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The Resurgent Tribal Agenda in Saudi Arabia

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The Resurgent Tribal Agenda in Saudi Arabia

By Sebastian Maisel

Abstract

This paper analyzes behavior patterns of tribal groups in Saudi Arabia over the past 25 years, and how they have responded to political and socio-economic challenges and changes. It argues that tribes in Saudi Arabia are reasserting the position they held in society prior to state formation in the region by demanding a revision of the government's social contract with its tribal population. They have based their claims on increased popularity in several sectors of Saudi society, such as the legal community, and among intellectuals and youth.

Executive Summary

- Over the past two decades, tribal groups from Saudi Arabia and the broader Arabian Peninsula have staged a socio-political comeback, claiming greater influence in the public sphere. They are active in various fields of endeavor such as social media, the legal sector, literary circles, television, and local politics. Here, tribal voices re-emerged from the physical and intellectual periphery and called for a re-evaluation of the tribes' role in Saudi society.
- Tribal values, mostly related to the former nomadic Bedouins, have been held in high esteem and traditionally played a significant role in the Saudi process of national-identity building. However, they were sidelined for generations and eclipsed by other pillars of Saudi society, notably religious and liberal voices.
- Under the current renaissance, the tribal component of Saudi society actively seeks to renegotiate the existing social contract between rulers and ruled by focusing on traditional Arabian concepts of identity building, such as kinship, genealogy, networking, and group solidarity. All of these represent reputable, non-confrontational, and moderate identity markers in contrast to the radicalism of Islamists and westernization of liberal reformers. Citing the failure, extremism, and corruption of the other concepts, tribal groups used the historic references to fill the void other forms of representation created. They have successfully manipulated public opinion by appealing to common values and through dominant narratives about the tribal past.

- The resurgence of tribalism in Saudi Arabia has provoked opposition, mainly from liberal activists who point to the tribes' discriminatory and elitist rhetoric and argue for a stronger adherence to a national identity based on a shared citizenship. Conservative religious circles also warn about the separatist nature of tribalism and the danger for splitting the Ummah. The government is largely uninterested in changing the existing status quo, but may be forced to recognize the growing influence of tribes in Saudi society.

Implications for Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States

- As formerly potent political and social actors, the influence tribes have over the decision-making process in Saudi society cannot be ignored; neither can their large natural network. The government, especially local and regional authorities, need to be aware of their rising influence in the legal sector, intellectual discourse, and among youth.
- Governments of the Arab Gulf states should develop coherent policies toward the tribes, which reflect their current social surge.
- The Saudi Arabian government should be proactive engaging tribal and non-tribal groups in the debate over citizenship. While the tribes may demand recognition and concessions for their constituencies, non-tribal groups may do the same triggering a national debate over equal civil rights, participation, and citizenship.
- The current state-society dialogue is too limited to address emerging socio-political issues. Thus, the National Dialogue should be reactivated with a stronger focus on tribal, regional, and sectarian issues.
- Social scientists, society leaders, and tribal groups should be invited to study the effect of tribalism on Saudi society from a domestic and transnational perspective. This would increase understanding of how to build civil society and the background behind civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

Implications for the United States

- Saudi society is not a homogenous, uniform entity. U.S. policymakers should improve their understanding of the social composition of Saudi Arabia and the motivations of mainstream Saudi society by studying and recognizing tribalism in its Arabian form and increase interaction with tribal leaders.
- A healthy and balanced relationship between state and tribes that serves as a bulwark against radical and sectarian elements is in the interest of the U.S. government. Learning how the Saudi government deals with its tribal citizens may help the United States in other regional conflicts, such as in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.
- The strong influence of tribal groups over the security sector makes them potential stakeholders in Saudi politics and thus should be recognized by the United States.
- The U.S. government should support indigenous ways to build and strengthen Saudi civil society, which in parts is dominated by tribal elements.

Introduction

For many people in the West as well as some in the Arab world, the word “tribe” carries a stigma of the past, something premodern, a relic of ancient times. Tribal sentiments were the societal core and glue that kept communities together, and tribes made particularly important contributions during the era of state formation in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the consolidation of central power as well as the vanishing of nomadic Bedouins seemed to coincide with the disappearance of tribal groups from the public sphere.

Tribes in Saudi Arabia have for over a century struggled to find a place in the national hierarchy. Despite being the dominant and traditional form of social organization, they have been sidelined in the public political domain. With the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and later during the process of consolidating political and economic power, tribal groups were forcefully integrated into the newly created Saudi national realm. Subjugated to the acceptance of a central authority over the unified territory, the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula had to adapt to new political, economic, and social realities. Tribal groups fought alongside the Saudi government and opposed it, but ultimately, they all were relegated to positions of lesser influence in the wake of the kingdom’s rapid development process.

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The founding king, Abdulaziz, (Ibn Saud), was a master of tactfully shifting the tribal agenda toward his vision of the future kingdom, a trait that future kings possessed, albeit to a lesser degree. The king was able to push formerly hostile and feuding tribes such as the Shammar and Anazeh, Qahtan and Utaybah, or Ajman and Bani Khaled, to put their animosities aside, temporarily, and to join the national movement of building a modern rentier state.

The military sector has been a primary area of incorporating tribal fractions. Saudi Arabia’s National Guard (SANG), which was headed by the late King Abdullah and his son Mitab, recruited its personnel mostly from among the tribes and its units were organized by tribal affiliation. SANG has an important national security role, with its mission focusing on the protection of the royal family, the holy cities, and oil facilities. However, SANG has also developed into a large-scale umbrella organization with hospitals, factories, and other facilities, which first serve the enlisted tribal members and their families. SANG has been described as the closest tie between the tribes and the government.¹

While certain tribal groups have been favored, others have been excluded from the system of institution building based on patronage and personal relations. For example, it was difficult for Shammar tribals to find employment with the government or to be promoted, while members of the Bani Ghamid tribe, which has been traditionally loyal to the government, were given many jobs at Aramco. The ruling family, in addition, has strengthened (or severed) ties with tribes through a system of marital bonds with tribal groups. Overall, the carrot-and-stick or *sayf-wa-mansaf*² policy vis-à-vis the tribes has served the government well for several decades maintaining the status quo and avoiding tribal unrest.

¹ David Long and Sebastian Maisel, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010), 153-156.

² sword and mansaf – The traditional Bedouin dish is used as a metaphor.

Today the Saudi tribal landscape comprises over a hundred tribes and many sub-tribes of different size, origin, and influence. Tribes nowadays live in rural and urban areas often concentrating in locations that used to be described as tribal homelands, *dira*. While this concept was abolished in the 1960s,³ there is still a concentration of tribal members in their former diras. For example the region between Afif and Dawadimi is the former dira of the Utayba and many Utaybis are still in the business, administration, and social elite there. Similarly, this is the case for the Dawasir in Sulayil, Shammar in Hail, and Bani Ghamid and Zahran in al-Baha. Furthermore, within the large cities, entire neighborhoods or quarters are dominated by inhabitants from a particular regional and tribal background.⁴ This gives credence to the notion that urbanization did not lead to an abandonment of tribalism but, rather, to its revival.

Tribes differ in size from several hundreds to millions of members. The largest tribal confederation in Saudi Arabia is the Anazeh, which also extends into neighboring Jordan, Iraq, and Syria. The largest tribe exclusively in the kingdom is the Utaybah. Generally, there are fewer tribes in the north, each with larger memberships, while in the south there are many more tribes, with smaller enrollments.

Tribes furthermore differ in their perception of status. The first distinction is made between tribal and non-tribal groups. Saad Sawoyan, a leading Saudi anthropologist, argues that the vast majority of Saudis consider themselves tribal. The division between *badw* (nomadic) and *hadhar* (settled) lost its credentials with the eradication of pastoral nomadism.⁵ Subsequently, there is a further distinction among the tribes into superior and inferior groups, which is based on their origin, genealogy, and pedigree, but also on their previous occupation as camel herders, sheep herders, or farmers. And finally, the royal family is positioned in this hierarchy, though that tends to be a controversial topic. Often, this is circumnavigated by placing the royal family above all other groups and granting it the status of the super tribe.⁶

Tribalism in Saudi Society

Saudi society and the foundation it is built upon underwent significant transformation over the past two decades with new groups emerging and others reasserting their position in the local hierarchy. Liberal, westernized groups pushed for reforming the legal and political sector, while conservative religious circles opposed them, sometimes using violent tactics. Economic lifestyles have also changed with a dramatic urbanization movement and the complete

³ Ugo Fabietti, "Sedentarization as a Means of Detribalization" in *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Tim Niblock (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 186-197.

⁴ Pascal Menoret describes the peripheral neighborhoods of Riyadh, such as al-Nasim or al-Suwaydi, as the Bedouin belt. See Pascal Menoret, "Urban Unrest and Non-Religious Radicalization in Saudi Arabia" in *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed and Marat Shterin (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 123-137.

⁵ Abdulaziz Al-Fahad, "The Imama vs. the Iqal: Hadari – Bedouin Conflict and the Formation of the Saudi State" in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 35-75.

⁶ See Sultan al-Qasemi "Tribalism in the Arabian Peninsula – It is a Family Affair" www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4198/tribalism-in-the-arabian-peninsula-it-is-a-family-

disappearance of nomadism.

While these changes were significant in the transformation of Saudi society, they did not lead to detribalization, but rather a resurgence. Tribalism is no longer an economic form of sustenance; instead it represents a type of behavior that is based on shared values and customs as well as a common belief in the hierarchical patronage system. Primarily, tribal members look for support within their own families or kin groups. There has been a surge in different forms of tribal affirmations, self-representations, and accounts. Tribal communities and individuals struggle successfully to find their positions in civil society and the social hierarchy.

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Due to rapid and profound changes in lifestyle, interaction, and communication, a new chapter in the relationships between tribes and authorities has opened. Concurrent social change brought along generational conflicts and pressures to which tribes have responded. The proliferation of new technology and media throughout the Middle Eastern region started a new process of public discourse and participation. Using powerful new communication tools, tribes are contributing to this ongoing debate. At the same time, they are challenging traditional ways of interaction between tribal members and the authorities. In this changing environment, the former definition of the tribe and its role in society has been found lacking, and a national discourse about tribalism, tribal values, and hierarchies has been reignited.

The New Tribal Agenda

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Saudi tribes used newly provided space to publicize their agenda during a time when other elements of Saudi society, such as Islamists, liberals, and Shias, faced restrictions and obstacles getting their voices heard. The tribes were more successful because their agenda was less threatening to the ruling family and more in-line with the national interest than the agendas of the other groups.

The tribes consciously focused their public relation campaigns on apolitical sectors of the public life, for example, literature, television, and popular culture. Through this avenue they avoided government scrutiny and reprisals. Although the tribal message received some opposition from liberal and religious circles, due to its deep roots and popular embedment, it also attracted a larger audience. The message called for a renewed interest in tribal histories and values, which worked well alongside the government-sponsored movement to incorporate local heritage into the discourse of national identity.

Television programs featuring tribal topics were abundant, especially the popular Ramadan series, which picked up the historical theme of Bedouins and their traditional desert life. Some programs were produced by governments in the Gulf and others by tribal financiers. They reached a large audience and triggered a debate over the accuracy and historicity⁷ of these series. When some tribes felt misrepresented and were offended by the plot, they vehemently

⁷ See Laila Prager, "Bedouinity on Stage. The Rise of the Bedouin Soap Opera (Musalsal Badawi) in Arab Television" in *Nomadic People*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2014): 53-77.

attacked the series, both rhetorically and physically. The debate over the *musalsal badawi* (Bedouin television dramas) offered the tribes a public forum to rewrite history according to the tribal narrative. Whether supported by the tribes or not, the musalsalat opened a national debate over the role of the tribes in earlier and contemporary society.

Bookstores, printing houses, and literacy clubs across the kingdom rushed to publish tribal histories, Nabati poetry,⁸ and other works cultivating tribalism as a popular genre of intellectual debate. Aside from religious publications, the section on tribal literature is the second largest in the kingdom's biggest bookstores.⁹ Additionally, Saudi Arabians have rushed to discover their roots in genealogies, i.e. tribal family trees showing a desire for more tribal information. Having a solid and strong pedigree or not has become an issue of social hierarchy and status even among the largely urbanized Saudi population. And the government keeps pushing these narratives by supporting public displays of tribalism during heritage festivals, poetry competitions, and camel races. The champion and main promoter of these activities from within the ruling family is Prince Mishaal bin Abdulaziz, chair of the allegiance council and patron of the Mazayin al-Ibl camel race at Um Ruqayba.¹⁰

Legal Merits and Political Impact

The different role that tribalism plays in current Saudi society is also apparent in the legal and political fields. While many societal leaders from liberal and religious circles warn of a greater tribal influence, it is no longer possible to avoid talking about this sensitive issue. When tribes have an impact on legal and political decisions, the national unity is threatened, participants at the National Dialogue¹¹ argued, calling at the same time for strengthening civil society and promoting effective citizenship. Their main complaint about tribalism was its discrimination against non-tribal members. Supporters of the tribes however argued that almost all Saudis are in fact tribal pointing to the positive role of the tribes in the identity-building process of the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia has initiated over the past decades several reforms of its legal and political sectors. While the legal system at large is deeply grounded in sharia law, the government has implemented changes for certain forms of legislation in areas not covered by sharia, such as state-sponsored common law as well as tribal customary law. Especially in rural areas, sharia courts at least consider tribal sentiments and allow for customary practices to continue.¹² Most notably, tribal reconciliation practices are used to handle sensitive cases of capital crimes as well as those involving issues of honor and shame.¹³ On the other hand,

⁸ Nabati poetry is the native Bedouin form of poetry in contrast to classical or modern Arabic poetry.

⁹ Author's personal observations between 2009 and 2012.

¹⁰ See the series of articles about the relationship between taassub (boasting tribal pride) and camel races in Al-Riyadh Newspaper, between Sept. 29 and Nov. 3, 2007 at www.alriyadh.com as well as posts on tribal discussion boards such as www.otaibah.net.

¹¹ Mark Thompson, "Assessing the Impact of Saudi Arabia's National Dialogue: The Controversial Case of the Cultural Discourse" in *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, (December 2011): 163-181.

¹² See more in Sebastian Maisel, "Who is right? Legal representation within the tribal society of Saudi Arabia" in *Nomadismus in der Alten Welt*, ed. Laila Prager (London: LiT-Verlag, 2012) 212-232.

¹³ Saad A Sowayan, "Customary Law in Arabia – An Ethnohistorical Perspective" http://www.saadsowayan.com/Publications/pub_E_13.pdf.

sharia courts proactively support the tribal agenda by issuing rulings on tribal compatibility of spouses, which is not considered one of their domains. While the well-known case of the forced divorce of Fatima and Mansur because of lineage incompatibility received much public attention,¹⁴ other rulings on tribal matters were noted, too. However, the decision in this case acknowledged the existence and dominance of social hierarchies in the kingdom.

Arguably the most tenuous sphere of public discourse in Saudi Arabia is the political landscape, which has been dominated for centuries by the ruling family of Al Saud in conjunction with leading religious and merchant families. After the expansion of Saudi rule over the formerly tribally controlled territories, the tribes had to adjust to the political realities. However, reforms also touched the political sectors, and mechanisms for increased political participation were introduced with the creation of the Consultation Council as well as various forms of electing representatives for professional organizations and municipal councils.

It is however illegal to run on a tribal (or political party) platform. Thus, in order to circumvent this restriction, tribal candidates have formed informal alliances to make sure non-tribal candidates were kept outside. In addition, new communications and social media tools such as blogs, discussion forums, Facebook, and Twitter are frequently used in support of tribal candidates. However, because of the small number of elections it is difficult to identify a persistent pattern of tribal voting behavior.

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Prior to the Arab Spring, which impacted the kingdom only marginally, political opposition to the ruling family was largely based abroad. For a short time, some tribal leaders, mostly from junior branches,¹⁵ sided with the opposition in order to create a joint platform of rhetorical dissent. As this was more a symbolic move, it failed to create momentum and to attract a substantial following. In reality, tribal leaders and masses have benefitted more economically from maintaining the status quo. And they have fared much better promoting their agendas when not focusing on sensitive political issues.

Similarly, intra-tribal tensions and horizontal competition between tribes over access to resources and political influence are also viewed as potentially disruptive, and are strongly discouraged by tribal leadership. While these struggles exist and sometimes erupt into real arguments, the traditional network of conflict resolution within the tribes – including judges, poets, multiple branches of sheikh-families, as well as the tribal bonds and cohesion – make sure that these issues are dealt with internally. Successful cases of reconciliation, however, are frequently and proudly presented in the local media.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Nadav Samin, “Kafā’a fī l-Nasab” in Saudi Arabia: Islamic Law, Tribal Custom, and Social Change, in *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol.2, no. 2, (December 2012): 109-126.

¹⁵ See Madawi al-Rasheed, “Complicated Relationship: The Tribe and the State in Saudi Arabia” in *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, Aug. 27, 2007. She lists the names of the participating tribal leaders: Talal al-Rasheed from the Shammar, Mamduh Sha’lan from the Anazeh, Musaid al-Dhuwaybi from the Harb, and Faysal al-Hithlayn from the Ajman.

¹⁶ Between 2011 and 2014, Sahifa Ukaz reported at least a dozen cases. See www.okaz.com.sa.

In another field tribal leaders have failed with their efforts to mediate and to display tribal unity. Rising tension among the tribal youth is noted throughout the kingdom and local newspapers and the tribal discussion forums frequently report about clashes between young tribal members over issues of honor, pride, status, or genealogies.¹⁷ This is an area that deserves the attention of community leaders and scholars alike.¹⁸

Conclusion

Tribal groups have been the dominant form of social organization and political representation in Saudi Arabia's past. However, they lacked a presence in the public sphere for a number of decades due to overwhelming pressure from other forms of identity, except through their representation in the security forces, especially SANG. Over the past 25 years, tribes have achieved a gradual revival and consequent resurgence in other areas of public life such as the legal sector, local political scene, and intellectual sphere. Not uncontested, but through a process of infiltrating important aspects of public life in the kingdom, tribal narratives gained a large audience and broad acceptance as traditional, uncompromised forms of identity, with which most Saudis can easily identify. More radical voices to the left and right as well as sectarian voices remained on the margins of Saudi society leaving the hearts and minds of the general public open for an agenda that wasn't so new after all. Through resources such as literature, television programs, poetry contests, camel races, reconciliation meetings, and election campaigns, with the help of modern technology and a strong network of committed supporters, Saudi Arabian tribes pushed their old ways into modern society. The government's response to the resurgence of tribal agendas is ambivalent and concentrates on the positive aspects such as common values and heritage. It is much easier to weave them into the national identity because they pose a lesser threat than the agendas of the hardliners from the liberal and religious sectors. However, as soon as the tribal sector pushes into the political arena, the state will ultimately intervene in order to protect the social contract upon which the kingdom is built.

¹⁷ Norman Cigar, "Tribes, Society and the State" in "Saudi Arabia: Change and Continuity and the Implications for Security and Stability" in *The Maghreb Review*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2011): 1-48 summarizes these press reports adequately.

¹⁸ Carlye Murphy's study "A Kingdom's Future: Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes of its Twentysomethings" (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2013) is a very good lead. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/kingdoms_future_saudi_arabia_through_the_eyes_twentysomethings.pdf.

