

There is often a temptation to talk about tribes in the Middle East as an eternal, unchanging reality, and to understand their socio-political presence as an intractable, necessary evil. In the spiralling civil wars of Yemen and Libya, there is little to challenge this position, writes Charlie Pratt. The chaos visited on both countries has enabled tribes to strengthen themselves as key military actors, controlling access to territory and resources for large portion of the South and East of both countries. Each seem eternal. This appearance matters, not just because it is a depressing indicator of the near total regression of the state in these countries, but because tribes as small, regional-local competitive social constructs now define the future trajectory of Middle Eastern geo-political security. By extension, that means European security too.

Even if I argue they are not an intractable reality, tribes have long been a central part of Yemeni and Libyan socio-political history, though their influence has waxed and waned. In Libya, the tribes were co-opted by Qadhafi into his state through force and patronage, and while doing so he brutally flattened their structures until they were subservient to him as an arm of the state. In more trying circumstances, the ex-Yemeni President of long-standing, 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih, found some way to weld together an incomplete mixture of Government and Tribal control into the appearance of a semi-modern state, giving him at least enough power to enable his state to operate in tribal areas, even if locked in an difficult and unsustainable "competition/embrace" dynamic.

Now, in large areas of both countries, tribes have moved from being part of the socio-political dynamic to defining it completely. In both Libya and Yemen the formal Government has retreated to tiny holdings in the respective capitals of Tripoli and Aden. In their place, a mixture of tribes and allied militias have taken over large swathes of the country – even the quasi-organised Libyan National Army currently cutting a swathe through Eastern and Southern Libya is a mixture of tribal levies, militias and ex-Gadhafi-era units, one that only moves with the acquiescence of tribal shaykhs.

The retreat of the state has often been caused by other factors than strong tribes. Because they are only regional-local actors, tribes do not have the power to destroy and take over the state. If they did ever possess this power they would, in turn, become the state. However, where the state has retreated, tribes have taken advantage to extend their power, causing further retreat of the state. The rise of tribes does not represent some restoration of the natural order in these countries. Far from it. They are enjoying re-emergence because, in the absence of the state, they are one of the few mechanisms that can promise safety and access to scant resource; because in chaos, "they supply a modicum of security and the rule of law via the semi-private provision of tribal law, which serves as an imperfect substitute for state law, an undersupplied public good" (Ref 1)

If the tribe cannot destroy the state, the opposite is certainly true. Tribes exist because the state does not. And when a modern state as we understand it, capable of controlling resource and projecting power to the borders of territory exists, the tribe disappears or is subsumed, acting only as a social linking mechanism, a way of ordering social relations in peripheral rural areas or a nostalgic reminder of how things were. Even now, they are only "dynamic social constructs that can be subject to different interpretations and are used to describe and validate changing social and political relationships" (Ref 2). The political development of Saudi Arabia is a perfect example, as the growing Saudi state, embodied by King 'Abd-al-'Aziz al-Sa'ud, knitted together previously warring coalitions of tribes, binding them through blood and marriage and gradually ingested them into the greater Saudi state. In essence, the victory of one tribe over the others led to the development of a modern state. In Saudi, tribes now act as a form of nostalgic social glue, but with little political or economic power.

History such as this shows that tribes are not an eternal construct, but instead the result of particular social circumstances. Where they are strong, the state is not. The state never fully regresses, but becomes locked in a dynamic equilibrium with tribes, co-opting where they can, and competing for territory and resources where they have to. But once the tribe re-emerges, it becomes a construct hard to remove without overwhelming power, such as the Al-Sa'ud once showed in pulling together the fractious tribes of the Nejd and Hijaz. In Libya and Yemen, overwhelming power in the hand of one actor is impossible. The state has withered, and there is no monopoly on power by any actor. Indeed, in both countries, the state is amongst the weakest actor in the country.

The bad news for the MENA region is that the State is regressing in several key MENA countries, and the tribal system is strengthening. Once the tribe strengthens, it squeezes the space for the existence of the state ever further. It is not just Libya and Yemen we need to worry about where the tribe has already re-emerged, but Iraq and what re-emerges in the aftermath of Syria. The withdrawal of the state damages every social and economic indicator available, but also calls into question the viability of the geographically-bound state itself. Yemen and Libya may seem peripheral, but they are fundamental security and socio-political threats to the Gulf and North Africa region – adding Iraq and Syria to the mix fundamentally de-stabilises the wider MENA region, and its links to Europe.

This instability emerges not just from tribe-state competition, but even more damagingly, from inter-tribal competition. Tribes exist to guarantee access to finite resource, whether it be food, security or government patronage. But by their very nature, no tribe dominates access to resource. This lack of monopoly and the finite nature of resource ensures that tribes are in a constant state of competition, often violent, with other tribes. In Yemen and Libya, tribal militias

clash openly, attempting to secure lucrative territory and resources. As they do so, they introduce further insecurity and instability into the countries that host them – with the state regressing, and no monopoly on power or resource by any group, zero-sum competition is all that is left.

The endemic insecurity and instability engendered by this competition, both tribe-tribe and tribe-state, is colossally damaging to Western interests. Not only is it fundamentally impossible to build the modern states that part of the MENA region needs so desperately while the tribe remains ascendant, but the terrorist threat often rises in states where the tribe exists, partially because of the under-governed space that exists between the tribe and state, and partially because neither the state, nor the tribe, can be a serious CT actor.

From a Western perspective, the CT issues attendant to tribal domination are the most pressing issue. Daesh/ISIL and AQ made themselves at home in the turmoil of Libya and Yemen, where tribes have frequently made deals with Jihadist organisations to enable their existence in return for power or resource. This decision is often a rational one that fits entirely within a decision-making matrix based on competition and zero-sum predation. Hosting jihadist organisations gives power, resource and leverage over actors, as the recent history of Yemeni tribes show. It is a trend that will only strengthen in the future as ISIL face increased pressure in their heartlands.

Critically, the retreat of the State in these areas means Western governments have no CT partner to work with. Tribal levies cannot live to the high standard of capability and regulation expected from the West, nor do they share Western CT intent which often interferes with their power and leverage. As the chaos continues in both Libya and Yemen, and the tribes strengthen, so will the CT issues. Though on the back foot in Libya, ISIL will re-gather in the chaos, and the carnage that surrounds IS-Yemen and AQAP provides both space for them to exist and a recruiting call. The longer they are left alone, the sooner an external threat will re-emerge.

There is no benefit in seeing tribes as a quaint expression of some deep human social needs, or a necessary evil. They are the opposite – a product of human need for access to resource in difficult conditions. In the deteriorating circumstances of Libya and Yemen they have once again strengthened to meet this need, and in doing so have become critical regional-local groupings, capable of determining the trajectory of the state they are present in, the MENA region they straddle and the CT threat to the West and Western interests. They may not be eternal, but if we see them as such, the threat they pose to Middle Eastern and European security will be so.

Ref 1 Corstange, D (2008) Tribes and the Rule of Law in Yemen -

<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/corstange/doc/corstange-tribes.pdf>

Ref 2 Rutting, T (2010) How Tribal are the Taleban -

<http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf>