TRIBAL INFLUENCE ON THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE YEMENI ARMY: BETWEEN STATE-BUILDING AND FRAGMENTATION (1962–2024)

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Abstract:

This article examines how tribal structures shaped the formation and development of the Yemeni army between 1962 and 2024, and why tribal influence alternated between supporting state-building in moments of crisis and accelerating institutional fragmentation during periods of political contestation. Using a historical-institutionalist approach, it traces how collective recruitment through tribal intermediaries, patronage-based command relationships, and parallel loyalties became embedded in Yemen's military institution. Empirically, it follows key phases: early republican military formation after 1962; the post-unification era in which divergent northern and southern legacies were merged without producing a unified institutional culture; and the post-2011 and post-2015 period in which the breakdown of centralized authority generated competing armies, militia–state entanglement, and externally sponsored formations. The findings highlight the emergence of a hybrid security order sustained by cross-border patronage networks and contested legitimacy. The article concludes that military reform is unlikely to succeed through rapid reunification alone and proposes a pragmatic pathway centered on gradual coordination and transitional institutional arrangements that rebuild professionalism and accountability under a shared national doctrine.

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1. Introduction

The Yemeni armed forces were formed and evolved within a social and political environment dominated by the tribal system. Since the 1962 Republican Revolution, which overthrew the Mutawakkilite Imamate in North Yemen, and later within the unified state established in 1990, tribal structures have historically served as a readily available source for rulers to consolidate authority, expand influence, supply fighters, wage wars, mediate disputes, and secure local compliance. At the same time, however, tribal brokerage entrenched parallel loyalties and patronage relations within formal security institutions, complicating the development of a unified chain of command and merit-based professional standards (Dresch, 2000; Brandt, 2017).

This article examines how Yemen's tribal social structures shaped the armed forces' foundational trajectory—its formation, organization, change, and long-term evolution—over more than six decades, from 1962 to 2024. It asks why tribal influence has been contradictory, even dual in nature: at times facilitating the building of state institutions, and at other times driving the dismantling of those very institutions. The article argues that the tribe was not merely a "backward" cultural obstacle standing in the way of modernizing the military into a professional institution; rather, it functioned as a tool and mode of governance repeatedly and deliberately employed by ruling elites to pursue practical political objectives such as regime stability, resource distribution, and threat management. It further shows how this tribalized governance produced a path-dependent institutional reality, through which early bargains over recruitment and command became embedded in the army's organizational routines, shaping later phases of unification, restructuring, and wartime fragmentation.

Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for current debates on security sector reform. Yemen's post-2015 landscape is not simply a divided army awaiting reunification; it is a hybrid security order in which formal units, local forces, and patronage networks intersect. Accordingly, reform requires attention to institutional incentives—not merely organizational blueprints.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The analysis adopts a historical-institutionalist perspective to link Yemen's social structures to institutional trajectories. Historical institutionalism emphasizes that choices made under crisis conditions can produce self-reinforcing patterns ("path dependence") and durable informal practices that persist even when formal reforms are announced (North, 1990; Collier & Collier, 2002).

Tribe is often viewed merely as a social or ethnic affiliation. This article, however, conceptualizes tribe not only as an identity, but as a functional governing system—or a governing institution—that performs roles akin to those of the state, especially where the state is absent or weak. In such settings, tribes can provide protection, resolve disputes, and sustain credible commitments.

State-building refers to the consolidation of authority through the administrative expansion of government institutions and the establishment of a legitimate monopoly over force, where the army and police are developed as professional, nationally unified, and accountable bodies, serving as the sole public source of coercive power, authority, and rule enforcement, rather than tribes or militias. Yet, in postcolonial contexts such as Yemen, state-building projects do not displace traditional systems like tribal structures; instead, the two coexist. This coexistence produces a hybrid order and quasi-feudal patterns whose underlying logic rests on patronage and personal loyalties. Public offices and military ranks thus become political currency awarded in exchange for personal loyalty to the ruler or the ruling network, rather than on the basis of competence (Ayoob, 1995; Mamdani, 2018).

Within this analytical framework, the Yemeni army is treated both as a coercive institution—the unified state's instrument for enforcing security and defense—and as a site of political bargaining. The military is not a neutral bloc; it is an arena of contestation and cooperation in which interests intersect simultaneously. Tribal brokerage and patronage are analyzed as mechanisms that can generate short-term cohesion for rulers during wartime crises and political challenges: tribal loyalty is "purchased" through granting military ranks to tribal members or by providing weapons and financial resources. While this strategy quickly supplies rulers with powerful allies and delivers immediate stability and leverage, it undermines long-term institutional integration by weakening loyalty to the institution, eroding professionalism, and creating internal centers of power.

3. Methodology and Sources

This study adopts a qualitative historical analysis and a process-tracing approach across four temporal phases. The first is the Republican formation period (1962–1990), the foundational stage in which the modern army emerged under the republican system in North Yemen after the fall of the Imamate. The second is the era of unification and consolidation (1990–2011), a phase of expansion and a largely failed attempt at integration, during which the northern army (tribal in its core structure) was merged with the southern army (more bureaucratic and formerly "Marxist") within a single state framework. The third is the uprising and attempted restructuring period (2011–2014), a phase of crisis and an unsuccessful reform effort: the youth revolution and the negotiated transition created a historic opportunity to reform and restructure the military away from tribal and regional loyalties. The fourth is the wartime fragmentation period (2015–2024),

the phase of collapse and hybridity; following the outbreak of war, the formal army split and parallel militias emerged.

The study synthesizes academic scholarship on Yemeni state formation, tribal politics, and civil–military relations with policy and institutional analyses of Yemen's security sector. Methodologically, the approach centers on identifying underlying mechanisms, focusing on how processes such as collective recruitment, rank distribution, customary arbitration, and related practices shaped cohesion, discipline, and command authority across successive stages (Khasrouf, 2012; Barani, 2016; Phillips, 2017).

4. Historical Framework: Yemen before 1962 and the Republic Era in Yemen

Yemen's modern military development cannot be separated from earlier patterns of governance in which ruling centers negotiated authority with local powerholders. During the late Ottoman period, the administration acknowledged the distinctiveness of tribal highland areas and developed differentiated arrangements rather than imposing a uniform bureaucratic model—what has been described as a "politics of difference" (Kuehn, 2011). The later Imamate relied on personal authority and negotiated control. The Imam's (ruler's) power was derived from a religious–historical legitimacy—namely, his claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad in Zaydi doctrine—rather than from modern state institutions. Governance also operated through continual bargaining with tribal shaykhs and local powerholders, who were granted financial or political privileges in exchange for loyalty, calm, and non-rebellion.

Moreover, there was no strong state bureaucracy capable of reaching every village to enforce a uniform law and collect taxes regularly. In tribal areas (especially in the north and east), tribal customary law remained the dominant legal order rather than the state's written law. In other words, state authority coexisted with tribal authority, and only rarely imposed itself coercively over it. This long-standing practice, sustained over centuries, shaped Yemeni society—tribes in particular—by establishing certain expectations about the nature of rule.

After 1962, republican rulers faced immediate security threats (a civil war against royalists loyal to the deposed Imam, as well as external interventions) and very limited state capacity: there was no robust administrative apparatus, no well-funded treasury, and no functioning standing army that could be relied upon. Under these conditions—and given the emergency context and the lack of time and resources to build a modern national army—the republicans turned to a historically available and "tested" instrument: contracting with influential tribal shaykhs (such as leaders from Hashid and Bakil) to secure rapid mobilization and local compliance, and to obtain thousands of fighters already trained in the use of weapons and possessing ready-made loyalty to their shaykhs. Yet this approach also transplanted sub-national hierarchies into the military's organizational structure.

5. Tribal Influence on the Formation and Development of the Yemeni Army (1962–2024)

5.1 Tribal Influence in Military Recruitment and Leadership (1962–1990)

Early republican military formation in North Yemen depended heavily on "collective recruitment," whereby the state contracted with a tribal bloc through an intermediary (the shaykh) to supply fighters. This transferred tribal hierarchy and group solidarity into military units, making the identity of the soldier closely tied to that of the tribesman, and often prioritizing loyalty to the immediate tribal commander over loyalty to the military institution (Khasroof, 2012).

Military rank (such as brigadier general or major general) and senior command positions were not awarded on the basis of military competence, combat experience, or specialized training. Instead, they became political gifts through the "shaykh–officer" phenomenon, granted to prominent tribal figures whose authority derived from social status, in order to purchase their loyalty to the ruling regime. This pattern contributed to rank inflation, as top ranks became crowded with individuals for whom there was no genuine military need, producing an oversized and bloated administrative and command hierarchy that weakened discipline and accountability (Barani, 2016).

The Yemeni soldier thus found himself subject to two conflicting systems of law and accountability: the formal military legal code—a strict, standardized system intended to create impersonal discipline—and tribal customary law and community norms, a flexible system grounded in mediation and negotiation among tribal shaykhs. Customary arbitration could intervene in disputes that were supposed to fall under military courts. Likewise, communal obligations—especially during periods of tension between two tribes—could pull soldiers away from their military units to join their tribe in its dispute, treating this as a social duty overriding their military obligation.

This coexistence produced a duality of discipline. At the same time, these mechanisms generated short-term mobilizational capacity by enabling rulers to mobilize thousands of fighters extremely rapidly through pre-existing tribal networks. They could assemble large forces without having to build a centralized recruitment and training system from scratch. Yet the long-term cost was high: these practices constrained institutional professionalization and impeded the emergence of a truly professional army.

5.2 The Post-Unification Army and the Role of Tribal Loyalties (1990–2011)

The 1990 unification brought together two military institutions shaped by two distinct legacies. The northern army (Yemen Arab Republic) was characterized by a clear tribal–patronage structure, as discussed earlier—most notably collective recruitment and the shaykh–officer phenomenon. The southern army (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen), by contrast, developed under a Marxist system and was more nationalized and bureaucratic. Loyalty was primarily directed to the ruling party (the Socialist Party) and

to the institution itself, with a stronger emphasis on training and a formal chain of command.

Nevertheless, integration remained partial and contested. Unification did not produce a genuine fusion that generated a new shared military culture; rather, it amounted to a forced coexistence in which each side retained its own culture, history, and loyalty networks. Differences in leadership norms and regional loyalties (North/South) continued to outweigh a unified national loyalty—more personalistic and tribal in the North, and more rigidly bureaucratic in the South.

The 1994 civil war became the confrontational "solution" to this contradiction, rather than institutional negotiation. The North (led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh) achieved military victory, making the northern army and its model dominant, but it did not resolve the underlying problem. The South was militarily subdued, yet its defeated army and its loyalties were not integrated; instead, they were converted into latent resentment and a sense of grievance. After the northern model prevailed, quasi-feudal bargains became the norm: military posts were distributed as rewards for political loyalty to President Saleh and his regime, and patronage and selective loyalty-building came to govern recruitment and promotion.

Over time, the army became deeply entangled in elite bargaining and the privatization of coercion: the state's instruments of violence (the military and security services) were increasingly treated as private assets used to serve narrow personal or factional interests rather than the public good. The military became an instrument in elite competition over power and resources. Senior commanders were simultaneously political and economic actors who used military influence to expand their wealth and consolidate their power.

Accordingly, the circle of "reliable" loyalty narrowed—from broad tribal alliances such as Hashid and Bakil to a more restricted sphere of trust. As Saleh's authority became entrenched, he began to fear the major tribes themselves. He thus shifted from reliance on tribal shaykhs to more intimate and concentrated networks tied to family and loyalists within the inner circle. He placed his sons, relatives, and officers personally loyal to him—often from his region or original tribe (Sanhan)—in sensitive leadership positions within the military, regardless of competence.

This strategy of narrowing patronage increased the regime's personal security and reduced immediate risks, but it devastated the army as an institution: it fragmented chains of command by creating parallel leadership structures and weakened institutional incentives based on merit (Phillips, 2017).

5.3 Disintegration and Militia Formation during the War (2011–2024)

The 2011 uprising refers to the large-scale popular protests that removed President Ali Abdullah Saleh as part of the Arab Spring, followed by a fragile transitional period. These developments were not merely a passing political crisis; they constituted a real test of the strength and cohesion of the military institution. They exposed a dangerous reality: politicized leadership and cohesion sustained through patronage. The army's leadership

was neither neutral nor professional; senior commanders were, in essence, political or tribal allies of the former regime, and the army's apparent unity was purchased through a complex web of privileges (money, ranks, and influence) rather than rooted in institutional loyalty or a national military doctrine. When the political order was shaken, these fragile alliances cracked. The military did not fracture due to strategic disagreements, but because patronage networks reorganized themselves around new power centers—between regime loyalists, protest supporters, and ostensibly "neutral" actors pursuing their own interests. Subsequent restructuring efforts under the Gulf Initiative failed to uproot the problem's foundations: the deep loyalties of units to their immediate commanders (often tribal or regional in nature) and rent-distribution systems that had become woven into the fabric of the state over decades.

The fall of the capital, Sana'a, to the Houthi movement in September 2014 was not simply a military development; it represented a comprehensive collapse of state centralization and sovereign institutions (the army, security services, and administration). Military camps were handed over, collapsed, or surrendered without meaningful fighting, or fragmented as soldiers fled back to their home areas. Central authority also disintegrated: there was no longer a single government capable of projecting power or issuing enforceable military orders across the national territory.

After 2015—following the Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015—the landscape evolved into what can be described as entrenched security pluralism. The reality no longer fit the model of "one army split between government and rebellion." Instead, multiple competing forces emerged: units loyal to President Hadi (themselves fragmented), Houthi forces, the Southern Transitional Council's forces, local forces in Tihama, tribal militias, and extremist groups. Each faction developed its own army or militia, security apparatus, and funding streams—often from external patrons (Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates)—as well as its own ideological or identity-based discourse.

In areas under Houthi control (primarily the northern governorates), the armed organization evolved from popular committees into an entity that resembles a state yet is not a state in the classical sense. It constitutes a hybrid between state and movement, combining formal state structures (ministries, military ranks) with parallel and supra-institutional movement structures (such as the Supreme Political Council, guidance committees, and "supervisors") that secure the Houthi elite's control and mobilize ideology as a substitute for institutional or national loyalty.

In government-adjacent areas—especially around Marib, Aden, and the western coast—it has been impossible to integrate all nominally pro-government forces (forces loyal to President Hadi, the Southern Transitional Council, Tareq Saleh's forces on the western coast, and tribal militias) under a single effective command. Integration dilemmas persisted as forces affiliated with different political actors operated within overlapping spheres of authority. The result is a hybrid security order in which formal labels coexist with fragmented authority and cross-border patronage networks (Shuja al-Deen, 2019).

5.4 Discussion: State vs Tribe – Is Reform Possible?

Tribal incorporation persists because it repeatedly served political functions for rulers and war-time actors. In the absence of strong administrative capacity, tribal mediation offers rulers a means to obtain manpower, manage local conflict, and secure compliance. But these bargains embed parallel authority structures inside the military and generate vested interests against professionalization.

The thesis evidence suggests that for six decades, the army failed to dissolve tribal identities because institutional incentives rewarded mediated loyalty over impersonal rules. Moreover, during war, the tribe often becomes a refuge, sub-state identities fill the vacuum created by institutional collapse, providing protection and dispute settlement when the state cannot.

Reform debates, therefore, face a structural dilemma; rapid reunification risks reproducing the same patronage bargains under a new label. A more realistic pathway is gradual coordination that manages hybridity, rebuilds oversight, stabilizes payroll and recruitment systems, and incrementally reconstructs national doctrine and accountability.

6. Conclusion

Tribal influence shaped Yemen's military through three interlocking mechanisms: collective recruitment via shaykhs, patronage-based distribution of ranks and command, and the coexistence of customary and military legal orders. These mechanisms enabled rapid mobilization and regime stabilization at critical moments, yet they constrained professionalization and embedded parallel loyalties that periodically re-emerged as fragmentation.

Since 2015, Yemen's security landscape has consolidated into a hybrid order of multiple armed formations, contested legitimacy, and external patronage. Accordingly, effective reform cannot be treated as a technical project of immediate reunification. It requires a political settlement that changes incentives, alongside phased institutional steps that coordinate existing forces, rebuild professional standards, and establish credible accountability under a shared national doctrine.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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