

Tribalism and Democracy in the Arab Middle East

*A comparison of native Arab forms of governance
to Western Democratic ones*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to compare and contrast Arab tribal systems of governance with Western democratic ones. A one to one comparison is not possible because of the different natures of the systems but by examining the overarching ideals and principles of tribal systems a loose comparison is possible. My findings indicated the tribal systems contained mechanisms that allowed the people of the tribe to express their views to their leaders while also holding the leaders effective for the decisions they make. But these systems also tended to discriminate against women and lower class members of the tribe. Because of this the Arab tribal systems could best be compared to early Western democracies which also favored elites and males. But the fact that Western democracies eventually became more pluralistic gives rise to the possibility that Arab tribal systems could be used to build up native forms of democracy in the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years as America has attempted to deal with the issues of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in the Middle East the idea of democracy promotion has been heavily debated. On one side democracy has been viewed as a potential solution to problems in the region and also as a way to moderate extremist forces. But the lack of progress in building democratic norms in the Middle East both in the years since 9/11 and in decades before that have led many to question if democracy is possible in the Middle East. When trying to determine the reasons for the lack of progress in creating democracies in the Middle East many different theories were created. Questions were raised about the compatibility of Islam and Democracy. Some people said that Islam

requires an authoritarian government and that it was incompatible with democracy, while others pointed out Islamic democracies in other parts of the world that function just fine. The idea of the rentier state was discussed but this does not fully explain the lack of democracy in both the oil producing Gulf states and the non-oil producing states of the Levant. In addition to this the old Orientalist theories of the “Arab mind’s” desire for a strong forceful ruler were raised.

But one topic that was not given much attention predates all of these other ideas. Before the development of the rentier state, before strong dictators arose in the Middle East, even before the revelations to the prophet Mohammed, there was a tribal structure in Arab societies. One of the most important underlying aspects of Arab culture and society, to this day, is the tribe. Tribes have been there since the beginning and while other forces have attempted to weaken or diminish them they continue to be an important force and they will most likely continue to be a large social force in the Arab world for the foreseeable future.

One need look no further than Iraq to see the continuing importance of tribes. Although Saddam Hussein tried to break the tribes, and many people thought he had, as soon as he was gone they quickly reappeared. The tribes proved themselves to be resilient and when all else seemed to be broken in Iraq people returned to their primordial tribal identities. The tribal identities of everyday Iraqis survived years of dictatorship when little else did, and they are arguably as important today as they were centuries ago. Thus to understand if democracy can prosper in the Arab Middle East it is necessary to understand the relationship between tribalism and democracy.

This paper will thus attempt to look at the decision making processes within tribes and then compare and contrast those methods with democratic norms. The systems of Arab tribalism and Western Democracy arose under different circumstances, in different times, so a straight comparison is impossible and would not be very useful. It would mostly reflect a difference in cultural backgrounds and levels of development. But a broad overview drawing parallels between the two while also pointing out important differences could give insight into the relationship between the two. Once this relationship is understood, a better understanding of how to engage tribes, if that is a good idea at all, in the effort to build democracy in Iraq, and the greater Middle East can be realized.

Before attempting to answer the question of whether or not Arab tribal societies are democratic or not, we must first understand the terms, tribalism, and democracy. These are terms that most people would be very comfortable using in everyday speech but they can mean many different things depending on the context, and the speaker. The way that one person defines these words is not necessarily the same way that a different person might define them. Thus a common understanding of what these words mean in the context of this paper must be established.

I choose to define tribalism as an identity established by a group of people to organize themselves politically and socially. It is not a predetermined identity but one that is formed through interactions with the surrounding environment and the people that inhabit that environment. A tribal identity can change its role and function through out history and space because it is not a static identity. In fact, a tribal identity is somewhat

circular in the fact that it is influenced by the people that subscribe to that identity, while at the same time those people are also influenced by their adoption of a tribal identity.

Richard Tapper refers to a tribe as a “state of mind” a ”construction of reality” and “a model for organization and action” (Tapper, 1979) Thus a tribe can be understood to a be a social and political relationship that is created and reinforced by its members and their continued interaction with each other. It exists only so long as its members exist and continue to use the identity. It is also an identity with a constantly evolving set of characteristics that depend of the situations that arise.

A more concrete definition of tribalism is difficult to come by because of the different nature of tribes through out the Arab world. A tribe of Bedouins living in the desert in Egypt is much different that a modern day tribe such as the Shamar, that have many members in settled cities through out Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. But there are some common themes that run through out Arab tribes. The importance of family bonds, especially patrilineal descent, and their political ramifications are very important in tribal systems, and these bonds give rise to the segmentary lineage system. The concept of honor and its importance is another aspect that is a reoccurring theme through out Arab tribes. Different tribes have different ways that its members must gain and keep their honor but the idea that people have honor and that their individual honor affects the honor of the rest of their family is seen in most Arab tribes.

An example that shows the importance of family bonds in the tribal systems is the idea that all members of the tribe descended from one primordial ancestor. This idea is a commonly shared belief even when it is quite obvious that it is not true. The idea of common descent from one primordial ancestor gives the tribe a sense of unity and shared importance. If a tribe assumes that everyone is descended from one common ancestor

then they have a vested interest in their fellow tribesmen's well being. The honor and well being of other members of the tribe become important because they are all family and family is one of the most important aspects of Arab identity.

The important role of family can also be seen in the practice of having daughters marry a nephew of their father. This system of marriage arrangement is used to keep the daughters in the family as a way of protecting them. If the daughter is married to someone who is in the family and she is abused by her husband, the matter can be handled by the family. Her father can go to his brother and address the problem. But on the other hand if the daughter is married to an outsider it is much more difficult to deal with the abuse because her father has no direct influence over her husband or her father-in-law and she is thus left vulnerable.

Another practice that shows the centrality of family is the tradition of having fathers go by a name that identifies them with their oldest son. If a father's oldest son is named Ahmed, he will often be called Abu Ahmed, meaning the father of Ahmed. Mothers can also be called by names such as Umm Ahmed, meaning the mother of Ahmed. Family lineages are also used in naming people as traditionally members of Arab tribes have their name as their first name followed by the name of their father, then the name of their grandfather, then the name of their great grandfather, and so on as long back as the genealogy is known.

These practices show that family is one of the most important aspects of understanding Arab tribalism and this centrality of family has led to a system where conflicts and disagreements are settled between people through the use of segmentation. Members of the tribe will split themselves according to their genealogy and their

relationships with the two parties in conflict. How much segmentation is actually used in reality is open to some debate but it forms an important part of the identity and theory of tribal systems. Members of Arab tribal systems put great weight in the system of segmentation even if it is not always used in real life the way that they describe it as working. But what is most important here is the large role that family bonds play in Arab tribal systems and the importance of them in understanding of how the tribal system is supposed to work.

Another common theme running through out Arab tribal systems is the idea of honor. The attributes that lead to honor are not always the same from one tribe to another but some of the common characteristics that lead to honor are independence, piousness, strength, wisdom and the ability to provide for one's family. These characteristics represent some common themes, but each tribe will have its own set of desirable characteristics, and its own rules of how people gain or loose their honor. Some tribes put greater value on independence, while others put more value on piousness. Some tribes allow women to gain honor, other restrict their ability to do this. But the unifying characteristic is the fact that Arab tribes select a set of characteristics that each person must try to live up to in order to have honor for both themselves and their family. And acquiring and marinating honor is a very important thing in the lives of Arabs with a tribal identity.

Thus tribalism can best be understood as a constructed reality that deals with the social and political relationships between people who accept the tribal identity. Tribalism places great importance on family and honor, but the way that each tribe does this is different. Tribalism is not one overarching system that is the same under all

circumstances. Thus in this paper tribalism will be understood to be a constantly changing, constructed reality which helps to organize a group of people both politically and socially.

To begin our understanding of the word democracy I believe it is helpful to look at the etymology of the word. The word democracy comes from the ancient Greek word *demokratia*. *Demokratia* in turn comes from the words *demos* and *kratia*. In ancient Greek *demos* meant people and *kratia* meant rule. Thus *demokratia* literally meant the rule of the people. I believe that this is a good starting point for my definition. Thus for a government to be called democratic it must be controlled by the people.

This control can take many different forms though. In the typical, idealized Western version of democracy, democratic control is exerted through elections. If a candidate holds ideas and beliefs that the people do not approve of they will not be elected to a position. And once in office if a person takes actions that the people do not agree with, the person will be voted out of office. But on the other hand a candidate who holds views that the people approve of will be elected. And if this person does what the people consider to be a good job while in office the leader will be reelected. Thus leaders are both selected for their compatibility with the opinions held by the people, and are also held accountable for the actions that they take while in a position of leadership.

Democracy though, if we define it as the control of the government by the people, does not have to feature elections. In fact using elections as the sole criteria for a democracy does a disservice to the very idea of democracy. Democracy means that the government is controlled by the people and forcing the people to have to use one system in order to exert their influence does not make sense. An example of democracy with out

elections would be ancient Athens. Direct democracy was used extensively in ancient Athens, although this statement must be made conditional because of the fact that only male citizens were allowed to take part in Athenian government. Under this system, all of the male citizens of Athens would meet in order to vote on legislation and executive bills. Since every citizen was able to directly take part in the legislative process there were no elections in the modern sense. Thus the government was controlled by the people and this system has to be considered democratic even though it lacked elections.

Another example of democracy with out elections could be NATO. It is traditional for NATO to only take actions that all members agree upon. NATO is thus ruled by consensus which would have to be considered a democratic form of governance. Each member has a say in what actions the group will take and will not take. Thus this system is also democratic although it lacks elections in the traditional way.

Elections can also not be the only measure of democracy because of the fact that one of the most important aspects of a true democracy is the ability of the people to protest actions taken by the government outside of elections. They can march on the Capitol, write letters to their local paper, start a blog online, or write a letter to their representatives in government. These actions fall outside the realm of elections but do help to shape the issues that the government will consider, and how it will deal with them. By making their voices heard the people hold the government accountable to their wishes. Thus the ability to freely and openly discuss issues the issues that the state faces is a very important aspect of democracy.

And on the other hand there are many countries that have elections but do not allow the people to actually influence their governments. When countries such as

Zimbabwe have elections the people might be able to vote but the actual effects that their voting has is minimal. Thus just judging a government by the presence of elections is a poor way to measure democracy.

But what the different types of democracy all share is the fact that the organization, whether it be a state, a city or an alliance, is held accountable to the wishes of the actors that compose it. It goes back to the basic idea of Locke, that government is a contract between the government and the governed. The government is only valid so long as the people continue to give it authority over themselves, and if the government no longer recognizes the wishes of the people they have the right to ignore that government thus making it invalid. The government is thus held accountable to the wishes of the people because it's only other option is to become illegitimate and invalid. The people are thus able to control any government that rules over them because without their consent there would be no government. And this is the most important part of my definition of democracy, the ability of the people to exert their influence over their government.

There are other definitions of democracy that will attempt to require things such as an independent judiciary, minority rights, freedom of the press, social and economic pluralism, etc., but these are not the most fundamental aspect of democracy. To be sure these are all important aspects of modern Western democracies but it is impossible to broadly apply them to all forms of democracy across the globe. By using those types of criteria my definition of democracy for the purpose of this paper will become to Westerncentric. And that will force Arab tribal systems to be declared undemocratic simply because of their different mechanisms and traditions they have when compared to

Western democratic systems. But just because a system arose under different circumstances than the Western democracies does not make it inherently inferior. And since the purpose of this paper is to attempt to find similarities and not just to point out the obvious differences I do not desire a definition of democracy that will automatically exclude Arab tribal systems.

I am thus using a minimalist definition of democracy so that all different forms of government can be looked at and compared equally without giving unequal weight to one particular type of system. For the purpose of this paper democracy will be understood to be a system of government that a group uses to come to decisions where all of the members of the group are able to have significant and important influence in the decision making process. The leadership of the group must take into account the views of the governed and the leadership must be held accountable for their actions by the people they rule over. The actual way that these things happen is left to the discretion of each individual group.

Backing up my assertion that democracy can take many different forms and that only its underlying traits are important is Abdeslam Maghraoui, director of the Muslim World Initiative at the United States Institute of Peace. He claims that “Trying to duplicate a precise definition of democracy shows a lack of imagination. Instead of attempting to implement a universalist model, it is important to imagine the possibility of diverse patterns of change, different political outcomes, and different forms of accountability.”

Thus when tribal systems are looked at they will be defined as democratic if they take into consideration the wishes of the people, and if the people have a way to hold

their leaders responsible for their actions. Tribal systems will be considered undemocratic if decisions are made by a ruling elite that does not listen to the will of the people. While this is a very simplistic definition I feel that it is the best one because different tribes contain different political systems and norms. It would thus be difficult to come up with a long checklist of requirements which might not apply to each and every tribe across the Arab Middle East, much less to different organizations and groups across the entire planet.

A somewhat simplistic definition of democracy is also useful because many tribes have simple political systems due to their relatively small size and lack of a central government in the Western sense. Tribes don't often have three separate branches of government, and they lack the bureaucracies that are present in larger governments. And although tribes can contain millions of people most of the time the tribal units that are activated are smaller than modern day States that can contain hundreds of millions of people. Thus tribal governments tend to have simpler structures and be smaller in size than their western comparisons. But even though they are small these tribal governments still make decisions, and the members of the tribe will undoubtedly have opinions on how these decisions should be made. Thus if the people are able to influence the outcome of the decision making process, and are able to hold their leaders accountable for their actions the tribe will be considered democratic.

When looking at tribal systems of governing there are two different schools of thought that I will address. The first and more traditional is the segmentation system. As mentioned before this is a system where the tribe divides itself into smaller subdivisions according to genealogy, and then even smaller subdivisions once again

according to family bonds. These lineages can be either real or imagined but the important part is that the people treat them as real. This school of thought is focused on individual actors and the way that they interact in the social and political atmosphere of the tribe in order to influence the tribe. The segmentation principle does not draw heavily on leadership organizations or structures of power. It instead focuses on individuals and the relationships that govern their behavior. According to the segmentation principle a political outcome will arise due to the actors and the relationships between them not because of the organization that comprise the government.

The second way of looking at tribes instead focuses on the political institutions inside of the tribe and the role that they play in making decisions. This structuralist school of thought relies on institutions that include things such as sheikhs, emirs, courts and councils of elders. The important difference though is that this school of thought is looking at the structures of the tribal system as the important part of the decision making process instead of looking at the relationships between the individual actors. This manner of understanding tribes relies more on the political position of a person as compared to the relationships that the person has with other members of the tribe.

SEGMENTARY SYSTEM

There is a vast array of work done on segmentation and but for the purpose of this paper examples will be drawn from Dale Eickelman, Paul Dresch and Steven Caton. But it is also important to note that not all definitions of segmentation are the same. There are conflicts and disagreements over the nature of segmentation and the role it places in tribal society. The first school of thought known as the essentialists draws on Carleton Coon

and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard. This group argues that tribes are organized around a real and definable lineage. These scholars support segmentary lineage theory which draws on the idea that tribes are bounded entities that do not overlap, and are organized by patrilineal familial ties. Thus disputes inside of the tribe will play out along the exact unchanging lines of descent. It is possible to map out in advance the way that the different parts of the tribe will segment if a conflict were to arise. This is because for essentialists, there is an unchanging set of identities that conflicts will draw out in people with a predictable division of the tribe.

The other group of scholars draws on Clifford Geertz (1973), and the Chicago School. They argue that identity, and thus tribal organization, is a constructed reality that only can be measured through context. They argue that there is no constant unchanging lineage and that each situation will bring out a different set of relationships between the people. Identity is constantly modified and argued over as situations change and people need to align themselves with a new set of people. Some examples are Lawrence Rosen (1984) who argues that all relationships, social and formal, are constructed through bargaining and can not exist independently of the people that are part of the relationship. Linda Layne (1994) is also a member of this school of thought and argues that reality, identity, and organization in Jordan are flexible and constructed as the situation and need arise. Thus where the essentialists see an unchanging and permanent set of relationships between members of the tribe, the group led by Geertz believes that the relationships between the members of the tribe are constantly changing and evolving in order to suit the current needs of the people.

For this purpose of this paper though Eickeman describes a segmentation system in its basic opposition to the Western sense of political order. In Western thinking as exemplified by Hobbes the belief is that because of the “spark of reason” humans come together and agree to at least some sovereign control over themselves in order to be able to better pursue their own self-interest. The idea is that without some form of control over their actions humans will live in anarchy which is disadvantageous for all people involved. Thus giving up some rights to a government that will set some controls over the people is the best solution because it creates the most opportunities to better one’s own position.

But segmentation takes a different view. In segmentary systems there is no real sovereign power over all of the people. Each person is ultimately only answerable to themselves. Yet political order is still maintained through each person’s desire to increase his or her own self-interest. The difference is that instead of having political order maintained by one person, or group of people, it is instead maintained by segmentation inside of the group. In this system, violence, or the threat of violence, self-help and the appeal to the group’s shared moral conventions are what allow order to be maintained. Political order is also maintained through balanced opposition and because people ultimately have an incentive to work out their conflicts in a way that does the least amount of damage to the overall group. Because of this these forces people have a strong incentive to work out the conflicts as quickly and with the least amount of violence as is possible.

Segmentation works as a system of levels and this is how it can be best understood. The whole tribe acts as one group on the top level while on the bottom level

are discrete local communities. The levels in the middle are based upon real or imagined lineages, common descent, local communities or other political and economic arrangements. Thus the top level where each member of the tribe is unified splits into multiple groups on the second level. Each of those groups on the second level then splits into even more groups on the third level. And all of the third level groups split even further into local communities that represent the bottom level.

When a conflict arises that needs to be settled people inside of the tribe will segment according to the groups that are in conflict. Members of the tribe will side with the group that they are closest to and oppose the group that they are farthest from. This helps explain the saying “me against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin, my cousin my brother and I against the outsider.” This system of segmentation will work because of the value that people place on honor and on balanced opposition. The sides want to find an honorable solution but have to work together to achieve this. And balanced opposition assures that one side is not able to monopolize all of the power in the conflict. Thus the two groups in conflict will come together to solve the dispute with a minimal amount of actual violence because that violence is likely to harm the overall economic vitality of the tribe or larger group that all of the people belong to.

If the two groups are unable to come to a decision regarding what should be done to solve their conflict they can call upon the larger groups that they belong to. For example if the two groups in conflict are in the lower level and have dissimilar groups a level above them but share a common group one more level up they can use that common group level to give them added support and they are then able to select a leader from their common second level group to serve as a mediator. Since this mediator will share bonds

with both groups he can be trusted to be impartial and not side with one side against the other and give an honest fair ruling.

This mediator can be an elder or other type of wise man, but he will have no actual political authority. Instead he will only be able to give his advice and it will be the responsibility of the two groups to realize that it is in the best interest of everyone for the conflict to be resolved, which will lead them to a solution. The fact that members of the tribe are reliant upon other members of the tribe for trading and marriage helps to solve these disputes because it is neither feasible nor desirable to have a long lasting dispute inside of the tribe.

Dresch adds to this model by drawing in the role of the Yemeni sheikhs to the segmentary system. He argues that there are many different sheikhs at many different levels of the segmentary system instead of just one at the top of the tribe. Some sheiks do represent the whole tribe, but others represent only small villages or lineage groups. Thus some sheikhs are more powerful than others, and some claim to represent larger groups than others. But what is important is the fact that there are many different sheikhs operating inside of one tribe. Thus these sheikhs can act as arbitrators for the different groups that they represent when they are in conflict. The sheikhs are able to bring people together and if not force them to come to an agreement, they are at least able to highly pressure them towards this agreement. Thus the important addition of Dresch to the segmentary system is his argument that sheikhs play an important role in bringing people together and in helping to solve their disputes.

Caton adds to this idea of a segmentation system with sheikhly power by arguing that the most important aspect of the sheikh is his ability to persuade people. Sheikhs

often come to power because of their ability to convince people that they are the best and most qualified candidate so their ability to convince people to end a conflict is not surprising. And since the sheikh has very little physical force that he is able to call upon, his power of persuasion thus becomes his most important source of authority. The actors in this system thus feel that they are free to either accept or deny the advice of the sheikh, but because the sheikh has such a great ability of persuasion he is usually able to get the two sides to agree to what he has proposed.

By drawing from these different sources we are able to piece together a picture of a society that has many different bases of power. The segmentary system gives individual people and the groups that they belong to power. These groups are often able to solve their own conflicts through balanced opposition and self-help. In situations where this is not enough they are able to call on the sheikhs which are another source of power. The lineage groups are not fully able to control the sheikhs and the sheikhs are not fully able to control the lineage groups but together they are able to work in such a way as to maintain order and resolve conflicts when they arise inside of the tribe.

Thus the segmentary system has many different components and there are many different ideas about how it actually functions in reality. Some of the work done of the segmentary system is in opposition to other work that was done, while others pieces of work attempt to add depth to other understandings of the system. Thus it would be difficult to say conclusively that each segmentary system acts in one concrete way, but we can take some general truths about tribal society under the segmentary system. The most important being that people will tend to group together in a conflict with those that they are closest too in lineage, either real or imagined, instead of independently trying to

ascertain who is guilty and who is innocent and aligning themselves that way. It is also important to note that in this system there is very little sovereign power over the people and there are many sheikhs attempting to assert their authority who are available to help mediate conflicts.

While the segmentary system should be viewed as a guideline for the way that conflicts are resolved inside of tribes, it can also serve as model for understanding how other political decisions are made. When a decision needs to be made the people of the tribe will first come together at their most basic levels and come up with a decision that they believe to be in the best interest of their group. Then the next level of segmentation will come together to hear the opinions of the groups below it and will also decide what is in its best interest. These groups will then follow the same pattern up to the next level and so on until the whole tribe, or the parts of it that are necessary for the particular decision to be made are all in agreement. Thus the tribe will make its political decisions from the ground up through the segmentary system. This process will be helped along the way by political figures, be they sheikhs or elders, who are able to act through the power of persuasion to bring compromise and consensus to the group because of the necessity to maintain cohesiveness.

STRUCTURALIST SCHOOL

An example of the structuralist school of thought, which takes a very different view of tribes when compared to the segmentary system, comes from Shelagh Weir in her book *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (2007). Her anthropological study for this book occurred in a small town in northern Yemen where

she studied the al-Nazir tribe. The al-Nazir tribe is part of a larger region called Jabal Razih and she attempts to extrapolate findings from the al-Nazir tribe to all of the tribes of Razih in general.

During her study Weir finds that each of the tribes in Razih has a well defined border with its neighbors and all territory is strongly identified as belonging to one tribe or another. Inside of each tribal territory there are further subdivisions. Each tribe is made up of clans which are based in a hamlet. These clans join together to form what she refers to as wards. There is no set number of how many wards a tribe must have but the al-Nazir have 3 wards. There is also a subdivision between wards and clans which are referred to as fractions such as quarter, or fifth, but these are less important and are used only sparingly. By far the most important divisions are tribe, ward and clan in descending order.

Each tribe has as its head a sheikh. The sheikh always comes from the one certain clan that has always been the ruling clan of the al-Nazir. The tribes people seemed to accept this as fact and did not view it with envy or hostility. They instead assumed that this was the normal way that things work and that it would be unnatural to have a sheikh from a non-sheikhly clan. There is only one sheikh and he is given great respect by the rest of his tribe.

Assisting the sheikh in his duties is a group of elders that come from other notable clans. Once again in the selection of elders there seems to be a hierarchy with certain clans monopolizing the positions of elders inside of the tribe. These elders serve as a group of deputies for the sheikh. Members of the tribe compare them to ministers helping a president. The elders help to represent and administer their own clans and wards and at

the same time act as intermediaries between the sheikh and the people. Also assisting the sheikh is a third group referred to as the headmen who represent their hamlets. These headmen report to the elders and could be viewed as deputy ministers.

There is also an important class structure to the al-Nazir tribe. At the top are the sayyids who claim to be descended from holy ancestors such as the prophet's daughter Fatima. The second level which includes almost all of the people is the qabili or tribespeople. The lowest level is the jazzar or butchers. The sayyids and butchers can not be part of the tribal leadership and instead fulfill specific roles inside tribal society. Sayyids specialize in the learned sciences and are often Quranic teachers. Butchers on the other hand do the jobs that are considered unclean such as performing circumcisions, making pottery, tanning and other occupations that the sayyids and tribespeople would not take part in. The tribespeople thus hold most of the other jobs and the major ones are farming and trading. This class structure seems to have less to do with economic power and more to do with influence and prestige inside of the tribe as no level was able to economically exploit another level.

Although the sayyids are considered the highest class the leadership of the tribes comes from select clans from within the tribespeople class. The leaders are said to be chosen on account of their knowledge and experience but this often equates to being the son of a former leader. The sons of sheiks and elders are often chosen because they have been around politics for most of their lives and thus they are assumed to be the most knowledgeable and best able to fulfill the role. Being a son of a former leader also helps because the person's family is able to campaign on their behalf with the assumed authority and blessing of the former leader. This gives them a level of legitimacy that

new comers to politics would find difficult to acquire. Thus while people are in theory chosen for their ability to lead, it would be more accurate to say that they are chosen for their lineage.

The main duties of the sheiks and elders is dealing with crimes and disputes that happen with in the boundaries of the tribal territory. Sheikhs are also responsible for representing their tribes at inter-tribal meetings and when there are disputes between different tribes. But this duty does not arise nearly as often as intertribal disputes. Holding meetings is thus one of the most important aspects of the sheikh and it is here that most tribal business is done. In these meetings disputes are solved and this is where people have their chance to influence the tribal government. The sheikh will lead the meeting but the elders must agree to what has been decided. And the elders are expected to represent the wishes and opinions of the people that they represent. One Naziri said that, “No one would dare say he represented his groups unless he knew it was behind him” (Weir p84, 2007). Thus the meetings serve as a way for the tribe to come to a decision as a group with all people having input even if not all people are able to be present.

Hosting these meetings can be quite expensive so each member of the tribe pays a small tax that goes toward the salary of the sheikh and the elders in order for them to be able to afford to host the meetings. These salaries are thus supposed to only help to offset the expenses of running the tribe but in reality also allow the leaders to accumulate some wealth. This form of quasi-taxation becomes important when people feel that their sheikhs are no longer listening to their opinions.

If a person wishes to show their disapproval with a decision a sheikh has made the most common form of protest is the refusal to pay taxes. If the elder of this person's ward sees it as a justified action they will support him against the sheikh, which usually forces the sheikh to change his opinion and the conflict is thus resolved. If this first step does not work there is also the possibility for a person to leave the tribe and join another if the situation is serious enough. This is not done very often but when it is done it does great harm to the sheikh's reputation and hinders his ability to govern effectively. Thus sheikhs will do a lot in order to avoid people leaving the tribe. This serves to make the threat of leaving almost more important than actual defections. Sheikhs do not want to appear to be weak or unfair so when someone threatens to defect the sheikh will usually attempt to address their concerns. So the idea of defecting should not be viewed as much as an attempt to find a new sheikh as an attempt to exert influence over the current one and force him to govern in a more fair and just manner.

Sheikhs are very dependent upon the public perception of them if they wish to maintain power. There are no standing police forces or armies to enforce the rule of the sheikh, so the only way that a sheikh can influence people is the perception that he is the legitimate source of power. This requires the sheikh to be fair in his decisions and to listen to the people. Otherwise the people are likely to turn against the sheikh and he will lose his power. But sheikhs do not act alone in their decision making process. The elders play an important role in leading the tribe, and the sheikh can also have many assistants. This can allow a sheikh to remain in power even if he is not an effective leader or the best person for the job as long as his governing team is effective. Thus the people's opinion of

the sheikh is as much a reflection of his governing group, as it is a reflection of his actual personal performance.

When a sheikh dies or is no longer able to fulfill his duties the process of selecting a new sheikh begins. While lineage is very important in this process there are usually at least a few competitors for the title of sheikh. Each nominee calls upon support from his clan, extended family and other allies that he has gained through out his life. The tribe will usually coalesce behind one potential sheikh over time, but if this does not occur the elders will intervene in order to act as mediators. If the elders can not come to a decision they can appoint co-sheikhs. Thus for a sheikh to take power he must convince the people that he will rule fairly, justly, and that he will represent them well. The sheikh must also have the support of the people in order to govern over them. This creates a situation where the most important thing that a candidate must do is convince the people that he is the best option for the tribe and that he will do the best job possible for the members of the tribe.

And maintaining the support of the people continues to be important once the sheikh has taken power. Sheikhs have to keep the favor of their own family along with the other important families and clans. Without this critical support the sheikh can become weak and ineffective as people no longer view him as the only legitimate source of authority. And since a weak sheikh will be unable to govern effectively maintaining the support of important families and clans becomes of the utmost importance. This can be achieved through intermarriage, hospitality towards other important families and favoritism towards the more powerful parts of the tribe when settling disputes or giving out favors.

When crimes are committed inside the tribe the people expect that their leaders will handle them effectively and fairly. Shari'ah, Islamic law, and 'urf, tribal law, form the backbone of the legal system in this tribal system. When some one has committed a crime or is accused of committing a crime the victim will seek out either the sheikh, an elder or possibly a hakim who is someone who is learned in the law, to act as a judge over the case. The accused will give either their dagger or their gun to the judge to represent their submission to the decision of the judge. This acts as a sort of bale bond in case the accused does not fulfill his punishment under the decision of the judge. Each side will present their evidence and their version of the events, and then a decision will be announced by the judge. Punishments usually take the form of a payment and the responsibility for collecting the payments comes from the clan or ward of the guilty party.

This system usually works because it relies on the people closest to the offender to come up with the money or else they will loose some of their honor. Since failure to pay the penalty places a great dishonor upon the group they will do what is necessary to make sure that this does not happen. They are thus able to either extract the money from the guilty person or they raise the money as a group. This group responsibility keeps manages to keep fairly good order because the members of the tribe do not want to loose their honor, and they thus make sure that the guilty party fulfills its obligations under the decision of the judge.

COMPARISONS

We thus have two different models of tribalism in the Arab Middle East. Interestingly though, they both seem to share some traits that appear to be democratic. In both systems there is a type of representational hierarchy in the decision making processes of the tribe. In the segmentary system this is achieved through each level of the tribe taking into account the wishes of the people or groups under it. It is assumed that the leaders of the different levels will act in the best interest of the people that they represent because they kin. Under this system the people are grouped together by family bonds and it would not be natural to support someone who is a non-family member when you should instead be supporting the members of your family. Thus the segmentary system creates a system of representation based upon family ties.

In the structuralist model representation of the people is achieved through the need of the sheikhs and elders to follow the wishes of the people they represent in order to maintain influence. The sheikhs and elders have to keep the people happy in order to maintain their power and this forces them to take the wishes of the people into consideration. The representation of the people is also achieved through elders who are informally required to represent the wishes of the people under them. Thus it appears that in both of these systems the people are able to influence the decisions that the leaders of the tribe make on their behalf. This would seem to indicate that tribes have some democratic tendencies in them.

But how much can someone in a tribal system actually influence their leaders? Because there are no formal and codified systems which say that the elders or sheikhs have to listen to the people they are supposed to represent the level of influence that the

people have is malleable. But it appears that the people are able to usually maintain a high level of influence over the decisions that their leaders make, even though the only thing that is forcing the leaders to consider the opinions of others are the customs of the tribe and the leaders need to maintain their influence, which would diminish if they don't listen to the will of the people.

And this is perhaps the most democratic aspect of the tribal system. If the sheikh, elder, or other type of leader does not listen to the people under him it is likely that the people will no longer acknowledge his authority. The leaders in tribal systems do not have armies or police forces at their disposal and can not forcibly compel people to follow their wishes. The only way that they are able to enforce decisions is through persuasion and the assumption that they know what is best. Thus if the leaders act in such a way as to weaken or destroy the people's belief in their decisions it is likely that their power will decrease and the people will turn to other leaders who will listen to them and take their opinions into account. This acts as a kind of organic election process where the leaders who are not popular lose their power over time to leaders who are more popular. It is not exactly the same as holding elections in the Western sense but the results are the same so this once again shows that there are some democratic tendencies in the Arab tribal system.

In both systems people can also show their displeasure with leadership or the decisions that the leadership makes. In the segmentary system people can change their allegiance within the tribe and start to align with a new group. According to Geertz's model people's lineage is malleable and is able to change over time. Thus if people find that their current lineage group is not representing their views they can change to a group

that they feel will better represent them. This allows them to find leaders that they feel will best represent them and their interests instead of having to blindly follow a leader that takes advantage of them. In the structuralist system a person could stop paying taxes to the sheikh or threaten to leave the tribe altogether in order to voice disapproval with decisions that the leadership has made. Both of the actions have the ability to change a person's representation and also to force their previous leaders to change the way that they act. Thus there exist well established systems for people to voice their concerns, and the people do take advantage of this. They use the systems that are available to them in order to make sure that they have leaders that act in a way that they approve of and also to make sure that their views are taken into account when decisions are being made. This ability of people to redress their concerns with the tribal leaderships points towards a democratic system because the people are able to hold their leaders accountable for mismanagement of the tribe's affairs, and poor representation of the people through the act of removing some of the leader's power.

Leaders are also held accountable for the decisions they make because of their physical proximity to the people they lead. The elder of a family most likely lives in the same house as the people whose view he is supposed to represent. So if he acts in such a way as to not represent their views he will very likely have to deal with the consequences when he goes home at night. And the leader of a village will see the people that he represents during his everyday activities such as shopping at the market. Thus if he does not listen to the people that he is supposed to represent, they will most likely make their views heard when they see him. And considering the fact that the elders require the other members of the tribe for trade and social interaction, the ability of the people to ostracize

a leader for a bad decision can be effective in forcing him to take their views into consideration.

Even a sheikh has to live among the people of the tribe that he leads. While the sheikh might have a slightly bigger house or tent he still lives with the people in his village. He is not separated away from them in a castle or in a secluded part of the village. Thus the sheikh will see the people that he leads everyday and will have to deal with them if he does not act in a way that they approve of. The people will be able to approach the sheikh and make their views heard. They will be able to make his life more difficult if he has acted in a way that they do not approve of. But they can also act in the reverse way and make his life easier if he acts in such a way that the people feel represents them well. Thus the sheikh will have to take the people's views into account if he does not want to deal with upset tribesmen. This ability to hold leaders accountable for their actions is a basic aspect of democracy and the fact that members of Arab tribes are able to do this once again shows the democratic tendencies that exist inside of the Arab tribal system.

Another reason that the elders, and the sheikh in particular, will have to listen to the views of the people is the fact that sheikhs are supposed to act as hosts and invite the other people of the tribe into their house. Hospitality is one of the most important and honorable characteristics in Arab tribal societies. Thus in situations where the leaders of the tribe are having people into their home the leaders will have to listen to what the people say about the management of the tribe's affairs. If the people want the sheikh to act one way or another they will be able to tell him, and if he has acted in the past in such a way that they did not like, they will probably tell him of this. Thus the sheikh can not

escape the views of the people, and can not hide from them. The sheikh may not have to do exactly as they say but the people will be able to make their voice heard and they will be able to share their views and opinions with their sheikh. This creates a very strong system of accountability where the leaders in tribal societies have to listen to what the people of the tribe want because they are not able to hide from the people or their opinions.

There thus exists a system where the leaders of the tribe are forced to listen to the voices of the people. And this goes directly back to the definition of democracy that is being used for this paper. If democracy is defined as a system where the leaders are forced to take into consideration this wishes of the people, and the people are able to hold their leaders responsible for their actions, than these tribal systems appear to meet this definition. As was mentioned the rulers have to listen to the people so that the people continue to support them and also because of the physical proximity of the people to the leaders. And the people are also able to hold their leaders accountable by taking away some of their authority through the refusal to recognize their legitimacy as a leader. Thus tribal systems appear to meet the standard of democracy that was first laid out in this paper.

Another important aspect of tribal systems is their lack of a strong central authority. In the more institutional system as described by Weir there is a sheikh and other elders that hold power, but their power mostly comes from the respect they are given by other members of the tribe. They do not have an army or police force that they can use to impose their will upon the other members of the tribe. There is also not a large standing bureaucracy that has to be loyal to the leadership of the tribe. And under the

segmentary system the leaders only have the power that they are able to gain through the support of their kin. There are no other autonomous sources of power beyond the people that you are able to round up to support you. Also in the segmentary system sheikhs are mostly used only to help settle disputes and are not in and of themselves sources of power. They have limited decision making power by themselves. Thus, in both systems, there is not one central authoritarian figure that could monopolize the politics of the tribe. This lack of a strong central authority serves as a way to prevent the tribe from having one despotic ruler who imposes his will and insures that multiple voices will be heard in any and all debates.

An important example of this lack of a central power is I.M. Lewis's book, *Pastoral Democracy; a Study of Pastoralism and Politics Among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*. While it is not written about a tribe that would traditionally be considered Arab, it does shed light onto the lack of a central authority in tribal systems. Lewis describes the Somali's as fiercely independent, a trait that would also describe most Arab tribesmen, and says that they refuse to recognize any higher corporeal power than themselves. Each Somali man acts on his own and views himself as the highest authority on what he should do. This is not exactly the same as in Arab systems, as Arab tribes tend to have sheikhs who have some authority, although weak, and Arab systems also put great importance on family and honor along with independence. Even though there are these differences this ideal of independence is comparable to Arab ideals of independence. And what is most important is the fact that the Somalis act so independently. This is important because of the fact that Lewis chooses to categorize this independence as democratic. The very title of the book shows how he views the tribe to

act in a democratic way. And throughout the book he refers to their system of government, or lack thereof, as highly democratic.

This lack of a strong central power inside of tribal systems could perhaps best be understood as the embodiment of highly libertarian values. In fact throughout the book Lewis makes this comparison and seems and he seems to believe that this is a fair comparison because of the high level of personal freedom that exists in the Somali system. This is exemplified through the fact that each person is responsible for their own welfare, and the state is unable to regulate the actions of people. There is also a high level of freedom of opinion, and action since the state is unable to regulate what people think or do. The only things that constrict the actions of the tribes people are their own ideas of morality and the resources that are at hand. Under such conditions it can be hard to pinpoint the line between democracy and anarchy, but the Somalis appear to fall on the side of democracy, at least according to Lewis. Thus it is not out of the question to extrapolate these findings and also say that the Arab tribes can be called democratic because of their similar lack of central authority, high levels of personal freedom and their valuing of individualism.

The lack of an authoritarian figure, even if it does not equal democracy by itself, is an important argument in favor of describing Arab tribes as democratic institutions. If there was a strong central power that could force people to act in a certain way it would obviously be undemocratic, so the absence of a strong central authority lends credence to the idea that the tribal system is democratic. Also since one of the bedrock foundations of any democratic system are basic human rights and freedoms, the fact that people in a tribal system are free to think and act as they wish is important. There might be cultural

and social norms that constrict the thoughts and actions of the members of the tribe, but there is no formal authoritarian figure that is forcing them to act in a certain way. The people are free to do and think what they want so far as the norms of the tribe will allow them to. Thus Arab tribal systems can be considered to have democratic tendencies when the absence of a central authoritarian figure and the freedom that comes with this is taken into account.

Thus I would say that in principle tribal systems can be said to have some highly democratic norms. People can make their voices heard and influence the decision making process. They can also take actions that will diminish the power of leaders who they feel do not act in their best interest. There is also a high level of freedom and there is not a strong central authority that can monopolize power over the decision making process. The Arab tribal system is not identical to the western type of democracy but it does have mechanisms that achieve many of the same things. But this does not mean that the Arab tribal systems are fully democratic. Along with the traits that are democratic there are also some traits that have to be considered undemocratic. But looking at the overall picture there is a strong argument to be made that the Arab tribal system has to be at considered at least semi-democratic because of its mix of democratic and non-democratic tendencies.

But it would not be fair to ignore the non-democratic tendencies that do exist inside of Arab tribal systems. This paper will address the two most important of those differences. The first is the roll of women in tribal societies. There are two different views on the role of women inside of Arab tribes. The view of some people is that women do have power inside of the tribes. Some tribal women say that they are greatly

able to influence their husbands and that they are able to manipulate situations through the informal powers that they have. While the man may be the official head of the house and women do much of the work inside of the house and use this to influence or outright control the men in the house. They work behind the scenes to get what they want and use all of the tools at their disposal even if they are not the kind of official tools of power that the men hold.

But there are also other women that say that they are disenfranchised inside tribal systems. They see the lack of women leaders as proof that men control the system and that there is no role for women. They point to the official means of decision making that exclude women and declare that they are not given a fair voice.

Thus the view of the women's role in tribal politics varies greatly and this also has to do with differences that exist between different tribes. While anthropologists and tribal women have different opinions of the exact level of influence that women have, it can be said that in general women do not enjoy the same level of overt economic and political freedom that men do.

The side that says women do not have official authority point to the fact that sheiks are always men, the man of the family is considered the leader, and the elders of a village or tribe are the oldest men. In some tribal societies women are not able to gain honor and in others they have a different system that they have to follow because of the perceived uncleanness of their reproductive cycle. In some tribes women are also considered to be under the control of men. Even though women may not be explicitly declared to be second class citizens, and many members of Arab tribes would say that

these actions are taken to protect women it appears that the system is discriminating against women on one level or another.

This segregation of women that keeps them out of the official realm of power has to be considered strongly undemocratic. Equality is one of the most important aspects of democracy and without equality it is difficult to say that democracy exists. Also if there are some groups that hold all the power at the expense of other groups, the tribal system would appear to be closer to an oligarchy than a democratic system. And most importantly in the definition of democracy that this paper is based off of the ability of all people to influence the government that serves over them is the fundamental aspect. Thus if women do not have the ability to exert control over how their tribe makes decisions the tribal system can not be considered democratic.

But just because women do not hold official power does not mean that they are not able to influence the decisions that the tribal leaders make through informal means. The first example is that wives often are able to greatly influence their husbands. While the men say that they have all of the power they often take their wives views very seriously and listen closely to what their wives have to say. Not all women, but some women, have a great ability to influence the decisions that their husbands will make. The men may not admit this in public for fear of looking weak but there is evidence that this does happen in some anthropological work that was done by women anthropologists. Women are also able to influence other members of their family through their physical proximity to them. In much the same way that average people can influence their leaders by seeing them in everyday situations women can make their views heard because they live with the men that are supposed to represent them. Not all women might be strong

enough to stand up and make their voices heard but there are examples of women that have been able to.

Women also form strong bonds between each other that allows them to keep up on all of the political news and gossip that is happening in the tribe. They form an important network inside of the tribal system that allows for the transfer of knowledge and rumors between different households with out the men having to get involved in this activity. Thus women serve as a sort of gatekeeper deciding what information their husbands will hear and what they will not. Women are also able to hold back, or pass along to other women, information from their family depending on what will best help them. This control of vital information can allow women to influence the decisions that the men will come to even if they do not play a formal role in that decision making process.

In some situations women are also considered the heads of the house. The father is in charge of the family but the mother is in charge of the affairs of the home. It requires a strong woman to fill this role, and make her voice heard but in many Arab tribal families the woman is the master of the home. Women are in this position because of their role in raising the children and keeping the home running smoothly. It is in this role that women can once again play an important part of the decision making process of the tribe, even if it is an informal system through which the women have to act in order to have an influence.

Thus a very complicated picture is painted. Women have little formal authority but they appear to have some informal power under some situations. Some women thus say they have an ability to influence the decisions that are made inside of a tribe. While

other women say that they are not considered to be equals to men in the decision making process. Thus it is difficult to say conclusively either way how much power women have. But what can be said with certainty is that the position of women inside of tribal systems is not codified in such a way as to protect their rights and give them an equal position to men. Some women may claim to be able to influence their husbands but in a fully democratic system their opinions would stand on their own and they would not have to work through the male figures in their family. Women may or may not be able to influence the tribes, but for the tribal system to be ultimately considered fully democratic it must allow women to have more official levels of power inside of the decision making apparatus, and must also recognize the basic fact that women should be equal to men in the decision making process instead of having to use informal means of influencing the men in the tribe in order to have their opinions heard.

The other problem in tribal systems is the fact that they can be class based and leadership can be hereditary. These are both concepts that seem to go against the ideals of democracy. In a democratic system each person should have equal influence regardless of the family that they were born into, and any person should be able to rise to the highest positions of power. These are some of the basic principles of democracy. But the principles do not always appear in tribal systems. There are some tribes where there are set lineages that the Sheikh must come from. While it is not necessarily passed from father to son the role of sheikh is reserved for males from certain lineages. Thus the leadership of these tribes is restricted to a small group of people who could potentially have the self-interest of their own family in conflict with the greater interest of the tribe. This monopoly of power can lead to the possibility of corruption or despotism. This does

not automatically mean that the rulers will not act for the good of the tribe or that they will ignore the wishes of the people, but where there is a disconnect between the ruling family and the rest of the tribe there is a strong potential for anti-democratic tendencies and this must be watched very closely. Thus the hereditary nature of the sheikh creates some problems for the argument that the tribal system is democratic.

The fact that some tribes are hierarchical and have a class structure also presents a problem. Tribes are often spoken of as being very egalitarian, and many in fact are that way, but there are also some tribes where certain families or lineages have distinct advantages over others. These advantages can be political, religious or economic but they do exist and must be considered. These hierarchies create a system where some families have more power and say over the affairs of the tribe than other families. These families are once again expected to take into consideration the views of the less privileged families but there is nothing holding them to this. Since they are the families with the power they are able to listen to or ignore the other families at their own discretion. At the same time the more powerful families often consider it their birthright to be the more powerful families while the lesser families often tacitly accept their lower position and allow the more powerful aspects of the tribe to make decisions for them. Thus there is a self-perpetuating system where the more powerful families inside of the tribe are able to amass power at the expense of the less powerful families. And this is assumed to be a perfectly natural thing by most of the people that are members of the tribe. Thus this lack of equality between different families is a strongly undemocratic characteristic of the tribal systems that are hierarchical.

Tribalism can thus best be understood to have both democratic and undemocratic characteristics. The democratic traits are the representation of people by their elders and sheikhs, the lack of a central authority that can exert tyrannical power over the people, the ability of the members of the tribe to make their opinions known to their leaders, and the options that people have to take power away from the leadership if it acts in a negative manner. This shows that the people can influence the decision making process and that they can also hold their leaders accountable for the actions as leaders. While this system may not be identical to Western democracies it does meet the basic standard of democracy that this paper is based upon.

But on the other hand positions of power are not always open to all people and there are instances of a class based society with little chance for social mobility. And the level of political power that is able to be exerted by women, while debated, is undeniably less than that of the men. These attributes show that the Arab tribal systems are not fully democratic and have some progress to make before they are up to modern western standards of democracy. And when we take these attributes into consideration it is very difficult to say that the tribal systems are fully democratic because of the flaws that they have.

Thus when attempting to compare tribal systems to democratic ones we find some important similarities while also noting some important differences and this paints a complicated picture. There are aspects of Arab tribal systems that are definitely democratic but at the same time there are aspects that are undemocratic. This makes it difficult to conclusively say one way or the other whether Arab tribal systems are

democratic or not. But what we can say conclusively is that the tribal systems are closer to democratic than it appears at first glance.

With all of this in mind I would say that tribal systems could best be compared to early Western democratic systems. Tribal systems share many similarities with systems such as Ancient Athens or pre-Civil War America. All of these systems formally excluded women, and favored elites at the expense of lower class people, while also showing early signs of democratic systems such as representation of the people and the accountability of leaders to the will of the governed. None of these systems are perfect by modern standards of democracy, but there is a case to be made that they are somewhat democratic. In fact the elites in both systems would probably say that the system is democratic and that it represents the will of the people. But on the other hand women and lower class people might disagree about the level of democracy. What is certain though is that these systems are clearly not authoritarian. And if nothing else that is at least a step in the right direction even if it is not all the way towards a modern Western democratic system.

APPLICATIONS

If we assume that Arab tribal systems are similar to early Western democracies than there is hope for those who want to promote democracy in the Arab world. This is because of the fact the early democratic systems in the West eventually evolved into the modern systems that exist today. This leads to the possibility that tribal systems can be used at to help build democracy in the Arab world. It will be not a quick process as it took America many years to evolve to the level of democracy that is currently present,

and the time line is even longer if America is looked at as a continuation of Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome and early British experiments with the rights of people. But if early Western systems, which are comparable to Arab tribal systems, eventually turned into the democracies that we have today there is a possibility that tribal systems could also evolve into more democratic systems if given the right circumstances and amount of time. The question thus becomes what circumstances are needed in order to spur this growth.

If democracy promotion is truly one of the important aspects of American foreign policy than policy makers would be wise to pay attention to tribal systems. Using tribes to help promote representative government presents an interesting alternative to the top down installation of democratic systems that has not work well so far in Iraq. By using tribalism to help develop democracy America will be drawing on native forms of governance that will be more familiar and comfortable to the people of the Middle East. It will seem less foreign and inauthentic. And this could be the key to success in promoting Arab democracies.

Tribal systems might have a better chance of acceptance because they will not be seen as an imposition of Western style democracy. Because of the history of colonialism many aspects of Arab society are hostile to Western ideas that they perceive as being forced upon them. Some elements of Arab society are hostile to Western interference in the Arab world whether that interference takes the form of support for dictators or military troops in the region. The current situation in Iraq also does not help the cause of people that want to bring democracy in the traditional sense to the area. This is because people see Iraq and the violence that exists there and equate it with the attempt at

democracy that was forced upon the country by the United States. But if native forms of representative government are promoted the people could be more accepting. This is where using forms of governance from tribal systems comes in. The people might see these mechanisms as more culturally authentic and not as an export from the West. This is not a guarantee for success but it does offer some hope when other attempts seem to not be working so far, or at least not working as well as people had hoped that they would.

A democratic system drawing on tribalism might also be more successful because the people will already have a basic familiarity with how the system works. People will feel comfortable with the actions that they have to take in order to influence their government. It won't be a completely new system that people are not familiar with and do not know how to operate inside of. People do not always understand how elections and parliamentary politics works if they have not had a history of involvement with it and this can create difficulty when building new democracies. But if instead people are being asked to work through their family elders and through their sheikh, they might be better able to understand the system which could lead to better a success rate and more promising long term results .

That being said there would also have to be a corresponding effort to try to give women and lesser classes more political equality. It would be unwise to just outright demand these things as that would create the impression of Western imposition of ideas, but these issues should be mentioned and addressed in a more sensitive way that will help the lower classes and women gain their equal rights. It is a sensitive topic and not one

that has to be dealt with carefully and with tact but for long term success it will have to be addressed.

It would be difficult to lay out an exact plan of how to engage Arab tribes in order to help build democracy but it is an idea that should be looked at. The recent success of American troops working with Sunni tribes in Iraq seems to show that the United States government is beginning to realize the importance of tribes in the Arab world. It also shows that the United States is willing and able to engage with these tribes when it helps United States policy. But so far this cooperation has been mostly along military lines. And while coordination for military and intelligence purposes is an important first step the next and possibly more important step will be to engage tribes in a effort to help support democracy. If a dialogue can be opened with both tribal leaders, and everyday tribe members about how the system could be used to help build and support democratic systems it might lead to positive results. If the people feel that they are the ones who are building the democracy and that they are using forms of governance that they are already familiar with there would seem to be a much better chance for long term success. There are no guarantees that it will be a success, but it is an idea that is worth looking at for no other reason than the current approach does not appear to be working as well as was hoped for.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between democracy and tribalism is not a straight forward one. There are important similarities and important differences. Arab tribal systems do have some mechanism that support representational decision making but there are also traits

that serve to exclude women and lower class people. The two systems are also very different because they come from very different historical backgrounds. They arose due to different circumstances and have been through different histories. But even though tribalism has both democratic and non-democratic mechanisms, it offers a unique opportunity for people who want to help promote democracy in the Arab world. It could serve as a basic foundation for a locally authentic form of democracy and if properly used it could help to support the United States' effort to promote democracy in the region. This would require some adjustments to the tribal system but there is hope for those that want to support democracy in the Arab world, if they are willing to engage the tribes and to support native forms of governance.

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