Tribes and Tribalism: A Select Bibliography


Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Writing Women’s Worlds* documents stories of the Awlad Ali Bedouin women in Egypt’s Western Desert. Abu-Lughod attempts to limit her anthropologist’s voice to the introduction and conclusion of the book, allowing the Bedouin women to tell their own stories without her analysis. She organizes the narratives under distinct chapters that each highlights a distinctive characteristic of tribal society in Bedouin tribes in Egypt. Her approach is a novel one that has revolutionized the approach towards documenting the oral histories and narratives of tribespeople.


This paper is a study in dancing, poetry, clothing, and food, and how these cultural practices underlie and define conceptions of the tribe in the northern highlands of Yemen. The article examines how nationalism is presented in tribal terms, using the rhetoric and markers of the tribe to express a national culture.


This article includes several case studies on the way that customary law is currently practiced in contemporary Yemen, arguing that certain forms of rural heritage have “trickled up” to impact the wider society, especially by influencing the 2011 Arab Spring protests. Forms of heritage, including women’s roles in leadership, have evolved over time and continue to support civil society and social equality within the national identity of Yemen.


This collection of essays examines the states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council, ad the specific changes that have taken place in the nature of kinship practices in those states since the 1970s due to the discovery of oil, access to education, technological advances, and economic globalization. Some of these chapters demonstrate how these factors have threatened kinship structures: Jean-François Seznec’s chapter examines how globalization and membership in the WTO are affecting the domination of merchant families in GCC states, and Fred Lawson’s chapter examines the rise of a new commercial and bureaucratic class threatens kinship systems. However, others demonstrate that kinship structures have been reinforced through changes in the last 30 years: Salwa al-Khateeb argues that the oil boom in Saudi Arabia reinforced and exacerbated patriarchal structures, and Mandana Limbert’s ethnographic analysis argues that marriage strategies in Oman are reinforced by government measures.
This article examines the ‘Adwan revolt in Transjordan in 1923 and its memory in contemporary Jordan. Alon claims that some students want to emphasize their tribes’ role in the revolt and expand the narrative beyond simply the ‘Adwan tribe, while others want to play down their role in the revolt. Alon states that for the Balqa tribes, the revolt signified their inability to challenge the central government, but that the revolt did not eliminate tribal policies and culture but rather saw tribes stand firm in the wake of increasing British determination to tighten their grip on Transjordan.

Yoav Alon’s most recent book is based on the claim that tribal leaders in Jordan remain critical for the stability of the Hashemite kingdom and helped the monarchy survive the upheaval of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. This book traces the biography of Mithqal al-Fayiz, whose life and work as a shaykh are exemplary of the central role of tribal leaders in social, political, and cultural life in the second half of the twentieth century.

This article examines the relationship between British administrators and tribal shaykhs, arguing that the British government relied on Abdullah to cultivate relationships with the tribes rather than expanding their direct influence to the countryside. This allowed tribes to remain powerful and influential, challenging the authority and exposing the limits of British rule. British rule in Transjordan did not extend down to local tribal structures; tribes were willing to collaborate with the British only as long as their interests were furthered. Alon argues that the weakness of the British state in Transjordan actually made it the most successful statebuilding project in the Middle East.

In this article, Alon attempts to offer a historical explanation for the resilience of tribal structures in Transjordan during the mandate years of 1921-1946. After the collapse of Ottoman rule, nearly all of Transjordan was organized along tribal lines and the tribe formed the basic unit for the organization of social life. The balance of power between tribe and state shifted throughout the mandate years as Transjordan developed a central administration, strong borders, welfare systems, and tax collection. The tribal system survived, but it was markedly changed as tribes were integrated into the state. Alon argues that this integration of tribe and state is unique to Jordan and did not go as smoothly in other Middle Eastern nations.

In this article, Alon argues that, from the mid-nineteenth century on, Ottoman authorities in Syria integrated tribal leaders in the desert into their administrative structure, thereby giving formalizing authority among the sheikhs and creating more enduring hereditary lines of succession. Following the implementation of the Tanzimat reforms, close collaboration between sheikhs and Ottoman administrators helped link tribal structures to the state. This article argues against other research about Iraq, which argues that, as Ottoman administrators implemented reforms, the tribal authorities were subsequently weakened.


In *The Making of Jordan*, Alon argues that unlike the other countries of the Fertile Crescent, tribalism in Jordan has demonstrated an “impressive resilience.” The Hashemite Kingdom explicitly incorporated tribalism into the political order; the British imperial mandate leveraged tribal structures; and tribes became the partners of state founders and have become the building blocks of the modern state. In conversation with contemporaneous works on tribes, Alon emphasizes the compatibility rather than contradiction between state and tribe in Jordan, resulting in a distinct hybrid of modern statehood and tribal confederacy.


Richard Antoun’s article argues that scholars have long construed tribes in Jordan as institutions defined by moral values of honor, hospitality, independence, and group loyalty as well as the material culture associated with nomadism; this approach has obscured the instrumental process of conflict resolution within the local level, which Antoun claims is at the heart of civil society in Jordan. He proves that the consensual, ad hoc process of conflict resolutions is the basis of Jordanian civil society, which operates in a “seamless web” with state processes.


This article provides an overview of the sociopolitical structures of the Khawlān and Jumā’ah tribes, tracing their historical formation and expansion in the tenth century A.D. This article demonstrates that, though the Jumā’ah can trace its lineage back to one ancestor, the Khawlān was formed through a series of much looser mutual alliances; this demonstrates that claims to a “shared ancestry” are critical in uniting the Khawlān and
Jumā’ah under a shared umbrella of kinship, but that direct ancestral ties are not always necessary to demonstrate and enact kinship.


In *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, Brandt examines the period of 1962-2010, tracing the complex local history of northern Yemen and then specifically examining the Sa’da wars of 2004-10. She rejects the characterization of the Sa’da conflict as a sectarian one, but rather argues that tribes, tribal sheikhs, qadis, non-tribal peoples, and urban city dwellers all fought to recognize their own authority. Only later on in the conflict did many of these groups decide to join the Houthi movement, once it became a catchall for those groups who felt economically and politically marginalized. This framework complicates the understanding of the Yemeni civil wars as sectarian conflicts or proxy wars, while not downplaying the role of Saudi Arabia and other regional powers in the conflict.


Brandt’s article on the 1972 Bayhan massacre in North Yemen uses the example of the power struggle between the Khalwan al-Tiyal tribe and the republican government to demonstrates that the Yemeni central government relief heavily on systems of patronage and clientelism with tribal leaders, leaving the tribal system largely intact in North Yemen. However, this patron-client relationship was not without frictions, as demonstrated by the Khalwan al-Tiyal tribe's attempt to form an independent polity, resulting in the Bayhan massacre. She argues that the 1960s civil war in Yemen was not only a conflict between two political systems but also a struggle for tribal leadership.


This book is a revised edition of van Bruinessen’s doctoral dissertation, which was originally published in 1978. It describes the Kurds’ strong kinship ties, which van Bruinessen argues are sufficiently strong to encourage some social groups to act contrary to their own interests. He argues that the social structure of the Kurds has evolved from state to chieftdom to tribe, as local loyalties have increased in importance over regional and national identities.


This edited volume is based on papers presented during a conference on “Tribes and Jihad” hosted by the European University Institute in 2015. The volume begins by examining the geographical relationship between the headquarters of Islamic emirates pledging allegiance to terrorist organization and lands where tribes are the predominant form of sociopolitical organization, noting that terrorist strongholds are frequently located in
“tribal lands.” Subsequent chapters are case studies in specific relationships between tribe and jihadist organization. Virginie Collombier’s conclusion ultimately asserts that there is no characteristic of tribes that makes them more vulnerable to the influence of jihadism, but that jihadist groups have taken advantage of the breakdown of state power, socioeconomic transformation, and civil warfare in tribal lands to expand their influence.


Stephen Day’s *Regionalism and Rebellion* analyzes Yemen’s history of national identity throughout the second half of the twentieth century, arguing that regional divisions that were exacerbated by the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 were never truly reconciled. He argues that the president and his closest associates maintained power through patron-client relationships with regional elites and tribesmen, which strengthened regional identities at the expense of nationalism. Thus, Day concludes, the 2011 Arab Spring revolution was not a surprise, but a foregone conclusion after years of division.


*State and Tribe in Syria* explores the policies of successive Syrian governments towards Arab tribes, as well as tribal reactions to these policies, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire through the current Syrian civil war. Based on deep research and personal interviews, Dukhan’s book demonstrates that local patterns of community and tribal affiliation continue to play a major role in the state institutions and policies of the modern nation-state.


In this book, Dukhan asks the question: what is the nature of the relationship between the Syrian regime and Syrian tribal Sheikhs, and how has this relationship manifested itself in the current uprising? He argues that, as much as Hafez al-Assad relied on his relationship with the Alawite community to fill political and military positions, he also relied on connections of patronage and clientelism with loyal tribal sheikhs. In exchange for their loyalty and their ability to maintain order and stability in their regions, sheikhs would receive financial and military aid as well as political positions. This example demonstrates how the relationship between state and tribe continues to shift and flex, and stays relevant in the twentieth century.

Dukhan, Haian. “‘They Talk to Us but Never Listen to Us’: Development-Induced Displacement among Syria’s Bedouin.” *Nomadic Peoples*, 2014.

Dukhan’s article examines the series of changes faced by the Syrian Bedouin since the 1960s, including climactic and environmental changes, marginalization by the government, and a lack of influence on policy-making. Dukhan concludes that the Syrian government has
made conscious efforts to transform or settle the Bedouins, based on a desire for greater political control but couched in environmental justifications. Development projects in the desert have not helped the Bedouin, but rather have denied them their traditional pasture rights and decreased their available land use.


Fletcher’s book examines the careers of European colonial administrators in the Middle Eastern deserts during the interwar period, examining how they answered “The Tribal Question,” or how to best administer nomadic populations. Fletcher argues that considering “The Tribal Question” illuminates the British fascination with nomads and brings to light a large official and bureaucratic discourse on how best to preserve “modes of life” while still maintaining imperial control. This Eurocentric analysis provides a viewpoint into the imperial methods of managing and organizing tribes, which can be compared with the Middle Eastern perspectives to create a complete picture.


*The Notion of Tribe* attempts to understand what a tribe is, challenging the concept of a tribe as a highly discrete political unit in a pre-state society. Fried uses comparative ethnographic evidence to demonstrate that tribes are not closely bounded populations in terms of territory or demography. Rather, he argues that, with the development of a strong state, central governments organized populations into easily understandable sub-sections, creating tribes where before there was only a loose conception of kinship. This argument has been hotly debated by scholars, including Emanuel Marx, Philip Salzmann, and others.


Fatma Göçek, professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies, compiled *Social Constructions of Nationalism* by focusing on the themes that crosscut existing boundaries between states. The chapters in the volume are predominantly focused on the themes of nationalist narratives, gender, and cultural representation in facilitation a social conceptualization and imagination of national identity. The nationalist communities discussed in the volume span geographical and tribal boundaries, and the authors grapple with these boundaries in their respective treatments of social constructions of nationalism.


Peter Gubser’s case study about political development in Al-Karak (edited by Albert Hourani) examines the changes that modern communication, education, and state and local government institutions wrought upon tribal society. Gubser argues that the development
of an educated middle class tied more closely to the Amman regime than to tribal identities and values have facilitated closer interaction with the modern state. Gubser’s close examination of Al-Karak provides a valuable tactical example of changing tribal structures in Jordan.


In this book, Christopher Houston presents an examination of the historical interpretations of “those who consider themselves to be mis-recognized by the Turkish Republic” (3). He charts out the relationships between Islamist and Kurdish movements in Turkey, identifying a competition between secular Kurdish identity and the broad Islamist movement that is transcended by Kurdish Islamism, which does not view these identities as mutually exclusive. Houston responds to Umit Sakallìoãglu, who questions whether Islamism could be a force of unity between Kurdish and Turkish peoples, by claiming that Kurdish Islamism indeed sharpens the divide between Kurd and Turk by exacerbating nationalist consciousness. This short volume is an interesting examination of the competing forces of nationalism, secularism, and religious fundamentalism, in a hotly contested tribal land.


Australian anthropologist Christopher Houston has two main aims in this book: first, to illuminate some of the ways in which individuals, groups, and institutions have imagined Kurdistan and the Kurds since the development of the modern nation-state; and second, to focus on the nation-state (Turkey, Iran, and Iraq) and the policies, reforms, and strategies these states have leveraged in order to deal with the paradigm of the Kurds within their own Kemalist cultural revolutions. By focusing on the Kemalist era, Houston intends to illuminate the ways in which the Kurds have crafted their own nation within the context of centralizing nation-states.


Paul Jureidini and R.D. McLaurin’s addition to the “Washington Papers” series argues that the major tribes and confederations of Jordan formed the foundation on which the modern Jordanian government and military were built, focusing on the tribal foundations as legitimizing institutions for the Hashemite regime. This approach, emphasizing the strong ties between tribe and monarchy, is in many ways contradictory to Linda Layne, Richard Antoun, Andrew Shryock, and Sally Howell’s claims about the shifting and contingent relationships between the state and tribal structures.

This volume, edited by anthropologist Diane King, includes a collection of chapters that each discuss various ways of belonging in the Middle East. Chapters discuss how women came to be objectified as symbols of the nation in Iraq, how Palestinian fighters identified with the Palestinian Resistance Movement and Palestinian civilians created symbols of nationness, how honor killing is integrated into patrilineage, and how headscarves play into women’s sense of belonging and exclusion. The volume concludes with a historiographical review of books that discuss the importance and intensity of belonging within the social and political structures of the Middle East. While these chapters do not directly address tribes as a central theme, examining other forms of belonging in Middle Eastern society is integral to understanding the role of tribes in formulating civil society.


Diane King's *Kurdistan on the Global Stage* examines the importance of patrilineage in Iraqi Kurdistan during the rise of globalization in the 1990s, illuminating the contemporary relevance and interpretations of lineage structures in present-day Kurdistan. King argues that lineages remain critical means of forming community connections and gaining sociopolitical status, and that subsequently, identity claims based on ethnicity and religion remain relatively fixed and permanent.


This book, which began as a conference sponsored by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1987, includes the perspectives of historians, political scientists, and anthropologists. The anthropologists whose works are included in this volume discuss the concept of a tribe, implying that the tribe and state, once two separate institutions, are now in the process of coexistence and convergence. Historians included in this volume contribute a series of case studies examining the relationship between state and tribe in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Libya.


Linda Layne's *Home and Homeland* examines the notion of collective identity and the difficulty of defining terms like “Bedouin,” “tribe,” and “Jordanian,” relying on deep analysis of newspaper columns, the use of tribal imagery in monarchical communications, and individual case studies. Her detailed ethnography examines the contested and shifting relationship between tribal actors and the state, arguing that the regime alternatively relied upon or diminished tribal identities as a means of developing a Jordanian identity.

This article examines the juxtaposition between urban and rural in contemporary Oman, focusing on how a national census, a soap opera, and a school textbook present the urban and the rural. In this article, Limbert argues that the exclusion of the Bedouin the nostalgia for small towns in these representations reflect the nation-building projects of Oman. Limbert claims that national identity and values are placed specifically within the Interior region, while the more remote desert and mountain regions (and their tribes) have effectively been erased, as Oman attempts to generate a specific form of national identity.


Joseph Massad’s study specifically examines the role of institutions (law, military, and discipline) in the production of national identity in Jordan. He ultimately concludes that law and the military were central in consolidating and homogenizing the varied geographic, ethnic, and religious groups inhabiting the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, identifying and producing a nation.


Responding in part to Fried’s survey of the tribe, Marx argues that the tribe is typically treated in academic literature as a cultural and linguistic unit, or a political unit, or both. Marx proposes an additional dimension of the tribe as a unit of subsistence – both a defined “territory” controlled by the tribesmen, and the additional areas used for subsistence. Based on a comparative study of pastoral nomads, he proposes an additional definition for a tribe: “a social aggregate of pastoral nomads who jointly exploit an area providing subsistence over numerous seasons.” (358)


Emanuel Marx’s chapter in Society and Political Structure in the Arab World attempts to generalize about some of the factors that influence the size of territorial and political nomadic units, arguing that the picture of the tribe as a segmentary political organization is insufficient to understand the function and organization of tribes in the Middle East. Marx claims that viewing the tribe as a centralized, stagnant sociopolitical unit minimizes the personal connections and interdependent relationships that exist between members of the tribe across vast swaths of territory.


Mundy’s analysis focuses on a community on the San’ā’ plateau, examining the role of the family and the community in the wider social and legal order of the state, and within the rural political traditions of Northern Yemen. She examines law, property ownership, social
cooperation, and family bonds to bring to light several distinct contrasts: in particular, the distinction between tribal boundaries and administrative units for the central government and the transition from a local agricultural economy to a national oil economy. She argues that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the state worked closely with tribal structures to transition local identities into regional administrative units, but that in the 1990s, these mechanisms were less central to the national political process.


Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam's edited volume includes chapters on the transformation from pastoral nomadism to central administration of the modern nation-state throughout the twentieth century. John Wilkinson’s chapter discusses specifically the principles and arguments used by European powers post-World War I to gain control over tribal lands throughout the Middle East, and Ugo Fabietti examines the contradiction between Saudi rulers’ boundary negotiations that focused on tribal borders and the subsequent limitation of tribal rights. Similarly, Tariq Tall explores relationships between government policies that privileged the authority of Bedouin tribes, and the lack of government support for the local economies of the tribes. Altogether, these chapters demonstrate the comparative similarities and differences in the negotiations between state power and tribal society during the twentieth-century Middle East.


Rogan and Tell’s edited volume argues that there was great continuity in Jordan’s infrastructure, landholding, and modes of production during the transition from Ottoman rule to the modern nation-state, in contradiction to many historical accounts that describe the period between Ottoman and Hashemite rule as one of great fracture and disruption. Each of the essays included in the book emphasize the remarkable similarities in Jordanian society throughout the tumultuous political period. Many of the chapters included in this volume reference the relationships between tribal societies and the government during this period of change.


In a response to Emmanuel Marx’s “The Tribe as a Unit of Subsistence,” Philip Salzman argues that the idea that people will organize together based on a need to control a certain territory is a functionalist fallacy. Rather, Salzman argues that some tribes control their area of subsistence and others do not; therefore, there is no natural close fit between tribe and control over subsistence area, as Marx claims.

In this article, Schmitz argues that contemporary economic and political globalization relies on interaction at the national level, leaving Yemen with “old” forms of economic integration into world markets. However, regional politics have created an opportunity for the Yemeni political elite to express Yemen as a strategic political player.


This article examines tribespeople of the ‘Abbad and the ‘Adwan tribes (members of the Balga confederation), whose tribal structures were incorporated into “Bedouin Suburbs” through the rapid expansion of Amman. Shryock bases his analysis on his fieldwork in these suburbs, arguing that land ownership was largely individual among the Balga even before the expansion of Amman, but that the state has nonetheless radically altered power and property ownership in the Balga. He ultimately concludes that, though Amman’s tribes are thoroughly modern, they have maintained a community identity and a political ethos that is uniquely Balga in nature.


Shryock’s ethnography of Balga tribesmen in Jordan begins with accounts of tribal elders, and ends with the historiography of Balga tribesmen who themselves became historians and anthropologists of their own society, ultimately concluding through his detailed research into Bedouin oral tradition that genealogical and nationalist images of community have encouraged tribesmen to view the modern state through a familiar, patriarchal lens. Shryock also questions whether or not oral tribal histories can possibly become historiography; he catalogs other ethnographers’ successes and failures in capturing the oral traditions of the Balga, ultimately concluding that the historical discourse is a structure of power and pervasive inequality.


In this article, Shryock and Sally Howell argue that the predominant literature about Jordan has emphasized the familial structure of the Hashemite Kingdom; they seek to destabilize conceptions of “modern” politics and explore the ways in which metropolitan political science institutions in Jordan are manifested through intimate encounters such as gift exchange, insults, marriage, friendship, and feuds. Their analysis blends the “high and low” registers of political and personal interaction that characterize the “house politics” of Jordan.

This essay examines the question of kinship as a category of analysis in history; Trautmann, Feeley-Harnik, and Mitani attempt to define the terms “kinship” and “history” with a historiographical review of the terms and their usage in anthropology, biology, and sociology. The authors eventually conclude that a new concept of kinship might include human relationships with other species and with environments, which would provide a “more expansive ecology” of kinship. This essay is a comprehensive foundational historiography of a term that is often used with regards to tribes, and therefore useful in the examination of how Middle Eastern tribal structures have been studied and written about throughout history.


*Tribe and Kinship among the Kurds* is based on Yalçın-Heckmann’s fieldwork in Hakkari, and specifically examines the relationships between Kurdish identity, tribal organization, and the Turkish state. Yalçın-Heckmann demonstrates in great detail the interactions between tribal structures and agents of the state, as well as the State’s perceptions of tribal vs. ethnic identity.