

**Mordechai Kedar & Irwin J. Mansdorf**

## **Tribal City States** **a new approach to Middle East stability**

Tribalism, which may be understood as “loyalty of individuals and groups to a traditional framework, such as a clan, sect, ethnic or religious subgroup,” is often thought of as a primitive institution which is awkward with respect to the modern world. In reality, it forms the basis of much of the social structure of the Arab and Islamic world. It has been noted that tribal or family alliances endure intact even after tribal territory has been incorporated into a state system, or after the imposition of an alien political structure. Recognizing this fact, it is pragmatic to examine the possibility of using tribal structures to formulate a political solution to the dilemma of state building for the Palestinians.

Undoubtedly, there are major discrepancies between the mores and values of tribal societies and those of Western societies, particularly in the areas of democratic values and human rights. The question is how, within those preexisting tribal structures, there might be built a political system that allows peaceful coexistence and respect for human rights.

In the Middle East, borders were largely determined by European colonial powers, usually according to their own interests. This led to the establishment of states that were conglomerates of disparate tribes and groups that had no history of peaceful coexistence before they were granted independence. What resulted was the establishment of countries, such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, in which tension and instability were the norm. This can be contrasted with the social and political stability that characterizes the United Arab Emirates (*The UAE consists of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras-al-Khaimah and Fujairah*), which consist of nation-states configured from single, traditional tribes that built their power base on the foundation of traditional tribal affiliations.

Since the imposition of Western ideas and forms of government upon tribal nations has failed miserably, perhaps the time has come to consider a different solution that can preserve some of the objectives of democratic systems while at the same time respecting local traditions and the cultural

authority of local tribes. (As the United States military is now attempting in Afghanistan, where appealing to tribal councils instead of a central government has had some success.)

The question is, whether by utilizing the Arab Emirates model of states founded upon tribal bases, a viable Palestinian entity can be established that will be accepted by the peoples of the region. If successful, these “United States of Palestine,” divided according to unique tribal areas, could form a confederacy that could make cooperative alliances with each other, with Israel and with other countries. Such a system could actually allow for greater democratic development, as the various subgroups within the culture would find self expression within their own politically unique areas. There would be many obstacles to be overcome. The key to the success of this endeavor would be to find the relevant “super ordinate goals” – that is, mutually agreed upon goals that would require the cooperation of more than one group to attain – that would foster growth, minimize conflict and hopefully promote a healthy civil society that respects human rights. The benefits would be many: The stability and ease of domestic tensions within Islamic societies, and the enhancement of the economy, employment opportunities, broadening of education, public health advancement and stable state infrastructure would all potentially arise from this arrangement, to the betterment of Islamic society, all while using traditional governmental and social structures. Obviously, utilizing the concept of tribalism is not the sole or complete solution to the problems of the region, but, at the same time, recognizing tribalism for the power it does have is essential.

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