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POINT OF VIEW

Tribes and Tribalism in the Arab Spring

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From Iraq in the north down to the Arabian Peninsula and west all the way to Morocco, tribal values have had a strong influence on shaping the political culture and state-society relations in the Middle East. Historians remind us that throughout the span of the Middle East' history, tribes have often posed a credible threat to central governments, and have played an important role in the making and dismantling of ruling dynasties. The Romans, the Persians, the Ottomans, the French, the British, the Italians, Arab kings, Imams, Sultans and the post independence Arab military officers, have all attempted, with various degrees of success and failure, to destroy, co-opt, subordinate and manipulate tribes. The Romans, for instance, allocated payments to tribes in the region to guard the frontiers against external intrusion. The Persians, on the other hand, used tribes as buffers against emerging powerful neighbouring dynasties, while western colonial forces promoted tribalism as a counterbalance to the rising urban sentiments of nationalism. Tribes, however, posed the most serious challenge to the political elites of the post-colonial independent Arab states. At the heart of this threat lies the obsessive preoccupation of the 20th century political regimes in the region with the total confiscation of the political arena, and the forcible submission of all social actors to the will of political leadership.

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By looking through the wrong end of the telescope, many in the Western world think of tribal people as nomads, riding camels and living in harsh and remote desert areas. This is not the reality in the Arab Middle East, where the distinction between tribal and non-tribal does not correspond in any significant way between nomadic and settled populations. The majority of Middle Eastern tribes do not move. Tribal populations, for instance, in Iraq and Yemen are settled farmers, who plant fruits and vegetables beside their sorghum and millet. Remarkably, tribal identity in the region is still alive in the socio-political consciousness of millions of Arabs residing in modern globalising cities. This unique phenomenon is one of the excellent mirrors to reflect how tribalism in the Arab world is not a way of life. Rather, it is an identity, which is grounded in cultural psychology and politics. In other words, tribalism in the Middle East is culturally rooted and politically shaped. It's uneven development and strength in the region is the outcome of the divergent and changing types of state formation, colonial penetration, economic growth and societal changes.

It is also important to note that the relationships between political administrations, whether foreign or indigenous, and tribes in the region were never fixed. Instead, they were always subject to adjustments in response to alterations in security, economic and political circumstances. The only fixed feature in these relations is that tribes become strong when political administrations are weak. In other words, the strength of the tribes is closely linked to the weakness of the state. In light of this, the role of tribes in state building in the Middle East is balanced by the role of the state in destroying tribes.[1]

A glance at today's map of state-society relations in the Arab Middle East reveals that tribes remain a major political actor in Saudi Arabia, the oil monarchies of the Gulf, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. In these countries, tribal banners fly next to national flags, and tribal identity continues to play an important role in the shaping of decision-making process of the state, and even in the construction of national identity. Tribal identity in these countries is so strong that it is competing with the two remaining influential identities-Islamism and nationalism. Some authors go further to argue that tribal loyalty can be even more important than Islam[2]. The impressive political influence of tribes in the region illustrates how 'modern' Arab political systems, rich and poor; monarchical and republican, remain very vulnerable to ideologies of tribal realities, and how tribal relations remain deeply intertwined with political relations[3].

The contemporary relations between tribes and state institutions in the Arab world are expressed, mainly, through relationships of patronage and clientism between influential tribal sheikhs and political elites. The form of the patronage varies from monthly payments to 'gifts' such as lucrative business deals, lands, government seats, vehicles and houses. For example, during the 1980-88 war with Iran, and after the miserable failure of the Iraqi military adventure in Kuwait, the Iraqi regime revitalized tribal justice system, and even granted tribal leaders diplomatic passports. Saddam Hussein went so far with his tribalization policy to the extent of declaring that Iraq' Ba'ath ruling party is "the tribe of all the tribes". On the other hand, in tribal countries with elections experiences, such as Yemen and Jordan, tribal leaders play a significant role in shaping the mechanisms and strategies not only of the regimes but also of the opposition parties, including Islamists. Tribesmen vote in support for their sheikhs, for the sheikhs of their allied tribes, and for candidates who are endorsed by their tribal leaders. Tribal voting in elections is not based on ideological affiliation but simply on the basis of the social obligations of tribal membership. In other Arab countries with large tribal population, the state's local administrative boundaries are drawn, mainly, on the basis of tribal lines, and local tribal sheikhs are the local administrative officials. The exercise of power by tribes and their leaders should not be seen, however, as a tribally-motivated attempt to overthrow modern state institutions and replace them by a tra-

ditional tribal political order. Rather, Arab tribal leaders prefer the extraction of maximum political concessions and economic benefits from the state, without being directly involved in the complex management of state affairs.

The unfolding Arab revolutions met the giant of tribalism in Libya and Yemen. In the two countries the peaceful 'Arab Spring' has turned into a bloody summer and a violent long autumn. Historically speaking, the modern Libyan and Yemeni nation-states were born and grew up with fundamental geographical flaws, as artificial national political entities that are caught into a strong web of regional and international geopolitical interests. Lacking harmony between their external modern form and their internal traditional contents, and suffering from serious problems of legitimacy and weak institutional building, modern Libya and Yemen came into existence as political units that are difficult to manage without gaining the support of tribes. Decades after independence, loyalty and allegiance to the clan and tribal sheikh in these countries remain far much stronger than loyalty to the country and allegiance to the state. Qaddafi of Libya, for instance, relied heavily on his own tribe, Qathathfa, and on other loyal tribes such as Warfala and Maghrha, which includes the Lockerbie suspected bomber Abdelbasset al-Maghrhai, for filling all strategic military and security positions[4].

Similarly, President Saleh of Yemen relied on his clan and tribe to infiltrate the military and state institutions. Saleh paid acute attention to the tribal backgrounds of his top ranking commanding officers. The majority of the generals in Yemen' military, for example, are drawn from Salih's clan, Sanhan, and other clans from Hashid tribal confederation. As a result, the Yemeni military became not a state institution, but a reflection of tribal power. The regime' orchestrated tribalization of state institutions in Yemen makes the state behaves like a tribe, and the tribe behaves like a state[5].

Even seasoned observers of the Middle East can notice how the current violent uprisings in Libya and Yemen have a strong tribal flavour. Tribes in the eastern parts of Libya, where much of the oil fields are located, are one of the major forces behind the rebellion against the Libyan regime. These tribes were excluded from Qaddafi's four decades patronage system, which favoured tribes in and around Tripoli. In Yemen, on the other hand, tribes that were marginalized by Saleh' regime, and tribal elites whom their interests clashed with the interests of Saleh' immediate family, constitute a major military and financial resource for supplying and complicating the anti-regime protestation. The prominence of the tribal factor in Libya and Yemen has militarized the uprisings, and pushed the peaceful protests into civil wars, not revolutions. The stubborn persistence of tribal identity in the Arab Middle East is the outcome of the failure of the national project of political modernization, and the addiction of Arab autocrats to politics of survival, even if survival strategies mean radical shifts in posture and policy.

The politicization of tribal cultural identity in the region is one of the troubling symptoms of the Arab State's crisis of legitimacy. In the post Arab spring era, the political administrations in Libya and Yemen will have to be very well prepared for their tough meetings with the giant of tribalism. Political reform based on constitutional legitimacy is the best first step towards undermining the influential political role of tribes in the Arab Middle East.

NOTES

1. Lancaster, W. & Lancaster, F. (1990), “Desert Devices: The Pastoral System of the Rwala Bedu”, in Galaty & Johnston, eds., The World Of Pastoralism. Herding Systems in Comparative Perspective. Guildford Press, Belhaven Press, pp. 179-94.

2. Fandy, M. (1994), “Tribe Vs.Islam: the post-colonial Arab state and democratic imperative”, Middle East Policy, Vol.13, no.2, 1994.

3. Khouri, P. & Kosiner, J.(Editors) (1990), Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East, University of California Press.

4. Paoletti, E. (2011), “Libya: Roots of a Civil Conflict”, Mediterranean Politics, Vol 16, Issue 2, July 2011, pp:313-319.

5. Fattah, K. (2011), “Yemen: a Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs”, Middle East Policy, vol.18, Issue 3, Fall 2001, pp:79-85.

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