



THE TRIBAL DIMENSION THE ROLE OF YEMENI TRIBES IN CONFLICT MEDIATION

RAIMAN AL-HAMDANI AND GABRIELLE STOWE

About the Authors

Raiman Al-Hamdani is a consultant for DeepRoot. He spent his formative years in Yemen, living between The Netherlands, Sana'a, and New York. He has a Master's in International Security and Conflict Resolution from The American University in Cairo and an MSc in Development Studies at SOAS. His research focuses on local communities in Yemen in particular and the region in whole. Raiman's academic background in foreign and public policy is complemented by practical experience working in the field of development. He has worked directly with refugees in IGOs and NGOs; and with special needs education in Sana'a, and with refugees and migrants at the Haradh refugee camp, on the northern Yemeni-Saudi border as well as in Egypt. In New York, he represented Yemen in the Economic and Financial Committee and was the assistant to the Military Adviser in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Gabrielle Hamilton Stowe graduated from Vanderbilt University with an undergraduate degree in Political Science and Islamic Studies. She has a Master's in Global Affairs with a concentration in International Security from The American University in Cairo, where she co-authored a thesis exploring the potential role of the Yemeni tribes in conflict resolution in Yemen. She is presently based in New York, where she continues to research and write about the conflict in Yemen.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Dr. Alison Hodgkins for her critical advice and guidance in formulating this paper.

This paper is part of the Supporting Inclusive Peacemaking and Political Transition in Yemen project, implemented by DeepRoot Consulting in partnership with Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), and funded by the EU.



Implementing partners



Funded by the European Union

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	4
BACKGROUND.....	5
Geographic distribution.....	7
EVOLUTION OF TRIBAL POWER	9
Security threats against tribal institutions	10
Ideological conflicts.....	11
MEDIATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION.....	13
Community-based peace and mediation.....	13
Women and tribalism	15
TRIBES AND SECURITY	16
Mediation and third-party guarantees	16
AQAP and the Tribes.....	17
Tribes and the protection of cities.....	19
Sana'a "Collar" Tribes	19
Marib	19
Dhahran Al-Janoub talks and multilateralism	20
CONCLUSION	21
RECOMMENDATIONS	21

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the absence of a strong, central state in ancient Yemen, tribal authorities were the primary arbitrators of conflict resolution. Despite efforts to increase centralization during the modern era, the institution of the tribe continues to function in much the same way, with tribal actors acting as mediators in the resolution of disputes at the local level. This is particularly true today, as Yemen's five-year war undermines executive authority across the country. While it is widely recognized that Yemeni tribes are fundamental to maintaining law and order at the local level, the potential for tribal leaders to mediate in wider peace talks should also be better understood.

Tribes are the most overlooked, indigenous Yemeni stakeholders in the current conflict despite their legitimacy, credibility and capacity to help negotiate an end to the civil war. While a country-wide cessation of hostilities is only likely to emerge by relying heavily on top-down international mediation, these multilateral efforts should not ignore the viability of Yemeni tribal leaders to support these efforts through parallel negotiations, and also to act as third-party security guarantors of potential peace agreements.

In this report, we present a brief historical overview of how tribal power has changed since the war began. Our research finds that inter-tribal conflicts have increased throughout the country. Additionally, ongoing fighting on the national level has led to more instances of tribes aligning with one another based on shared ideologies, rather than through historical political patronage in their competition over scarce resources such as water or property rights. The war has tested traditional tribalism in other ways as well, empowering certain tribes in some regions and depowering them in others.

The Houthis have sought to limit tribal power in regions under their control, while Saudi-backed forces have bolstered certain anti-Houthi tribal actors through patronage systems. Another shift in tribal dynamics has been in the country's southern regions. Following several decades of state repression, the south is experiencing a revival of tribal traditions, particularly in Al-Dhalea, Lahj and Shabwa governorates. This report concludes with an examination of the role of women in tribal dispute resolution, before providing recommendations for Yemeni and international stakeholders on how tribal actors can be better engaged in conflict resolution processes in Yemen.

INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years before the establishment of the modern state of the Republic of Yemen, Yemeni tribes functioned as the primary socio-political entities within the state's confines.¹ Today, Yemen's vast tribal networks exist alongside the Yemeni state as parallel structures, capable of exercising varying degrees of political, military and social authority across the territories under their respective control. Although the tribes are typically defined as rural entities, they are found in a variety of permutations all over the country, from its urban centers to the historically less-tribal southern regions.² Still, tribalism has the strongest foothold in northern Yemen, where the rugged and mountainous terrain has shaped tribal norms and values for over a millennium.

Long ago, tribes emerged when individuals with shared lineage formed territorial groupings based on kinship ties, reinforced by reciprocal notions of loyalty and honor (referred to as *sharaf* in Arabic).³ Tribalism (*qabaliya*)⁴ describes the institutional foundations of a tribe, including its organizational structure and code of conduct.⁵ Tribal identity is based on a code of conduct that enshrines nobility and honor; to be a tribesman (*qabili*) is to internalize these principles.⁶ Tribes operate according to customary law known as *urf*. Yemeni tribal expert Najwa Adra describes *urf* as a “set of principles and rules that regulates the reciprocal obligations of tribesmen and tribal obligations towards people defined as weak,” such as “tribesmen in vulnerable situations or members of the nontribal population.”⁷

Tribes are led by individuals known as *sheikhs*. These leaders are selected via a relatively meritocratic process which values a *sheikh*'s ability to serve his community.⁸ In order to effectively lead his tribe, a *sheikh* must have the resources and ability to successfully resolve intra and inter-tribal disputes.⁹ Tribal expertise in resolving conflict, although historically undervalued by the international community, could be leveraged to support peacemaking efforts in Yemen today.

¹ Adra, Najwa. “Tribal Mediation and Empowered Women: Potential Contributions of Heritage to National Development in Yemen.” *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 5, no. 2 (2016): 301–37.

² According to tribal expert Nadwa Al-Dawsari, even Yemeni city dwellers will sometimes choose tribal mediation over state-venues for justice. Al-Dawsari, Nadwa. “Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen.” *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, April 24, 2012. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/24/tribal-governance-and-stability-in-yemen-pub-47838>.

³ Salmoni, Barak A., Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells. *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen the Huthi Phenomenon*. RAND, 2010. Pg. 56-60.

⁴ Qabyala has different definitions and meanings from region to region and tribe to tribe, but the essential tenants of honor and protection are universal.

⁵ Salmoni, Barak A., et al. 2010.

⁶ Adra, Najwa. *Qabaliya: the Tribal Concept in the Central Highlands of the Yemen Arab Republic*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1983.

⁷ Adra, Najwa. “Tribal Mediation in Yemen and Its Implications to Development.” *Austrian Academy of Sciences* 19 (2010): 1–19.

⁸ In rare cases, shaykhs are self-appointed or even elected. For more, see, Al-Dawsari, Nadwa. “Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen.” 2012.

⁹ Al-Dawsari, 2012.

BACKGROUND

North and south Yemen, independent states until unification in 1990, have distinct histories with tribalism. Whereas the north began integrating the tribes into the ruling system in the 1960s, the south did so only recently (since the beginning of the 2015 Saudi-led intervention in Yemen).¹⁰ As armed, indigenous actors, Yemeni tribes have historically represented a potential threat to state power. Since the foundation of the Yemen Arab Republic (commonly referred to as North Yemen) in 1962, government leaders have sought to consolidate their executive authority, often at the expense of tribal leaders. At the same time, successive generations of government officials have also had to rely on tribes to provide security in places where the Yemeni army was unable to do so.

In the 1960s, recognition that the state's military forces could not enforce security across the entire country led to the establishment of "Popular Committees." These were essentially tribal militias that the state armed and supported.¹¹ The name "Popular Committees" was deliberately selected to obfuscate the identity and allegiances of their members, whose loyalties were first and foremost to their respective tribes, not the state.¹² The government practice of paying tribes to fight on its behalf continues to this day; an entire department within the Ministry of Interior serves as the official link between the government and the tribes.¹³ The northern Yemeni government created the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 1962¹⁴ to facilitate payments to key tribal leaders.¹⁵ These and other efforts to institutionalize tribalism in Yemen reflect the state's ongoing effort to coopt and harness tribal power.¹⁶

Yemen's strongman and longtime authoritarian leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, owes much of his 33-year tenure as president to his unique ability to manipulate tribes for his own political gain.

Saleh remains notorious for using an entrenched patronage network to secure tribal alliances and pit tribes against one another. Marieke Brandt, an expert in Yemeni tribal affairs, argues that undermining the military and political power of tribes also had the

¹⁰ Manea, Elham M. "Yemen, the Tribe and the State." In *international colloquium on Islam and Social Change, University of Lausanne*, Pg. 10-11. 1996.

¹¹ "'Popular Committees' Feed Yemen Polarization." *The New Humanitarian*, 3 Nov. 2014, <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2014/11/03/popular-committees-feed-yemen-polarization>.

¹² Hadi's government engaged the "Popular Committees" to fight for the state throughout the current conflict. For instance, in 2012, Popular Committees composed of southern tribes from Yafei, Dhale,' and Shabwa drove AQAP from the town of Abyan.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Originally named the "Ministry of Tribal Affairs," its form was changed to a less official form in 1968 in 1968. For more, see Elie, Serge D. "State Politics in Yemen: Antinomies of Nation and State." *Global Journal of Anthropology Research* 5 (2018): Pg. 5

¹⁵ Ibid., Pg. 5

¹⁶ Ibid., Pg.5

detrimental effect of weakening their more socially constructive powers, in regards to mediation and conflict resolution.¹⁷

Most recently, current Yemeni President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi's lack of tribal connections frustrated his attempts to govern Yemen pre-war, and continues to present a barrier to his consolidating control over both the north and the south of the country. However, despite his weak relationships with the tribes, Hadi's 2015 escape from Sana'a to Aden was primarily facilitated through the tribal connections of his associate, Sheikh Hussein Al-Awadhi, who was subsequently appointed governor of Al-Jawf.¹⁸ A member of the Yemeni Socialist Party and a tribal leader from Al-Jawf governorate, Al-Awadhi continues to play an active role in Yemen as a government official and prominent tribal leader.¹⁹ His appointment shows how Hadi seeks to maximize his limited tribal connections.²⁰ Moreover, governorates that are highly tribal are often appointed tribal figures as governors.

While less research is available about the historical role of tribes in south Yemen, they have observably become more politically integrated in the south since the Saudi-UAE coalition intervened in Yemen in March 2015.²¹ Despite historically not having as much power or influence as their northern counterparts, southern tribal leaders undoubtedly helped shape the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY). Tribal support for the 14th of October "Revolution of Independence" in the south in 1963 was critical to the revolution's success. Historians have also noted that the tribes played the most critical role in providing support to politicians in the liberation fronts that demanded and fought for independence, particularly after the position of merchants and laborers was weakened in South Yemen due to the 1967 closure of the Suez Canal. At this time, labor and trade unions in the south were considered the most powerful members of civil society calling for independence.²² The closure of the Suez Canal gave the tribes the chance to act outside of Aden (where the movement originated) to arm and equip supporters from areas under weaker, limited, or zero British control.²³

Moreover, during the 1986 January Events in Aden, which witnessed a coup attempt and infighting within the ruling Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), tribes were split in their support between Abdulfattah Ismail and Ali Salem Al-Beidh. Despite the PDY's strict policy of

¹⁷ Brandt, Marieke. "Twelve Years of Shifting Sands Conflict Mediation with Yemen's Huthis (2004-2016). 2018."

¹⁸ According to verified personal accounts.

¹⁹ "The Yemen Exchange - An Intensive Course on Yemen." *Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies*, <http://sanaacenter.org/issue/the-yemen-exchange>.

²⁰ Al-Awadhi continues to be an active member of the government and a tribal mediator to this day.

²¹ For more, see, Al-Sabahi, Ahmed. "Dawr Al-Qabilah Yazdahir Ba'ad A'sefat Al-Hazm." *Al Bayan*. April 1, 2015.

²² Mawby, Spencer. "From tribal rebellions to revolution: British counter-insurgency operations in Southwest Arabia 1955-67." *Electronic Journal of International History* 5 (2000). January 2, 2012. https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3392/1/Journal_of_International_History_2000_n5_Mawby.pdf

²³ Smitson, Scott A. *The Road to Good Intentions: British Nation-building in Aden*. Center for Complex Operations, National Defense University, 2010.

Thus, it is important to recognize the inherently political role tribes play on the ground in Yemen, and the conceptual impossibility of extricating them from the country's wider political environment.

eradicating tribal influence,²⁴ Ali Salem Al-Beidh drew support from the tribes hailing from Yafea, Al-Dhalea, Radhfan and Subaiha, in addition to some tribes from Hadhramout and Al-Mahrah; while the majority of tribes in Shabwa and Abyan supported Ali Nasser Salem (as did Hadi, a native of Abyan).

Attempts to formalize the role of the tribes within the state post-Saleh became more evident in 2012. To fill the security vacuum that followed the Arab Spring, the national government empowered tribes

in the south to create popular committees consisting of tribal fighters to battle Al-Qaeda and maintain security in the devastated towns in Abyan.²⁵

Geographic distribution

Tribal leaders are more autonomous and active in Yemen's geographic north – particularly in the governorates of Sana'a, Marib, Al-Jawf, Al-Mahwit, Amran, Ibb Sa'ada, and Dhamar – where tribal customs are more entrenched than in the south. Tribal authority is particularly strong in rural areas, where the state has historically exercised tenuous authority, which has only eroded further during the current conflict. In Tihama, along Yemen's western coast, tribal structures exist, but evidence of strong conflict resolution amongst the tribes is less visible.

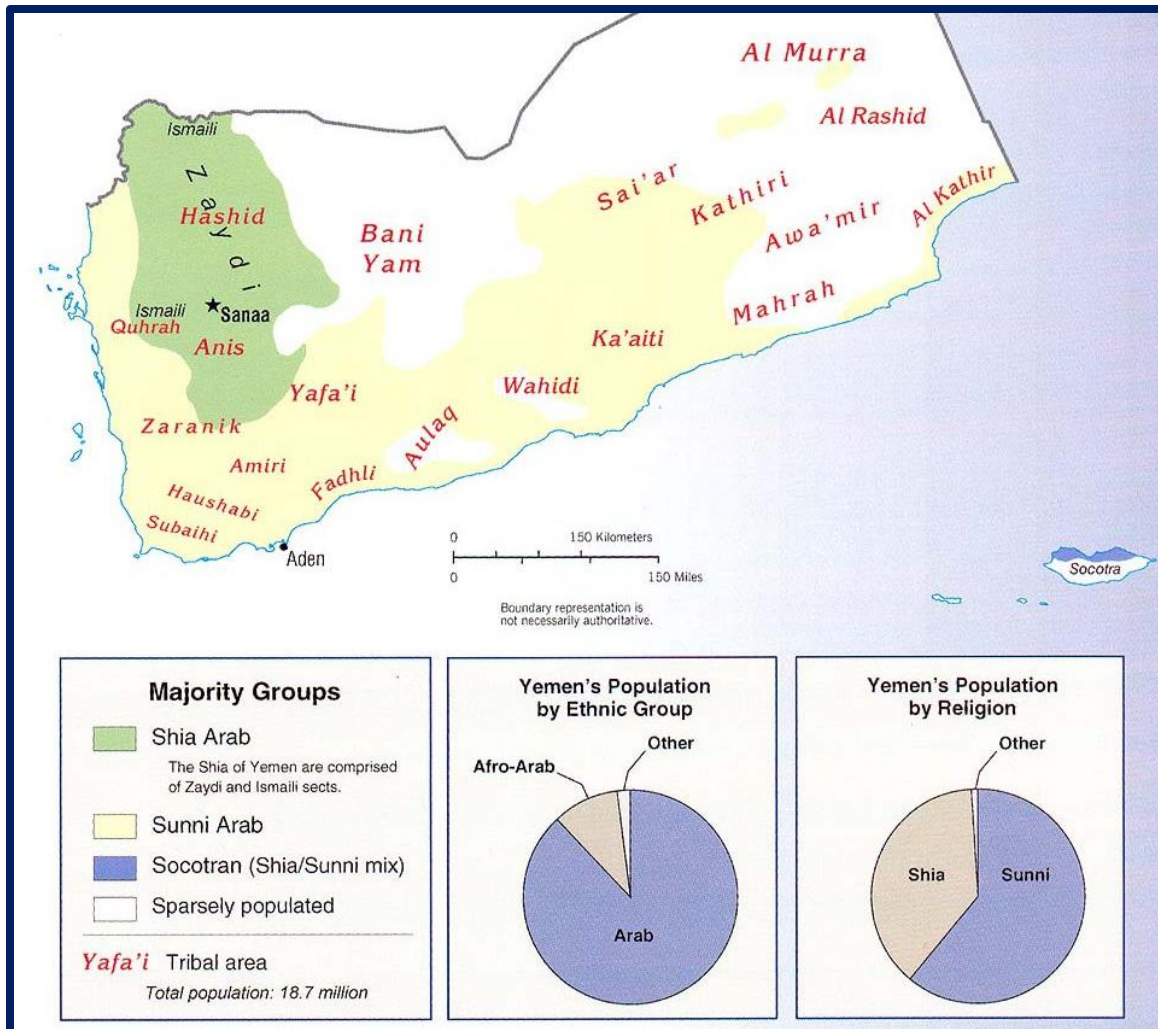
In Yafea and Al-Dhalea, we note a resurgence of tribal initiatives toward conflict resolution, particularly in the cities. In the south, the tribes in Shabwa governorate are likely the most active in conflict resolution, most notably the Al-Awlaqi tribe, who have played a vital role in negotiation settlements in the past between AQAP and the government.²⁶ Amongst the Shabwa tribes, there is an observable surge in intra-tribal conflict-resolution initiatives, particularly amongst the government and AQAP, and more recently, between the Southern Transitional Council and the internationally recognized government.²⁷ Tribal structures are present throughout other cities and governorates, with various degrees of modus operandi and conflict resolution mechanisms.

²⁴ Kifner, John. "MASSACRE WITH TEA: SOUTHERN YEMEN AT WAR." The New York Times. The New York Times, February 9, 1986.

²⁵ Gaston, Erica. "Sustainable Security in Yemen: Popular Committees in Abyan." *United States Institute of Peace*, 14 June 2013, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2013/06/sustainable-security-yemen-popular-committees-abyan>.

²⁶ Gordon, Sasha. *Tribal Militias in Yemen: Al Bayda and Shabwah*. American Enterprise Institute, 2013.

²⁷ "Yemen Government Urges 'Security Belt' to Comply with Legitimacy's Demands." Asharq Al-Awsat, August 28, 2019. <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1876051/yemen-government-urges-'security-belt'-comply-legitimacy's-demands>.



EVOLUTION OF TRIBAL POWER

The internationalization of the ongoing armed conflict in Yemen has superimposed another layer onto the already complex dynamics of tribal relations in the country. In addition to performing their traditional roles as mediators and arbitrators in domestic feuds involving indigenous Yemeni actors, the tribes now find themselves as key players in a regional war involving a multiplicity of exogenous actors, principally Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Activities that used to be performed exclusively within inter-tribal and civil contexts – implementing and overseeing ceasefire agreements, mediating prisoner of war exchanges and providing governance and security in areas lacking strong central authority – are now taking place alongside traditional actors and groups with a stake in the war.

Yemen's 2011 political uprising forced President Saleh to resign, catalyzing an almost immediate decline of the central state's power throughout Yemen. In response, Yemenis increasingly turned to traditional social structures for governance, security, and conflict resolution. In the absence of any state-sanctioned conflict resolution system, the tribes played an outsized role in local communities. While resource disputes still underpin the majority of tribal conflicts in Yemen, the addition of yet another dimension of conflict has increased feuding within and across tribes, hindering their ability to conduct traditional tribal peace-building activities.²⁹

The internationalization of what was previously a domestic Yemeni conflict increased the number of actors willing to provide patronage to the tribes, further complicating the traditional relationships and balance of power between Yemeni tribes.³⁰ Moreover, the partial land, sea, and air blockade of Yemen by the coalition, combined with conflict-related forced migration of IDPs, has strained natural resources in most of the cities throughout the country.³¹ These and other issues have led to a general increase in tribal feuds, from personal conflicts over private property to disagreements relating to community-based water and natural resource management.³²

Historically, tribal conflicts in Yemen have not been religiously motivated, with the majority of disputes arising over property rights and access to water resources.²⁸

²⁸ Al-Dawsari, Nadwa. "Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen." 2012.

²⁹ *Yemen: Tribal Conflict Management Program Research Report*, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), March 2007, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Conflict%20Management%20Program%20Research%20Report%20March%202007.pdf>

³⁰ Brandt, Marieke. *Tribes and politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi conflict*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

³¹ *Yemen Area Assessment Round 37 March 2019*. IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2017, *Yemen Area Assessment Round 37 March 2019*, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen Area Assessment Round 37_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20Area%20Assessment%20Round%2037_0.pdf).

³² "Al-Urf Al-Qabli Yafodh Niza'at Al-Yamaneien." *The New Arab*, July 25, 2015. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2017/7/24/1-العرب-القبلي-يفض-نزاعات-اليمنيين>.

Security threats against tribal institutions

The conflict in Yemen presents a myriad of existential threats to Yemeni tribal institutions. Pre-war threats that directly challenged the tribal way of life, such as urbanization and modernization, have increased during the conflict with the rising number of IDPs.³³ The importation of Wahhabi ideology from Saudi Arabia through a well-funded and deliberate campaign to establish Wahhabi mosques across the country has increased social conservatism in Yemen.³⁴ This influence has led to more strict adherence to the principles of Sharia law, which presents a challenge to tribal law.³⁵ Najwa Adra explains that:

Perhaps the most pernicious threats to tribalism and women's empowerment stem from Wahhabi, Salafi and other forms of politicized Islam, arguably another form of modernism. Islamists yearn for a single, centralized, homogeneous Islamic nation. They consider tribal diversity divisive, condemn dialogue and consensus building as chaotic (*fitna*) and disapprove of rural gender mixing as well as Yemen's dance and poetic heritage...³⁶

Across tribal communities, the ongoing conflict has created widespread economic devastation in addition to physical destruction. In Yemen's devastating war economy, fighting for money presents a lucrative option relative to other jobs. Today, tribesmen increasingly risk injury and death fighting as proxies for other countries and groups in the war. In the violent present, tribesmen are valued less for their traditional conflict resolution skills and more for their military potential as armed actors.³⁷ In this temporal context, the traditional tribal impulse to seek non-violent solutions to conflict is repressed in favor of committing ongoing acts of violence. The viciousness and barbarity of this war has the potential to erode the quintessentially tribal desire for peace – a devastating development that existentially threatens the very nature of tribalism, while critically endangering future peace in Yemen:

To limit the escalation of violence, tribes typically avoid using force unless they have exhausted all peaceful means to mediate and resolve a conflict. They will try to avoid fighting in their own territory unless faced with an immediate threat to their authority.⁷² However, due to the severe degradation of Yemen's security environment, the tribal system and its conflict resolution systems are under strain.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wahhabism describes a puritanical, conservative strain of Islam originating from Saudi-Arabia in the 18th century, which seeks a return to the political, social, and religious purity of the time of the Prophet Mohamad and his immediate successors. Broadly, it rejects social progressivism and advances a strict interpretation of Islamic texts, upholds prescribed gender norms and rejects "modern" social and religious innovations.

³⁵ Al Dawsari, Nadwa, and Danya Greenfield. "The role of the tribal system in developing a democratic, civil state in Yemen: Rule of law, good governance, and security." In *Reconstructing the Middle East*, pp. 129-146. Routledge, 2017.

³⁶ Adra, Najwa. "Tribal Mediation and Empowered Women: Potential Contributions of Heritage to National Development in Yemen."

³⁷ See Brandt, Marieke. *Tribes and politics in Yemen 2017* and Salmoni et al., *Regime and Periphery*, 2010.

It is increasingly difficult for tribes to manage conflicts and contain violence according to customary law and other tribal rules.³⁸

Still, despite these collective threats, tribal dynamics and authority remain relatively strong in Yemen. Rather than attempt to challenge tribal power through military means, the coalition has attempted to harness tribal leaders' local authority through patronage. Saudi Arabia adopted a similar strategy in the 1960s when it backed the Hashid tribe's leader, the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein Al-Ahmar. Al-Ahmar is well known for co-founding the Islah Party, a national political party tied to the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁹ Despite changes in the patron-client relationship, tribes continue to embrace an external patronage system. For instance, Hashid has been under the control of the Houthis since they drove the Al-Ahmar family out, in September 2014.⁴⁰ In short, changes to tribal leadership – historic and momentous though they may be – have not structurally altered the tribe or its mechanisms, which endure largely in their original historical forms.

Ideological conflicts

The Houthis have developed a new and powerful relationship with the tribes by offering them the opportunity to return to their historical role as the collective military wing of the state (a policy adopted by the Imamate of Yemen). In this capacity, the tribes act essentially as the army and political supporters of the Houthis.⁴¹ In other spaces, traditional forms and sources of patronage, whether from the Yemeni government or Saudi Arabia, continue to dictate the political behavior of tribes.⁴² In general, there is an observable split across Yemeni tribes, with those in Zaydi areas supporting the Houthis, and tribes under government control being allied with Saudi Arabia. The present re-emergence of an historical method of managing the tribes has sparked conflicts within the Houthis and tribes in the regions under Houthi control. Conflict between the Houthis and the tribes in Houthi regions increased in the aftermath of Saleh's forced resignation.⁴³

Today, the Houthis deliberately act to weaken political and social tribal power wherever it presents as a threat. This can be seen in the example of Hajour, in Hajjah governorate, where the Houthis worked to crush a tribal uprising against their de-facto rule. Hajour is an area that has historically resisted Houthi control and was therefore viewed by the government and the coalition as a potential front against the Houthis.⁴⁴ According to interviews, simmering tensions between Hajour and the Houthis resulted in their sending

³⁸ Al-Dawsari, 2018. *Foe Not Friend*. Pg. 20

³⁹ Alley, April Longley. "The rules of the game: unpacking patronage politics in Yemen." *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (2010): 385-409.

⁴⁰ Albahesh, Abdo. "The Houthi Movement in Yemen: From Insurgency to Military Coup, 2004–2014." Medium, October 23, 2018. <https://medium.com/@drabdoalbahesh/the-houthi-movement-in-yemen-from-insurgency-to-military-coup-2004-2010-6756fbfa410b>.

⁴¹ Brandt, 2018. "Twelve Years of Shifting Sands."

⁴² Brandt, *The Irregulars of the Sa'ada War*; Hill, *Yemen Endures*, 190; Salmoni et al., *Regime and Periphery*, 8.

⁴³ Al-Dawsari, 2012. *Tribal Governance and Stability*. Pg. 3

⁴⁴ Shujaa Al-Deen, Maysaa "The Houthi–Tribal Conflict in Yemen." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 23, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78969>.

in of the Amran governor as a mediator. However, the governor, Faisal Jum'an, was supposedly killed by Hajour tribes.⁴⁵ In response, the Houthis attacked Hajour, killing tribal elders as well as tribal Salafi followers,⁴⁶ and the battle was decided conclusively in favor of the Houthis.⁴⁷ This example displays the tactical position of the Houthis in their tribal relations.⁴⁸ Fearful that the tribes will one day reject their rule, the Houthis have worked to undermine the tribe's traditional role in conflict resolution.⁴⁹ By usurping a key source of tribal legitimacy, the Houthis seek to weaken the cultural bonds between the tribes and the people; the ultimate source of tribal power.

⁴⁵ "Masadir Yemeniah: Maqtal Muhafidh Amran 'Faisal Jum'an.'" *Youm7*, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2019/2/15/-مصادر-يمنية-مقتل-محافظ-عمران-فيصل-جمعان-المعين-من-4142143/قبل>.

⁴⁶ "Yemen FM Calls on Int'l Community to Exert More Pressure on Houthis." *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 13 Mar. 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1631871/yemen-fm-calls-int'l-community-exert-more-pressure-houthis>.

⁴⁷ According to local interviews.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

MEDIATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Community-based peace and mediation

Northern Yemen was predominately tribal until the 1962 revolution against the ruling Imamate.⁵⁰ In the north, when faced with conflict, tribes typically turn first to non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms, including arbitration, negotiation and mediation. Violence, which tends to intensify disputes and existentially endanger tribes, is typically a last resort, only employed after non-violent attempts to resolve the conflict have failed.⁵¹ For the tribes, this strategic avoidance of violence manifests in a collective desire to solve disputes early, before they grow more entrenched.⁵² Sheikhs have a duty to contain and resolve conflict immediately—they typically lead the arbitration and negotiation proceedings. The tribe as a whole is also collectively invested in the resolution process, explains tribal expert Nadwa Dawsari.⁵³ The tribe stands as the unified guarantor of whatever settlement is reached between individuals. An individual who reneges on the final agreement insults the honor of those involved in the resolution process, which can put their tribe at risk of retaliation.⁵⁴

One of the key areas of tribal jurisdiction is within inter-familial and inter-tribal conflict and feud (*tha'r*) resolution. In this context, the tribes provide mediation and arbitration for disputes relating to matters including property and water rights and inheritance. Tribal leaders rely on several traditional conflict resolution techniques to maintain the peace. The most common are mediation (*wasatah*) and arbitration (*tahkim*).⁵⁵ The goal of this approach is to reach mutual consent/agreement (*al-tarathi*) and ultimately, reconciliation (*sulh*). In *tahkim* and *wasata*, tribal elders or sheikhs are given this role, under the condition that they are neutral to the conflict and possess a “credible” reputation.⁵⁶ There are several tribal tools used to achieve reconciliation in the north of Yemen, as described in the box below.

⁵⁰ Dresch, Paul. *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2001.

⁵¹ Al-Dawsari, Nadwa. "Foe not Friend: Yemeni Tribes and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula." *POMED: Project on Middle East Democracy*. (2018). Pg. 23.

⁵² Al-Dawsari, 2012. Tribal Governance and Stability, Pg. 9.

⁵³ Ibid., Pg. 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Pg. 10.

⁵⁵ Al-Najar, Mohamed, Noriah Shuja Al-Deen, Abdulmalik Essa, and Al-Hassan Al-Qawtary. *Al-Adawat Al-Taqlidiyah Al-Yamaniah Lihal Al-Niza'at Wa Dawr Al-Nisaa Wa Al-Rijal*. Sanaa, Yemen: Youth Leadership Development Foundation, 2018.

⁵⁶ Ibid

Info box: Tribal methods used to achieve reconciliation in northern Yemen

- *Wasata*: One sheikh or a limited number of sheikhs mediate a conflict amongst themselves, without involving the larger conflicting tribes.
- *Tahkim*: Parties to the dispute choose an arbitrator(s), who provides an absolute and final resolution. The arbitrators often negotiate for material items such as money, guns or *janbiyas* (Yemeni ornamental daggers that denote social status) to satisfy the offense.
- *Hajr (or Tahjir)*: The offending party compensates the wronged family with either money or an animal sacrifice (*hajr*).⁵⁷ If the first two gestures are not accepted, the offender's family may surrender him and avenge the party he has wronged as an apology.
- *Qita'a qabali* (Road block): A tribe searching for an individual or groups accused of some wrong doing will cut off a vital roadway within the offending party's tribal territory, seizing passing cars and passengers as hostages.⁵⁸ Both people and goods are held hostage until the offending party's tribe hands over the wanted person.⁵⁹

Collectively, these conflict resolution tools are a general process by which the community (led by the tribal elders/leaders) encourages the injured party to accept the proffered apology and reach an agreement (end the *th'ar*). Sheikhs on both sides of the conflict will continue to encourage their fellow tribal members to accept an agreement; the family will continue to bring offerings until an agreement is accepted.

However, despite a strong historical commitment to conflict resolution, cyclical violence remains entrenched in contemporary tribalism, causing generational harm. The tribal customs of revenge-killing and *tha'r*, which can foster “an eye for an eye” mentality, have no positive social benefit in Yemeni society, and should ideally be mitigated by greater civic engagement. Paradoxically, tribal violence has also historically provided motivation for tribes to use non-violent methods of conflict resolution, principally mediation and arbitration. Attempts by civil society organizations to dismantle the more violent, less socially constructive aspects of tribalism are promising, but have ultimately failed to eradicate socially destructive practice.⁶⁰

Future efforts by civil society and developmental organizations to engage tribes in dispute resolution must therefore be wary of provoking the tribal potential and capacity for violence.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Examples of civil society and developmental organizations in mitigating blood feud cycles are exercised through bottom-up approaches of building awareness, cooperation with NGOs, and the inclusion of tribal members in civic institutions. “Civil Society in Mitigating Revenge Cycles Report.” Sanaa. 2007 <http://yemenparliament.gov.ye/uploads/posts/documents/2018/12/1210201882942717.pdf>, 2007.

Women and tribalism

Women are playing an increasingly important role in tribal mediation as Yemen inches towards its sixth year of war. Still, Yemeni society in general and tribalism in particular remains patriarchal, with contemporary tribes being almost entirely composed of and led by men.⁶¹ However, while Yemeni women are largely invisible in the eyes of the international community, they continue to perform their traditional matriarchal roles at home, where they have profound, yet unquantifiable influence on their male relatives, principally their husband, sons, and fathers. Additionally, women have conflict-resolution tools unique to their gender, which are increasingly leveraged in tribal disputes.⁶²

One particularly common tool wielded by women, *al-hanaq*, literally translates into “indignation” and is invoked when a woman leaves her husband or his family and returns to her extended family, while she waits for her husband’s family to make amends via a formal pledge. At this point, the husband will be forced to compensate his wife’s family to facilitate her return. A more recent phenomenon involves women reaching out to imams and neighborhood leaders, called *aqils*,⁶³ to help resolve a conflict. In some cases, a woman will threaten to cut her hair or burn her clothes, an act which is seen as dishonorable, in order to gain leverage in a dispute. These and other female-led initiatives are hindered by Wahhabism, which traditionally seeks to circumscribes female power to the domestic sphere, and largely rejects female participation in the traditionally male domain of conflict resolution. The spread of Wahhabism across Yemen has hindered women’s access to the public spaces where they historically wielded the conflict resolution tools unique to their gender. However, increased social conservatism in the present has not prevented Yemeni women from participating in public protests across the country.

While the role of women in the tribes has decreased due to imported ideas of conservatism, there are exceptions to this general trend. In 2012, a Yemeni woman who ascended the ranks of tribalism managed to end a 16-year tribal blood feud over a plot of land. In 2012, Sumaya Ahmed Al-Hussam was tasked with returning to her home governorate of Hajjah to resolve the feud between Bani Badr and Bait Al-Qa’idi.⁶⁴ Using tribal mediation tools, she successfully put an end to the historic and destructive feud, which had killed over 60 tribal fighters. Al-Hussam eventually became a sheikh in her highly conservative society.⁶⁵

Women have the potential to play an equally constructive role as men in tribal dispute resolutions, and knowledge of such activities should be leveraged to support tribesmen resolving political conflicts, alongside civil and domestic disputes.

⁶¹ Al-Najar et al., 2018. *Al-Adawat Al-Taqlidiyah*.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Literally: Judicious; the name of neighbourhood and community entrusted officials who play the role of neighbourhood or community watch

⁶⁴ Sumaya Al-Hussam became a member of the National Dialogue Conference in 2013. “Yemeni Woman Succeeds in Resolving Bloody Tribal Feud.” *Saudigazette*. NEWSPAPER_NAME, November 1, 2017. <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/520790>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

TRIBES AND SECURITY

Tribes have historically been the guarantors of peace agreements during times of war. An examination of the theoretical literature on civil war settlement shows how Yemeni tribes could serve a similar function in the current conflict. A successful resolution to a civil war has two fundamental components: 1) armed peacekeepers and 2) security guarantors who are neutral and capable of committing to the post-conflict reconstruction process.⁶⁶ Temporary unarmed international peacekeepers cannot keep a country out of conflict long-term. Furthermore, the international community lacks the capacity and even the will to put peacekeepers on the ground in Yemen. This is why Yemen's tribes are best positioned to be third party security guarantors of whatever peace agreements emerge from mediation.

The Yemeni tribes are indigenous, and armed – having historically resisted calls by the state to disarm. During periods of political instability in Yemen, tribes, rather than the Yemeni state, have generally guaranteed local security for citizens.⁶⁷ Additionally, because the majority of domestic war combatants in Yemen identify as tribal, those who demobilize

Historically in Yemen, verbal agreements are accepted, and even preferred to written treaties, in order to allow for flexible and creative future adaptations.⁶⁸

will not be left unprotected. In the absence of the state's capacity or willingness to provide security, Yemen's tribal authorities will step in – and have done so before. For example, the 1970s civil war between Royalists and Republicans in north Yemen is one of only two civil wars between 1940-1990 to have ended through a settlement without an outside guarantor. The peace “treaty” that ended the North Yemen Civil

War was an oral agreement.⁶⁹ Thus, tribal customs allow for a large degree of pliability and interpretation when it comes to conflict resolution. That the northern Yemenis did not seek a written agreement or require outside guarantors to their conflict displays the tribal nature of Yemeni society.

Mediation and third-party guarantees

Building on their ability to solve local disputes, tribes have also proven that they can operate in an international mediation framework. The potential success of tribal mediators is due in part to their possession of elements critical to successful mediators. Studies identify six potential dimensions of power for mediators: reward power, coercive power, expert power, legitimate power, referent power and informational power.⁷⁰ As indigenous

⁶⁶ Walter, Barbara F. "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement." *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (1997): 335-364.

⁶⁷ This has been observed more in the north of Yemen.

⁶⁸ Walter, 1997. The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement.

⁶⁹ Al-Zwaini, Laila. "State and Non-state Justice in Yemen." In *Paper for the conference on the Relationship between State and Non-State Justice Systems in Afghanistan, Kabul*, pp. 10-14. 2006.

⁷⁰ Crocker, Chester A., Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela R. Aall. "Ready for prime time: the when, who, and why of international mediation." *Negotiation Journal* 19, no. 2 (2003): 151-167; and Rubin, Jeffrey Z.

"Conclusion: International mediation in context." In *Mediation in International Relations*, pp. 249-272. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1992.

actors in Yemen, tribes are inherently seen as legitimate and intuitive. They also have expert power due to their on-the-ground perspective and understanding of the conflict's complex dynamics. Finally, as armed actors, the tribes possess both reward and coercive power – they can compel others to do their bidding and have (or are capable of acquiring) the political connections to reward actors that obey their commands.

Even before the coalition bombing campaign began, tribal leaders were working to de-escalate domestic political tensions. In northern Yemen, fighting broke out between pro-Islah tribes and pro-Houthi fighters in Arhab district of Sana'a governorate, beginning in February of 2014.⁷¹ In an effort to ease tensions, the government gathered a tribal mediation committee comprised of 11 tribal sheikhs and eight third-party guarantors.⁷² These committee members were putting their lives at risk to work as intermediaries between the two warring parties. Members even erected white tents between the two groups as a universally recognized symbol of peace. As a result of these negotiations, the parties signed a peace agreement shortly after the committee's intervention.⁷³

Throughout the war, the tribes have assumed their historical role in local conflicts, overseeing the exchange of prisoners of war, securing roads, and providing local justice, particularly in the context of family disputes.⁷⁴ The creation of tribal committees to exchange prisoners of war between the Houthis and pro-government forces is yet another example of the significant power tribes wield in Yemen. The largest tribal-mediated POW exchange took place in May 2019, when over 400 Houthi fighters were released from UAE-affiliated prisons in the country's south.⁷⁵

AQAP and the Tribes

Aside from their ideological differences, Yemeni tribes tend to view AQAP and other religious extremist groups as threats to both their authority and the security of their respective communities. Perceptions of “lawless” tribal areas in Yemen ignore the fact that these regions are subject to tribal law, which currently does not compete with Sharia⁷⁶ for hearts and minds.⁷⁷ Yemeni tribal expert Nadwa Dawsari has noted that “tribes oppose AQAP because its presence can instigate conflict within tribes, threaten the fragile social

⁷¹ “CORI Country Report Yemen, September 2014.” Commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/542e61da4.pdf>.

⁷² “Agreement Between the Houthis and the Arhab Tribes.” PA-X Peace Agreements Database, n.d. <https://www.peaceagreements.org/view/2226>.

⁷³ Interview with Shaykh Abulkarim Al-Maqdashi, one of the main mediators in the committee.

⁷⁴ Mojalli, Almidgad. “Traditional Tribal Justice Trumps State Laws for Many in Yemen.” Middle East Eye, November 26, 2015. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/traditional-tribal-justice-trumps-state-laws-many-yemen>.

⁷⁵ “Al-Houthiyun Yaljaoun Lilwasata.” Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni, May 28, 2005. <https://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/134557>.

⁷⁶ Sharia law can be translated into religious Islamic law based on interpretations of Islamic sources of law, including fundamental Islamic texts, particularly the Quran. AQAP operates according to a violent and extremist interpretation of Islamic law, which is overwhelmingly rejected and condemned by mainstream Islamic scholars.

⁷⁷ Al-Dawsari, 2018. Foe Not Friend.

order and invite air strikes. Tribes reject AQAP's goal of replacing tribal customs with Sharia law and relegating tribes to a subordinate status.”⁷⁸

Negotiating AQAP's withdrawal from Rada'a

In 2011, a tribal mediatory group successfully negotiated the peaceful removal of AQAP members from the town of Rada'a in the central Al-Baydha governorate. The group had moved into the town the same year, taking advantage of a country-wide security vacuum created during Yemen's Arab Spring uprising. In 2012, a tribal group headed by Sheikh Abdulkarim Al-Maqdashi entered into negotiations with AQAP leader Tarek Al-Dahab, a relative of Anwar Al-Awlaki⁷⁹, and persuaded his fighters to leave Rada'a in exchange for releasing some AQAP members from prison. Al-Dahab assented to leave Rada'a,⁸⁰ however, he soon returned to the town following the release of prisoners—a violation of the tribal agreement. This breach of contract dishonored the tribe; in retaliation, Al-Dahab was murdered by his brother.⁸¹

Historically, Yemeni tribes have been more successful at countering violent extremism than the Yemeni state. AQAP and other extremist groups in Yemen have cautiously interacted with tribes, wary of provoking tribal retaliation in response to the groups' acts of violence. This may be one explanation for why AQAP and the Islamic State in Yemen have carried out comparatively fewer suicide bombings in Yemen than in places like Iraq. In Yemen, these groups are also quick to discredit false claims that they carried out an attack.

As the above example in Rada'a exemplifies, negotiating with extremist groups on the ground in Yemen, rather than immediately resorting to drone strikes or other extrajudicial actions, is often a more effective strategy to counter extremism. As Sarah Philips, a Yemen expert on security and development notes, “Western counter-terrorism practices” such as aerial drone strikes have generally failed to diminish AQAP's presence in Yemen because such tactics “are structured to defeat coherent, organizationally rational (and thus broadly

⁷⁸ Ibid. Pg. 3

⁷⁹ Considered a charismatic speaker who mastered Arabic and English, Al-Awlaki was one of al-Qaeda's greatest propagandists and recruiters. The radical cleric jumped to the notoriety when he became the spokesman for the al-Qaeda network in the Arabian Peninsula and was wanted by both the United States and Yemen for his alleged involvement in several terrorist attacks. He was killed by a drone attack in Yemen in 2011. See Shane, Scott. *Inside Al Qaeda's Plot to Blow Up an American Airliner*. The New York Times, 23 Feb. 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/us/politics/anwar-awlaki-underwear-bomber-abdultalab.html?rref=collection/timestopic/Awlaki, Anwar al-&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics®ion&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacem ent=8&pgtype=collection.

⁸⁰ “Al Qaeda Militants Withdraw from Yemeni Town.” France 24, January 25, 2012. <https://www.france24.com/en/20120125-qaeda-militants-withdraw-yemeni-town-rada-tribal-leaders-prisoner-exchange>.

⁸¹ Ghobari, Mohammed. “Qaeda Militant Killed by Brother in Yemen.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, February 16, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-qaeda/qaeda-militant-killed-by-brother-in-yemen-idUSTRE81F0Q720120216>.

predictable) entities” – which AQAP is not.⁸² Tribes are thus better situated to contain and combat AQAP’s influence in Yemen.

Tribes and the protection of cities

Sana’a “Collar” Tribes

The collar tribes around Sana’a have succeeded in building strong inter-tribal bonds, and have historically managed to provide security for public areas and the road network. In the absence of a functioning judicial system, they have also been able to curb a perpetual cycle of violence in which tribes seek revenge on one another. While the duration of Yemen’s war will likely ultimately be determined by the willingness of the Houthis and the government to negotiate a peace settlement, the tribes surrounding Sana’a are critical to the Houthis’ survival.

In the event that the Sana’a collar tribes choose to withdraw their support for the Houthis, the militant group will no longer be able to hold the capital. The area tribes played a very important role in limiting violence in 2014 when the Houthis took over Sana’a. At this watershed moment, Islah-affiliated tribes made a pragmatic decision to not fight the Houthis and allow them to enter the city, resulting in a relatively short, three-day battle for the capital. The tribes ultimately decided to spare Sana’a from the inevitably bloody and potentially lengthy violence that would have followed their decision to try and stop the Houthis.⁸³

In December 2017, the collar tribes again made another pragmatic decision. As tensions escalated between former President Saleh and the Houthis, the tribes were forced to choose an allegiance. Ultimately, the tribes selected the Houthis as the more strategic allies due to the size and superior capabilities of the militant forces. Had the tribes sided with Saleh, they would likely have sustained heavy losses.

Marib

The city of Marib, east of Sana’a, is fundamentally controlled by tribesmen, either belonging to individual tribes or members of the national army, itself a military collective of tribes. In 2014, local tribes jointly acted to prevent the Houthis from entering Marib.⁸⁴ In January 2015, influential tribal leaders in Marib issued a tribal ‘alert’ to defend the city, mobilizing thousands of men.⁸⁵ For months, tribal fighters had been amassing along the main road between Marib and the capital Sana’a, in anticipation of such an alert.⁸⁶

⁸² Phillips, Sarah G. "Making al-Qa’ida legible: Counter-terrorism and the reproduction of terrorism." *European Journal of International Relations* (2019). Pg. 2-3.

⁸³ Michael, Maggie, and Ahmed Al-Haj. "Saleh's Death Puts Yemen's War at a Crossroads." AP NEWS. Associated Press, December 6, 2017. <https://apnews.com/84adfb0dc6664ae285cfb5934b51a1ee>.

⁸⁴ Al-Batati, Saeed. "Yemen: Tribes in Mareb Raise Alarm over Houthis' Advance." Middle East Eye, November 24, 2014. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-tribes-mareb-raise-alarm-over-houthis-advance>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Dhahran Al-Janoub talks and multilateralism

The Dhahran Al-Janoub talks demonstrate the potential for tribal traditions to help end the war in Yemen. In early 2015, tribes on both sides of the Yemeni/Saudi border created the space for reconciliation efforts at the Saudi-Yemeni border, which led to a lull in fighting and served as a catalyst for upper-level negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.⁸⁷ In March 2016, secret backchannel talks culminated in the breakthrough visit of Mohamed Abdulsalam, Houthi spokesman and head of the group's peace delegation, to Saudi Arabia. These negotiations led to the Houthis handing over a captured Saudi soldier.⁸⁸ According to interviews, this tribal mediation process was encouraged by both the Houthis and the Saudis to try to ease tensions along the border.

Only when regional tribes engaged in a confidence building measure could Saudi Arabia then invite a Houthi representative to travel into its territory; an event which paved the way for negotiations at the national and international levels. During this time, Ahmed Al-Asiri, then spokesperson of the coalition, attributed the temporary lull in border hostilities between the two countries to mediation efforts carried out by Yemeni tribes. These negotiations, which began secretly, became known as the Dhahran Al-Janoub talks, and are credited with paving the way for the first round of national peace talks in Kuwait.⁸⁹

Moreover, as the conflict continued, the European Union began to acknowledge the vital yet previously unheralded role of the tribes in trying to reach peaceful settlements among the warring parties. In 2017, the head of the EU Mission to Yemen, Antonia Calvo-Puerta, invited 70 tribal leaders as a track II diplomacy initiative to discuss potential solutions to the conflict in Yemen.⁹⁰ The talks were limited, however, as only 30 tribal leaders could attend,⁹¹ and the majority of invitees could not travel out of Houthi-controlled areas due to the coalition's aerial blockade.⁹²

Although tribal mediation between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis has thus far failed to lead to a major settlement, the success of the Dhahran Al-Janoub talks demonstrates the potential for localized tribal mediation to encourage more substantial negotiation attempts at the national level.

The tribes continue to take serious strides towards peace making in Yemen, where they present as arguably the most successful of the peace-seeking actors to the conflict. The tribes and their leadership continue to exhibit fluidity in their political movements and a

⁸⁷ "Mofawadat Houthiyah Saudiyyah.. Hal Tantahi Al-Harb Fi Al-Yaman?" Al-Hurra, March 11, 2016. <https://www.alhurra.com/a/yemen-saudi-chances-of-peace/297659.html>.

⁸⁸ According to personal interviews conducted in 2016.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ According to tribal sheikhs that attended the meeting.

⁹¹ "Ba'd Ijtima'tiha Fi Bruxelles, Hal Takoon Al-Qabilah Al-Hal?" *Yemen Monitor*, 19 Dec. 2017, <http://www.yemenmonitor.com/m/details/artmid/1052/ArticleID/20449>.

⁹² According to interviews with tribal figures.

willingness to engage with the international community and be recognized for their achievements. For example, in Serwah district of Marib, one of the main fault lines between the Houthis and the government that has largely remained a fixed, yet deadly, frontline, tribal leaders on both sides of the conflict are meeting to discuss how to de-escalate tensions in the area.⁹³

CONCLUSION

We are mindful of the fact that to many Yemeni and international observers, Yemen's vast tribal networks pose a threat to future security and development in Yemen. The purpose of this paper is not to idealize tribalism in either its historical or present form. We recognize that Yemeni tribes can engage in violent behavior to resolve conflicts, and continue to advocate for increased education and other constructive initiatives to mitigate cyclical revenge. Additionally tribes have become increasingly, almost exclusively male spaces in Yemen. At present, this largely Wahhabism-fueled social conservatism leaves little space for women in Yemeni tribes. However, ignoring the inherent power of the tribes is its own form of idealism. To truly understand the current conflict dynamics in Yemen, international observers should begin making meaningful connections with tribal leaders. Traditional tribal approaches towards conflict resolution should be seriously considered as the international community continues to push for peace talks in Yemen.

While a ceasefire in Yemen will likely only emerge as a result of top-down international mediation, these multilateral efforts should not ignore the potential for tribal leaders to serve as parallel mediators. Ultimately, it is domestic forces who will have to enforce a ceasefire and safeguard the post-conflict political process, and Yemen's tribes could be the most effective guarantors of a peace settlement. Whether it endures in the long term will be up to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. International stakeholders must engage directly with Yemen's tribal leaders to better understand tribal functions. This understanding can be used to craft location-specific developmental projects that will be well received and effective in local communities.
2. Tribal power and legitimacy should be leveraged during the war by supporting tribes and tribal actors (including local councils) in their traditional activities, such as mediation and the provision of justice, to be conducive to wider peace building and conflict resolution efforts. One way to do this is to dedicate international donor funding in support of tribal mediation efforts.
3. Tribal involvement in international peace negotiations can provide more legitimacy to the talks. The preservation of these traditional avenues of dispute

⁹³ Al-Akhali, Rafat, and Brett Scott. "Opinion: In Yemen's Internationalised War, It's Time to Give Local Peacemakers the Floor." *The New Humanitarian*, 4 July 2019, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2019/07/04/yemen-war-local-peacemakers>.

resolution must be perceived as a priority to those seeking to increase security in the country. In the current conflict, this translates to respecting these traditional mechanisms and structures as legitimate avenues for dispute resolution, and preserving and securing them in the reconstruction stage. To this end:

4. Peacemakers and all parties to the conflict must press for the creation of a platform and space for warring parties and tribal leaders to convene under the auspices of foreign powers. This will go a long way in making up for the historical neglect of tribes, limiting their inclusion to track II or even III diplomacy – they need to be up there with track I.
5. Recognize that any attempt to destroy or significantly alter these extant social and political structures in order to rebuild the state would likely decrease rather than strengthen security in the country.
6. Enhance the capacities of tribeswomen in conflict resolution by engaging in discussion with tribes over the role that women do and could play, and take a gender-sensitive approach to the wider topic of tribes in peacebuilding.
7. Recognize that Wahhabism and ideological Islamism (including Houthism) present one of the greatest threats to tribal society in Yemen. Countering the threat posed by malign and/or external influences will require the reinforcement of tribal traditions. Tribal elders and leaders can leverage their respected wisdom in this critical time to inform members and hold meetings together to denounce and reject extremism and political Islam as antithetical to tribalism. Moreover, they can use their influence over their fellow tribesman to strengthen the role of women in peacemaking in Yemen.
8. Provide educational spaces for the tribes on civic engagement so they have a better understanding of conflict resolution and the opportunities they could engage in away from tribalism (this can be done by engaging the elders of the community and the sheikh, and encouraging them to promote these ideals). Indeed, many tribal figures have managed to fuse a civil/tribal identity in engaging with Yemeni politics and society.

