



# TRIBES AND THE STATE IN MARIB

By:

Ahmed Al-Tars Al-Arami

May 4, 2021

---

# TRIBES AND THE STATE IN MARIB

By:

Ahmed Al-Tars Al-Arami

---

May 4, 2021

COVER PHOTO: Armed tribesmen and Yemeni army forces keep watch at the frontline area of Al-Jadafer, Marib, near the border with Al-Jawf governorate, on September 6, 2020 // Sana'a Center photo by Ali Owidha



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Marib's Tribes and the State before the War</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Facing Houthi Expansion, Marib's Tribes Side with the Government</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Tribal-State Relations in Marib</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Conclusion and Looking Ahead</b>	<b>12</b>



## INTRODUCTION

For most of Yemen's modern history, the tribes of Marib have largely been perceived as hostile toward the state. This perception, however, has been turned on its head since the armed Houthi movement seized the capital Sana'a in 2014, after which the group set its eyes on neighboring Marib. In response, Marib's tribes have emerged as the last line of defense against Houthi attempts to capture the strategic governorate from the internationally recognized government. Alongside the positive role the tribes have played in ensuring Marib's stability, a noticeable change has emerged in tribal views toward the Yemeni state and its interests. Rather than viewing the state with suspicion and hostility, the tribes have become a critical force in maintaining whatever is left of the state's institutions, and even the republican system, in Marib. This new reality necessitates exploring new formulas that can push for peace and help fulfill the project of building a democratic Yemeni state.

## MARIB'S TRIBES AND THE STATE BEFORE THE WAR

Tribes represent the most important social component in Marib.<sup>[1]</sup> While this is the case in other areas of northern Yemen, Maribi tribes differ in several ways. Structurally, Marib's tribes closely mirror the tribes of central Arabia<sup>[2]</sup> in terms of their economic reliance on grazing animals and the fact that membership stems primarily from shared familial and geographical origins. Tribes in the northern Yemeni highlands, by contrast, predominantly rely on agriculture, and membership is more dependent on a system of alliances than familial ties. Both Maribis and other Yemeni tribes adhere to a similar tribal custom system,<sup>[3]</sup> although Maribi tribes tend to place more importance on this code and follow it more closely.

Since the establishment of the republican system in northern Yemen in 1962, the most dominant feature of tribal-state relations in Marib was the intersection of tribal power with the state's weakness and corruption. Initially, the tribes viewed the republican system as far preferable to the resented imamate, which created a ruling class consisting of Zaidi Shia 'outsiders' in the eyes of many Marib tribes, the majority of whom are Sunni.<sup>[4]</sup> However, under the republican state, Marib remained mostly underdeveloped, despite it being resource-rich and a source of electricity generation for much of the country. This led to a growing sense of aggrievement toward the state among Maribis over the perceived exploitation and marginalization of the governorate. Tribes dealing with the state's corrupt

---

1) For a breakdown of Marib's tribes and their geographic influence, see: Casey Coombs and Ali al-Sakani, "Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances," the Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, October 22, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11778>

2) The Arabian Peninsula witnessed important demographic and social changes from the 6th century onward as the emphasis on agriculture waned and tribes in the desert became more influential. This paved the way for migration waves from the center to the outskirts, and fertile agricultural lands were increasingly transformed into grazing areas. Such shifts and migration waves in Marib and neighboring Al-Jawf governorate, sites of two of the oldest and most important fertile valleys which ancient Yemeni civilizations relied on for agricultural production, contributed to the composition of the Maribi society today. See: Lira M. Lapidus, "A History of Islamic Societies, Volume 1," translated into Arabic by Fadel Jatkr, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi, Beirut, 2011, p.69.

3) Tribal custom was laid out in a document by tribal sheikh Hadi bin Saleh Hadi Mohammed Sayyad and signed by scholars and Yemen's different tribes in Dhu al-Qada in 1837 (1253 hijri). It was then approved by ruling authorities during the reign of Imam al-Nasir Abdallah bin al-Hassan bin al-Imam al-Mahdy Abbas (1837-1840). Around 80 years later, it was approved again by Imam Yahya bin Mohammed bin Yahya Hamideddine (1918-1948).

4) "Tribes in Yemen: An introduction to the tribal system," ACAPS, August 13, 2020, [https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200813\\_acaps\\_thematic\\_report\\_tribes\\_in\\_yemen\\_0.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200813_acaps_thematic_report_tribes_in_yemen_0.pdf)

system of governance, based on favoritism and personal networks, realized that they could extract concessions through force, including by kidnapping foreigners, establishing roadblocks, and attacking oil, gas and electricity installations.<sup>[5]</sup> The sabotage of infrastructure in Marib continued even after the 2011 uprising that removed then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh from power, and the appointment of local Marib tribal sheikh Sultan al-Aradah as governor in 2012. Attacks on Marib's electricity infrastructure often led to long blackouts across Yemen, including in the capital Sana'a.

---

5) Nadwa al-Dawsari, "Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen", The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2012, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen\\_tribal\\_governance.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_tribal_governance.pdf)

## FACING HOUTHİ EXPANSION, MARİB'S TRIBES SIDE WITH THE GOVERNMENT

When the Yemeni state itself was threatened following the Houthi seizure of Sana'a in September 2014, Marib's tribes largely threw their lot in with the internationally recognized government. While there was a sectarian element in tribes' decision to forcibly oppose the expansion of the Zaidi Shia Houthi movement, a more important factor was that many Marib tribes view the Houthis as simply another tribe.<sup>[6]</sup> While the tribes could accept the supremacy of the state, should it provide services and development, it was unacceptable to permit a 'tribe' from Sa'ada to take control over the land and resources of Marib, and impose dominance over the local tribes. As the state's authority continued to disintegrate, Governor Al-Aradah privately said he preferred to avoid a war with the Houthis, and at the time would have even accepted Houthi control of Sana'a as long as they did not enter Marib.<sup>[7]</sup> But when Houthi forces moved toward Marib, the tribes saw no reason to submit to an outsider 'tribe' as their superiors, and in response, they rallied to defend their lands.<sup>[8]</sup>

To rally the opposition against the Houthis, Marib's tribes began organizing traditional tribal gatherings, called *matareh*.<sup>[9]</sup> The first *matareh* took place in the areas of Nakhla and Al-Suhail, north of Marib city, on September 18, 2014.<sup>[10]</sup> Here some of Marib's tribes agreed to fight the Houthi forces as well as armed forces loyal to the Houthis' ally, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, after they violated a tribal agreement signed the day before with the Jadaan tribe, which stipulated the withdrawal of fighters on both sides from Jadaan tribal areas.

---

6) The Houthis are not a tribe in the traditional Yemeni sense, and the Houthi leadership is part of the Hashemite *sayyid* class. However, Marib's tribes view the Houthis as another tribe in the sense that they are a non-state actor largely grouped around a shared socio-religious and geographical background.

7) Author's interview with a local researcher in Marib present for the governor's remarks, February 2021.

8) "For more on conceptualizing the Houthis as a tribe, see: Ahmad Al-Tars al-Arami, "The Houthis between politics, the tribe and the sect [AR]," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 2, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/analysis-ar/8003>

9) Locally, *matareh* refers to a place where men gather upon invitation from a tribe to mediate among conflicting parties, or to graze cattle during rainy seasons. *Matareh* can also refer to areas where a group of men gathers and stays, or where tribesmen await an invader. *Matareh* are usually temporary and employed only in emergencies. In the past, women accompanied tribesmen to assist in chores such as bringing water and food preparation; in current times, however, only men are present.

10) Naji al-Hunaishi, "Marib commemorates the third anniversary of the *Matareh* against Houthi aggression [AR]," 26 September, September 20, 2017, <http://www.26sepnews.net/2017/09/20/1-86/>



The matareh at Nakhla would form the nucleus of what later became known as the ‘popular resistance’ against the Houthi movement in Marib. Part of this popular resistance later joined the national army while others have maintained their independence as tribal fighters. Meanwhile, the tribes have kept the matareh active to mobilize a standby force in case the Yemeni government performs poorly militarily or collapses,<sup>[11]</sup> a sort of tribal insurance policy aimed at ensuring that Marib avoids the fate of other governorates captured by the Houthis.

The matareh served a unifying purpose and helped to formalize a new mode of tribal-state relations. At Nakhla, the tribes reached an agreement to postpone feuds and disputes in order to focus on confronting the Houthis. They agreed that Al-Aradah, in his capacity as an Abidah tribal sheikh and Marib governor, would mediate any future disputes.<sup>[12]</sup> This helped to more clearly define the balance of power between the tribes and the state, and perhaps more significantly, shifted the tribes’ general interests and behavior toward the state. The destruction and sabotage of oil and power infrastructure ended. Moreover, the tribes became a major partner – in fact the most influential factor – in the stability of the governorate as it grew into one of the government’s main centers of power in the country.

---

11) Author’s confidential interview with a local source who works at a media outlet in Marib, June 2020.

12) Ibid.



## TRIBAL-STATE RELATIONS IN MARIB

During the war, Marib has been one of Yemen's most stable governorates and among the most influential in Yemeni politics. Centrally located and one of the richest in terms of oil and gas resources, it serves as a base for a large number of the Yemeni government's armed forces. Frontlines have been present in Marib since 2015, when it became the first northern governorate to push back Houthi forces. Marib city, the governorate capital, is currently the second-most important urban center under the control of anti-Houthi forces, after Yemen's temporary capital, Aden. It is also the last northern governorate capital under the total control of the Yemeni government.

Marib's relative stability made it a major destination for tens of thousands of Yemenis internally displaced by the conflict, leading to demographic and political changes that the local tribes have shown flexibility in navigating. Before the war, the city's population was 30,000; since then, the population has reached between 2-3 million – of which the displaced constitute the majority.<sup>[13]</sup> Included among the new arrivals were numerous middle-ranking and lower-ranking Islah party leaders, as well as many tribal leaders and tribesmen who left Houthi-controlled governorates such as Dhamar, Sana'a and Amran. At the same time, massive military recruitment drives from different areas of Yemen, and support from the Saudi-led coalition, led to a flow of fighters and weapons into the governorate.<sup>[14]</sup> This could have created a perfect environment for conflict among various anti-Houthi groups, but this has not happened thus far. Still, there have been grievances expressed among Marib tribesmen related to the authority held by outsiders from the northern Yemeni highlands as well as some chafing at the increased power and authority of the Islah party.<sup>[15]</sup>

One factor in maintaining stability has been the definition of responsibilities among various central government and local-level actors present in the governorate. While some tribal leaders from outside Marib do hold official military and other senior government positions in the governorate – notable examples include

---

13) Peter Salisbury, "Behind the Frontlines in Yemen's Marib," International Crisis Group, April 17, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/behind-front-lines-yemens-marib>

14) Author's confidential interview with a local source who works at a media outlet in Marib, June 2020.

15) Local sources interviewed by the author spoke of resentment among Marib tribes stemming from the current influence of people from the "Plateau", a reference to Yemenis who came to Marib from the northern governorates of Dhamar, Sana'a, Amran and Hajjah.

Hashem al-Ahmar, who headed the army's 6th Military District from February 2018 until January 2020, Saghir bin Aziz, the current army chief of staff, and Major General Mohammed Ali al-Maqdashi, the current minister of defense – they do not play a role in local governance nor in tribal affairs. Each tribe remains the primary decision maker in their respective tribal territory, and Islah controls most political machinations within the local authority.

Tensions between the tribes and Islah are mostly managed by the fact that the party is active within the tribes themselves. The party's relations with Maribi tribes date back to its formation in the 1990s, though its presence then was largely limited to Marib al-Wadi and parts of Harib, Al-Abdiyah and Al-Jubah districts; Islah remained in the shadow of former president Saleh's more popular General People's Congress (GPC) party. Since the 2011 uprising against the Saleh regime, Islah's influence has increased at the expense of a weakened GPC.<sup>[16]</sup> By 2014, Islah, which found itself forced out of Sana'a after the Houthi takeover, had transferred its base to Marib, building on the foundations in the governorate that had grown since 2011.<sup>[17]</sup> Marib's tribes, which had taken a firm stance against the Houthi incursion to the outskirts of Marib city, were in need of an ally to support them in the battle, and Islah appeared at the right time. This alliance, based on a mix of ideology, pragmatism and access to state resources, served to counter the Houthi attempts to expand into Marib.

Islah members joined the so-called popular resistance against the Houthis, and many of them were later included in army formations and held leadership positions despite their former non-military professions. As a result, Islah gained influence in the military during the course of the war and benefited from the money and weapons the Saudi-led coalition provided. The party also extended its influence in the Marib local authority and executive office branches by installing loyalists in key positions. Critically, this provided Islah with access to governorate resources, including revenues from oil and gas, taxes, and the Central Bank of Yemen. The Abidah tribe, from which governor Al-Aradah hails, has become the main center of gravity for Islah in Marib, with members from the tribe having the second-largest presence in civil departments.<sup>[18]</sup> With Islah firmly entrenched

---

16) Author's confidential interview with a media source in Marib, June 5, 2020; author's interview with a local researcher, June 14, 2020.

17) Author's confidential interviews with a Murad tribesman, December 2020, and with a local researcher, June 14, 2020.

18) Casey Coombs and Ali al-Sakani, "Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances, the Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, October 22, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11778>

in the local authority, Maribis not affiliated with the party have found it more difficult to gain positions in the public administration.<sup>[19]</sup>

The pragmatism of the tribes is a decisive factor in explaining their general acceptance of Islah's growing influence. Partly as a result of the weakness of the Yemeni government, as well as Al-Aradah's involvement with Islah, the tribes have come to view Islah as if it is the state and deal with it accordingly. However, the tribes continue to operate with autonomy, looking out for their own interests first and foremost; they remain unwilling to rely exclusively on the state (Islah in this context). This was most starkly illustrated in the initial tribal call to fight the Houthis and endures to today, with tribes still bearing the brunt of the defense of Marib. This perceived need for self-reliance among the tribes was reinforced further after the Houthi advance into Al-Jawf in 2020, when accusations rose from anti-Islah figures that the party had been complicit in handing the governorate over and that they could do the same in Marib.<sup>[20]</sup>

A secondary factor motivating the tribal-Islah alliance is shared religious doctrine – conservative Sunni Islam – in opposition to the Houthis' political Zaidi project. Antipathy and conflict between Marib's tribes and Zaidi rule have been notable features of Yemeni history. The penultimate monarch of the Mutawakkilite Zaidi imamate, Imam Yahya, was assassinated by Nasser al-Qardaei, a Marib tribal sheikh.

However, beyond religion, the tribes, as a traditional social structure, tend to be resistant to change. As both a social and territorial entity, tribes view any outside entity like the Houthi movement – with its military strength, territorial ambitions and emphasis on establishing a dynastic mode of rule<sup>[21]</sup> – as an invader and existential threat. Should the Houthis succeed in taking Marib, there is a perception among the tribes that the group would essentially create a ruling class limited to professed descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, eliminating any space for tribal influence or autonomy. Whereas no matter how tense relations between tribes and the state may have been at various points in Yemen's modern history, unlike the Houthi threat, neither had ever posed an existential threat to the other.

---

19) Author's confidential interviews with a local researcher, June 14, 2020, and with an official at Saba News Agency, June 15, 2020.

20) Correspondence with a tribal source, a notable figure from the Murad tribe who leads a group of tribal fighters fighting in a frontline in Marib against the Houthis, October 2020.

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

## CONCLUSION AND LOOKING AHEAD

Events in Marib since 2014 have underscored that the tribes and the state share a mutual fate. Although the tribes are not homogeneous in terms of their stances and affiliations, they currently represent the last line of defense in a shared battle with the Yemeni government against the Houthi movement. This contradicts the historical notion – articulated by some prominent Yemeni intellectuals<sup>[22]</sup> – that tribes are the antithesis of the state and its natural rival, and calls for exploring ideas for how tribes and the state can further contribute to building peace and stability together.

Given the current weakness of the central government, tribes have increasingly dealt with Islah as if the party is the state. This mode of tribal-state relations has benefited from the dual role played by Al-Aradah as an Abidah tribal sheikh and governor. His position as the ultimate arbitrator of disputes in Marib was established in the 2014 Nakhla tribal matareh. This clearly demonstrates the positive role played by Marib's tribes in instilling stability and advocating a more consultative process of local governance and suggests that tribes can play a critical role in politics and supporting the state in the future.

One obvious place to include more tribal participation is in the UN-backed peace negotiations on Yemen. These efforts would benefit from tribal mediation customs and from tribes' reputation as adaptive non-ideological social entities, and for political flexibility and dealing making. Additionally, the unique societal position of tribal sheikhs should be utilized; sheikhs can become cease-fire guarantors, based on the historic perception of them as honorable and fair figures. Relationships between tribal sheikhs can also be used to bridge divides brought about by the war; for instance, relationships between Marib-based tribal sheikhs and other tribal leaders considered neutral in the war (such as in Al-Mahra and Shabwa) could be utilized to reach out to tribal sheikhs in Houthi-controlled areas, which could serve as a basis for local, or even national, negotiations.

The humanitarian situation and efforts to normalize life near frontlines in Marib could also be improved by facilitating communication between tribes in Houthi-held areas and government-controlled territory; working to reach agreements based on and protected by tribal custom could help overcome differences that have emerged as a result of the war. For example, the tribal law of hijra (migration)

---

22) Adel Al-Sharjabi, "The Palace and the Diwan: The Political Role of the Tribe in Yemen [AR]," Sana'a: the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights, Sana'a, 2009.

closely resembles the international legal concept of safe zones. Invoking hijra could transform certain contested areas into humanitarian zones protected by the tribes – including the main road between Marib and Sana’a – as has previously taken place in Shabwa. Finally, the state should respond to the transformation in tribal attitudes toward the state by working to better address basic needs, ensuring the delivery of public services, and enhancing development in tribal areas.

**Ahmed Al-Tars Al-Arami** is a contributing researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and the executive director of Arabia Felix Center for Studies. His research focuses on social and tribal structures and transformations in Yemen. Al-Arami is the author of *The Secret Religion of Yemen: The Deity of Hakim Al-Falah in Folklore*, published by Arwaqah House, Cairo: 2019.

This paper was funded by the German Federal Government, the Government of Canada and the European Union.

The views and analysis expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions, positions, or policies of the donors.



[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)