

NORTHERN YEMENI TRIBES DURING THE ERAS OF ALI ABDULLAH SALEH AND THE HOUTHJI MOVEMENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY



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February 14, 2022

COVER PHOTO: The historic town of Thula, Amran governorate, March 23, 2019 // Sana'a Center photo by Asem Alposi



This paper was produced by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, as part of the Leveraging Innovative Technology for Ceasefire Monitoring, Civilian Protection and Accountability in Yemen project.

It is funded by the German Federal Government, the Government of Canada and the European Union.



Federal Foreign Office

Canada

the European Union



Note: This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the German Federal Government, the Government of Canada and the European Union. The content and recommendations expressed within this document are the personal opinions of the author(s) only, and do not represent the views of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies or Hala Systems, or any other persons or organizations with whom the participants may be otherwise affiliated. The contents of this document can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the positions of the German Federal Government, the Government of Canada or the European Union.

INTRODUCTION

The support of northern Yemeni tribes has historically been critical for the ability of the central government in Sana'a to maintain power. During the period of the Zaidi Imamate – the northern religious polity that ended in 1962 – the rulers, or imams, used their social status as descendants of the Prophet Mohammed's family to win over the two most important tribes in the north, the Hashid and Bakil, between whom there is a long history of rivalry. "The imams and rulers depended to a large extent on the northern tribes, and the most famous warring tribes in Yemen were the Hashid and Bakil. They are known as the two wings," the late nationalist politician Ahmad Mohammed Noaman wrote in his memoirs.^[1]

However, following the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) in September 1962, the methods used to win tribal loyalty began to change, as the government – which no longer claimed legitimacy on a religious basis – found it necessary to search for new strategies to win them over. Most governments were successful in this, with the exception of the rule of President Ibrahim al-Hamdi between 1974 and 1977, which was characterized by conflict with the northern tribes, contributing to his downfall. With the ascent of Ali Abdullah Saleh to power in 1978, the government adopted a different attitude, based on a realization that the tribe should be considered the "main component of Yemeni society ... one of the most important explanatory factors for Yemeni social and political reality" if stable governance in a modern state was to be possible.^[2] The regime thus shifted from use of violence against the tribes to peaceful means of winning their loyalty.

The Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) also understood the importance of the northern tribes for those who wanted to rule Sana'a, specifically the fact that they formed a large reservoir of potential fighters.^[3] The movement noted that in recent history the 1948 revolution against the Imamate had failed because the tribes were on the side of the imams, the revolution of September 1962 succeeded because the tribes sided with the republicans, and the 2011 uprising was able to force President Ali Abdallah Saleh from power because the tribes gathered in the

[1] Ali Mohammed Zaid (ed), *Memoirs of Ahmad Mohammed Noaman: A Cultural and Political Biography* [AR] (Cairo: Madbouli, 2003), p. 216.

[2] Mohammed al-Zahari, "Tribal and political conferences in Yemen," *Alkhaleej*, November 21, 2010, [www.alkhaleej.ae/](http://www.alkhaleej.ae/-في-القبيلية-والسياسة-في-مقالات-المؤتمرات-القبيلية-والسياسة-في-www.alkhaleej.ae/) [في-القبيلية-والسياسة-في-مقالات-المؤتمرات-القبيلية-والسياسة-في-www.alkhaleej.ae/](http://www.alkhaleej.ae/-في-القبيلية-والسياسة-في-مقالات-المؤتمرات-القبيلية-والسياسة-في-www.alkhaleej.ae/) كما أنها 20% سياسية 20% text = %20 فالقبيلة 20% اليمنية 20% لا تزال 20% المكون 20% التفسير 20% للواقع 20% الاجتماعي 20% والسياسي 20% اليمني 20% #:text = %20 الجذور 20% بحكم 20% (بنويبا) 20% وتجاهلها 20% سياسيا 20%

[3] Joshua Rogers, "Northern Yemen Tribes and Central Authority During the Civil War 1962-1970," *Journal of the British Yemeni Society*, Volume 24, 2016, p. 13.

squares to support it.^[4] Thus, one of the early priorities of the Houthi movement was to apply a variety of cultural means, in addition to military force, to subjugate the tribes and use them to consolidate power.

This paper compares the strategies pursued by the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi movement to control and utilize the northern tribes. Where were they successful and where did they fail? Specifically, it examines the Saleh regime's attention to winning tribal loyalty through political integration and, by contrast, the Houthi movement's focus on ideology and militarization in its approach.

[4] Adel Dashela, *The Houthi Movement and the Yemeni Tribe between 2011-2020* [AR] (Istanbul: Arab Foundation for Strategic Studies, 2021), p. 140.

HOW THE SALEH REGIME WON THE LOYALTY OF THE TRIBES

Saleh, a Hashid tribesman from a minor branch of the confederation, managed to gain tribal support due to his understanding of the dynamics of the Yemeni tribe. The tribal leaders whose loyalty he won included Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar (1932-2007), chief of the Hashid confederation, and Sheikh Najib bin Abdulaziz Al-Sha'if (b. 1941) and Sheikh Sinan Abu Lahoum (1922-2021), two of the most prominent figures of the Bakil tribes. Saleh's knowledge of tribal psychology, the mentality of the sheikhs, the social structure of tribes, and the roles and capabilities of tribesmen meant that tribes viewed Saleh as one of their own and felt an obligation to support him.^[5] Saleh focused on containing these forces through maintaining a flexible relationship, based on a cautious policy of bringing tribal leaders into the ruling power structure to assure them that their interests were being preserved.^[6]

Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar was appointed chairman of the Yemeni parliament following the first parliamentary elections in 1993, and other sheikhs at different levels within the tribal hierarchy were encouraged by Saleh and his inner circle to seek office in parliament, as well as the upper house of parliament (Shura Council) and local councils. Many parliamentary seats in tribal regions thus passed into the hands of tribal sheikhs. Hence, while on the surface the Saleh regime was an institutionalized, representative political system, it also functioned as a traditional tribal system. Tribal custom had a role in defining and mapping the relationship between the tribe and the state within the political idiom and structure of the time, which was the parliamentary system.^[7] Some Hashid and Bakil subtribes and their sheikhs were also integrated into the military, such as the Hajour, Ans, Al-Himatin, Hamadan, Bani al-Harith, Khawlan, Sanhan (to which Saleh belonged) and others, some on a voluntary, some on a conscription basis.

[5] Led since 2008 by Sheikh Sadeq al-Ahmar, the Hashid confederation is made up of four large tribes based in Amran: Kharif, Bani Suraim, Odhar and Al-Osaimat. Smaller tribes within Hashid include: Hamdan, Sanhan and Hbour Zulaima. The Bakil confederation, led by Sheikh Najib bin Abdulaziz al-Sha'if, is made up of Arhab, Nahm, Dhu Mohammed, Dhu Hussein, the tribes of Sufyan, Jamaa and Sahhar. Their areas are located in Amran, Al-Jawf, Sana'a and Sa'ada. See Mohammed bin Ahmad al-Hijri, *Yemen's Tribes* [AR] (Sana'a: Dar al-Hikma al-Yamaniyya, 1996, 2nd ed.) and Fadel Ali Abu Ghanem, *Tribal Structure in Yemen between Continuity and Change* [AR] (Sana'a: Dar al-Hikma al-Yamaniyya, 1996, 2nd ed.).

[6] Abdelwahab al-Rouhani, *Yemen, Specific Characteristics of Governance and Unity: An Analytical Study* [AR] (Amman: Dar Zahran, 2009, 2nd ed.), p.64.

[7] Jumaa Belaid, *The Tribe's Role in Arab Political Regimes: Yemen as a Model* [AR] (Master's Thesis, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Middle East University, 2015), p.17.

Further, tribal elders were accorded a large degree of autonomy in their areas, allowing some sheikhs to settle criminal and social cases without state intervention. The fact tribe that settled disputes and regulated relations between its members^[8] eased state burdens, but it also weakened the authority of the state in favor of the tribes. A Tribal Affairs Authority^[9] was established in the 1980s, allocating monthly salaries to sheikhs to ensure their continued loyalty. It is clear, then, that the tribal sheikhs made considerable political and financial gains under the Saleh regime.

Factors Behind the Weakening of Tribal Solidarity Under Saleh

With the tribe's integration into the pluralistic parliamentary political system adopted following unification in 1990, the old notion of the tribe as a negative feature of society militating toward disunity and, by definition, undermining state power, was gradually dispelled.^[10] The tribes became heavily involved in the political arena, but this integration was flawed and came to form a threat to tribal cohesion itself. This was because, distributed in political parties which were largely ideological rather than representative of tribal interests per se, tribal members began to develop partisan attachments that effectively replaced tribal partisanship with a new loyalty to the party. The tribal leaders themselves became apprehensive about this new partisanship, considering it a direct threat to the cohesion of the tribe. Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, himself a founding member of the Islamist Islah party and its president until his death in 2007, acknowledged this in his memoirs, writing that "partisanship has affected tribal cohesion".^[11] The long-term danger was the disintegration of the tribe itself.

Another harbinger of tribal disintegration was the fact that the legitimacy of some tribal sheikhs was linked to the authority in Sana'a and no longer emanated from within the tribe itself,^[12] with its complex linkages between sheikh and members

[8] Adel al-Sharjabi et al., "Al-Qasr wa-l-Diwan: The Tribe's Political Role [AR]," Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights and the Institute for International Development Studies, Canada, October 2009, p. 15.

[9] For more, see: <https://arbyy.com/detail1199142123.html>

[10] Mohammed Najib Bou Taleb, *Sociology of the Tribe in the Arab Maghreb* [AR] (Beirut: Arab Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2002), p. 60; and Ahmed al-Mawari, "Local Governance In Yemen: Challenges And Opportunities," Berghof Institute, 2018, p.1.

[11] Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, *Memoirs: Positions and Issues* [AR] (Sana'a: Al-Afaq for Printing and Publishing, 2008, 2nd ed.), p. 325.

[12] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "The Sectarianization of Yemen's War [AR]," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 16, 2016, <https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/analysis-ar/76>

that represented a form of social contract.^[13] The men of the tribes typically meet and consult among themselves to appoint their sheikh unanimously in accordance with this contract. The sheikh of the tribe becomes its front and its representative among other tribes. The most prominent terms of this contract state that the tribal sheikh must abide by the customs of the tribe, that he must be wise, and that he should be known for his experience in resolving tribal disputes. He should act in a way that preserves the interests of the tribe, displaying the characteristics of a generous,^[14] courageous and noble leader.

In supporting some tribal figures financially and politically at the expense of the traditional sheikhs, the state caused a weakening in both the rule of law and the tribe's power. As a member of one of these tribes, the author of this paper observed during the Saleh era how support was given to tribal leaders at the expense of attention to the popular base inside the tribes. This made the tribesmen feel that the political system was only interested in the political and symbolic value to be extracted from its relationship with senior tribal stakeholders and not with the wellbeing of tribal society itself.

Alienated from both their tribal leaders and the government, many tribesmen decided to migrate to neighboring countries, but others were drawn to armed groups such as the Houthi movement as it grew in the early 2000s. Many of the poorest tribesmen joined the army, while others took up agriculture as a profession. A small number pursued higher education. But the vast majority ended up jobless, leading to social problems such as tribal uprisings and the proliferation of highway robbery. These phenomena spread as a result of the absence of state security institutions in tribal areas, which in turn fed back into the resort to violence to restore rights. The lack of interest among sheikhs – the representatives of their regions in parliament, local councils and other government institutions – in implementing development projects, including the provision of basic services in their areas, also hindered the urbanization of tribal communities, which became another factor in both tribal disintegration and the weakening of the state writ.

Another element in the weakening of tribal cohesion in northern areas was the state's effort between 2004 and 2010 to militarize them to confront the Houthi movement, despite the existence of the army and security forces. Many members

[13] Nadwa al-Dawsari, "Tribes, Conflict and Rural Livelihoods in Yemen," Chatham House, 2010, p. 3.

[14] "The sheikh has a famous house and a diwan. People go there and eat food with him, and the sheikh is generous. A wayfarer passing by, the poor and the needy all sleep at the sheikh's house... If the state sends soldiers to this tribe, the sheikh receives them, and the sheikh acts as the ruler of the town. These traditions are still observed ... And if there is a feast or a wedding and guests come to this tribe, they stay in the sheikh's diwan," Ali Mohammad Zaid (ed.), *Memoirs of Ahmad Mohammed al-Noaman*, p. 216-217.

of tribes like Hashid, Ans, Hajour, Sufyan, Hamadan, et al., joined the state's military camps, though they lacked the training to face an ideological military force such as the Houthi movement. These battles led to the deaths of many tribesmen.^[15] The policy was not new, in that the Yemeni state has often mobilized tribal fighters to support a weak army in its multiple local wars.^[16]

When the uprising first erupted in 2011, each tribe sided with the political group where it saw its interest lying. The tribes' internal structure was in a notably deteriorated condition, through the involvement of their members in the political conflict directly. The struggle between the political elite in Sana'a fueled the conflict between tribes, especially in the northern regions. This made the tribes vulnerable to exploitation by opposition political parties and the ruling party, not least because the tribal sheikhs were more concerned with preserving their personal interests.^[17] These disputes affected the social cohesion and loyalty of the tribe. The tribe was, then, already a weak social institution when the Houthi movement managed to exert control over the entire tribal system in the northern regions.

During the rise of the Houthi movement, it was able to manipulate tribal partisanship and rivalry in the lead-up to its seizure of the capital Sana'a in September 2014. Since the Hashid had long been associated in the minds of many with the government during the Saleh years, Houthi leaders were able to draw sizable support from the Bakil. The tribes "were influenced by the orientations of their leaders or sheikhs as the centers of power. For example, the Bakil sided with the Houthis as a result of its historical rivalry with the Hashid," wrote researcher Ahmad al-Arami.^[18] In the end, the Houthi forces invaded areas of tribes that were fighting on the side of the state, and the state miscalculated in failing to stand with the people of these areas, instead sending tribal mediators, as if the war was between the Houthi movement and the tribes.^[19] The Houthis also promoted this narrative; for example, when fighting erupted between Houthi forces and Al-Osaimat tribes in the Danan district of Amran in 2013, the Houthi movement portrayed the conflict as between the Al-Osaimat and Odhar tribes (both subgroups of Hashid), establishing a mediation committee to resolve it.^[20]

[15] Author's phone interview with a tribal leader who worked with the state from 2004-2010 as leader of a tribal group, November 17, 2021.

[16] Farea al-Muslimi, "The Popular Committee Phenomenon in Yemen: Fueling War and Conflict," Malcolm H. Kerr, Carnegie Middle East, Center, April 1, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59560>

[17] Monzer Ishaq, *The Tribe and Politics in Yemen: A sociological comparison* [AR] (Taiz: Youth Development Organization, 2012), p. 10.

[18] Ahmad al-Arami, "The Houthis between politics, tribes and sect [AR]," September 2, 2019, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, <https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/analysis-ar/8003>

[19] Author's phone interview with a tribal leader, November 19, 2021.

[20] The committee was made up of the governor of Amran – at the time, the late Mohammad Hassan Dammaj – and Shura Council members Kahlan Abu Shawareb, Faisal Abdullah Manna', Bakil Naji al-Sufi, Qassem Qubaiza, Mohammad Abdullah Badreddine, and other tribal figures. The following points were agreed upon: securing roads; returning what was stolen to its owners; allowing the tribe of Dhu Ghalis, who were aligned with the Houthis, to return to lands they were expelled from in Al-Osaimat areas; implementing rulings and decrees between the Odhar and Al-Osaimat; handing over those who killed people in the streets; withdrawing armed men from sites of confrontation; freedom of thought and belief; the formation of a committee to resolve disputes between the Odhar and Al-Osaimat over adjacent lands; reconstructing what the war destroyed; and the formation of a committee to implement all these points. See "The Houthi-Ahmar War: Mediation committee formed to calm the situation succeeds in reaching a ceasefire [AR]," Sam Press, September 14, 2013, <https://www.sampress.net/portal/news-2350.htm>

Once Houthi forces had taken control of Sana'a, the tribesmen who were involved with political parties found themselves in a difficult position. Some of them ostensibly renounced their political affiliation, returned to their rural tribal areas and did not oppose the new rulers for fear of their lives. Others refused to remain under Houthi jurisdiction, choosing to either leave Yemen or settle in areas under the control of the internationally recognized government such as Marib, Taiz, Al-Mahra, Shabwa, and Wadi Hadramawt. Of those who joined the Houthi movement, some were subsequently imprisoned for expressing disapproval of Houthi policies or because of their previous political activities.^[21]

[21] Author's phone interview with a tribal leader, November 18, 2021.

HOUTHİ STRATAGEMS TO SUBJUGATE THE TRIBES

Tribes and the state were both weakened as a result of the events of 2011 and the expansion of the Houthi control from Sa'ada toward tribal areas in Amran via military force. The Houthi movement is not a tribe in its own right, but rather an ideological movement of Zaidi revivalism led by the Al-Houthi family, with a core of sympathizers from tribes (including some among the Bakil and Hashid) in the northern governorates of Dhamar, Hajjah, Sana'a, Amran, Sa'ada and Al-Mahwit.

In 2012, the Houthi movement used the tribal card to strengthen its social status by presenting itself as an alternative to the state. It took advantage of political disagreements prevalent among the tribes, especially within Hashid between supporters of Sheikh Sadeq al-Ahmar, the Islah party and Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar on the one hand, and supporters of President Saleh on the other. The Houthi movement exploited this division and adopted an offensive strategy that targeted the areas that were the most threatening and strategically important.^[22]

In addition, the Houthi movement succeeded in neutralizing most of the Hashid Bani Suraim tribes through a traditional tribal agreement known as Musawana, which guarantees non-aggression among its signatories.^[23] This agreement was concluded in February 2014 between a group of Bani Suraim tribes led by Ali Hamid Julidan, Mabkhout al-Mashreqi and other tribal figures on the one hand, and the representative of the Houthi movement, Abu Ali al-Hakim, on the other hand, but without consulting other Hashid sheikhs.^[24] Known later as the Black Line Agreement, it opened the Houthi movement's path to the town of Khamer, the seat of the Hashid tribe where both Bani Suraim and the house of Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar are located. It stipulated "the commitment of the Bani Suraim tribes to open and protect the road [between Sana'a and Sa'ada] and the Houthi movement's commitment not to attack the lands of Bani Suraim or interfere in

[22] Ali al-Zahab, "The Houthis' Military Strategy: Strengths, Weaknesses and Turning Points [AR]," Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 2019, p. 2, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2019/03/clone.of.190321083659544.html>

[23] Al-Masawana in tribal customs means a document agreeing not to attack others.

[24] Author's phone interview with Abdelmajeed al-Ghawi, head of the Hashid Youth Forum, November 17, 2021.

their affairs.”^[25] It was most likely the sight of Hashid tribal areas falling one after the other to Houthi forces as well as Bani Suraim’s good relations with new Houthi ally Ali Abdullah Saleh that led the Bani Suraim sheikhs to make this significant deal with the Houthi movement.

During the Houthi invasion of the tribal areas in Amran and Sa’ada, they also tried to win the sympathy of Bakil people, firstly by appointing Dhaif Allah Rassam – sheikh of the Haydan area in Sa’ada from the Khawlan bin Amer tribe – as head of the Tribal Cohesion Council that the Houthi movement established in Sa’ada in early 2013.^[26] This appointment was a clear sign that the tribal center of power had shifted from Hashid to the Houthi movement in Sa’ada, since Rassam had now become a political leader for Yemeni tribes in general despite being a weak figure lacking charisma. In addition, while the chief of the tribe is normally appointed by its members through consultation, Dhaif Allah Rassam was appointed in a manner contrary to custom. Well-known sheikhs of the Bakil were not enthusiastic about these maneuvers, which left them with a feeling that the Houthis wanted to pull the rug from under them by appointing figures with little experience in managing tribal affairs.

Initially, the Houthi movement sought to present itself as fighting negative phenomena prevalent in tribal societies – such as blood feuds, robbing travelers on roads and high dowries – in order to win tribal loyalty. But this was not enough to convince most tribesmen to submit to Houthi rule. As a result, Houthi authorities since 2011 have resorted to targeting the recalcitrant tribes one by one, occupying their areas with military force and in some cases destroying the homes of tribal figures in several governorates, often using explosives. These included the homes of: Sheikh Ali Hussein al-Munbihi in Sa’ada governorate; in Amran governorate, Sheikh Saleh Souda in Qaflat Odhar district and Sheikh Saghir bin Aziz, Sheikh Sadeq al-Ahmar and Sheikh Mabkhout al-Mashreqi; in Ibb governorate, Sheikh Abdul Wahed al-Da’am in Al-Radma district and sheikhs Ali Qasha, Moaz al-Jammal and Sheikh Ali Badr; Sheikh Abduljalil al-Hudhaifi in Al-Husha district, Al-Dhalea governorate; Sheikh Saleh bin Farid al-Awlaki in Shabwa governorate; Sheikh Akram al-Zarqa in Hajjah governorate; and in Dhamar governorate, Sheikh Abdulwahhab Moawadeh in Atma district and Sheikh Ali Ahmed al-Maqdashi.^[27]

[25] Disputes between Hashid tribes in Bani Suraim and the Houthis threaten to end the agreement [AR], Al-Mashhad al-Yemeni, April 27, 2014, <https://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/10459>

[26] “Announcing the Tribal Cohesion Council in the city of Sa’ada has revolutionary significance in that Sa’ada is the first Yemeni governorate to engage in revolutionary action,” writes Abdo al-Bahsh, “The Tribal Cohesion Council, a creative revolutionary work [AR],” Yemeni Press, January 5, 2013, <https://www.yemenipress.net/archives/4911>

[27] “Houthis and the Yemeni tribe: A story of enslavement [AR],” Manchette, September 19, 2020, <https://www.manchette.net/news10401.html>

This was a message of threat and warning to the tribes that the era of pragmatic give-and-take had ended and the rule of the Houthi movement must be accepted, no questions asked. Houthi forces also used the tactic of sudden mass attacks on tribal areas of the Sufyan, Al-Osaimat, Odhar, Hajour, Atma and others. Softer, traditional methods were also used to subjugate the tribes. The Houthi authorities opened summer schools to spread the ideology of the movement through courses for sheikhs and tribesmen alike. The task of managing these programs was entrusted to Yahya al-Houthi, the minister of education in the Houthi government. Though the Tribal Cohesion Council and a tribal honor document that the Houthi authorities formulated in early 2019,^[28] what these agreements amounted to in effect was further subjugation of the tribes to Houthi ideological leadership. The Tribal Cohesion Council mobilized tribes to fight with Houthi forces and pulled the rug from under the tribal sheikhs who had dominated the tribal scene from 1962 revolution until the 2011 uprising.

The tribal honor document^[29] appeared to mark a new stage in Houthi-tribal relations. Although it used the language of tribal cohesion and its revitalization, this document imposed tribal taxation and explicitly obliged the tribes to provide fighters for the war since 2015 against the internationally recognized Yemeni government and Saudi-led coalition forces. In 2018, Houthi authorities also established the General Authority for Tribal Affairs to monitor the actions of tribal sheikhs in support of the Tribal Cohesion Council, which was also achieved through social, cultural, educational and security supervisors appointed by the Houthi authorities to each administrative district.^[30]

The Houthi movement has appealed to the tribal notion of equality,^[31] which helped mitigate the impact of Houthi rhetoric and its theory of a ruling elite by birthright, while Houthi-aligned media tries to emphasize and celebrate tribal customs and traditions. Houthi leaders adhere to the tribal dress code in public events and appeal to the tribal concept of mutual aid known as al-nakaf al-qibli^[32] as another means of persuading the tribes to fight alongside them in the name of defending the homeland. The Houthi authorities have also deployed the folkloric

[28] "President Al-Mashat inaugurates executive procedures for the Tribal Honor Document [AR]," *Ansarollah.com*, February 20, 2019, <https://cutt.ly/XOWahMr>

[29] According to the Houthi-affiliated Al-Masirah website, this document stipulated tribal solidarity with the Houthi government against supporters, participants and instigators of the Saudi-led war to reinstate the internationally recognized government; "Articles of the tribal honor document that Yemeni tribes signed to strengthen national principles [AR]," Al-Masirah, March 4, 2019, <http://www.almasirahnews.com/38021/>

[30] "The Houthis issue a decision to establish the General Authority for Tribal Affairs [AR]," Al-Mahrah Post, October 27, 2018, <https://almahrahpost.com/news/6898#.YgPdofUzZgd>

[31] Azmi Bishara, *On Revolutions and the Susceptibility to Revolution* [AR] (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014, 2nd ed.), p.13.

[32] This is a tribal custom used to support any cause financially, militarily or by other means.

songs, known as zuwamel, that tribes traditionally chant during harvest and collective work as a way of rallying support and raising morale among fighters.^[33] Coalition behavior in areas that did not witness direct conflict with the Houthi movement, such as Socotra Island in the Arabian Sea, Mayun Island at Bab al-Mandab Strait, as well as Al-Mahra governorate, also helped encourage tribesmen to join the war from a nationalist perspective.

The Status of the Tribe Under Houthi Rule

The tribe is a conservative social and political phenomenon governed by customs and traditions that operate as laws to be adhered to. The bond of kinship is fundamental to this social pact.^[34] In Houthi ideology, social and political power is centered around the Hashemi branch of descendants of the Prophet Mohammed's family (known as Ahl al-Bayt), as represented in the current era by Houthi movement leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi and his family. Abdelmalek al-Houthi has the final say in all matters, and obeying his orders is a religious duty for all members of the movement. The oath of allegiance to the group is given as a pledge to God regarding guardianship and authority (wilaya): "We solemnly accept the guardianship of God, His Prophet, Imam Ali and my lord and master Abdelmalek Badreddine al-Houthi, whom you ordered us to accept as guardian. We solemnly disavow your enemies, the enemies of the Prophet, the enemies of Imam Ali and the enemies of my lord and master Abdelmalek Badreddine al-Houthi, whom you ordered us to accept as guardian."^[35] The Houthi message to followers is that the group alone is on the path of truth, unlike other organizational entities such as the tribe. The movement treats the Hashemites, including the Houthi family, as an elite, privileged class within society.^[36] From this perspective, the Houthi movement does not represent society's various components, but rather it sits above them.

After it seized control of Sana'a, the political role of influential tribal figures declined. A new group of sheikhs appointed by Houthi authorities became their

[33] Abdulhakim Hilal, "Abdelhadi al-Az'azi: Yemen's heritage at risk due to destructive war [AR]," Al-Jazeera, October 27, 2019, www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2019/10/27/عبد-الهادي-العززي-التراث-اللامادي

[34] Nabawiya Helmy Abu Basha, "The social and political environment and its impact on the establishment of the United Arab Emirates," Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2002, p.89.

[35] Mohammed al-Mikhlaifi, The Case of the Rule of Law in the Yemeni Crisis: Permanent War and the State-building Project (Part Two) (Cairo: Dar Anawin, n.d.a.) p. 213, <https://cutt.ly/QTaocF3>

[36] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, The Houthis: From the Sa'ada Wars to the Saudi-led Intervention, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 16, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/10205>

tribal front, despite lacking tribal legitimacy of their own. For example, Hashemi figures were appointed to positions of tribal importance in the Ans tribe. Sheikh Muhammad Mutahhir al-Washli, the son of a judge and feudal lord of Zabid district of the Ans tribal area of Dhamar during the Zaidi Imamate, did not have any tribal status in his area until the Houthis appointed him the Ans chief of sheikhs in Zubaid, a new position. But such titles are general, do not emerge from the deep tribal structure, and cannot supersede the boundaries existing according to tribal custom.^[37]

It can be said that the tribe in the era of the Houthi movement went through three phases. Firstly, there was the conflict with the Houthi movement that some tribes engaged in between 2011 and 2014 in Amran, Sana'a and Hajjah. The aim of these battles was to defend tribe and land, not to defend or resist a particular ideology. Indeed, the tribes were aware of the implications of the Houthi movement's control over them, given their bitter experience with the Imamate before 1962 from which the Houthi movement claims descent. In the second phase, there was a pragmatic alliance between the Houthi movement and some of the tribes that had been loyal to Saleh. This alliance was a meeting of interests in confronting the Saudi-led campaign and was supported by Saleh himself. The third phase, following Saleh's killing at the hands of the Houthis in December 2017, witnessed the subjugation of tribes to Houthi rule by force and extension of Houthi control over tribal areas such as Hajour in Hajjah and parts of Dhamar. The tribes no longer have any political or social influence in light of the Houthi control of the political and tribal arena, with the exception of some small internal issues left to the tribes to manage.

It is clear that the wars launched by the Houthi movement against the northern tribes caused major ruptures within the tribal structure. Underpinned by ideology, Houthi power came at the expense of the tribes and other political forces. At the same time, tribesmen were susceptible to ideological militarization within the new Houthi order. The role of the tribes shifted from assisting the state in governance to providing manpower for the realization of war aims. The conflict between the Houthi movement and internationally recognized government in Marib governorate over the past six years bears this out. In a rare statement in November 2021, a Houthi official declared publicly they had lost 15,000 of their forces in the six-month period from June until November 2021 during the battles the movement launched there.^[38]

[37] Ahmad al-Arabi, "The Houthis between politics, tribes and sect [AR]," September 2, 2019, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, <https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/analysis-ar/8003>

[38] "A rare confession by the Houthis regarding their massive losses, they lost around 15,000 fighters during six months in Marib," Arabic Post, November 19, 2021, www.arabicpost.net/اعتراف-نادر-من-الحوثيين-بخسائرهم-الكبيرة/2021/11/19/أخبار/

The Houthi movement was able to subjugate the tribes through two main factors. One was the lack of strong leadership within the Yemeni state following Saleh's ouster. Indeed, the internationally recognized government was forced to relocate to Aden in 2015, which contributed to the tribes accepting Houthi authority in Sana'a. Secondly, the Houthi movement could exploit the ongoing war through use of populist rhetoric portraying it as confronting an external aggressor, again winning over the tribes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper has argued that the previous regime, led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, used pragmatic means to gain the loyalty of the northern tribes but these means ultimately weakened the tribes and the state in equal measure. The Houthi movement took advantage of this weakness, the disarray among Yemeni political forces that accompanied the descent into war and foreign intervention in Yemen's affairs to subjugate the tribes in an unprecedented manner. The Houthi movement used an array of policies toward the tribes, including violence, and altered tribal customs and traditions to serve its war project, and this led to depletion of the tribes' human resources. This went beyond the limited conscription that took place in Saleh's later years when wars with the Houthi movement began.

The Houthi movement is an ideologically driven military group with a totalitarian mindset, applying a logic of oppression and dominance towards the northern tribes. In other words, it lacks a base of popular support in tribal communities, which have been largely coerced into expressions of solidarity, including participation in the Houthi war effort. While tribes enjoyed social and political privilege during the Saleh regime, they have been stripped of this during the Houthi era, and they are no longer the cohesive tribal entity they once were.

Based on the above research, the following recommendations are offered:

- The Houthi movement should cease the use of tribal customs and traditions to implement political agendas since it does not serve the goal of lasting civil peace; and the use of violence to subjugate the tribes for ideological purposes will not lead to stability. Even if it seems that the tribes have become subservient, this cannot last for long.
- The Houthi movement should realize that this use of ideology in a conservative, religious tribal society will have serious ramifications for social peace and cohesion after the war, putting the country's political unity at risk.

- The mobilization of tribes in the ongoing conflict should end since it will only perpetuate the culture of blood feud, which will not serve the cause of peace and harmony once the war is over.
- The continued humiliation of the tribes through arresting their members and destroying their homes should end since it risks deepening the divide between the tribes and the Hashemite class to which the Al-Houthi family belong.
- Failure to address the economic situation, especially in the poorest northern tribal areas, risks provoking even more civil strife in the future.

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