. For them, there is no connection between their national identity and a state that claims to represent that identity .These are two separate issues. As far as they are concerned, the state is a mere synonym of the political elite who holds the power in Yemen to the detriment of the country. The tribes' deeply rooted mistrust of the state's, intentions and actions received little attention of the government.

That did not mean, however, that the tribal factor was not used in the political conflict in the center. Both the Socialist party and the People General Congress attempted to strengthen their position at the cost of the other. Tribalism, from the stand point of the political elite, was a card used to gain political leverage. The Socialist Party, for example, playing on the historical rivalry between the Hashid and Bakil Confederation seemed to gain the support of the Bakil's tribe. But in reality , the tribes trusted neither side. This was particularly evident during the 1994 war where the tribes simply ignored the fighting. There was no tribal role in the war, as Paul K. Dresch rightly asserted,²⁷ although the feuding parties issued several statements claiming tribal support.

This fact brings to our attention a new dimension in the tribe-state relations. The previous situation of the state's embodiment of tribalism, being the case in the former North, has changed more recently. The tribes, as an institution, have only limited influence in the political decision-making process in Yemen today, although tribal representation in the state's organizations and the political landscape after the end of the war is still evident. In fact, the Speaker of the Yemeni parliament is Sheik Abdullah Al Ahmer, the head of the Hashid tribal confederation, and at the same time leader of the Islah Party -an Islamic oriented party and the partner of the GPC in the first coalition government after the civil war of 1994. The country's president, Ali Abdullah Salih, also belongs to the Hashid tribe; and the brothers of the president, of the same tribal origin, control the army and the security apparatus. Finally, the Bath Party is headed by Sheik Sinan Abu Lahum of the Bakil the tribe. Obviously, the tribe is represented in the state's apparatus. However, this seeming contradiction is resolved once we realize that we are facing a situation of ' strongmen' control in Yemen. Using the words of Dresch II a small class emerged (some of tribal background, some not) whose interests became distinct from those of their immediate neighbors. The distinction between those in power (the state, roughly speaking) and society at large arose within a previously quite integrated setting."²⁸ Accordingly, a strong sense of alienation of the tribesmen from their tribal leaders is apparent. For example, starting from 1990, Sheik Abdullah Al Ahmer was the target of mounting resentment within Hashid, where he was blamed for "his men's misfortunes."²⁹ Regardless of whether this is true or not, the point is that influential tribal leaders no longer represent their tribes. This does not indicate the termination of patronage relations. The tradition is still apparent in Yemeni politics, but power and political influence is exercised by few strongmen only.

5. Conclusion: Contemporary Implication Tribe-State Relations

As this essay has tried to show, the general assumption that a tribal based society is synonymous with political instability can only be confirmed for part of Yemen's more recent past and even then the picture is actually more complex. During the ancient period, the tribal base of the society was in fact a positive factor that enhanced the state's ability to control its territory. A possible explanation of this situation is that the tribal institution was integrated in the structural body of the state. The Yemeni kingdoms accepted the tribal nature of the social structure and devised a method of control that accommodated tribalism. However, after the collapse of the central state, the consolidation of the tribal role as a source of political instability evolved mainly due to economic reasons. As mentioned before, the presence and absence of fertile lands respectively was the determinant for a strong tribal influence in the North and for a comparatively weak one in the South.

If we move to the situation in contemporary Yemen, the tribe-state relations is characterized by two elements: a tribal perception that separates national identity from the concept of a sovereign state; and an alienation of tribesmen from their tribal leaders who exercise political power in the center. Both elements reflect a situation where the tribes and the state are disengaged and function in separate

spheres: the state in the center and the tribes in the periphery .This situation emphasizes the core of Yemen's political dilemma. Unlike what many might think, the critical task facing Yemen is not nation-building. By accepting Walker Connor's definition of a nation as "a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a most vital way"³⁰, Yemen stands as an example of a nation. Yemeni people, including tribesmen, have hardly any doubt about their national identity. However, when tribesmen state proudly that they are Yemenis, the question that follows is which Yemen are they talking about? What seems clear is that they are not referring to the state. In my opinion, this perception pertains to the very heart of the problems that the country faces on the political front: state-building. In fact, by all the differences of the former Y.A.R. and P.D.R.Y, neither was able to integrate the tribes in the political system in a manner that generates their acceptance of a sovereign state. Hence, state-building would be the way to solve this problem. It would require the creation of a strong state, meaning the building of strong institutions and the ability to enforce law and order. At the same time, it would also demand persistent efforts from the state to create bridges of trust that can dissolve the widespread tribal animosity towards the state, thereby connecting the tribesmen to the center. No doubt that to succeed in this is an extraordinary challenge, but only if it is attained, a nation-state of Yemen will be born.

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FOOTNOTES

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