TRIBES IN YEMEN
An introduction to the tribal system

Yemen has been customarily described as one of the most "tribal" countries in the Middle East, if not the world. This statement reflects the fact that the vast majority of the Yemeni population, at least nominally, identifies as belonging to a tribal group. For a lot of Yemenis tribal identity is inextricably linked with Yemeni national identity. However, there are different ways in which tribal identity manifests itself in practice. Being Yemeni does not automatically mean you will follow the same tribal conventions across the country, or to apply the same importance to that identity above all else.

The aim of this report is to provide an introduction to Yemeni tribes and their place within Yemeni society. It explains what it means for an individual to belong to a tribe and the tribal structures that determine certain aspects of their life and behaviour. Understanding how tribes are organised in Yemen is fundamental to avoid improper comparisons with other Middle Eastern contexts.

Tribes matter to humanitarian operators in Yemen because they exercise some direct or indirect control over geographical territory and because they have become increasingly relevant and influential in parts of the country where state institutions are weakened or absent. Furthermore, tribespeople make up the majority of beneficiaries of local projects and are likely to be part of locally employed staff.

The report gives an overview of the ways Yemeni tribes have engaged with the current conflict and how they have been affected by it. This includes potential intersections between tribal actors and humanitarian and other NGOs that operate in areas under tribal influence or control. It is a tool for humanitarian actors who need a comprehensive backgrounder on the social, political, and cultural norms that characterise Yemeni tribes and their adherents.

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Methodology

This thematic report presents an analysis of publicly available secondary data and first-hand data collected by the authors of the report via ethnographic fieldwork conducted throughout Yemen between 2009 and 2013. It offers an overview of the traditional hierarchical organisation of Yemen's society and of the history, geography, and structure of the main Yemeni tribes. It also analyses the relationship between the state and the tribes, by presenting contemporary case studies.

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Key messages

Tribesmen make up 70-80% of Yemeni society. Historically, Yemenis would often rely on tribal traditions and tribal law to regulate conflict and provide security. Tribal structure, ideology, and law shape conflict dynamics and affect humanitarian operations. Given that a large number of humanitarian projects in Yemen are based in areas under some form of tribal control and that the majority of people in need of humanitarian assistance are bound to be tribespeople, interactions between Yemeni tribes and the humanitarian community present a number of challenges as well as opportunities for INGOs.

Local tribal structures and community leaders can help maintain communications between humanitarians and local stakeholders, and enhance humanitarian access and accountability to communities. Tribal leaders can often provide unrivalled access to state institutions either through personal contacts, or their status. Their traditional role as intermediaries between the local community and the state puts them in a privileged position to help outsiders navigate state bureaucracy and solve potential problems. However, it is important for 'outsiders' to remember the breadth and limitations of tribal hospitality, the implicit obligation of the guest to reciprocate in some form, and to be explicit about the aims of their project in the area.

Although they often intersect, key humanitarian principles such as impartiality and neutrality are not congruent with tribal traditions. Core humanitarian principles such as neutrality and impartiality have different meanings in the tribal context and their application does not necessarily extend to those outside of what is considered the tribal group. Shaykhs are in a good position to understand local needs and identify required interventions in their communities. But they are also liable to privilege their own constituencies over others.

Tribal actors are often likely to overlook the needs of vulnerable communities that belong to what are perceived as lower social groups. Reports of shaykhs diverting aid distributions away from vulnerable people, often those who are considered at the bottom of Yemen's social order, such as the Muhammashin are a characteristic example of the limitations of humanitarian engagement with the tribal system.

Yemen's 'tribal culture' has often been blamed for the country's ills. It is important for humanitarians to be mindful of stereotypes and misconceptions, such as the general mistrust that characterises the attitudes of urban populations towards tribespeople.

The tribal map of Yemen is dotted by a multitude of tribal entities of varying degrees of influence, significance, and demographic size. Yemeni tribes are for the most part settled in towns and villages within a well-defined territory. Due to the scarcity of resources and aridity of their environment, in some parts in the east of the country, tribes lead a semi-nomadic existence, albeit still near their major settlements.

Yemeni tribes are groups of adult men sharing a common territory and waging war together in case of offence or defence. Women and children are considered their dependents and fall under their protection. Membership of a particular tribal group is usually determined by territorial belonging and some form of common ancestry. Yemen's tribesmen are mostly engaged in farming and are often landowners. **As the only social group in Yemen allowed to bear weapons and because of their demographic size, they dominate all aspects of political, economic, and cultural activity in Yemen.** Even in areas where tribal identities are not strong, people can still trace their family's origins to an actual or even fictional tribal ancestor.

The strength of tribal values is not the same across Yemen. Modern developments have transformed Yemen's traditional social roles, including that of tribesmen, but their basic tenets still apply, especially in rural communities. Tribal identity in the northern highlands as well as the southeastern desert areas is stronger compared to the rest of the country.

The structure of tribes and their identity is multi-layered. Bigger tribal units encompass and include smaller ones. At low level tribal units, ancestry plays a bigger role, but in bigger tribal structures, contractual alliances assume ever-increasing importance. Each level of the tribal structure is represented by a *shaykh*. The shaykh is often described as a "first among equals". He is a tribesman who emerges among his peers for his ability to solve problems and conduct arbitrations and mediations.

Yemen's tribal system is constantly evolving in response to political changes as local alliances are re-evaluated. It is impossible to give straightforward answers about the number of tribes or their allegiance. Tribal militias have been mobilised by all participants in the current conflict, often upsetting the local balance of power. Some tribes actively support one of the parties to the conflict, others try to remain neutral, and some are split in their allegiance. In theory, tribal identity is neutral to political factions and tribes only operate to protect core tribal values. However, in practice, political and tribal identities overlap, and tribes and tribal values can and have been exploited during the current conflict for political ends.

Limitations

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted before the war erupted in Yemen in 2015, and it may not reflect the latest developments. Updated secondary data is intended to fill this gap. The report focuses on one of the many functions of the tribes, namely conflict resolution. Forthcoming ACAPS products will tackle the economic and welfare dimensions of the tribal system. Given that Yemeni society is organised around hierarchical social groups and strict gender segregation, this report mainly represents the perspective of the adult men who belong to the tribes. Consequently, marginal groups and women are described from the tribesmen's perspective.

Tribes and humanitarian operations

Anti-tribal bias

The place and role of tribes within Yemeni society and politics has been contested over the years. Especially after the northern and southern revolutions of the 1960s, Yemeni society underwent significant change that brought about the loss of influence of the traditional sayyid elites and opened up the political field to tribespeople. A case in point is former President Saleh, who presented himself as the archetypal village boy, a self-made tribesman that was able to achieve the highest office in the land (Hill 2017). The social upheaval of the 1960s aimed to overturn the traditional Yemeni social order.

The counter-narrative to this has created a negative stereotypical image of the tribesman as the archetypical illiterate, uncultured Bedouin. Going a step further, Yemen's 'tribal' culture and the domination of the country's politics by tribesmen has been often singled out as the main reason for the country's multiplicity of crises and failures.

It is important for humanitarian actors in the country to be mindful of the general mistrust that characterises the attitudes of urban populations towards tribespeople. Given that a large number of humanitarian projects are based in areas under some form of tribal control and that most of the beneficiaries of these projects are bound to be tribespeople, interactions between Yemeni tribes and the humanitarian community present a number of challenges, but also opportunities for INGOs.

Communication

The values and practices associated with the tribal ideology (*qabyala*) are likely to shape many aspects of the relationship between humanitarian actors and tribesmen. Humanitarian actors are 'outsiders' within the tribal system and, as such, they are assigned a role according to the qabyala: they are guests to honour, but they are also 'weak people' to protect and provide for; they are travellers, and they fall under the protection of the tribe as long as they are hosted in its territory; they are a potential threat to a tribesman's womenfolk; they are a source of revenue, but also a factor of imbalance and corruption.

Local tribal structures can contribute to maintaining communications between humanitarian actors and local stakeholders and enhance the transparency of humanitarian activities in tribal areas. It is important for 'outsiders', including humanitarians, to remember both the breadth and limitations of tribal hospitality, the obligation on the guest to reciprocate in some form, and to be explicit about the aims of their project in the area.

Life-cycle events of the local community are significant instances during which guests are expected to affirm their commitment to the community with their presence. Security conditions and the current pandemic have led to the reduction of community-based activities and minimised the scope of interactions. Nevertheless, expressions of appreciation, support, or even empathy can be transmitted to the local community via maintaining open channels of personal communications with community and tribal leaders (24/06/2020, interview with Yemen tribal expert).

In a tribal environment, communication is highly ritualised and subject to peculiar cultural standards. Tribesmen are likely to ask questions – e.g. where are you coming from and where are you going? Where is your family? – that may sound invasive or disrespectful to foreigners. Moreover, the access to tribal gatherings, ceremonies, and households is subject to a set of formal rituals. Greetings are extremely formalised and follow specific conventions. A thorough knowledge of these practices can signal respect, and it is highly appreciated.

Mediation is a means to resolve conflicts, but also a cultural practice that has a pervasive reach. When approaching an unknown person, it is always important to be 'prese nted' by someone who is known to both parties. Finding the appropriate *wasta* (a sort of broker) can open many doors. In case of conflict, it always appropriate to find a third-party mediating, instead of directly addressing the opposing party.

Access and aid delivery

Shaykhs are in a good position to understand local needs and identify required interventions in their communities; however they are also liable to privilege their own constituencies over others. Reports of shaykhs diverting aid distribution away from vulnerable people, often those who are considered at the bottom of Yemen's social order, such as the muhammashin (El Rajji 2016), are a characteristic example of the limitations of humanitarian engagement with the tribal system. The self-perception of the tribe as a well-defined group of individuals at the exclusion of others does not afford tribesmen to be impartial. Nevertheless, maintaining balanced relations with the different tribal groups that inhabit the area of a humanitarian organisation's operations is a prerequisite (Caton 1986). The values and practices associated with the *qabyala* are likely to shape many aspects of the relationship between humanitarian actors and tribesmen.

Tribes within Yemen's traditional social order

The social fabric of Yemen is characterised by a high degree of stratification. There is no universal agreement among experts on the exact number and subdivisions within the various social groups (Petouris 2017). However, the basic, traditional distinction among Yemenis is between people who can bear arms, and thus are able to protect themselves, and those who are considered 'weak' and are therefore under the protection of others.

Although women, girls, and underaged boys belong by birth to their respective social group, they are also considered 'weak' and are under the protection of those able to bear arms.

Tribesmen, seen as the typical example of arms-bearing people, and their dependents constitute the vast majority of the country's population, estimated at about 70–80% of the whole at any given time (Lackner 2016). The rest belong to the much smaller classes of the sayyids, the qadhis, and the dhaif. Within Yemen's traditional social order, tribesmen, known as qabilis, are conventionally considered to come third after the sayyids and the qadhis.

This universally accepted categorisation of Yemeni society exists within the context of the Islamic religion. It is therefore also affected by the characteristics of the two major Islamic denominations to which the vast majority of Yemenis belong. The Zaydi Shia school is prevalent in the highland regions of Upper Yemen north of Ibb. People living on the Red Sea coast and the southern and eastern governorates all the way to the Omani border adhere to the Shafiite Sunni school.

Membership of a particular tribal group is usually determined by territorial belonging and some form of common ancestry. As the only social group in Yemen allowed to bear weapons and because of their demographic size, tribes dominate all aspects of political, economic, and cultural activity. Even in parts of Yemen where tribal identities are not strong, people take pride in tracing their family's origins to an actual or even fictional tribal ancestor.

The life of a tribesman is determined by a particular set of social principles and structures that prescribe his behaviour and life choices. Yemen's tribesmen are mostly engaged in farming and are often landowners. Modernity, migration to cities, economic factors, and the deterioration of natural resources have all played a role in the transformation, and sometimes decline of traditional tribal values. However, tribal institutions and kinship networks remain one of the more effective and accessible social support systems in the country.

The lack of state institutions in rural areas, especially after the beginning of the current conflict, has meant that Yemenis rely now more than ever on local tribal structures. In spite of attempts by the former southern socialist state to moderate the influence of tribalism in society, the post-unity regime of Ali Abdallah Saleh promoted the 're-tribalisation' of southern society. This was achieved by co-opting traditional tribal leaders to his patronage network, or even by installing his own candidates as leaders. The Saleh regime effectively incorporated traditional tribal roles and structures into the formal, institutional structure of political parties and the state itself.

It is important to understand other classes of Yemeni society in order to understand their relations with the tribes. A small but historically influential Yemeni social class, the **sayyids**, trace their descent to the family of Prophet Muhammad. Although they tend to be unarmed (with notable exceptions in the Zaydi north and desert areas in the southeast), they consider themselves the top of the Yemeni social hierarchy. Apart from religious, scholarly authority, sayyid families yielded significant political power before the 1960s revolutions in both northern and southern Yemen. In northern Yemen, the Imam of the Zaydi sect, always a sayyid, was also leader of the Yemeni state. He was assisted in ruling by a number of sayyid elites. The Houthi family is a characteristic example of a Zaydi sayyid family. In the south, the region of Hadramawt is notable for the sociopolitical role the sayyids have played in its history. Next to their religious and political duties, sayyids have traditionally provided spiritual protection over specific market towns across the country. Within the boundaries of such a sanctuary people belonging to rival tribes or families are able to trade and conduct their affairs unarmed and without being under threat.

Second in the social hierarchy are the **qadhi** families that have historically played the role of religious scholars, jurists, and state administrators. Their status is connected to their learning and their ability to mediate in tribal conflicts. The same class of people is called mashaykh in the southern part of the country (not to be confused with the leaders of tribes, who also carry the title of shaykh). The al-Iryani family is one of the best-known Yemeni qadhis, its members having served as presidents, prime ministers, and political advisers.

The so-called **dhaif** (weak) or miskin (poor) are thought to be at the bottom of the traditional Yemeni social order. They consist of town-dwellers, tradespeople, artisans, and workers in a wide array of occupations and services. They are considered 'weak' because they customarily do not carry arms and depend on the tribes for their protection. Further below them are the muhammashin (marginalised), who are commonly referred to by the derogatory term akhdam (servants), and their population estimated at 3.5 million people (Sanaa Centre, 2019). The muhammashin are engaged in what is seen as the most menial occupations, such as garbage collection. The origins of their marginalisation and experiences of discrimination stem mainly from their position outside traditional social structures and their perceived African ethnic origins. They have always been one of the most vulnerable social groups in the country, and their position has deteriorated significantly in the course of the current conflict.

A segment of Yemeni society with considerable influence at home and abroad is the extended **Yemeni diaspora** in the Gulf countries, the Horn of Africa, and southeast Asia. Yemeni presence in the Gulf is primarily connected to unskilled migrant workers, but also to a number of powerful business families, especially in Saudi Arabia. Yemeni

communities in the Horn or Southeast Asia are often of Hadhrami origins, a remnant of the religious and trade networks established by sayyids and tribesmen alike throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. These connections provide Yemenis at home with the vital lifeline of remittances and opportunities to work and study abroad. Divisions in diasporic communities often reflect the mutual mistrust that characterises relations between people who come from different social backgrounds, especially between sayyids and the rest. Nevertheless, personal success and achievement of wealth abroad often leads to wider social recognition.

The existence of these social distinctions within Yemeni society is not always readily visible to an outsider, apart from occasional subtle differences in people's traditional dress and behaviour. The principal way in which this social order is enforced is reflected in the institution of marriage, whereby women are not permitted to marry men of lower social status than themselves. It is also still prevalent in the types of employment that are considered dishonourable for members of specific social classes. Even so, it is important to note that the Yemeni economy underwent radical transformation after unity. With the attendant rise in poverty and mobility both in rural and urban areas, traditional social structures started to erode and personal wealth or access to political patronage became as important as birth or occupation in signifying social status.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the increasing participation of women, often of tribal origins, in a variety of urban economic activities. In rural areas, by contrast, women still carry out as much as 90% of agricultural work (Lackner 2019). The position of women in Yemeni society as a whole is characterised by the great degree of gender segregation that defines interactions between the sexes and prescribes what is permissible behaviour for them. Although women in urban settings are more visible, within the tribal context there exists a stricter 'division of labour' between men and women. Women are essentially excluded from the main functions of a tribe that are discussed in this report, which involve politics and armed conflict. Tribal values and ideology revolve around notions of masculinity to which women are external. Running of the household, educating the children, and laborious agricultural work are some of the areas in which the women of the tribe contribute. They are full participants in their community's social activities and life events, but always within the parameters of gender segregation, something that has a direct impact on humanitarian activities in tribal areas.

The Yemeni Tribe

What is a tribe?

A great variety of native Arabic terms are translated to the word 'tribe' in English. Throughout the Middle East, a 'tribe' can be nomadic or sedentary; grounded on shared ancestry or shared territory; composed by a few dozens of men with a common ancestor or by thousands of individuals who willingly entered into a political alliance.

At its most basic definition, a Yemeni tribe is a group of adult men sharing a common territory and waging war together in case of offence or defence.[1]

Tribes are not stable or permanent. They are mobilised in response to peculiar circumstances, usually in case of conflict. The biggest possible tribal group is the **confederation**, the smallest is the **household**. Predicting circumstances that would activate a tribe, and on which level – e.g. the family rather than the confederation – requires an understanding of three different layers:

1) **Tribal structure** - the 'unwritten' and implicit organisation that guides the activation and mobilisation of armed groups of tribesmen in case of conflict

2) **Tribal ideology** - the system of values, emotions, ideas, and practices that constitute the 'tribal code', or *qabyala*;

3) **Tribal law** - the system of rules that governs inter-tribal relationships and the resolution of conflicts among tribesmen, the customary law (*'urf*).

Tribal structure

Whenever a tribesman is wronged, he can count on the support of his fellow tribesmen. Mutual support and shared responsibility lie at the core of tribal corporate action: in fact, even if one member of the tribe needs back up, the whole group is likely to react and support him. This kind of collective action is underpinned by a principle of reciprocity: "Today it happens to me, another day it will happen to anyone else" (Nevola 2020). Tribesmen feel compelled to back up their peers because they might need the same kind of support in the future.

Tribal structure is often described in genealogical terms, as if the different components of the tribe were organised in a chain of ancestors and descendants. In this representation, smaller tribal sections appear as the sons (e.g. *bani*, *awlad*, *'iyal*, *dhu*, etc.) of bigger encompassing tribal confederations bearing the name of a common ancestor (Brandt 2014).

This genealogical framework is imaginary, and it is extremely misleading: tribal identity in Yemen is defined territorially and contractually, rather than by genealogical descent (Varisco 2017). 'Territorially' means that mutually supportive tribesmen usually inhabit a shared territory and do not necessarily recognise a common ancestor (indeed, most tribesmen barely know their genealogy). 'Contractually' means that smaller tribal units are combined into larger corporate groups through political alliances (and this also implies that tribal alliances can shift as, in fact, they often do).

The tribal identity is nested and multi-layered along the same lines of the tribal structure: bigger tribal units encompass and include smaller ones (see the illustration below). Lineage (or the fact of sharing a common ancestor) is relevant in defining a tribesman's identity, but only matters for low-level tribal units. Moving upwards in the tribal structure, contractual alliances assume ever-increasing importance.
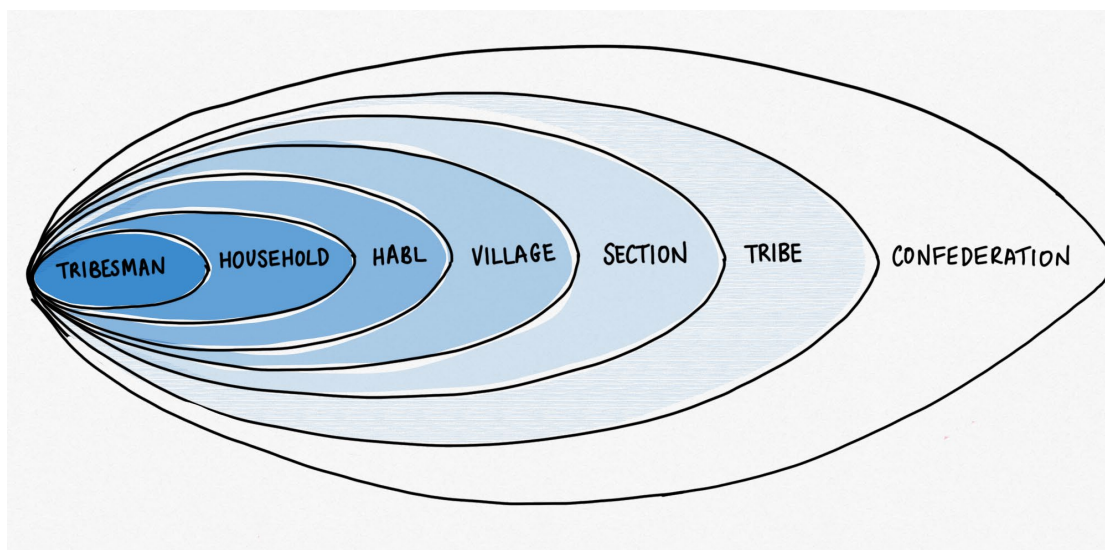
Let us consider the case of Fulan[2] son of Muhammad, living in a village called al-Ahmar in the Sanhan tribe of the Hashid confederation.

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[1] Nomadic tribes exist in Yemen, but they are a minority and an exception to the general definition.
2 Fulan is the Arabic term for indicating a generic person.

TRIBAL CONFEDERATION

A contractual alliance of tribes, only mobilised for conflicts with another confederation or with the state. My tribe belongs to the Hashid confederation.

TRIBE - QABILA

Made up of multiple sections and including hundreds of thousands of people. The entire tribe is usually only mobilised for conflicts with other tribes or the state. My tribe's name is Sanhan.

TRIBAL SECTION - UZLA

Bigger than the village, the tribal section contains dozens of villages. It is defined by its territorial space. Intermarriage takes place between villages which are part of the section.

THE VILLAGE - QARYA

The collection of houses we are a part of is our village. Outside the village I am Fulan Al-Ahmar, the name of my village.

THE DESCENT GROUP - HABL

We are strongly connected to our close relatives. We live near them in a cluster of houses called a Badana or a Habl. Within the village I am known as Fulan al-Qalisi, the name of my decent group.

THE HOUSEHOLD - BAYT

Our household, Bayt Muhammad, is led by my father, Muhammad. My brothers and I live with our parents, our wives and our children in the house owned by my grandfather.

Hi, I'm Fulan Ibn Muhammad
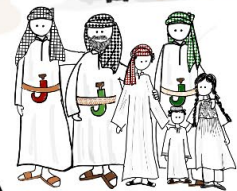
The household – bayt.[3] On the lowest level of identification, Fulan is a tribesman affiliated with his own household. The household is both a physical and a symbolic space. In traditional settings, a Yemeni tower house hosts two or three generations of people descending from a living ancestor (the grandfather or the great grandfather) who is the owner of the properties of the family. Different nuclear families (each associated with one of the ancestor's sons or nephews) coexist under the same roof. The household is a unit of economic production and is a co-liable group in case of offence and defence. When the grandfather dies, the household is subjected to disaggregation. Often the common property is split up through inheritance, new houses are built, and new households are established.[4]

The descent group – habl. Different households with a common remote ancestor are often organised in a wider unit called *habl* (or *bayt*, or *badana*, or *lahm*). This larger group is sometimes represented by an elected leader (called *'ayn* or *'aqil* or even *shaykh*). The *habl* loosely cooperates as a unit of production and rarely owns joint property, but it functions as a co-liable group if one of its members enters in conflict with a member of another *habl*. Following the example of Fulan, imagine that his remote ancestor was from the al-Qalis village in Bani Matar. In this case, his *habl* will be called Bayt al-Qalisi, and Fulan will be identified as Fulan Muhammad al-Qalisi within his own village.

The village – qarya. The household and the *habl* are groups grounded on family ties. On the contrary, **villages** are composed of several descent groups sharing no common ancestor – they are **territorial and contractual units**. This means that people in a village are bound together through shared territory and connections established through marriage, but also a formal legal structure. Each tribesman in the village is expected to pay *ghurm*, a fee covering joint expenses and collective debts, especially in relation to the blood-price[5] (*diya*). Tribesmen who pay this fee are considered active members of the tribe, and they are called *gharram*, a sort of citizen (Weir 2007).[6] In our example, with respect to his village called al-Ahmar, Fulan will be identified by the outsiders as Fulan al-Ahmari, thus dropping the lineage name. It is important to emphasise that the alliance between each tribesman and the overall village is political and contractual. This means that a tribesman can choose to move to a different village and join the tribal group of this

new village through a ritual known as *mukhuwwa*.[7] Sometimes, a whole village or even a whole tribal section can do *mukhuwwa* and pledge alliance to a different tribal group, or even to a different confederation. These shifts of alliances are possible because the tribes are 'contractual' units, and lineage plays no role in defining tribal belonging.

Tribal section – *'uzla*. Above the village, a bigger tribal section called *'uzla* (or *fakhdh, or batn*, or *mikhlaf*) can be made up of dozens of villages. On this level, the identification is still territorial and there is a certain degree of intermarriage between villages. However, a tribesman only identifies with the tribal section in case of offence or defence. In our example, the Sanhan tribe is composed of four sections, each represented by a *shaykh*. Fulan al-Ahmari belongs to one of these four sections, but this identity will be activated only in case of conflict with another section.

Tribe – *qabila*. A certain number of sections make up a *qabila*, each section including several communities, and it can include hundreds of thousands of people. Examples of this type of grouping are Sanhan, Bani Matar, Khawlan al-Tiyal, Subayhi, Murad, Humum, and so forth. A tribe, on this level, is only ever mobilised in case of conflict with the members of another tribe, or with the state.

Tribal confederation. A tribal confederation is a contractual alliance of tribes. Classic examples are Hashid, Bakil, and Madhhij. A confederation is represented by one or more paramount shaykhs (*shaykh mashaykh*) and it rarely acts as one corporate group. It is only mobilised when conflict erupts with another tribal confederation, or with the state.

The tribal structure has three main functions:

1) it is the foundation of the multi-layered or nested identity of the tribesmen

2) it organises the collective action of the tribes

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3 Tribal units have different names depending on the geographical area which is considered. Sometimes, the same Arabic word can refer to units of different size. In this report, alternative Arabic terms are listed without the aim of being exhaustive.
4 Salaried jobs have greatly impacted this kind of organisation, making the sons independent of the head of the household and thus partially undermining his authority.
5 Whenever an individual is killed, his death must be compensated either through retaliation or by paying a set amount of money, the blood-price. The amount of money is defined by law, and it's different in case of murder or homicide.

6 The term gharram also refers to an 'ordinary' tribesman in opposition to a shaykh. 'Weak people', like the servant of the village, are not considered gharrams and they do not pay ghurm.
7 Tribesmen can join a new tribal group for several reasons: sometimes they seek refuge from vengeance; sometimes they are forced to leave their own village as compensation for a crime; sometimes they are unsatisfied because their own tribal group is not backing them up in case of conflict; sometimes they are simply travelling in search of work, and they resettle in a new village.

3) it structures the authority of the *shaykhs*. Tribal groups of ever-increasing dimensions can be mobilised in case of conflict, when the core values of a tribe are at stake. To determine which level of the tribal structure is going to be activated in given circumstances, a classic Arabic proverb comes in handy:

> Me against my brother, my brother & me against our cousins, and all the family against the others.

A conflict between Fulan and his brothers will not activate any collective reaction within al-Ahmar (Fulan's village). However, a conflict between Fulan and members of another village will likely mobilise all the tribesmen of al-Ahmar in his defence. Similarly, a conflict between Fulan and a tribesman from another tribe, e.g. Bani Matar will likely trigger a conflict between Sanhan (Fulan's tribe) and Bani Matar. Eventually, a conflict between Fulan and the state might mobilise an entire tribal confederation at the governorate level.

Shaykhs and tribal authority

Each level of the tribal structure is represented by a shaykh. The shaykh is often described as a "first among equals". He is a tribesman who emerges among his peers for his ability to solve problems and conduct arbitrations and mediations. He can be formally elected by his fellow tribesmen or simply acknowledged as a shaykh by virtue of his prestige and influence. A shaykh is usually a wealthy and generous person, and has a thorough knowledge of customary law and great rhetorical skills. The shaykh's role is not hereditary – though it's often passed down from father to son along with the required set of skills – and his fellow tribesmen's recognition is key to maintain his position (al-Dawsari 2012).

Tribal ideology - the qabyala and the language of honour

The basic building block of a tribe is the tribesman (*qabili*), a man who, by virtue of his genealogical origin, is expected to behave in an honourable way and embrace a certain mode of livelihood. The *qabyala* is the tribal code, the ideology of the *qabili,* the map of values and principles that drive his action, thus making him an honourable man. Being a *qabili* is being a man, and being a man is being a *qabili*: the moral values of the *qabyala* are often defined as descending from manliness (*rajula*) itself.

Tribal values are never fully separated from Islamic religion, and tribal belonging often overlaps with professional, territorial, religious, and political forms of identification. However, the following elements of the qabyala are important in contemporary Yemen.

Self-reliance and independence. In Yemeni society, occupations are believed to define the moral conduct of human beings and doing a certain job equals being a certain kind of person. Tribesmen have traditionally made their living by farming and raising livestock. Practicing subsistence agriculture, and in particular cultivating grain crops, is an assertion of independence and self-reliance, two core values of the qabyala. Practicing other tasks – like crafts and services – is considered a form of dependence. Somehow contradicting this principle, nowadays many tribesmen live in urban settings and they practice any kind of job (with the exception of a few stigmatised ones). Yet, most of them maintain strong ties with their village of origin, they greatly value their lands, and still uphold the myth of self-reliance.

The Houthis, who are aware of the value of self-reliance for the tribesmen, exploit this theme for political purposes. For instance, they encourage local agriculture as a form of emancipation from western countries (Nevola 2020).

Honour, an ambiguous term. When referring to tribal values, the English word honour (*sharaf*) is frequently mentioned. The term refers to a wide number of concepts and social practices. Two main strands, however, can be distinguished.

a) **Honour as competition for prestige.** A *qabili* (a tribesman) competes with his peers for prestige and to prove his value (*qidr*). **Hospitality** is one of the domains where competition is more visible. Honouring a guest is a duty that projects prestige on the host. It forces the guest to reciprocate, thus establishing long-lasting networks of mutual reciprocity. During life-cycle events (e.g. weddings, funerals, births, etc.), the tribesman is prone to offer outstanding displays of hospitality to gain prestige.[8]

Generosity (*karam*), closely associated with hospitality, is a quality of the tribesman. The term must be defined at the crossroad of 'tribal' and 'Islamic' values. Being generous in God's name, through anonymous charitable donations (*sadaqa*), is an asset for the afterlife. Meanwhile, in the tribal domain, displaying generosity is a way to gather prestige and backup. **Poetry** is another domain of competition. A tribesman is expected to be an eloquent poet and conflicts are sometimes fought or solved with words. Persuasion, rather than violence or coercion, is the main weapon of the tribesman.

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8 Competition can also become disruptive for the community. One of the tasks of a shaykh consists in regulating the displays of generosity during life-cycle events.

b) **Honour as protecting what is vulnerable.** One defining characteristic of the tribesman is his power to protect what is vulnerable. This implies 1) having something worth to protect, and 2) being recognised by fellow tribesmen as capable of protecting (Dresch 2006). The power to protect is often symbolised through weapons, such as the typical Yemeni dagger (*janbiyya*) and the rifle.

The core of what needs to be protected is summed up by three elements:

1) land (*ardh*) and property (*haqq*),
2) blood (*dima'*),
3) women's integrity (*'irdh*). In sum, to wrong a tribesman is to offend, injure, or kill him or his womenfolk, or to assault or damage his property.

Land/Property/House. Though all private property must be defended, land holds a pivotal, symbolic role in a tribesman's value system. Land use is a matter of borders (*hudud*) and property (*milk*). Borders separate households, plots of land, villages, tribal sections and confederations. Though ideologically very important, borderlines are fuzzy and they are often defined, or redefined, in case of conflict (Dresch 2006). Grazing land is common and it is enclosed by village borders or tribal section borders. However, most land belongs to individuals who own it privately. The possession of land symbolises the connection of a tribesman with a certain tribe, and land contracts are often used to prove genealogical origin.[9]

Easily as important as land is the physical and symbolic space of the household. Entering a tribesman's house without permission is a shameful act that calls for compensation. Similarly, breaking the peace of a house by triggering a conflict – either verbal or physical – is a shameful act that calls for compensation for the owner of the house.

Blood. Homicide and physical wounds must always be avenged or compensated. According to the law of retaliation (*qisas*), 'clean blood' (murder) is avenged through the killing of the murderer or one of his kin. The relatives of the victim (*ahl al-maqtul*) can accept a blood price (*diya*) in replacement of a revenge killing with the value dependant on the circumstances of the murder. In case of murder, apology is possible and encouraged by the tribesmen and it constitutes a pillar of tribal culture (al-Dawsari 2020).

Women. Most tribesmen argue that their honour (*sharaf*) is the *'irdh* of their women. A tribesman is expected to protect 'his' womenfolk's 'reputation and physical integrity' (*'irdh*), especially in the sexual domain, and to avenge any offence or attack. A synonym of *sharaf*, if considered as 'sexual honour', is *'ar*. Women under a man's protection are his daughters and sisters, his mother, his paternal cousins, and his wife.[10] However, depending on the identity of the offender, this 'inner circle' can be expanded to include any woman from a tribal confederation, or even any Yemeni woman. An offence directed against a woman (e.g. a verbal insult) must be compensated by paying a fine (*hajar*). In contrast, if a woman is wounded or killed "no settlement is possible, no customary payment is recognised" (Dresch 2006).[11] Women, as other 'weak' individuals, depend on a man not just for physical protection, but also for sustenance.[12]

The three elements mentioned above constitute the 'core' of a *qabili*'s (tribesman's) protected space. Yet other social categories and social spaces fall under the protection of the tribesmen.

'Weak' or dependent people. The servant of the tribe (*muzayyin*) is an example of a protected individual who does not share the political rights of the tribal group. He is legally entitled to protection and sustenance and, in exchange, he performs menial tasks.[13] When an outsider insults, injures, or even kills a 'weak' individual, the tribal group is expected to intervene, and retaliation is increased for the 'black shame (see box below).

Outsiders. Several typologies of 'outsiders' who are entitled to sustenance and protection can reside in the territory of a tribe. The guest is someone living for a limited amount of time – usually a maximum of three days – in a tribesman's home territory. The *jar* is someone seeking refuge from another group threatening him.[14] The *muhajjar* is someone offering religious knowledge. These categories of people, as outsiders, cannot rely on their own tribal backup and traditional means of support, and are placed under the protection of another tribal group to which they do not belong.

Markets and religious enclaves. Physical spaces can fall under the protection of tribal groups that agree to guarantee their peace. Markets are often carved out in tribal areas and subjected to specific agreements. A common feature of most agreements is the definition of an area where violence is forbidden and the definition of penalties for those breaching the peace of the market. Tribal *shaykhs* usually guarantee the enforcement of

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9 Given that arable land is private property, individuals are allowed to acquire it outside of their village.
10 The responsibility for protecting a married woman is often situated between marital and paternal kin.
11 The principle is that killing a woman deliberately is shame (ayb). Payment is sometimes accepted as compensation, in the form of an increased blood price.
12 A woman is also termed, in Arabic, maklaf (pl. makalif). The Arabic root implies that someone is 'providing for her' (yukallif laha).

13 The tribesmen consider it shameful to practice such services in exchange of money. Traditional professions stigmatised by the tribesmen include the butcher, the circumciser, the bard, the tanner, the innkeeper, the servant, etc.
14 Sometimes also the weak protégé is defined jar and, in the past, the Jew was considered jar (or, in Islamic terms, dhimmi) (Rossi 1948) (Dresch 2017).

these stipulations on their honour – literally 'on their face' (*fi wajih*), a metaphor for their reputation.

Similarly, religious enclaves are carved out by agreement within the tribal territory. These sacred areas are defined *hijra* in Upper Yemen and *hawta* in the southern region. While most *hijras* are established because of the presence of religious scholars of Hashemite origin, the *hawtas* are usually associated with the grave of a renowned religious character worshipped by local populations.

Ayb

The expression ʿayb ʿalayk — literally 'shame on you' — is one of the most often heard in Yemen. The person pronouncing ʿayb ʿalayk accompanies the expression with a peculiar gesture: holding the chin between thumb and index finger. In its widespread everyday usage, ʿayb ʿalayk amounts to a strong reproach which sanctions what may be considered immoral behaviour. Its coverage ranges from minor mischiefs (e.g. scolding a child) to the most despicable behaviours (e.g. insulting women, stealing, killing, etc.). In tribal customary law, the term ʿayb has a specific meaning, describing illicit behaviours. The expression 'black shame' (al-ʿayb al-aswad) refers to disgraceful cases of murder that require an increase in sentence (e.g. killing a weak protégé; killing a person from behind; etc.).

Tribal Customary Law

In Yemen, tribal customary law is called *ʿurf* (also *silf*, *taghut*, *sharʿ*, or sometimes *sinna).* The *ʿurf* is the law of the tribesmen and it is orally transmitted from generation to generation. It covers a multitude of sides of tribal life, including business, market law, marital relationships, environmental and property regulations, etc. (Carnegie 19/03/2010). An important part of the *ʿurf* are the laws of protection, (*manʿa),* which govern security (Dresch 2017). Many of the values of the *qabyala* examined above are enshrined in this corpus of law.

The *ʿurf* is also termed *taghut,* and this word is somehow derogatory. It describes tribal law in opposition to the Islamic Sharia (Dresch 2017, Rossi 1938). Though some values and prescriptions of the Islamic law overlap with the *ʿurf*, there is also a significant distance between the two systems.[15] The *ʿurf* is usually applied to resolve conflicts in a complex process of mediations and appeals. *Shaykhs* are usually in charge of this process and of the judgment, though what matters is not their formal role, but rather their skills and

reputation. Yemenis often prefer tribal mediation over the formal court system, because it is faster and more effective. The adoption of tribal mediation is favoured by the Arbitration Law (1992) which recognises tribal arbitration as an alternative to the state's legal system (Al-Dawasri 2012).

Mediation and the tribes

Dialogue and the culture of apology are central elements of tribal culture (Dawsari 2020). In case of conflict, Yemenis often resort to tribal customary law. This system is preferred over the formal judicial authority because it is faster and more effective, but also because it better reflects what Yemenis perceive as the fundamental function of conflict resolution: namely, "putting back people in a position in which they can negotiate their own arrangements with one another" (Rosen 1989).

Mediation holds an important role in favouring the rapprochement of the contending parties and in limiting the escalation of conflicts. At times, mediation directly leads to conflict resolution. However, in most cases, it is aimed at pushing the conflicting parties to enter voluntary negotiations or to submit themselves to the arbitration (*tahkim*) of a trusted third party. In order for a negotiation to be effective, "it must be voluntarily accepted by the parties in dispute" (Firth 1965). For this reason, mediators must be skillful speakers, capable of persuading the opponents to accept mediation without violating their autonomy (Caton 1990).

Shaykhs are often experienced mediators, and they can also act as guarantors. If the conflict is not immediately solved, they "provide financial compensation for the plaintiff and guarantee for the "good conduct of the culprits" (Brandt 2018).

The authority and prestige of the mediator, and his capacity to persuade, can descend from two ideal roles.

Outsider - impartial mediator. He is distant from the conflict, a third party acting in an impartial manner. His position protects his legitimacy and authority that are created primarily through the mediator's professional role, position, and function. The sayyids historically acted as outsider-impartial mediators. In fact, they grounded their authority on religious knowledge and presented themselves as outsiders, since they did not belong to any of the contending tribal lineages.

Insider - partial mediator. This second type of mediator is connected to both the parties of the conflict by means of a previous relationship and, though he is skilled in religious or customary law, personal trust is the primary medium of his authority. The effectiveness

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15 As a matter of example, retaliation (qisas) in the sharia is "an eye for an eye"; tribal law, on the other hand, provides for fourfold and even elevenfold retaliations for shameful acts.

of an insider-partial mediator dwells on his connection with the dispute (Wehr & Lederach 1991).

Mediation in Yemen is not just a device for conflict resolution. It is a pervasive cultural language permeating most domains of everyday life. Indeed, when strangers enter into a relationship, a mediator is often required to guarantee for the reputation and identity of the parties. Obtaining a job, buying a car, or arranging a marriage are just a few examples of social domains where individuals and families will enter in contact only through the services of a third party who is known and trusted by both sides.

Yemeni tribes in the context of the current conflict

It is impossible to give straightforward answers about the number of tribes in Yemen or their allegiance. Tribal groups have been mobilised by all participants in the current conflict, often impacting the local balance of power. Local political actors and regional powers have recruited tribal groups in order to pursue their individual aims. Nevertheless, it is often the case that tribes have joined one side of the conflict in response to their traditional adversaries joining another. Some tribes actively support one of the parties to the conflict, others try to remain neutral. Often, tribal groups are split in their allegiance.

In theory, tribal identity is independent from political factions and tribes only operate to protect core tribal values. However, in practice, political and tribal identities overlap, and tribes and tribal values can and have been exploited during the current conflict for political ends.

Political authorities and the tribes

Tribes and the internationally recognised Government of Yemen

President Ali Abdallah Saleh was mindful of the influence of the tribes. When he took power in 1978, he sought an agreement with General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, a top army commander from Sanhan, his own tribe, and forged an alliance with the paramount *shaykh* of the Hashid tribal confederation, Abdallah al-Ahmar.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Saleh re-established the *Tribal Affairs Authority* (TAA), expanding its scope and structure. He placed it under the organisational chart of the Ministry of Interior and created new branches in each governorate. Through the TAA, he guaranteed the neutrality of those *shaykhs* marginalised from the political system by paying them a monthly salary. In 2005, the TAA counted around 399 *shaykhs*, of which 8 paramount *shaykhs*, 69 guarantor *shaykhs*, 222 *shaykhs*, and 100 local chairmen (Al Jazeera Center for Studies 2010: 44). These arrangements guaranteed Saleh a grip over state institutions and tribal forces for more than two decades (Phillips 2011).

In February 2012, Hadi replaced Saleh as President of the Republic and inaugurated a new attitude towards the tribes. During the National Dialogue Conference (NDC, 2013–2014), *shaykh* al-Ahmar pushed for the recognition of tribal quotas in the NDC (Alaug 2014). However, Hadi dismissed his requests. Public pressure mounted to dismantle the TAA – which cost 13 billion Yemeni Riyals (YER) per year in shaykhs' salaries (Al Masdar 7/05/2012) – until the Basindwa government (2011–2014) announced it would stop funding the authority (Yemen Press 28/07/2013, Al Jazeera 18/09/2013).

The Houthis and the tribes

In September 2014, the Houthi–Saleh alliance seized the capital Sanaa, and in the subsequent months it gained control of much of upper Yemen. During this period, the influence of the Houthis was limited to their northern strongholds (Saada, and parts of al-Jawf and Amran), while Saleh's patronage networks guaranteed the support of the tribes throughout much of the northern governorates.

As long as the Houthi-Saleh alliance remained in place (2014 – Dec. 2017), the TAA continued operating under the guidance of Numan Duwayd, a tribal shaykh from Khawlan al-Tiyal and one of Saleh's loyalists. Concurrently, the Houthis established a parallel network of shaykhs, with the aim of gaining tribal support independently from Saleh. In October 2014, they declared Dhayfullah Rassam 'paramount shaykh of Yemen', a role previously held by Abdallah al-Ahmar. In the ensuing months, Rassam established the Council of Tribal and Popular Cohesion (CTPC) and appointed local representatives in each Houthi-controlled governorate, with the aim of gathering tribal support and fighters for the frontlines. This strategy paved the ground for breaking the alliance with Saleh, while maintaining tribal support.

After the dissolution of the Houthi alliance with Saleh (December 2017) the TAA was gradually marginalised and its prerogatives assumed by the Office of the President of the Republic, led by Ahmed Hamid. In September 2019, the Houthis established the General

The Tribal Chart of Honour

Starting from October 2015, the **Council of Tribal and Popular Cohesion** has promoted a tribal manifesto entitled 'The Tribal Chart of Honour' and fostered tribesmen to adhere to it. This manifesto authorises tribesmen to handle justice independently from the state and to exile from their territories as traitors those tribesmen who are not opposing the Saudi-led coalition (Taiz News 18/05/2015).

Authority for Tribal Affairs (GATT), and appointed Hunayn Qutayna as its chair. [16] The GATT has allegedly modified the list of shaykhs entitled to a state salary, excluding rival ones from the southern governorates (Al Youm 19/09/2019).

AQAP, ISIS, and the tribes

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) started operating in Yemen in January 2009, bringing together Saudi and Yemeni cells sharing al-Qaeda's global jihad agenda. During the past decade, AQAP successfully expanded in the southern areas of Yemen, establishing the Abyan–Shabwah emirate (2011–2012) and controlling the rich seaport of Al Mukalla in Hadramawt (2015–2016), before being ousted by government and coalition forces. During the last year, AQAP has mainly been active in the Al Bayda and Abyan governorates, with episodic activities recorded in Marib, Hadramawt, Taiz, and Ibb governorates (ACLED Data).

AQAP's relative success in taking root in territories controlled by armed tribesmen is explained by practical and symbolic strategies.

- The jihadist group nurtures kinship ties with local tribal groups through marriage and recruitment (Kendall 2018).

- It addresses local audiences through narratives resonating with the tribal language of honour, rather than religious tenets (Kendall 2016); it mobilises traditional poetry and religious hymns to inspire local audiences on the emotional level; it narrates martyrdom in terms of glorious tribal deeds (Kendall 2016).

- It has tackled local grievances by focusing on the provision of essential services (e.g. conflict resolution, water and electricity, health services, security, etc.).

- It has co-opted local political elites and tribal shaykhs, instead of replacing local authorities with AQAP members.

- It has re-branded its symbol and name, adopting different denominations (e.g. *Ansar al-Sharia*, *Abna Hadramawt*, *Abna Abyan* etc.) for each governorate, in order to signal proximity to local causes.

The Islamic State (IS), which emerged in Yemen in November 2014, adopted a different approach, favouring anti-Shia narratives directed against the Houthis, violent media messaging, and strict implementation of Sharia law. These strategies have proved unpopular among the Yemeni tribes (Kendall 2016). However, they have some appeal to the most radical fighters and might drain support from AQAP, pushing the latter organisation to radicalise its own narratives.

Tribes in the southern governorates

Since the Houthi attack on Aden in April 2015, armed militias made up of southern tribesmen have participated in all major conflicts and battlefields both within their territorial boundaries and attached to coalition forces in other parts of the country. Across the southern governorates, a number of tribes have been co-opted by the legitimate government forces, the coalition partners, especially the UAE, and the local political movement, the Southern Transitional Council (STC).

The STC was set up in May 2017 by a number of south Yemeni political actors, prominent among whom are Aydarus al-Zubaidi and Ahmad b. Burayk, former governors of Aden and Hadramawt respectively. Together with Hani b. Burayk, a militant Salafi, they form the leadership of the STC. The movement draws its main support among the tribes of Ad Dali, to which al-Zubaydi belongs, and Yafi. Political actors from the same tribes in the Ad Dali and Lahj governorates were part of one of the factions (the so-called Tughma) that fought against southerners from Abyan and Shabwa (the so-called Zumra faction) during the 1986 civil war. (al-Hamdani 2020; ACLED 18/12/2019).

After the expulsion of the Houthis from Aden the UAE trained local forces for each southern governorate, called the *Security Belt Forces*, apart from Shabwah and Hadramawt where they are known as the *Elite Forces*. Four southern tribes stand out for their particular affiliation to the UAE when it comes to recruitment into these troops:

- Yafiis and Dhaliis make up the bulk of Security Belt men in Aden.

- The Subayhis, a tribe of Lahj, has provided instrumental support in the coalition fight in the Red Sea coast and the attempt to take Hodeidah and has been part of the *Giants' Brigades*.

- The Wahidis have provided the main recruits for the Shabwani Elite Forces, which caused frictions with the Awlaqis, the largest tribal confederation in the governorate.

The internationally recognised government of president Hadi has relied mostly on military commanders from Abyan, Hadi's birthplace, and the army comrades he had fought together with during the 1986 and 1994 civil wars. Hadi's reliance on Abyanis has reinforced the perception that the government/STC conflict is at least partly a revival of

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16 Qutayna, a tribal shaykh from al-Mahwit, is considered one of the architects of the alliance between the Houthis and the tribes of the Sanaa belt.

the historical factional competitions within southern society that pit local tribal structures **against each other**. It also helps explain the current configuration of power across most of the southern governorates, where the government and the STC have been actively competing for control of Abyan and Shabwah. Apart from strategic considerations, the ability to inflict a defeat within an opponent's tribal area of influence carries a significant amount of prestige and can often help tip the local balance of power in favour of the winning side.

The regions of Hadramawt and Al Maharah have always enjoyed a level of local autonomy because of their distance from the centre of political power. This has been strengthened over the course of the current conflict, and in response to the collapse of central authority, tribal units in both areas self-organised into tribal councils. The Hadramawt Tribal Alliance was established in December 2013 and claims to represent all tribes and sections of the governorate, about 185 of them, under the leadership of the paramount shaykh of the Humum tribe (Talib 2017). The main aim of the Alliance has been to enhance security in the governorate. Its leader also holds the position of First Deputy Governor of Hadramawt in a clear indication of the intersections of state and tribal institutions in Yemen. The Hadramawt Tribal Alliance has collaborated mainly with Saudi forces in fighting against local AQAP elements.

By contrast, in Al Maharah there are at least two opposing tribal councils whose division is political rather than tribal. The strong tribal traditions of the Mahris have helped avoid the spillover of conflict and mediation by tribal elders takes precedence over an armed confrontation (Nagi 2020). Local coalition forces have at times also come under attack, particularly the Saudis, when they have ignored local dynamics.

Case Study – Al Bayda

Radman al-Awadh is a district in the north of Al Bayda governorate. By the end of April 2020, violent clashes erupted between Houthi authorities controlling the area and local tribes. On 27 April, Houthi supervisors from al-Shaʿaf, in Sadah governorate, killed a woman from al-Asbah village in her own house, in At Taffah district in Al Bayda, during a security campaign aimed at arresting a wanted person.

On 29 April, Yasir al-Awadhi, a General People's Congress (GPC) leader and a tribal shaykh from the area, immediately took the lead in the situation, and tackled the issue in two major ways. Firstly, he framed the murder in tribal language. He summoned the shaykhs of Al Bayda, calling them to the "duty of brotherhood and the tie of honour and land". To reinforce the message, he added that the murdered girl was to be considered "everybody's daughter", thus exemplifying the fact that women are the honour of the whole tribe. He concluded by inciting the tribes to "clean the dropped blood and the sexual honour". In fact, the Houthis had committed shame (ʿayb) not only by killing the woman, but also by violating a house. He highlighted the political neutrality of the tribes and their legal demands in terms of customary law (Yaser Alawadi 2 May 2020). In accord with other shaykhs from the area, he demanded the head of the murderer or that of the general supervisor of the governorate, thus blaming Houthi authorities for the accident and issuing a three-day ultimatum to surrender the culprit. Through this strategy, he mobilised the tribes at the governorate level by mobilising them against the state, an outside actor.

However, on a second level, al-Awadhi used the incident to advance political demands. While stressing that the tribes firmly opposed the "aggression" (i.e. the Saudi-led coalition's war), he demanded to replace the Houthi supervisors from Sadah, labelling them "tyrants" (Dawsari 22/06/2020). At the same time, he expressed full trust in the national Houthi leadership, personified by Mahdi al-Mashat and Abdulmalik al-Houthi, as opposed to the Houthi supervisors in charge of the governorate. On 1 May, the Houthis agreed to establish an investigation committee. They deposited five rifles with shaykh Khadhar al-Asbahi – a sort of confession of the crime they committed (al-Dawsari 2012) – recognising him as head of the committee and also appointed three members of their national leadership as its members (Ansar Allah 1/05/2020).

However, on the following day, the deadline of the ultimatum, the Houthis did not hand over the culprit. Some of the shaykhs of At Taffah district pledged their alliance to the Houthis, demanding the right to "face the state or any enemy by ourselves" (al-Iʿlam al-Shaʿabi al-Yamani 1/05/2020). Concurrently, the family of the murdered girl called for a tribal intervention led by Yasir al-Awadhi (Anawin Post 2/05/2020). On the same day, the tribes, led by al-Awadhi, clashed with Houthi forces in Radman al-Awadh. The coalition forces attempted to exploit the situation, supporting the tribes against the Houthis. However, their belated intervention did not prevent the Houthis from regaining control over the whole district on 15 June.

Overall, the case of Al Bayda offers a good example on the points raised in this report:

- tribal values and customary law are strategically used to mobilise tribal groups

- when the culprit is the state, the tribes are mobilised at the governorate level, or even as confederations; in these cases, mediation committees often include leaders of national standing

- in theory, tribal identity is neutral in respect to political factions and tribes only operate to protect core tribal values; however, in practice, political and tribal identities overlap, and tribes and tribal values can and have been exploited in the course of the current conflict for political ends.

Brief Mapping of the Tribes of Yemen

The tribal map of Yemen is dotted by a multitude of tribal entities of varying degrees of influence, significance, and demographic size. Contrary to the experience of other countries, Yemeni tribes are for the most part settled in towns and villages within a well-defined territory. Due to the scarcity of resources and aridity of their environment, in some parts in the east of the country, tribes such as the Sayar lead a semi-nomadic existence, albeit still near their major settlements. Over the years specific tribes and tribal confederations have acquired importance either because of the proximity of their leading members to the state, or because of the strategic significance of the regions over which they hold sway. Similarly, political changes at the centre, or defeats in inter-tribal conflicts have often led to loss of influence and power.

The Hashid tribal confederation, which spans the region northwest of Sanaa, is a notable example of both geographical and political influence, but also of the way the current conflict has led to its decline. It is the tribe to which former President Saleh, the current Vice President Ali Muhsin, and the leader of the al-Islah party, the businessman Hamid al-Ahmar, belong. Members of the Hashid have dominated the political and military elites of Yemen since the fall of the Imamate in 1962 (Peterson 2016).

Their participation on the government's side in the Houthi wars (2004–2010) alongside a number of historical grievances from the time of the republican revolution meant that they were particularly singled out by the Houthis as their opponents. Thus, the Houthi descent on Sanaa in September 2014 brought about one of the most significant upsets in Yemen's tribal system in recent times. The direct challenge the Houthis posed to the al-Ahmar family, paramount shaykhs of the Hashid confederation, was manifested in a very symbolic fashion in the destruction of their ancestral home. These events and their adversaries' ascent to power marked the decline of the al-Ahmar family's standing among its adherents, and the overall loss of influence of the Hashid confederation in Yemen's national political scene.

The Bakil is often mentioned alongside the Hashid as the other one of the two major northern Yemeni tribal confederations. Tribes belonging to the Bakil tribal confederation surround the capital Sanaa and most of the northeastern region and have often antagonised the Hashid. Hence, the Saleh regime's dependence and favouritism towards the Hashid led to a number of Bakil tribes aligning themselves with the Houthi movement. The Abu Luhum family is considered the most prominent among the Bakil.

The Madhhij is the third major tribal confederation of northern Yemen, occupying the area south of Marib. The relative stability and development that Marib has enjoyed during the current conflict is credited to the area's tribal traditions and the ability of local tribal customs to regulate inter-tribal conflict in the face of external threats (Sanaa Centre 01/08/2019).

The Murad and Abida tribes of Marib have long fought against the Houthis and have historically opposed Zaydi religious rule, as their tribespeople belong to Sunni Islam. The assassin in 1948 of Imam Yahya, Yemen's Zaydi leader, was a tribesman of the Murad. The Abida tribe have gained in influence in recent times because the current governor of Marib, Sultan al-Arada, belongs to that tribe. His favouritism towards his kinsmen has been a cause of resentment among the other local tribal leaders (Baron 2018).

Tribal identity and the adherence to tribal social norms are at their strongest among the Yemenis of the northern highlands (Schmitz & Burrowes 2018). This is not to say that people in other parts of the country do not trace their family lineage to a local tribe, but it means that tribal affiliations in other areas compete or overlap with other kinds of local, regional, even political identities. A case in point is the Tihama, Yemen's narrow Red Sea Coast, where one of the notable tribes is the Zaraniq. The Zaraniq, a once influential tribe depending on piracy and smuggling in the Red Sea, was reduced to the status of peasantry after a campaign against them by Imam Yahya in the late 1920s. The particular environmental and social conditions in the Tihama (large agricultural landholdings by few individuals, lack of rainfall, African cultural influences) have contributed to the decline of tribal social ties.

In the southern governorates, which formed the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), a combination of historic, geographical, and political factors has meant that most tribal entities are smaller compared to those in the northern parts of the country, and do not usually form larger confederations. The southern state was to a large degree successful in curbing the influence of tribalism, a process that was mostly reversed by the Saleh regime after unification (Brehony 2011).

YEMEN: Geographic Distribution of Yemen's Tribes

Legend

Tribes located

—— Governorate BRD
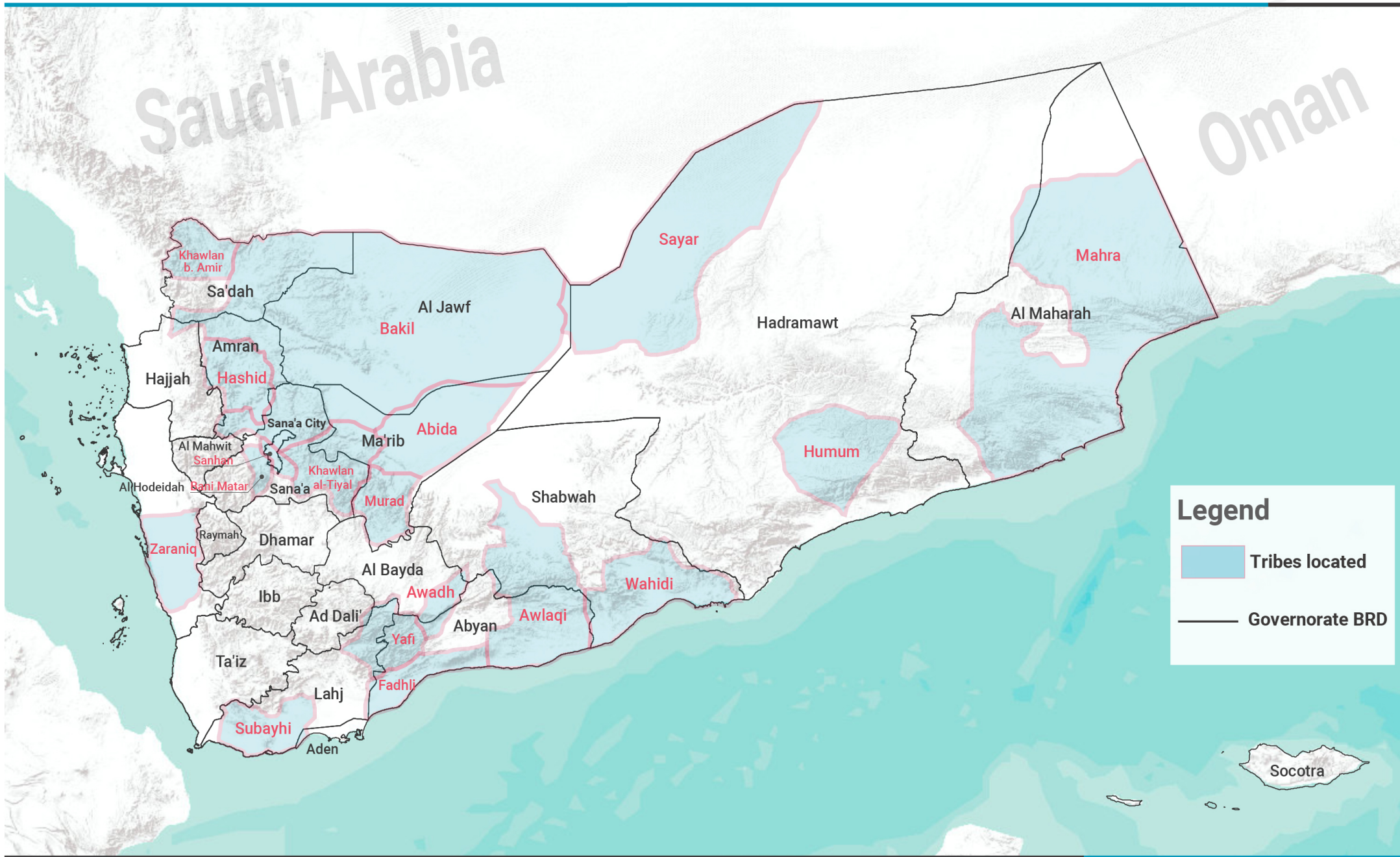
Two of the more important tribal confederations in southern Yemen are the Yafi in Lahj and the Awlaqi in Shabwah. Most other southern tribes identify broadly with the regions they inhabit, for example the Hadramawt, Al Maharah, or Ad Dali.[17] In spite of the socialists' attempts to break tribalism, the 1986 southern civil war was manifested as a conflict between political leaders and their regional, tribal power bases and remains a source of inter-tribal competition to this day. At the time, politicians from Ad Dali, Lahj, and Yafi and their supporters, the so-called *Tughma* faction, won over the *Zumra* faction that drew its support from Abyan, Shabwah, and Hadramawt (International Crisis Group 20/10/2011). President Hadi is one of the well-known members of the *Zumra* group from Abyan, whereas most leaders of the Southern Transitional Council originate in the *Tughma* areas of Ad Dali, and Yafi.

The imposition of modern international borders in the Arabian Peninsula has meant that a number of tribes and tribal confederations often extend across the borderlands of two or more states. Two characteristic examples are the tribes of Khawlan bin Amir in the northwest by the Saudi border, and of Al Maharah in the east on the border with Oman. The alliance of the Khawlan bin Amir tribes with the Houthi movement presents the potential for a spillover of the Yemeni conflict into the other half of the confederation that resides in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the Omani state takes a keen interest in the welfare of Mahra tribesmen on the Yemeni side of the border and has often received and cared for refugees from the areas of Hadramawt and Al Maharah adjoining Oman (al-Monitor 09/01/2020). The existence of historical tribal alliances across international borders, even with regional states that do not border Yemen such as the UAE, often helps to explain aspects of the current conflict.

Useful Terms

aqil

The aqil is a male elder, a community leader, in a neighbourhood, village, or town setting. In tribal society the aqil is elected from among the members of an extended family and represents that group, which is usually identical with a local neighbourhood. Aqils perform a number of functions that relate to the provision of public services and resolution of disputes at the neighbourhood level.

qabili

A qabili, tribesman, is the ordinary male member of a Yemeni tribe. The vast majority of Yemen's population belongs to a tribe. Qabilis have the right to bear arms and are bound to behave according to a well-defined value system. In this sense, being a qabili is not only the affirmation of a person's inherent attribute, but a constant aim to live up to the set of principles that define membership of the tribal social class. Qabilis are today found in almost all walks of life, and even in professions that in the past were not considered honourable enough for a tribesman. Although traditionally a Yemeni tribesman is distinguished by his janbiyya (dagger, with a variety of regional and tribal designs) and also often by his rifle, there are also Yemenis who identify as qabilis without the external symbols of their status.

qadhi

Literally meaning 'judge', the qadhi social status, which only exists in upper Yemen, is considered just below that of sayyid and is hereditary. It is ascribed to families of religious and legal learning that used to act as jurists and state bureaucrats. A Yemeni 8qadhi would customarily wear a different type of janbiyya, the thuma, on the right side of his belt.

sayyid

A sayyid belongs to a family that claims descent from the prophet Muhammad. In Yemen there are sayyid families of both the Zaydi school in the north, and the Sunni school in the central and southern regions. The Sunni sayyid families claim descent from Muhammad's grandson Husayn, while the Zaydi sayyids (including the Houthis) claim their descent from his grandson Hasan. Because of their ancestry, the sayyids are considered 'outsiders' to the native Yemeni population and strictly speaking they are 'guests' of the tribe in whose territory they reside. A sayyid will often wear white headgear as a sign of his status, usually without the customary janbiyya dagger, but definitely unarmed. Alternative titles that are used for the same people are Sharif, and Hashemite. Women of sayyid descent (sharifas) are only permitted to marry within this social class.

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17 Interview with Yemeni interlocutor, 15/6/2020.

shaykh

The term shaykh is used in a variety of situations across Yemen, which can cause confusion to outsiders. In a tribal context, a shaykh is the hereditary leader of a tribe, or tribal section. Occasionally it is possible for a tribesman to rise to the position of shaykh by governmental appointment or election by his tribe. In the area of Hadramawt anyone in the *mashaykh* social class, which is roughly equivalent to the *qadhi* class of northern Yemen, can carry the title of shaykh. The Saleh regime's policy of appointing tribal shaykhs and placing them on a governmental payroll via the Tribal Affairs Authority eroded their traditional role and caused divisions in some tribes. Illustrious members of society such as businessmen and local benefactors are often given the title of shaykh out of respect. A large proportion of members of Yemen's parliament, especially from northern constituencies, are also tribal shaykhs.

shaykh mashaykh

Literally 'shaykh of shaykhs'. The title is often translated as 'paramount shaykh'. His role is as the nominal head of a tribal confederation. He is usually the leader of the more influential and powerful tribe of the confederation and enjoys acceptance and a degree of political influence at the national level. The most characteristic example was that of Shaykh Abdallah b. Husayn al-Ahmar (1933–2007), paramount shaykh of the Hashid tribal confederation and Speaker of the Yemeni Parliament. Because of his personal clout and political power, he was sometimes considered the paramount shaykh of all Yemen.

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