Tribal Culture and the Islamic Awakening

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Can culture help explain the prevalence of conflict? Anthropologist Professor Philip Salzman has done extensive field work on this topic in the Middle East. By settling with the Yarahmadzai Baluch tribe in Iranian Baluchistan, Salzman has gained invaluable firsthand experience on the structure and culture of tribal society in the region. He claims that the Baluch experience can shed light onto how we can understand the current wave of Islamist popularity and electoral success throughout the Middle East.[1]

Societal arrangements vary from no political order, where every individual looks out for oneself, to the imposition of the state, where a small number of powerful people possess the means of coercion. The latter characterized pre-industrial states, as the elite essentially exploited their positions for their own benefit, often at the expense of the general population. Tribal organization, on the other hand, is based on a collective arrangement where everyone makes decisions and all members share the means of coercion. Tribes prefer this arrangement and strive for independence, preferring to maintain control over themselves rather than lose their freedom to the power of the state. Peace and stability is maintained by collective responsibility and the implicit balance of power between subgroups within the broader tribe.

The Baluch remained independent of the Persian monarchy until the 1928 Reza Shah campaign, capitulating in 1935 and forced to change their name to Shahwazi (descendents of the crown). This was an extraordinarily traumatizing experience as the tribe had to relinquish their traditional acquisition of wealth in the form of predatory raiding for extremely low-wage migrant labour. Facing total domination, the tribe realized that the Persians were more powerful militarily, politically, and economically. Their self-perception deteriorated immensely and the pride they possessed in themselves as warriors was shattered. The Baluch had to redefine themselves as their entire paradigm altered dramatically.

The tribal leaders therefore embarked on a mission to redefine their society's identity. The chief and his brother embarked on the Hajj (Pilgrimage) to Mecca, which no one from the tribe had ever done before. They became actively more religious, building a Madrassa (Islamic School), hosting large indoctrination sessions, and contracting foreign religious specialists to preach to the tribesmen. Furthermore, various young men began travelling to Pakistan to study for a few years, returning to lead prayers and sermons. The Baluch are Sunni, whereas the Persian conquerors are of the Shi'a sect. By alleging the Persians were not true Muslims, the Baluch found one key aspect where they can perceive themselves to be superior. Can this phenomenon help explain the current wave of Islamic popularity throughout the Middle East?

Bedouin tribesmen emanating from Northern Arabia who embraced Islam formed armies that conquered the Middle East in the 7th Century. Salzman argues that Bedouin would have only accepted Islam if the religion was consistent with tribal structure, such as conceptions of honour and maintaining the tradition of predatory raiding. The distinction between the Umma and infidels, Dar al Islam vs. Dar al Harb, relates precisely to the concept of balanced opposition that characterizes tribal governance. It is widely believed by faithful Muslims that the prophet Muhammad preached against conflict amongst the tribes, advocating for unity against foreigners. The Umma therefore was regarded as a higher level of tribal organization, a more encompassing structure that incorporated various tribes in forming a new civilization to counter the foreign enemies of Islam.

The ideology of equality in these types of societies is very powerful. The tribal members share the means of coercion and are mobile, with the freedom to pack up and leave at any moment. As

a result, the leadership in nomadic tribes tends not to be despotic. Leadership in Middle Eastern tribes derives from the ability to mediate successfully amongst the various tribal sectors embroiled in conflict. The absence of strict hierarchies and lack of significant oppression ensures a society based on equality and autonomy.

The concept of honour is based on one's reputation as a tribesman that exhibits due loyalty, fulfilling social norms by consistently contributing to the group. Acting independently as an autonomous actor is the main basis for maintaining respect. There is no provision in Arab culture for a religious validation of a ruler, as hierarchical leaders are not perceived to represent Allah. Honour is lost if one is not fully self-sufficient and thus the imposition of the state is resisted. There is a fundamental contradiction between autonomy and honour in Arab culture and the necessities of the state apparatus, which depends on sustaining control through force and the suppression of individual liberties. No Middle Eastern government is fully legitimate by this standard.

To this day, there are tribes located throughout the region from the Pashtuns in Afghanistan to the Berber in North Africa. These tribes are active in modern conflicts; occasionally tribes may switch sides and therefore their role to influence the course of wars increases. This was the case when the Sunni tribes in Iraq decided to join the government after being part of the resistance. Bedouin tribes in the Sinai are increasingly asserting their power throughout the Peninsula in the absence of a viable security presence following President Mubarak's demise. Recent developments illustrate that the Sinai Bedouin are threatening the fragile peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, a cornerstone of Middle East stability. Furthermore, various tribes are contesting power currently in post-Qaddafi Libya, a country that consists almost entirely of Bedouin.

By the end of the 19th century, many Muslims travelled to study in Europe with the intentions of returning with ideas regarding the development of the Arab world. Western conceptions of modernization and nationalism were imported with the aim of revitalizing the declining Ottoman Empire. Many experts have devoted their attention to evaluating the merits of these experiences. Some observers argue that the push for modernization failed under the guise of Arab socialism, embodied by the Ba'athist parties of Saddam ruled Iraq and al-Assad's Syria. Furthermore, the Arab world's humiliating defeat to Israel in 1967 and Lebanon's devastating civil war crushed any hopes for Egyptian President Nasser's pan-Arab nationalist vision. The Western backed, secular autocracies of the 20th century that produced tyrannical societies were perceived as imperialist constructions. The people therefore regarded these ideologies as foreign transplants that contradicted Middle Eastern tribal culture.

Similar to the disgruntled tribe in Baluchistan, the Muslim world had to redefine itself in an effort to alleviate the pressure of their perceived inferior status with respect to the West. Since all secular movements were believed to have failed, there was a significant attraction and return to political Islam. This ideology has not been proven to have failed in the past and is a well

established part of the culture that the people related to. Islam has always been central to identity as the main *modus operandi* in the Middle East. As the Muslim world increasingly associates itself as the true followers of God, they can finally perceive themselves as superior to the West in the most significant respect. The waves of Islamist successes in the region's first free and fair elections this past year reinforce this reality. This provides a significant underlying cultural theme characterizing the regime changes and subsequent electoral outcomes derived from truly popular uprisings.

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[1] Salzman, Philip. "Can 'Culture' Help Explain Middle East Conflicts?" 26 Jan. 2012. University of Ottawa. Centre for International Policy Studies. Ottawa, Ontario. Guest Lecture.