

The Yemeni Tribe and War:

Transformations of the Tribal Role under Houthi Control

An Analytical Study of Tribal Structure, Political Instrumentalization,
Mediation, and Repositioning

Special File

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Table of Content

□	General Introduction: Executive Summary and Methodology.....	3
□	Chapter One: The Yemeni Tribe: Structure and Organization	8
□	Chapter Two: Tribalism as a Political Reference Framework.....	11
□	Chapter Three: The Tribe, the State, and Conflict Management.....	14
□	Chapter Four: The Tribe, Mediation, and Peacebuilding.....	18
□	Chapter Five: The Tribe in Confronting the Houthis.....	21
□	Chapter Six: The Deferred Battle between the Tribes and the Houthis.....	24
□	Chapter Seven: Future Scenarios.....	29
□	Conclusion: Findings and Recommendations.....	31

Executive Summary

This study examines the transformations in the role of the Yemeni tribe during the war and under the control of the Houthi group over large areas of northern and western Yemen. It proceeds from a central assumption: the tribe has not lost its presence, but it has been subjected to coercive reshaping that has turned it, in some areas, into a depleted actor in the war and, while other areas continues to be an influential local mediator capable of reducing violence and resolving disputes.

The analysis included in this file reviews the structure of the Yemeni tribe and traces the evolution of its relationship with the state. They show how the tribe has remained present in Yemeni politics, whether by supporting the state, competing with it, or replacing it when the state weakens. The study also examines the involvement of tribes in different stages of conflict, from the republican–imamate struggle, through the Saada wars, to the period that followed the Houthis' takeover of Sana'a in 2014.

The study also focuses in particular on the Houthi relationship with the tribes. It argues that this relationship has shifted from co-optation and alliance to subjugation and direct control through policies that include the supervisor system, the marginalization of traditional sheikhs, recruitment, levies, and the deployment of religious and nationalist discourse.

The study concludes that the Houthis have achieved tactical success in mobilizing tribes and silencing part of the tribal opposition. Yet this success remains fragile because of accumulating social and economic fractures, continued human losses, and declining trust between the tribal communities and leaders linked to the group. By contrast, the tribe remains capable of playing an important role in mediation and peacebuilding, especially in local disputes and humanitarian issues, provided this role is supported and linked to the state project rather than the competing agendas of armed non-state groups.

Keywords: Yemeni tribe; conflict; Houthis; tribal custom; mediation; peacebuilding.

Introduction

The Yemeni tribe is one of the country's oldest and most influential social and political structures in playing a central role in shaping public life. It is not merely a kinship-based social structure or a local social unit. Across different historical stages, it has remained a political, security, judicial, and mediating actor in conflict management and dispute resolution, particularly during periods when the state weakens or loses the ability to manage society.

The Yemeni tribe has derived its presence from its ability to adapt to political and social transformations and from its possession of customary and organizational systems that enabled it to manage its internal affairs, protect its interests, and intervene at moments of conflict or settlement. For this reason, the relationship between the tribe and the State in Yemen has remained complex, moving between integration and competition, and between support and confrontation, depending on the nature of the ruling authority, the balance of power, and the interests of local actors.

With the outbreak of the current war and the Houthi takeover of capital city Sana'a and large areas of northern Yemen, the tribe entered a new phase of transformation. Its traditional structure came under broad pressure, including human depletion, the decline of the authority of traditional sheikhs, the rise of the Houthi supervisor system, and the use of religious discourse for mobilization and recruitment fighters. At the same time, the tribe preserved part of its social presence, especially in local mediation, dispute settlement, prisoner exchanges, and the mitigation of some effects of war on local communities.

This study therefore seeks to analyze the transformations that have affected the role of the Yemeni tribe during conflict and peace; to analyze the tribe's relationship with relation to the State, the Houthi group, and local society; and to anticipate the possibilities for its future role in repositioning or peacebuilding.

The study approaches the Yemeni tribe not as a remnant of a traditional structure and not as a fixed actor in the war, but as a social and political structure whose role has been reshaped under the pressures of war, State retreat, and the rise of the Houthi group. It argues that the most important transformation is not the decline or disappearance of the tribe, but its shift from an actor with a margin of initiative and mediation into a field of competition, subjugation, and attrition, while retaining an underlying ability to reposition itself whenever the balance of power changes and political and security guarantees become available.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study stems from the fact that the tribe remains one of the principal analytical lenses through which the Yemeni conflict can be understood: as a deep social structure, as a local actor in war and mediation, and as a field over which the state and armed groups compete. The study is also important because it does not treat the tribe as a rigid bloc, but as a changing structure affected by war, the economy, religious discourse, and regional transformations.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to:

- Analyze the structure of the Yemeni tribe and the historical and social sources of its strength.
- Explain transformations in the tribe's relationship with the State and the Houthi group.
- Understand the tools used by the Houthis to subjugate the tribe and redeploy it politically and militarily.
- Assess the tribe's potential to contribute to mediation and peacebuilding under current conflict conditions.
- Anticipate future scenarios for the relationship between tribes and the Houthis.

Research Problem

The study's central problem is expressed in the following question: How have the war, Houthi control, and the retreat of state institutions reshaped the roles of the Yemeni tribe between involvement in conflict, mediation for peacebuilding, and possible future repositioning?

Sub-questions

- What is the nature of the Yemeni tribal structure and the sources of its strength?
- How did the tribe shift from a relatively independent actor into a depleted actor in the war?
- What tools have the Houthis used to subjugate and redeploy Yemeni tribe?
- To what extent can the Yemeni tribe play a role in mediation and peacebuilding?
- What future scenarios are likely for the relationship between the Yemeni tribe and the Houthis?

Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes that the Yemeni tribe has not lost its role in the current war, but it has undergone a deep transformation in the nature of that role. From a relatively autonomous social and political actor capable of mediation, it has increasingly become an arena of contestation, coercion, and gradual erosion in Houthi-controlled areas, while retaining the latent ability to reassert its role in peacebuilding if the balance of power changes and political and security guarantees are provided.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive analytical method drawing on the relevant literature, previous studies, analysis of the political and social context, and case evidence of tribal engagement with both the state and the Houthis across different phases of the conflict. The analysis is further informed by three complementary analytical approaches:

- Historical approach: to understand the evolution of the relationship between tribe and state in Yemen and transformations in the tribal role from the establishment of the republican state to the current war.
- Political-sociological approach: to analyze tribal roles in conflict, mediation, and peacebuilding and to understand the relationship between the tribal structure and local balances of power.
- Foresight approach: to estimate the possibilities of tribal action or repositioning in light of current variables, especially ongoing economic and social pressures and the changing nature of relations between the Houthis and the Yemeni tribes.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on the Yemeni tribe as a social and political actor in pathways of conflict and peace, with special attention to northern and western Yemen, which are under Houthi control and have witnessed deep transformations in the relationship between the tribe, authority, and the armed group. Temporally, the study covers multiple stages: the evolution of the tribe–state relationship in republican Yemen; the Saada wars; the period after the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014; and the tribal uprisings of 2026.

Operational Concepts

- Tribe: a social structure based on kinship, place, and custom, with internal mechanisms for regulation, solidarity, and mediation.
- Tribal custom: a system of mostly unwritten rules and traditions that regulates relations, disputes, guarantees, and reconciliation within tribal society and between tribes.
- Tribal mediation: the intervention of socially respected tribal figures to bring viewpoints closer, stop disputes, and guarantee the implementation of agreements according to custom.
- Repositioning: the shift of a tribe or some of its figures from one political or military position to another based on changes in the balance of power, interests, and guarantees.
- Subjugation: a set of security, military, economic, and symbolic policies aimed at reducing the autonomy of tribal decision-making and tying it to the authority of the armed group.

Content of the Study

This study addresses the Yemeni tribe as an influential social and political structure in the trajectories of conflict and peace in Yemen. It focuses on the structure of the tribe, the transformation of its roles since the establishment of the republican state, its involvement in political and military conflicts, and its complex relationship with the Houthi group.

The study argues that the Yemeni tribe still retains a degree of cohesion and social legitimacy, but during the current war it has been subjected to processes of attrition, fragmentation, and coercive redeployment, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas. It also highlights the tribe's ability to mediate and contribute to peacebuilding in local and humanitarian issues, while stressing that any broad tribal role against the Houthis remains contingent upon a change in the balance of power, political and military support, and guarantees protecting tribes from retaliation.

The study also examines the stages of tribal involvement in the current war, whether through support for the internationally recognized government and its military formations or through the participation of some tribal members in fighting with Houthi militias before and after the fall of Sana'a to the Houthi coup in late 2014. It also examines the possibility of a general tribal movement against the Houthis, considering local and regional factors that may support such movement while acknowledging the challenges that may prevent it, based on previous isolated tribal actions that the Houthis managed to suppress.

What Is New in This Study?

This study offers a composite reading of the transformations of the Yemeni tribe during the war. It does not reduce the tribe to a traditional structure or a source of fighters. Its main contribution lies in three levels: first, analyzing the shift in the Houthi relationship with tribes from co-optation and alliance to direct control through supervisors, recruitment, and levies; second, highlighting the persistence of the Yemeni tribe as a local actor in humanitarian mediation and dispute settlement despite the decline of its political role; and third, identifying indicators of tribal resistance to Houthi rule.

Chapter One: The Yemeni Tribe: Structure and Organization

Introduction

The Yemeni tribe is one of the oldest social and political structures in Yemen. It has never been merely a lineage or kinship bond; rather, it has functioned as a broad framework for social, political, economic, and cultural relations that took shape over history. Tribal members are bound by blood ties, place, custom, and common interest, making the tribe a cohesive social unit, a political unit capable of representing its members, and an economic unit that shares land and resources and protects common interests.

The tribe gained its importance from its ability to perform multiple roles in society, particularly when state authority weakens or loses the ability to manage the local sphere. In such circumstances, the tribe performed functions of protection, regulation, mediation, dispute settlement, and the organization of relations among its members and with other tribes, relying on a system of customs, traditions, and internal hierarchies.

Understanding the structure of the Yemeni tribe is therefore a basic entry point for understanding its presence in politics, conflict, and peace. The tribe has not been a static structure isolated from state transformations; it has been a dynamic entity that rearranges its roles according to balances of power, local social needs, and the nature of the ruling authority.

The Tribal Unit

The tribe is a historical, political, cultural, and social phenomenon known to Yemen throughout its long history. It is composed of individuals connected by lineage and family kinship, united by common historical, cultural, and religious bonds, inhabiting a defined territory as a political unit and using its natural resources jointly as an economic unit. These elements have played a major role in preserving the kinship and political unity of the tribe and have made the Yemeni tribe an integrated and relatively independent political, social, and economic unit.

Yemen has four main tribal confederations: Hamdan, Himyar, Kinda, and Madhhij, in addition to other scattered tribal groupings. Some tribes extend beyond Yemen's borders, reflecting old migrations from Yemen for different reasons. Hamdan includes the two major northern confederations of Hashid and Bakil. Madhhij includes Ans, Murad, al-Nakha'in, al-Hada, and others, extending from central Yemen to several southern and eastern areas. Himyar includes tribes inhabiting the central plateau and the southern and western mountain areas, while Kinda includes tribes of Hadramawt and al-Mahra in the east. This broad classification has continued, although it has seen changes such as the incorporation of some tribes into Hashid and others into Bakil.²

Researchers classify the levels of the Yemeni tribal structure as follows: tribal confederation or grouping, tribe, clan, and house. In everyday usage, however, the term "tribe" may refer to a confederation, a tribe, or a clan without distinction. Thus, one may say "the Hashid tribe" while referring to all Hashid tribes. When compared with administrative divisions, a tribal confederation extends across several governorates, a tribe may extend across one district or several districts, more than one tribe may share one district, a clan often corresponds to a subdistrict or local area, and a "house" corresponds to the village. Hence, some Yemeni villages are called "Bayt," indicating both a spatial-administrative and a kinship bond.³

Yemen has experienced political, social, and economic instability except during limited historical periods. This pushed the tribe to perform the role of the State according to a near-constant equation in Yemeni history: when the state weakens, the tribe appears, assuming political, economic, social, and cultural functions that the State would otherwise perform.

Organization of the Yemeni Tribe

The Yemeni tribe possesses tribal rules, customs, and internal regulations that qualify it to manage itself. These customs have helped resolve many disputes, including blood feuds and other conflicts within a single tribe or between tribes. Kinship ties have made the Yemeni tribe a cohesive social unit represented by a recognized tribal figure who speaks for it internally and in relations with other tribes, helping it maintain cohesion even under the most difficult circumstances.

Authority in tribal society follows a hierarchy that parallels tribal organization. In Hashid, the highest tribal authority is the sheikh of sheikhs, followed by guarantor sheikhs, then sheikhs, then local notables and trustees. In Bakil, there is also a sheikh of sheikhs, followed by captains, sheikhs, local notables, and trustees. In Hadramawt, each tribe is headed by a muqaddam.

The sheikh of sheikhs and the guarantor sheikhs in Hashid represent the political authority of the tribe, or what Islamic jurisprudence calls the “people of authority and consultation.” They are authorized by their tribes to conclude treaties, agreements, and alliances with the state and other tribes, and they represent their tribes before the state and other tribes.⁴

Since the September 1962 Revolution, the tribe and the State have moved beyond the historical condition of rupture and hostility created by various factors. Their relationship has fluctuated between tension and cooperation, but at certain moments it reached forms of interaction and collaboration.

Chapter One Summary

The structure of the Yemeni tribe reveals that the tribe has never been merely a lineage bond or local social formation. It has been a political, social, and customary framework that contributed to the management of the public sphere, especially during periods when the State weakened or lost the ability to regulate society. The tribe relies on customs, hierarchies, and social symbols that granted it the ability to manage disputes, protect interests, and represent local communities. This background explains the continued presence of the tribe not as a rigid traditional force but as a dynamic structure affected by balances of power and capable of repositioning itself according to circumstances.

Chapter Two: Tribalism as a Political Reference Framework

Introduction

The first chapter addressed the Yemeni tribe in terms of its structure, Organization, and social-geographical levels. This chapter moves to another level of analysis: the presence of tribalism as a political reference framework that has affected the structure of the State, the nature of authority, and the behavior of parties, elites, and society. In Yemen, the tribe did not remain confined to the social sphere. Its values, customs, and patterns of loyalty extended into the political sphere, making it difficult to understand the modern Yemeni State apart from the tribal structure that surrounded and interwove with it.

This chapter is important because it helps explain subsequent transformations in the relationship between the tribe, the state, and the Houthis. The Houthis inherited a political order in which tribal structures formed an integral part of governance, authority, and alliance-building. Understanding tribalism as a political reference framework is therefore necessary to understand how the tribe was instrumentalized, weakened, and reshaped in the current war.

The Tribe and Politics

Tribalism remains, as some researchers argue, a general political mentality and a governing reference for politics. It has reflected itself in all forms of political relations and institutions. Tribal values and customary norms remain deeply embedded in Yemen's political culture. The State, authority, and their relationship with the population remain governed by tribal arrangements, while tribal solidarities and loyalties remain present in many details. This presence has produced a form of political tribalism.⁵

The Orientalist Piotrovsky argues that Yemen's social and cultural structure continues to emanate from the special position of tribes, in which a deeply rooted tribal lifestyle predominates as a result of the success and dominance of the values and traditions of nomadic tribes over sedentary populations.⁶ Political turbulence and the politicization of the tribe gave life in Yemen a warlike character. Since the strong impose their culture, and the defeated tend to imitate the victorious, as Ibn Khaldun observed, this warlike social pattern centered on the tribe became a model for emulation.

Because politics ultimately reflects the active social actors and their culture, tribal social organization, the strength of the tribe, and its politicization inevitably gave political life a tribal character. The population's relationship with politics and states continued to be mediated through primordial solidarities of tribe, sect, and region. In their interaction with politics and its institutions, people often displayed attitudes, visions, and philosophies of a solidaristic character.⁷

The tribal mentality was also evident in democratic practices and activities in Yemen over the past three decades. The result was a form of democracy largely stripped of its substantive content, sometimes described as "tribal democracy" or, in Ghassan Khaled's term, "Bedoucracy."⁸ Tribal sheikhs dominated parliamentary councils in northern Yemen and then in the unified state, and this dominance was even clearer in the elected local administration system.⁹

During this period, tribal solidarity manifested itself strikingly. Party competition often became competition between tribal elites, especially sheikhs, over political activity. Expressions such as "the party of the tribe" and "the tribe of the party" emerged sarcastically. In addition to entire tribes supporting a particular party, many members of some parties came disproportionately from specific areas. The tribe became similar to a party and an interest group, and for ambitious individuals it became a parallel option to party affiliation.¹⁰

Paradoxically, political party competition became, to a considerable extent, an extension of tribal solidarity, reinforcing tribal loyalties rather than weakening them. It should be noted, however, that the expressions of clan solidarity observed during elections do not necessarily reflect a deeply rooted tribal identity or a lasting commitment to tribal unity. It is, above all, a mechanism for accessing benefits, and may be considered closer to a popular ideology.¹¹

Tribal Sheikhs in Political Positions

Over past decades, important political bodies were occupied by tribal sheikhs in their ability as such, including the Defense Council at the beginning of the republican era in the north. Tribal sheikhs also had quasi-official institutions such as the Higher Council of Sheikhs and sheikhs' councils in the governorates.¹²

The Presidency Council in the north in 1963 included thirteen tribal sheikhs. The state continued to behave like a tribe in managing its affairs and organizing its relationship with individuals.¹³ Politics in general continued to resort to and borrow tribal customs and traditions. From at least the seventh century until the establishment of the republican system, states did not apply general laws consistently across their territories; public affairs were managed by the general customs prevailing in tribal society.

In recent decades, many of these customs were incorporated into the legislative structure, and the law granted tribal sheikhs and local notables judicial-policing authority. This historical condition helps explain why tribal custom still enjoys legal and social regulatory authority greater than that of formal laws, and why customary adjudication remains preferred by many Yemenis.¹⁴

Politicians and regimes found in the concept of solidarity a useful tool. They frequently relied on tribal and regional networks or bases. Rulers and governing elites continued to manage and control the country through family, clan, and broader tribal ties. This was clear under former President Saleh, was observable after him, and is even clearer under Houthi authority. Even in cases where tribal culture seemed to have weakened and tribes seemed to have lost cohesion and political role, as in the south before unity, conflicts proved capable of reversing that picture.

Traditional systems and concepts do not disappear; they evolve and reappear in more modern forms. Politics, while relying on traditional solidarities, also came to depend on imagined or virtual solidarities. The ruling class appeared as a new tribe whose dynamics do not differ greatly from the traditional tribe. Political and bureaucratic elites emerged as groups and as political-bureaucratic "tribes."¹⁵ In recent decades, a parallel system evolved in which formal state institutions and informal tribal networks became increasingly intertwined, giving rise to what is often described as a patronage-based system. This system reached the point where patterns of rule and administration acquired hereditary features, with political and administrative posts, including parliamentary and local authority positions, passed to relatives.¹⁶

Chapter Two Summary

This chapter examined the presence of tribalism as a foundational framework of political authority in Yemen. The tribe did not remain merely a social structure; it became a political mentality that affects the state, parties, elections, and administration. Yemeni politics borrowed many tribal customs and values of solidarity and loyalty, to the point that formal and party institutions sometimes operate according to tribal or regional logic. The chapter concludes that tribalism did not disappear with the modern state; rather, it reproduced itself within the political system through tribal sheikhs, patronage networks, inherited influence, and the transformation of governing and bureaucratic elites into something resembling new "political tribes."

Chapter Three: The Tribe, the State, and Conflict Management

Introduction

After examining tribalism as a political reference framework, this chapter analyzes the relationship between the tribe and the state in the context of conflict management. The tribe in Yemen has remained an influential local actor whose role sometimes overlaps with the state and at other times competes with or replaces it, especially when central authority weakens or conflicts expand.

The Yemeni tribe is one of the unofficial local actors and has a strong presence in its areas. Because of the cohesion of its internal structure during wars, it has been able to protect its members and social fabric from disintegration. Tribes are an essential element of the social fabric and are therefore important for understanding different levels of conflict in the country. They have often been misunderstood, and the term “tribe” has sometimes been used in ahistorical ways that ignore the changes that have occurred over decades within tribes and in their relations with others.¹⁷ Some scholars regard tribes as a key to Yemeni politics and central to the stability of the Yemeni State.¹⁸ This does not mean, however, that tribes did not become involved in political and military conflicts among Yemeni forces. Like other Yemeni components, they had political ambitions, although initially they could not change the rule of the Hamid al-Din family; the 1948 attempt to overthrow the imamate failed in part because many tribes aligned with the imamate.¹⁹

Tribal Support for the State

When the Yemeni revolution against the imamate began in September 1962, the Yemeni tribe became directly involved in the military struggle and split into two camps. One supported the republican current. Prominent tribal figures who supported the republican system included Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, leader of Hashid; Sheikh Mujahid Abu Shawarib, leader of Kharif, one of the Hashid tribes; Sheikh Sinan Abu Luhum, one of the most prominent Bakil sheikhs; and others. Tribal involvement in that conflict tipped the balance politically and militarily in favor of the republican current because of the social and political weight represented by the tribe.

When the conflict erupted between the leftist current coming from the south and the central regime in Sana'a, the tribe stood with the political system to confront that advance in what was then called the Central Regions wars in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After the unification of northern and southern Yemen in May 1990, the tribe stood with the state of unity.²⁰ It also stood with the state when the conflict between the Houthi group and the Yemeni government erupted between 2004 and 2010. These positions indicate that the tribe supported the state as long as its political interests were not harmed.

The tribe tends to become a partner and supporter of the state when state authority is strong and protects its interests.²¹ But it seeks to become an alternative to the state in protecting when it believes that the state is no longer capable of protecting tribal interests. Across previous conflicts, the tribe maintained its cohesion for political, economic, and social reasons, including tribal participation in power, their role in internal conflicts alongside foreign assistance, and the strength of customs, traditions, and tribal solidarity.²²

The succession of republican regimes since the revolution and the establishment of the national state clearly shows that the tribe was an integral part of political conflict. Its presence in politics did not necessarily mean moral support for the party controlling authority; it often meant helping the authority bring tribal areas under state rule in exchange for privileges and political gains. At times, tribes joined the central authority against rebellions. In Houthi-controlled tribal areas, however, the role of some tribal figures has gone beyond bringing tribal areas under Houthi authority; they have become tools for mobilizing tribal members to fight alongside the Houthis, leading to human and material depletion of the tribes.

Tribal Involvement in Conflicts

The tribe's involvement in the ongoing conflict can be divided into three stages.

Stage One: 2004-2010

Many tribal members joined the Yemeni army to confront the Houthi group in its stronghold in Marran, Saada governorate. At the time, the state opened camps for tribes and recruited them in a popular manner. Some observers considered this a mistake because the Yemeni army could have dealt with the rebellion without involving tribal members, especially as the outcome was counterproductive for some tribes. The Houthi militia itself exploited the tribal factor to expand and target its opponents across governorates.

Stage Two: 2011-2014

During the Houthi advance into tribal areas, tribes split between supporters and opponents of the group. This reflected the political division in Sana'a between the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh and opposition parties, especially the Islah Party. Some tribal figures aligned with Saleh joined the Houthis to settle scores with the al-Ahmar family and Islah. Tribal forces close to Islah confronted the Houthis but were eventually defeated. Many tribes also confronted the Houthis not from a political perspective, but in defense of themselves and their lands.

Stage Three: 2014-2022

After 2014, the Houthi militia worked to attract tribes into the military conflict within its camp through several means:

- Politicizing tribal customs to mobilize tribes for fighting.
- Promoting the narrative that the group was fighting corruption and resisting foreign invasion through a media machine that operated before the military fall of Sana'a in late 2014 and after it.
- Exploiting tribal poverty and need. Many tribal members joined the Houthi ranks to obtain money, weapons, or other gains, while others became compelled to do so under threats of abduction and property confiscation if they refused the group's orders.²³
- Using religious discourse and force in tribal areas, which weakened the level of tribal loyalty and pushed the tribe into a stage of fragility.²⁴

On the religious side, the group sought to present Abdul-Malik al-Houthi as a sacred leader representing the Ahl al-Bayt. In Houthi doctrine, social and political authority revolves around the Hashemites, currently represented by the Houthi leader and his family. He has the final word in all matters, and obedience to him is presented as a religious obligation for the group's members.²⁵

The group also used slogans with tribal and emotional appeal, such as its well-known cry: "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse on the Jews, victory to Islam." It exploited the religiosity of tribal members by reviving religious occasions that suggest Yemen's rule is valid only for the Ahl al-Bayt, including Eid al-Ghadir. Politically, the Houthis marginalized traditional tribal symbols and replaced them with loyal tribal personalities.

The participation of some tribal members in the conflict fragmented the tribe's internal fabric, depleted its members, and reduced it to a marginal faction under Houthi control of the levers of authority. Even the sheikhs appointed by the group are often merely tribal façades, some ideologically indoctrinated and more concerned with serving the group's doctrinal orientation than with serving tribal custom.

Despite the decline of the tribal role because of Houthi control and doctrinal discourse in many northern tribal areas, this does not mean that the role of tribal leaders has disappeared. The tribe remains largely cohesive. Recent tribal positions, such as the al-Rayyan nakf in the Jawf desert in 2026 and the mobilization of Qayfa tribes after the Khabza incident in al-Bayda in 2022, show that the tribe has not fully surrendered to Houthi authority and that tribal custom can still mobilize solidarity networks when an assault affects dignity, protection, or social standing.

The expansion of the group's grip through security structures and ideological supervisors does not mean tribal submission to absolute rule. Tribal customs remain a firm basis in many tribal areas. The tribe still retains a measure of cohesion, which makes it unlikely to be completely absorbed into the Houthi doctrinal project over the long term.

The tribe has historically aligned in wars according to political interests. The larger tribal confederations, in particular, have historically negotiated the terms of their participation before entering alliances, seeking arrangements that safeguard their interests while preserving relations with other tribes.²⁶ Whatever the tribe's involvement in armed violence, material need, illiteracy, and continued Houthi dissemination of violent ideas through religious centers remain among the main reasons why some tribal members join the conflict.

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter showed that the tribe has been an essential part of Yemen's social and political fabric and that its presence in conflicts was not accidental but linked to a long history of relations with the state, authority, and society. Tribes were involved in different stages of the Yemeni conflict, sometimes alongside the state and sometimes in defense of their interests and areas. The current war, however, has caused a deep shift in the tribe's position: in many areas it is no longer an independent actor with a margin of initiative, but a field of attrition, mobilization, and military instrumentalization. Still, the persistence of tribal customs, social ties, and the historical memory of resistance and mediation prevents the tribe from being reduced to a single image: neither a permanent ally of authority nor a complete subordinate to armed groups.

Chapter Four: The Yemeni Tribe, Mediation, and Peacebuilding

Introduction

Just as the tribe becomes involved in conflicts to defend its interests, it sometimes undertakes mediation to end wars, protect itself from attrition, and avert danger. Tribes traditionally organized their own affairs, both individually and collectively, with minimal state intervention.²⁷ The authority of tribal sheikhs at their different levels is consensual rather than coercive. From this standpoint, mediation is used in tribal custom to settle disputes by consent.

Neutrality is one of the most important principles that must be respected when a mediator works to resolve disputes, because neutrality helps ensure the success and effectiveness of mediation. This is a characteristic enjoyed by tribal figures who work in mediation.²⁸ Throughout the history of tribal conflict, and even military conflict between tribes and the state or between Yemeni political parties, especially since the formation of the national state, tribal mediation has been present in many pending files and has succeeded in resolving many disputes.

Tribal Mediation

Although tribes became involved in political and military conflicts, they also worked to bring viewpoints closer among political rivals. During the Taif Conference in 1965 between royalists and republicans, tribal leaders played a significant role in bringing positions closer and stopping the war. The conference approved the end of the imamate and national reconciliation.

This demonstrates that the tribe can mediate between parties even when it has been involved in the conflict. It contributed positively to reconciliation, and these events showed that tribal mediation can succeed when given the opportunity. Tribal figures, led by Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar and a number of senior sheikhs, also contributed to major political and social transformations, including the preparation and implementation of the November 5, 1967 movement, which saved the September Revolution from collapse and opened the way to peace and national reconciliation.²⁹

Since the beginning of this century, the tribe has mediated many times between the state and the Houthi group. These efforts did not achieve lasting success because the Houthis sought to impose their political project by military force. Sheikh Hussein al-Ahmar led some mediations between the government and the Houthis and between the Houthis and the Salafis in Dammaj. These efforts temporarily stopped violence, but the Houthis often used mediation to rearrange their ranks and then attack tribal areas. The state also formed tribal committees to mediate between the Houthis and tribes, as occurred in Adhar and al-Usaymat in 2013.³⁰

These mediations occurred during the National Dialogue Conference, when political parties were debating the form of the state, the transitional process, and other issues. The results were usually temporary pauses in violence followed by renewed conflict, because the state lacked a clear strategy for dealing decisively with the Houthi group when mediation failed.

The key point is that the tribe—sometimes at the state's request—tried to defuse crises to prevent the collapse of the state and the destruction of areas affected by conflict. Yet mediation between the tribe, the Houthi group, and the state differed fundamentally from previous mediations between tribes and the state or among political parties. The chances of progress were limited because of the Houthis' ideological-sectarian project and their insistence on implementing their objectives as part of a strategy to seize power. They saw the tribes not as mediators for peace but as instruments to help implement their project. Therefore, tribal mediation could not stop the conflict at its roots.

Despite the Houthis' tight control over northern Yemen, tribes in different Yemeni governorates played roles during the war that helped reduce and settle internal fighting, prevent escalation, and spare some areas from becoming conflict zones.³¹ However, the Houthis frequently failed to honor these agreements, asserting their authority as the de facto governing power and reserving the right to revoke arrangements they considered incompatible with their interests.³²

Factors Supporting Tribal Mediation

- The tribe's longstanding social and historical tradition of mediation. Tribal custom relies on resolving disputes through mediation, and many blood feuds and land conflicts have been resolved this way over past decades.
- The trust accumulated from previous tribal mediation. Local communities often view tribal mediation positively because it provides quick, simple, low-cost, confidential, and socially reconciliatory dispute settlement with effective guarantees of implementation.³³
- The tribe's success in resolving many problems that arose between the state and tribes through mediation.
- The strength of tribal custom in respecting covenants and agreements, which are difficult to break under custom, whereas political agreements may be violated when interests change.
- The social standing of tribal figures, which makes their role in mediation widely accepted. The tribe can build on success in humanitarian and local files as a basis for mediation in broader political issues.

The Tribe as a Contributor to Peacebuilding and Stability

The ongoing conflict has fragmented the tribe and weakened its social structure, leading to significant change in mediation strategies. Many tribal members, especially from mountainous areas in northern Yemen under Houthi control, became fighters because of poverty, the absence of state institutions, deteriorating economic conditions, and ideological mobilization in areas that have become almost closed spaces for the Houthi group.

Most major Yemeni tribal sheikhs moved away from the political scene and remained silent because of the Houthi iron grip. Despite the weakening of the tribe's political role, it still performs positive mediation functions in resolving some issues between the Houthis and tribes. It also plays a major humanitarian role in mediating prisoner and detainee exchanges between the government and the Houthis. Many local tribal mediations have produced partial solutions to social problems, including exchanges of bodies of those killed, prisoners, detainees, and abductees. One important example was the 2015 mediation led by tribal leader Yasser al-Hadi al-Yafi'i, which resulted in the exchange of 605 prisoners between the Houthis and resistance forces in southern Yemen.

³⁴ Tribal mediation also facilitated movement between Houthi-controlled areas and government-controlled areas and helped solve community problems in the absence of functioning state institutions, especially the judiciary.

Challenges Facing Tribal Mediation

- The conflict has moved beyond its local framework, and the Houthi group is linked to a regional ideological-military project. It is difficult for the group to make substantive concessions without a clear mechanism for dealing with it.
- The political role of the tribe remains important, but it cannot succeed without an integrative relationship between the state and the tribe, as occurred during the siege of seventy days and republican–royalist dialogues.
- There are attempts to weaken the tribal role and deny it the opportunity to play any political function.
- The withdrawal of some tribal figures from public affairs affects the tribe's political role. The tribe needs to reorganize itself so that it has both a political face and a ground presence, in full coordination with the state. If the relationship between the state and the tribe is managed effectively, the two can together help shield the country from the destabilizing effects of ideologically driven and regionally backed armed groups.

Chapter Four Summary

This chapter shows that tribal mediation has been one of the historically important functions of the Yemeni tribe. It rests on custom, the social standing of mediators, and their ability to guarantee implementation of agreements. Tribes have played multiple roles in reducing disputes, stopping some confrontations, facilitating local understandings, and dealing with humanitarian issues such as exchanges of bodies, prisoners, and abductees. The current war and the rise of armed groups, however, have reduced the tribe's ability to act as an independent mediator, especially in Houthi-controlled areas where mediation is constrained by the balance of power and security oversight. Nevertheless, the tribal role in mediation remains capable of activation if three conditions are present: relative neutrality, political and security guarantees, and a link between mediation and the state project rather than the interests of armed groups.

Chapter Five: The Tribe in Confronting the Houthis

Introduction

The tribe remains an active element in the equations of war and peace, whether as a party to war or as a trusted mediator. Yet after the Houthis' rise to power, the tribe, its customs, and its traditions appear to have been subjected to a systematic campaign reminiscent of the war waged against them by the imamate.

The military confrontations launched by the Houthi group against tribes reveal that the Houthis view the primary function of tribes as serving the Ahl al-Bayt. In this context, the ideological, political, and military thought of the Houthi group in dealing and clashing with tribes cannot be understood without returning to the methods used by the imamate to subdue tribes. The Houthi group should be understood as an extension of the imamate in thought, reality, and practice, with some changes in Houthi thought and military methods resulting from its connection to the Iranian regime. Although tribes were subject to the imamate, the imamate sought to erase the tribal system; Imam Yahya described tribal custom as "the rule of taghut." The imamate created problems and wars among tribes to maintain control and subject them to the Zaydi imamate doctrine. Any tribal leader who attempted to rebel had a hostage taken from his family—his son or another relative—to ensure loyalty. This became known as the hostage system.³⁵

The Tribe as the Antithesis of the Imamate

Historically, the most the tribe could obtain under the imamate was incorporation into the imam's camps. Events show that both the Houthi group and the imamate view traditional tribal rule as an opposite to imamate rule. Because of this policy, Yemeni tribes fought a bitter struggle against the imamate in the past and against the Houthi group today.

After consolidating itself in Saada, its main stronghold, the Houthi group began attacking tribes that refused its rule and expanded toward the governorate center. Three days after the Friday of Dignity massacre in Sana'a's Change Square on March 18, 2011, the Houthis took over the center of Saada without resistance.³⁶ The group had already attacked tribal areas in al-Sawad, affiliated with al-Usaymat tribes in Amran, between 2009 and 2010. In 2010, it attacked the tribes of Sheikh Saghir bin Aziz, now Chief of Staff of the Yemeni Armed Forces, for four months. At that time, the state failed to support one of its most important allies, leaving Bin Aziz to fight alone.³⁷

The Houthis did not stop with their attacks on the territory of the Bin Aziz tribe. Between 2011 and 2015, they launched successive offensives against the Bakil tribes in al-Jawf and Hajjah, the Hashid tribes in Amran, and the Arhab tribe in Sana'a. Although these tribes mounted determined resistance, they were ultimately constrained by the significant disparity in military capabilities and equipment. At the time, the alliance between former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis persuaded some tribes to align with the movement in response to Saleh's influence, while the weakness of his successor, President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, further facilitated the Houthis' territorial expansion.

Factors That Helped the Houthis Control Tribes

- The large military gap in weapons: the Houthis fought with state weapons looted from Yemeni army camps, while tribes defended themselves with personal weapons.
- The spread of resentments and score-settling among some tribal figures after the collapse of the state, which enabled the Houthis to support one side against another and destabilize the tribe.
- The collapse of political alliances and the failure of political solutions between the late Ali Abdullah Saleh's party and the Yemeni opposition, especially Islah Party, weakened the tribal system in the face of the armed Houthi doctrinal expansion. Most tribal figures were linked to either the General People's Congress or Islah Party, and these divisions helped the Houthis expand rapidly in tribal areas.
- The emergence of tribal forces whose interests and influence became tied to the Houthis at the expense of tribal figures opposed to the Houthi project and discourse.
- The emergence of regional dimensions in inter-tribal conflict helped the Houthi group break the strength of opposing tribes.

Although the Houthis control mountainous areas with high tribal population density, this does not mean that these tribes have surrendered, even if they currently appear subdued and weak. They do not want to enter battles that would produce material and human losses without real gains. If political parties unite with tribes in Houthi-controlled areas, the equation could shift in favor of the national state project, as happened in the mid-1960s when tribes stood with the republican current, stopped the Houthis advance from Saada and Hajjah toward Sana'a, and helped break the seventy-day siege when imamate forces nearly brought down the republican system.

Tribal opposition to Houthi rule can be understood as a rejection of Houthi thought, which seeks to subjugate the tribe, strip it of social and political independence, and turn its members into a force for military mobilization, much as the imamate did for centuries. The Houthis seek to build a theocratic political system based on exclusion and the elimination of equality among citizens, while monopolizing power and wealth. This project is not national; it is a sectarian-doctrinal project linked to the Iranian regime. The Houthis' excessive violence against tribes has made the group socially unacceptable, while its fundraising methods through levies and religious occasions have turned tribes into mere payers of tribute, depleting their savings.

Chapter Five Summary

This chapter treats the Houthi relationship with tribes as an extension of a historical conflict between the tribal system and the imamate project. The Houthis view the tribe as a tool for mobilization and military service, not as an independent actor. The chapter shows how the group moved from Saada to attack tribes in Amran, al-Jawf, Hajjah, and Arhab, benefiting from military superiority, state weapons, the collapse of political alliances, and tribal and regional divisions. It concludes that Houthi control over tribal areas does not mean genuine tribal acceptance; it reflects a temporary condition of subjugation imposed by force and political circumstances. The Houthi project, with its doctrinal and genealogical exclusivism and monopoly over power and wealth, collides with the nature of the Yemeni tribe, which rejects enslavement and marginalization. This keeps the possibilities of resistance or repositioning alive whenever political leadership, guarantees, and a favorable balance of power are available.

Chapter Six: The Deferred Battle between the Tribe and the Houthis

Introduction

Given the Houthis' extensive control over political, economic, and social life across northern and western Yemen, together with the mounting economic and social pressures facing tribal communities under their rule, an important question arises: could the current conditions lay the groundwork for a coordinated tribal movement against the Houthis? This analysis examines that possibility by identifying the factors that motivate tribes toward confrontation and the challenges that prevent such movement, contributing to an understanding of the future trajectories of conflict in Yemen.

Pressures and Drivers of a Tribal-Houthi Confrontation

Tribes in Houthi-controlled areas are experiencing a critical and difficult phase. They suffer economic and social exhaustion, and there is growing dissatisfaction because of dominance, organized repression, security violations, and arbitrary arrests.

Violations

Tribes have been subjected to systematic campaigns of coercive arrests, abductions, torture, and killing. Violations have included humiliating, degrading, and threatening tribal leaders. The Houthis have consistently taken retaliatory action against individuals they perceive as opponents or suspect because of their views or activities, including tribal sheikhs and other members of the tribes. Many have been abducted, had their homes blown up, or been killed, and many tribal members and sheikhs remain displaced from their homes and areas.

Damage to Interests

The interests of many tribal leaders and members have been adversely affected, especially those linked to the state that they had relied on under Saleh. More dangerously, the influence of tribal sheikhs has begun to decline in favor of the group. The Houthi militia has shown a monopolistic tendency and has not allowed sheikhs to exercise their traditional influence, confirming that the Houthi project is moving toward undermining the traditional tribal structure.

Forced Recruitment and Attrition

The Houthis continue to exert direct pressure on sheikhs and families to recruit more fighters. Since November 2025, they have launched a broad recruitment campaign. Houthi Supervisors visit villages accompanied by armed escorts and request lists of young men to join military courses. These practices have pushed Yemeni families to move their sons to safer areas. Tribes, especially in Saada, Amran, and the Sana'a belt, have borne heavy human losses on different fronts.

Economic Conditions

In addition to economic collapse, the Houthis imposed a heavy tax system on tribes, including the khums tax of 20 percent on all economic activities, including agriculture, fishing, mining, and water. They also collect customs and other taxes harshly while refusing to pay public-sector salaries or provide basic services. They have imposed monopolistic control over trade through loyal companies, forcing the private sector to close or submit. Since tribes remain the overwhelming majority of the population in Houthi areas, they are among the first to suffer from these conditions.

Tribal Culture

Beyond current pressures, Yemeni tribes have a long tradition of resistance to central authorities. Historical experience shows that volatility is a main feature of the political and military positions of populations in tribal environments, and that the relationship between tribes and political authority, regardless of its origin or approach, rarely remains stable.

Challenges Preventing a Tribal Uprising

The Houthis have strengthened their authority over tribes through military force and control of resources. Yet repression, heavy taxation, deteriorating economic conditions, and growing human rights violations may create a social environment in which tribal dissatisfaction grows. Tribes have a long history of resistance to central authorities, which increases the possibility of an opposition movement if suitable conditions arise. However, tribal positions result from the interaction of several determinants, a careful calculation of costs and risks, and a reading of the political and military scene. These positions are shaped by:

- Assessment of the costs and expected risks of confrontation or of maintaining the status quo. The higher the costs and risks, the lower the likelihood of participation.
- Assessment of existing, perceived, or expected interests with the parties to the conflict. The greater the interests with one side, the greater the likelihood of supporting it.
- The degree of involvement with the existing authority. The more a tribe is implicated with the authority or the conflict on its side, the less likely it is to turn against it.
- The political and military situation. Experience suggests that tribes do not usually move on their own unless confrontation is imposed on them, and their movement is often linked to an active struggle on the ground. Progress by one party to the conflict may encourage tribes and make them more willing to engage with it.

Despite major pressures and a general climate of coercion, there are significant challenges to any tribal uprising against the Houthi group. These challenges prevent an independent movement and may make it impossible while fighting between the internationally recognized government's coalition and the Houthi group remains paused.

Involvement with the Houthis

Many tribes appear deeply involved with the Houthi group. A large proportion of the group's forces and militias come from northern tribal areas. As a result, tribes have lost thousands of their members in the conflict. Reports indicate that Saada tribes and then tribes in the Sana'a belt provided the largest share of Houthi casualties, creating a sense of no return. Loyal tribal sheikhs receive economic and symbolic privileges, stable income, influence, and social prestige. Tribal military commanders receive armed protection, while fighters receive monthly salaries and food rations. Under severe economic collapse, this has encouraged some tribal members to join the group.

Fragmentation and Dispersal

Tribes no longer act collectively under a unified sense of collective responsibility. They are not one unified entity and have competing interests. Charismatic leaders capable of uniting tribes under one banner are absent. This makes agreement among different tribes difficult, although such agreement is a condition for collective action. Internal divisions, especially those caused by the involvement of some tribal members with the Houthis, further complicate the tribal position. These divisions are political but also familial and leadership-based; any movement could deepen internal splits.

Limited Capabilities

Tribes lack the ability to confront organized Houthi forces built over ten years. Tribal forces are less organized, and tribes lack the weapons needed to face Houthi arms. In addition, the migration and displacement of many sheikhs and thousands of tribal members have weakened tribal fighting ability.

High Risks

Tribes fear the consequences of action against the Houthis, especially retaliation and abandonment by anti-Houthi forces. These fears are based on experience. Several tribes previously found themselves alone against the Houthis without real support, allowing the group to break them and inflict harm, as happened in Hajour in Hajjah, Utmah in Dhamar, and Al Awadh in al-Bayda. The defeat of these tribes dealt a severe blow to their morale and to the morale of the anti-Houthi public.

The Field and Political Scene

Military stagnation and the tendency of coalition states and the international community toward settlement are among the main discouraging factors for any tribal move against the Houthis. The current situation reinforces the impression among tribes that matters are moving toward acceptance of the Houthis and consolidation of their authority. This makes any move against them not only high-risk but also seemingly futile. Available indicators suggest the possibility of tribal protests or limited confrontations that may expand if they coincide with a major military change, organized political support, and serious guarantees for tribal protection.

The Tribal Uprising and the al-Rayyan Nakf

This is one of the clearest tribal cases illustrating the continuing conflict between tribes and the Houthis. It also confirms that tribal challenge and ongoing resistance to the Houthis recur as the tribe seeks to restore a condition of stability.

Sheikh Ahmed bin Fadgham's call for a tribal nakf in the al-Rayyan desert east of al-Jawf in June, and the tribal response that followed, open a new window for understanding the current relationship between tribes and the Houthi group. It was not merely an individual position or an isolated local incident. Rather, it reflected broader resentment within the tribal structure in Houthi-controlled areas, particularly with the accumulation of policies of subjugation, recruitment, levies, marginalization of traditional sheikhs, and the rise of Houthi supervisors at the expense of tribal authorities.

The importance of this call lies in its grounding in customary tribal logic, not only in direct political discourse. In the case of the woman known as "Mira Saddam Hussein," who sought tribal protection, the tribe invoked values of protection, rescue, dignity, and rejection of assaults on custom. These values can still mobilize tribal solidarity networks even as the traditional political role of the tribe has declined. The response to the call reveals that tribal custom has not lost its effect and that the Houthis, despite their success in controlling tribal decision-making through security and military means, have not been able to erase the symbolic structure that gives the tribe its mobilizing ability.

The importance of this call does not necessarily mean that tribes are on the threshold of a comprehensive confrontation with the Houthis. Tribes usually move according to precise calculations of cost, interest, and guarantees. They do not enter a broad confrontation with a dominant armed authority unless supportive conditions are present, foremost among them a unifying tribal leadership, political and military backing, a change in the balance of power, and guarantees protecting tribes from retaliation.

Therefore, Ahmed bin Fadgham's call appears more as an early tribal warning indicator that exposes the fragility of the coercive stability imposed by the Houthis than as a direct declaration of a comprehensive tribal uprising.

This case confirms the study's argument that the Houthi relationship with the tribe has not reached full absorption. It remains governed by latent tension between the group's authority based on security control and ideological mobilization, and a tribal structure that retains its memory, customs, and sensitivity toward humiliation and attrition. The battle between the tribe and the Houthis appears deferred, not ended. It may remain latent in the form of localized protests, symbolic calls, or limited tribal interactions until conditions allow it to become a wider movement.

From this perspective, Ahmed bin Fadgham's call should not be read as separate from the broader trajectory of tribal transformations. It is a telling model of the persistence of tribal ability for protest and repositioning. It also shows that the Houthis' ability to use tribes in war does not mean they possess their final loyalty, and that accumulating economic, social, and security pressures may turn any incident with a tribal dimension into a rallying point for deferred social anger.

Chapter Six Summary

This chapter concludes that the possibility of a broad tribal confrontation with the Houthis is not linked to popular anger alone, despite the accumulation of violations, levies, recruitment, and attrition. It depends on more complex calculations involving cost, protection, political alternative, and the military situation. Tribes do not usually move spontaneously against a dominant armed force, especially when previous experiences have shown the high cost of confrontation without support. Therefore, the battle between tribes and the Houthis appears deferred rather than absent. Current pressures may produce protests or limited confrontations, but they will not become a broad tribal movement unless they coincide with a significant military change and organized political support.

Chapter Seven: Future Scenarios for the Relationship between the Yemeni Tribe and the Houthis

Introduction

The study confirms that the relationship between Yemeni tribes and the Houthi group has moved from co-optation and temporary alliance to subjugation and direct control. The group has used multiple tools, including supervisors, recruitment, levies, marginalization of traditional sheikhs, and the use of religious and political discourse. Yet this control has not ended the tribal presence; rather, it has accumulated resentment and tension, particularly with the continuation of human and economic attrition.

Accordingly, the future of the relationship between the tribe and the Houthis can be anticipated through four main scenarios.

Scenario One: Continued Houthi Subjugation of the Tribe

This scenario assumes the continuation of the current situation, whereby the Houthis maintain control over tribes through security force, social penetration, and the distribution of privileges to loyal sheikhs while continuing to marginalize independent tribal leaders. This scenario is strengthened by the absence of a national leadership capable of providing guarantees to tribes, the continued division among anti-Houthi forces, and tribal fears of retaliation if they move alone.

This scenario would continue the attrition of the tribe, the decline of customary authority, and the widening gap between the tribal communities and leaders linked to the Houthis. Yet it does not eliminate the possibility of future explosion; it merely postpones it.

Scenario Two: Limited Tribal Uprisings

This scenario is based on the possibility that tribal uprisings against the Houthis erupt because of a particular incident. In such a case, limited confrontations or tribal movements may appear, but they will not necessarily turn into a comprehensive uprising because of the absence of coordination and support. This scenario would disturb the Houthis locally and expose the fragility of their relationship with tribes, while the group may resort to repression and coercive mediation to contain such moves.

Scenario Three: Gradual Tribal Repositioning

This scenario assumes that some tribes and leaders gradually move from silence or forced cooperation with the Houthis toward neutrality, then refusal to mobilize fighters, and perhaps communication with anti-Houthi forces if the balance of power changes. It does not require a sudden uprising. It rests on the accumulation of losses, declining trust in the Houthis, and a tribal sense that the group's continuation means further marginalization and attrition. This scenario would weaken the Houthis' mobilization ability, increase silent defections, and push some tribal leaders to seek a new position in a post-Houthi phase.

Scenario Four: A Broad Tribal Uprising

This scenario is based on the outbreak of a broad and coordinated tribal movement against the Houthis in more than one governorate. Its realization requires clear conditions, including a visible decline in Houthi power, the presence of tribal and political leadership, military support, and guarantees that prevent tribes from being left alone before retaliation. If this scenario materializes, it could mark a major turning point in the conflict by confronting the Houthis within their own social base. However, it carries high risks, including broad repression, divisions within tribes, and the transformation of the confrontation into a prolonged internal conflict.

Scenario Weighting

Before the latest developments and the al-Rayyan uprising, the general situation pointed toward continued Houthi subjugation of tribes, with the emergence of limited and intermittent local uprisings. However, events in Yemen appear to be accelerating and may move beyond mere repositioning as Houthi power declines toward a wider uprising. This remains linked to conditions such as unified leadership, political and military cover, and regional and international support.

Conclusion, Findings, and Recommendations

First: Findings

1. The Yemeni tribe has not lost its presence, but it has lost a large part of the autonomy of its decision-making in Houthi-controlled areas.
2. The Houthi relationship with tribes shifted from co-optation to direct subjugation through supervisors, recruitment, levies, and the marginalization of sheikhs.
3. The Houthis succeeded tactically in mobilizing some tribes, but this success does not reflect firm loyalty; it is often based on fear, interest, and economic pressure.
4. Recruitment and continued human losses have weakened the tribal structure, especially in Saada, Amran, the Sana'a belt, al-Jawf, and Hajjah.
5. The role of traditional sheikhs has declined in favor of Houthi supervisors and figures loyal to the group, creating a legitimacy crisis within tribal society.
6. The tribe can play an important role in local and humanitarian mediation, provided this role is linked to the state project rather than to the authority of armed groups.
7. The tribe remains capable of repositioning itself, but it usually moves only when it sees a clear shift in the balance of power and the availability of guarantees.
8. A broad tribal uprising is no longer excluded, but it remains conditional on changes in the balance of power, the presence of unified leadership, political and military support, and internal and external cover.

Second: Recommendations

9. Build a national strategy for dealing with tribes as social and political partners, not merely as a source for military mobilization.
10. Provide clear guarantees to tribes in Houthi-controlled areas, especially regarding protection from retaliation.
11. Open safe communication channels with independent tribal leaders who are not involved in violations.
12. Support tribal roles in humanitarian mediation, especially prisoner exchanges, reopening roads, and resolving local disputes.
13. Document Houthi violations against tribes, including arrests, house demolitions, displacement, levies, and forced recruitment.
14. Avoid using the tribe as a temporary instrument of war; instead, work to integrate it into a project of statehood and law.
15. Support services and development in tribal areas, because poverty and the absence of the state are among the most important entry points through which the Houthis penetrate tribal society.

Conclusion

The study shows that the Yemeni tribe remains an important actor in conflict and peace, but during the current war it has fundamentally reshaped by coercive pressures, especially in Houthi-controlled areas. The group sought to subjugate the tribe, dismantle its autonomy, and turn its members into a force for military and economic mobilization.

Nevertheless, Houthi control over tribes does not mean stable tribal acceptance. Recruitment, levies, the marginalization of sheikhs, violations, and the decline of traditional interests have all accumulated resentment within tribal society.

The study concludes that comprehensive confrontation between tribes and the Houthis is not excluded. Tribes usually move when the balance of power changes and guarantees become available.

The future of the Yemeni tribe will not be determined only by its relationship with the Houthis, but also by the nature of the coming state. If the absence of the state continues, the tribe will remain a field for instrumentalization and attrition. If it is integrated into a national project based on citizenship, partnership, and justice, it can move from being a depleted actor in war to becoming a local lever for stability and peacebuilding.

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