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RECEIVED 25 June 2024

ACCEPTED 04 October 2024

PUBLISHED 28 October 2024

## CITATION

Gao E (2024) Bringing back the tribe: why we should not abandon the study of tribes in the Arab world.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 6:1454752.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1454752

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# Bringing back the tribe: why we should not abandon the study of tribes in the Arab world

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Once broadly applied, the term “tribe” has been discredited and is now rarely used in the social sciences. Critics argue that the concept is vague, is evocative of primitive and backwards connotations, and has been inappropriately applied to societies that are not “tribal.” While these criticisms are well-founded and legitimate, I argue in this Perspective piece that we must not abandon the study of tribes in the Arab world. The concept of “tribe” continues to be salient for Arab citizens and one that they aptly assign to themselves. To address criticisms of previous studies, I offer three ways to reform scholarly pursuit on tribes: (1) adopting a thin conception of tribe (2) treating the concept as a dynamic not static unit and (3) being led by on-the-ground reality and not by theoretical biases regarding the applicability of this term.

## KEYWORDS

tribes, Arab world, identity, orientalism and colonialism, conceptual stretching, decolonization

## 1 Introduction

Once embraced as a pertinent unit that applied to large swathes of populations across the world, the term “tribe” has become a noxious concept in the social sciences. Southall (1996) cautioned in the *Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology* that, “Tribe is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which vague notions of outsiders are essentialised” (1331). Critics allege that the term has not only been stretched so far that “tribe” has become a vague and meaningless concept, but that it also possesses orientalist connotations. Societies have been classified as tribal to suit European interpretations when such descriptions were inappropriate. Likewise, tribal societies have been viewed as primitive, backwards and less evolved than other societies.

While these are astute objections, I argue in this Perspective article that to fully engage with the politics of the Arab world, we must not abandon the concept of tribes. Tribes continue to be salient in this region, not because European colonial scholarship forcibly describes social groupings as tribes but because Arab citizens themselves, continue to insist on the relevance of tribe in their daily lives (Adra, 2021). In a 2019 interdisciplinary roundtable on tribes and tribalism in the Middle East, the fruits of which were published in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, contributors agreed that tribes continue to “offer meaningful identities and forms of organization across the region and enjoy influence and power” (Wien, 2021, p. 471).

Rather than eliminating usage of the term, I argue that we should reform our study of tribe by (1) retaining a thin conception of the term (2) treating the tribe as a dynamic rather than static entity and (3) employing the term based on empirical reality rather than our assumptions of societal relations. I first present some common criticisms of the study of tribes before describing the proposed reforms in greater detail in part 2.

Tribes exist outside of the Arab world and are salient units in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Africa. However, the scholarship around tribes differs across these regions

and therefore, I focus exclusively on the political study of tribes in the Arab world. Nonetheless, even the Arab world is heterogeneous and includes a wide array of diverse ethnicities. Some of these ethnic groups such as the Kurds, Berbers, Persians, Turkmen, and Circassians also organize themselves tribally like the Arabs (Hoffman and Miller, 2010; Mohammadpour and Soleimani, 2019; Salzman, 2015). The manner in which these groups practice tribalism varies but regardless, tribal membership is meaningful across these ethnicities. In this article my focus is not the manifestation of tribalism across ethnicities in the Arab world but to summarize criticisms of the study of tribes in the Arab world overall.

## 2 The problem of tribe: “the least creative contribution made by anthropologists”<sup>1</sup>

The problem of “tribe” begins with basic foundational issues of how the term is defined. Some social scientists conceive of tribes as being rooted in kinship, although they diverge as to whether that is real or imagined. For anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1969) whose work on the Nuer in Sudan is considered both seminal and problematic, tribes are segmentary lineage systems where members of a tribe share a distant apical ancestor. Actual kinship is an accurate description, however, only for some tribes. In Jordan, many tribes claim to share a single ancestor through historically held but invented narratives (Alon, 2021; Shryock, 1997).

While kinship is the basis of some conceptions of tribe, other conceptions move away from kinship altogether to define tribes as individuals who share “a common territory, a common language, and a common culture” (Honigmann, 1964, p. 307) or “a group of bands occupying contiguous territories” (Linton, 1936, p. 231). Some locate the basis of tribe in its ability to provide sustenance: “the tribe is a social aggregate of pastoral nomads who jointly exploit an area providing subsistence over numerous seasons” (Marx, 1977, 358) or its capacity to offer common defense: “a ‘tribe’ is defined as a regional defense system” (Salzman, 2020, p. 2). The diversity of definitions, while reflective and representative of scholarly experiences, robs the term, however, of its conceptual clarity. Is the tribe defined by kinship ties? Or the sharing of territory or language or culture? Must the group be pastoral and provide sustenance for its citizens? As tribes were defined in so many ways, the term became “exceedingly opaque but also obtrusive.” Conceptual stretching meant that tribe could equally be used to refer to “clan, ethnicity, or bandits” (Mohammadpour and Soleimani, 2019, p. 1800).

Arguably even more problematic are the multitude of undesirable traits attributed to tribes. Tribes have frequently been described as backwards and tribal ties as primordial and problematic. Durkheim envisioned tribal societies as not fully modern but as one “stage in an evolutionary sequence” (Godelier, 1977, p. 42) from “mechanical solidarity” to “complex societies based on organic solidarity” (Salzman, 2020, p. 5). Tribes were more developed than “bands” but less so than “more advanced chiefdoms” (Sahlins, 1961, p. 323).

Tribal ties could be troublesome because they created “a strong attachment to particularistic values and traditions as opposed to universalist values necessary to the modern world” (Layne, 1987, p. 193). This “direct conflict between primordial and civil sentiments—this ‘longing not to belong to any other group’ that gives to the problem variously called tribalism, parochialism, communalism” could be “ominous,” “deeply threatening,” “very serious and intractable” for states (Geertz, 1973, p. 261).

It is tribalism, alleges journalist Mackey (1994) that motivates continuing strife in the Arab world. Either tribal members offer preferential treatment to their own or they bicker ceaselessly: “The Arabs move rapidly back and forth between the realm of brotherhood and the recesses of betrayal, between unity and conflict... It is this juxtaposing of conflict and unity that fuels the turmoil of the Arab world” (p. 14). This competition both within and between tribes is a “zero-sum affair” where “pursuit of ambition by one family or tribe is necessarily loss and restriction to another” leading to a “power-challenge dynamic [that] continues to prevent the transformation of the collectivity of separate families into an electorate of group values into rights and duties...” (Pryce-Jones, 1989, p. 33).

If not troublesome, then tribal members are at the very least stereotypical and anachronistic caricatures. Adventurers of the nineteenth century latched onto the “image of the Arabian Bedouin as a noble savage living ‘deep in the interior of Arabia’s Nejd desert’ with a character that ‘combin[ed] virility, chivalry, tenderness, and a natural instinct for godliness” (Gregg and Matsumoto, 2005, p. 17). Even today this “picture of the never-changing Bedouin” continues to hold resonance because it “emphasizes the cultural coherence and consensus of the imagined golden era” (Layne, 1987, p. 194).

Alongside the stereotypical, romanticized image of the Bedouin exist a multitude of other outdated and divisive stereotypes that may repel scholars from studying tribes. Those who are considered “tribal” can be scorned even by fellow Arabs as rural, backwards, and uncivilized. In Kuwait, the tribal Bedouin or *badu* in Arabic can be perceived as self-serving and nepotistic by their urban counterparts: “Not only are *badu* said to milk the state, but they are accused of being loyal only to their tribes and tribal leaders. Kuwait—the nation-state—means nothing to them... To many *hadhar* [settled folk], this concern with tribal connections is a major problem: they complain that the new immigrants bring with them a culture of ‘connections’ (*wasta*) and nepotism based on particularistic identities” (Longva, 2006, p. 173).

Furthermore, a strong tribal identity, it was declared, negates the possibility of a strong national identity. Tribal ties necessitated the “placing of family ties before all other political allegiances” (Layne, 1987, p. 186–187). Rather than aspiring toward the advancement of all citizens, members of tribes desired the prowess and power of their own individual groups above all. Even more insidious than the loss of civic duty, such singular focus on one’s own tribe was alleged to be the root of a multifarious ills in the Arab world. Zero-sum competition between tribes generated a “power challenge dialectic” that has “prevent[ed] the transformation of the collectivity of separate families into an electorate, of group values into rights and duties, of obedience into choice and tolerance... and of power holder into a party system with a loyal opposition” (Pryce-Jones, 1989, p. 33). Ultimately, these dynamics “surviving as a tribal legacy down the centuries... has everywhere perpetuated absolute and despotic rule” (33).

If tribes were peripheral to the study of the Arab world then these inaccurate and distorted descriptions would be problematic but have

<sup>1</sup> Gutkind (1970) is paraphrasing Herbert Chitepo, a politician and nationalist leader in former Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe (p. 2).

little in the way of legacy. But instead, tribes became *the* primary unit of interest in the region. They had “a cast-iron legitimacy as an object, with appropriate methodological and theoretical underpinnings” (Gilsenan, 1990, p. 232). Regarded by some as the “DNA’ of Middle Eastern people” (Mohammadpour and Soleimani, 2019, p. 1799), scholars have focused on topics such as the “imperative role” of tribes (Suwaed, 2022, p. 13), the “resurgence of tribalism” (Alshawi and Gardiner, 2013, p. 46) and “re-tribalisation” of the region (Bar, 2020, p. 128).

This emphasis on tribes produced a “deeply ingrained theoretical bias which privilege[d] certain objects at the exclusion of others for anthropological attention” (Elie, 2003, p. 5) resulting in what some argue as orientalist scholarship that advanced the prerogatives of the dominant West. Indeed the very creation of the concepts of tribe, tribalism, and tribal “were coined by the power of colonialism to portray the non-West as a homogeneous multitude as opposed to the West’s unique position in the world” (Mohammadpour and Soleimani, 2019, p. 1808). It was alleged that colonial powers wanting to “better control their subject populations, invented tribes, imposed boundaries, and inscribed them on official documents and maps” (Salzman, 2015, p. 354).

It is no wonder then that social scientists demanded that we move away from the study of tribes altogether. The tribe became “a less appealing, and slightly embarrassing subject of study for the average historian of the modern Middle East” (Samin, 2021, p. 473). Similarly, anthropologists “should not refer to ‘tribes’ because the reference is both inauthentic and demeaning” (Salzman, 2015, p. 354) with the term being “strongly associated with primitivism and Victorian social evolutionism” (Shryock, 1997, p. 513).

While scholars clamoured for a permanent diversion from the study of tribes, socioeconomic changes in the region suggested that the unit might disappear in practice as well. Sedentarisation policies halted or diminished nomadism and reliance on tribal authority (Al Radihan, 2006; Chatty, 2006; Keenan, 2006). At the same time, modernisation theory predicted that rising education levels and rapidly growing urban populations, would render tribalism obsolete (Fathi, 1994). Educated individuals would abandon tribal norms while migration from tribal bases to urban centres would reduce tribal control (Jureidini and McLaurin, 1984). Furthermore, as newly established Arab states assumed greater responsibilities and extended their geographical control, citizens would turn not to their tribe and its traditional practices but to the state and civil law. In Jordan, the 1970s were awash with such predictions. Tribal law in Jordan was banned in 1976 with the Senate voting to abolish informal tribal legal practices. The Jordan Times, the country’s English language newspaper published articles entitled, “Can we afford these archaic customs?” and “Detribalisation: Toward the rule of one law” (Layne, 1987, p. 186).

### 3 The continuing salience of tribe: “when ‘natives’ refer to their groupings as ‘tribes’”<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to these historical predictions, tribes, however, did not wane into disuse. The ascent of the modern state did not

render tribes obsolete; rather these units continued to be salient alongside civil authorities. Arab citizens still readily turn to tribal shaykhs to resolve tribal conflicts, including in Jordan where tribal law was officially banned (Gao, 2015). In surveys undertaken before the Arab Spring, Yemenis stated that tribal shaykhs were the fairest amongst adjudicators (Schmitz, 2021). In Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, tribes are powerful political actors: nominating candidates, mobilising voters, and often garnering more votes than political parties or blocs (Gao, 2016; Freer, 2021; Freer and Leber, 2021; Marzooq, 2021). In many states, members of tribes gather together in diwans to conduct tribal affairs such as organising celebrations, discussing resolutions to tribal conflicts, and collecting funds to help members in financial need. Bolstered by the enduring relevance of tribes, even historically non-tribal portions of the Qatari population are “increasingly performing the idea of tribe and tribal belonging... [and] re-envisioning themselves as clans and tribes” (Alshawi and Gardiner, 2013, p. 56).

In recent years civil conflicts and state fragmentation in the region have further enhanced the role of tribes and academic scholarship has reflected their renewed position and visibility. Some of these conflicts were initiated during the Arab Spring such as the fall of Qaddafi in Libya, civil war in Syria, and the Houthi conflict in Yemen. In the case of Iraq, the role of tribes was also reinvigorated with the second Iraq war and the security vacuum that developed soon after its inception (Tripp, 2004). As a result, academic scholarship on the role of tribes has increased to reflect their growing salience (i.e., Brandt, 2017; Dukhan, 2019; Erdag, 2017; Pargeter, 2023).

Despite scholarly objections, the tribe, therefore, is a unit that citizens of the Arab world continue to embrace. Anthropologist Andrew Shryock notes that while social scientists may reject the term, “[b]eing told that tribes are a thing of the past, or a creation of the colonial or postcolonial state, or morally and politically retrograde, or a false rendering of class formations, or an Orientalist fixation: none of this messaging is reassuring to the millions of Jordanians for whom tribal identities are important” (Shryock, 1997, p. 513). We, therefore, cannot abolish the concept of “tribe” simply because previous studies have been problematic and because its abandonment seems to fulfil the decolonising agenda. The solution is not to eradicate any scholarly pursuit of tribes but to reform these investigations. Here I offer three ways of approaching a renewed study of tribes: (1) uncoupling “tribe” from ‘tribalism’ and ‘tribal’ (2) recognising tribes as dynamic entities and (3) using the term, tribe, when it fits reality.

Firstly, we must disentangle tribe from the many attributes that have been assigned to this entity: nomadic or rural, primordial, premodern, nepotistic, traditional, static, pro-regime as well as many other characteristics. Tribes are not always nomadic; tribal attachments do not unilaterally produce zero-sum competition for resources; and tribal members can simultaneously harbor both strong tribal and national ties. In other words, members of a *tribe* are not necessarily *tribal* or engage in *tribalism*. Just as institutions like a political party can vary across a number of attributes so tribes can do so as well. The term, tribe, is merely “a label” and the “complex realities represented by the label must be teased out and elaborated (Salzman, 2015, p. 360).

<sup>2</sup> Salzman (2015, p. 359).

For instance, tribes in the Arab world challenge the dual stereotypes of either harboring anti-state attitudes or being unwavering supporters of the state. Yemeni tribes desire greater legal involvement from the state to deal with criminals and to prevent cycles of revenge over land and water, tasks traditionally handled by tribes. Here boundaries “between modernity and tradition as understood in Yemeni political discourse are not the same as the lines between state and tribe. We find state and tribe on both sides of the political divide between proponents of tradition and those of modernity” (Schmitz, 2021, p. 498).

Similarly, tribes in Jordan have consistently been viewed as a conservative force whose support are the bedrock of the Hashemite monarchy but not all Jordanian tribes are monolithically supportive of the King. Some tribes are indeed regime stalwarts while others are not. It is “cliché to say that the tribes are the backbone of the Hashemite regime,” rather they are “entangled in multiple state institutions, variously supporting and resisting them. The tribes are not a guaranteed bloc of pro-state tendencies” (Shryock, 1997, p. 512). Likewise, in the Syrian civil war, individual tribes were divided between both sides. Tribal youth joined the Free Syrian Army to fight against the regime while their shaykhs tended to support the regime (Dukhan, 2021).

Rather than a thick, complex conception of a tribe that is bound to a number of characteristics applicable only in specific contexts, we should adopt a thin, parsimonious conception of a tribe focused on the essential characteristics that differentiate a tribe from other social units. Tribes are groups based in kinship, whether that is real or imagined<sup>3</sup>. Tribes can exist in rural or urban spaces; possess nomadic or peasant roots; act cohesively or fractiously and vary across a multitude of other characteristics. It is the conflation of context-dependent attributes with the term, tribe, that has motivated the dizzying number of conceptions.

Secondly, we must recognize that tribes are not static but dynamic entities. Tribes today do not “constitute an exact replica of the tribes in the time of the Jahiliya before the emergence of Islam or even the tribes of the early 20th century” (Alon, 2021, p. 477). A tribe of the same name as yesteryears is not the same tribe. Its branches and clans may have shifted; the tribe may have grown or diminished in membership; and norms regarding tribal cohesion and obligations are likely to have altered. Over time, migration in Jordan has caused some clans to become tribes in their own right; long-held historical alliances can motivate the merging of tribal identities. While Jordanians may still turn to their tribes for conflict resolution, the authority of shaykhs has diminished (Layne, 1994).

Tribes are adaptable entities, which shift and change according to social circumstances and regime agendas. The political relevance of tribal identity has in many ways been perpetuated by the Jordanian and Kuwaiti monarchies which have purposely selected electoral rules that encourage voting for one’s own tribe over political parties or blocs. In this way politics has become atomised with a focus on local patronage rather than national policies (Gao

and Templeman, 2023; Lust-Okar and Jamal, 2002; Lust-Okar, 2006). In Syria, efforts were made to settle tribes and to end tribal law after 1946 but when Hafez Assad assumed the presidency in 1971, he manipulated tribal loyalties to counterbalance challenges to the state. Under his son, Bashar Assad, the Syrian regime manoeuvred tribal ties between Iraq and Syria to dampen the threat of American presence in Iraq. When a Kurdish revolt began in 2004, the Syrian government allowed certain tribes to take up arms to help quell the insurrection (Dukhan, 2021).

Understood in this way, tribes are “a modern phenomenon rather than the more common view—a relic of the past, a burden or chain on the back of modern societies, which slows down their march toward progress and prosperity” (Samin, 2021, p. 477). Furthermore, when Arab citizens act according to their tribal identities, they do so not because of the existence of primordial or ancient ties but because it is rational for them to do so. Rulers have engineered laws and encouraged tribal ties to serve their own interests. Tribes continue to be salient partly because rulers wish them to be salient. Tribes are not backwards or persistent relics of the past; they are modern and responsive to contemporary prompts.

Finally, we must be led by contemporary reality. Our prerogatives about how the world operates (i.e., tribes are *the* salient social unit or tribes are irrelevant in the Arab world) are not necessarily how the world actually operates. When I traveled to Jordan to study municipal service provision, my plan was to explore whether the presence of Islamist officials affected public goods. It was my Jordanian interviewees who repeatedly mentioned the importance of tribes and how tribal politics affects local services. While they recounted the tangible role of tribes in their lives, my scholarly colleagues at the same time were disparaging the term as archaic, old-fashioned, and orientalist. Despite prior assumptions and theoretical views, we must remain open to what is: whether that is the relevance or the irrelevance of the tribe.

## 4 Discussion

The concept of “tribe” has been rightly criticised for being vague, orientalist, and evocative of primitive and nomadic societies. It is a term that has at times been indiscriminately applied to the non-Western world even when societies were not organized as such to serve Western intellectual and organizational interests. Nonetheless it is a term that still holds resonance for many citizens of the Arab world and one that they independently use to describe their own societies. Of course, tribal ties, tribal solidarity, and a collective tribal identity are not applicable to all Arab populations but these are resonant concepts to a significant portion of this region’s citizens. Decolonization in this context, therefore, does not mean retracting and barring the usage of the term to fulfil Western agendas once again but being led by local preferences. Hence, despite criticisms, we cannot invalidate the study of tribes when trying to understand the politics of the Arab world. I argue instead for reforming the concept. By reducing the tribe to its most essential characteristics, distinguishing the term from various, often negative attributes it has been assigned, and not presupposing the absence or salience of tribes, we can resurrect a badly maligned but still very useful concept.

<sup>3</sup> This conception also includes tribes in Yemen, where tribal membership extends to those who share the same territory. Nonetheless, common descent whether that is true or constructed is still the basis of tribal membership there (Adra, 2021).

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

EG: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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