

## **Transformation of Tribal Perceptions on the Yemeni-Saudi Border**

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### **Introduction**

I want to begin my paper with introducing Ahmed, a sheikh from an influential tribe from the province of Ṣa'da, North Yemen, who is living now in Saudi Arabia. The name Ahmad is a pseudonym. Since some months, I am in contact with him via *WhatsApp* and I have been asking Ahmad about his experiences with the Yemeni-Saudi border, which is the research objective of my PhD thesis. Ahmad's profile picture on WhatsApp shows an image of two national flags, the Yemeni and the Saudi Arabian, merging together in one flag. Below, there is the Arabic proverb *waṭan wāḥid wa sha'b wāḥid* meaning "one homeland and one people". When I asked Ahmed about the meaning of his profile picture, he told me that the peoples of Saudi Arabia and Yemen love each other and nothing will separate them, although many attempts have been made to separate them into two throughout the last century.

Ahmad's picture and his quote render possible a variety of interpretations. It can be read within the context of the current political situation as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia fiercely attempts to expand its military presence and political pressure on Yemen. Furthermore, this picture provides different interpretations when analyzed through the context of the common border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, a contested border since its contemporary establishment almost a century ago. In 1934, the territory of Khawlān b. 'Āmir, one of the three major tribal confederations in Northern Yemen, which Ahmed's tribe belongs, has been bisected by the international borderline. The majority of the confederation's tribes now belong to the Yemeni state, whereas three tribes are located within Saudi Arabia's national borders. However, tribal relations built on kinship, trade and tribal affiliation remain close and vital across the international border. This paper aims at tracing the historical transformation of the Yemeni-Saudi border from an anthropological border tribal residents' perspective; a point of view that has not yet been taken into comprehensive academic consideration.

The Yemeni-Saudi border region surrounds a borderline spanning 1,800 kilometers from the Red Sea to the border triangle with Oman compassing strategically and economically significant land and maritime territories. For an extended period of time large stretches of the international border remained undefined and unfixed due to the active involvement of the borderland tribes within both countries to establish and secure the border. Recently, their exclusive rights to cross the border have been curtailed by Saudi Arabia as an attempt, despite the fierce opposition of the local border tribes, to fortify its boundary with Yemen.

### **Phases in the Yemeni-Saudi border relationship and its borderland tribes**

In the historical Yemeni-Saudi boundary's development and its mutual relationship with the borderland residents, I have identified four major phases that will be discussed in more detail. The present study is based on the bottom-up approach of social and cultural anthropology in order to develop a new perspective on the study of the Yemeni-Saudi boundary beside the border narratives of the nation states; a perspective that has not yet been subject to thorough academic scrutiny.

## 1. The establishment of the border's boundaries

The historic rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Zaydi Imamate of Imam Yahya, and the short-lived Idrīsī Emirate led to the existence of the Yemeni-Saudi boundary. Muhammad bin al-Idrīsī, founder of the Idrīsī Emirate of 'Asīr in 1908, expanded his political power into the South and large parts of the Tihama region and thereby provoked Imam Yahya's sovereignty (Schofield 1992: 275) who – on historical and tribal grounds – declared the whole 'Asīr region as having been always Yemeni, despite the Idrīsī's occupation. The Saudi government counterclaimed the disputed provinces as Idrīsī's legal territory and denied the Yemeni claims. Under the Mecca Treaty of 1926, the provinces of the Idrīsī Emirate fell under the protection of Saudi Arabia and four years later became totally incorporated into the Saudi Kingdom (Schofield 1992: 39).

The continuous growth of Ibn Saud's territory in the North into areas in the South claimed by Yemen resulted in the Saudi-Yemeni war of 1934. The Saudi government occupied large parts of the tribal border regions. Forced by Saudi military superiority, Imam Yahya capitulated and signed a bilateral peace treaty. This document, known as the Treaty of Ṭā'if, first officially defined the boundary between the Yemeni Imamate and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia along the Ṭā'if line between the Red Sea coast and Jabal al Thā'r near Najrān in the East. The established border segment bisected the territories of the tribal confederations Khawlān b. 'Āmir and Bakīl (Brandt i.pr.). The division was implemented by the work of a border demarcation committee under the supervision of Harry St. J. Philby, that located more than 200 border markers along the Ṭā'if line (Philby 1952). However, parts of the central mountainous section of the borderline remained undefined because the committee could not access the region due to tribal conflicts (al-Enazy 2005:14).

The Ṭā'if line as designated in the Treaty of Ṭā'if represented political rather than tribal interests. Nevertheless, the peace negotiations after the Yemeni-Saudi war marked the beginning of a close relationship between the Saudi Kingdom and the Yemeni borderland tribes. From 1934 onwards, the Saudi government pursued a policy of alliance and patronage in the common borderlands aiming at securing the Yemeni border tribes' loyalty. As legal basis for Saudi Arabia's political strategy, special and unusual provisions regarding the rights of the borderland tribes, were included in the Treaty of Ṭā'if and its appendices. Appendix 3, Article 1 (1936) granted borderland residents the right to cross the border through certain checkpoints without restrictions whereas other Yemeni citizens were obliged to enter Saudi Arabia with regular passports and visa. Moreover, some Yemeni border shaykhs were actively involved in the boundary negotiations as members of the border demarcation committee. Through the integration of Yemeni borderland shaykhs into Saudi patronage networks, the Saudi Kingdom aimed at securing the stability of the new controversial border with the support of its local tribal aides. From the tribal perspective, the Saudi cooperation strategy and the establishment of the international border, in which influential border shaykhs partly co-determined, was highly beneficial as long as their legal rights to cross the border were guaranteed (Schofield 1992; Brandt i.pr.).

## 2. Saudi Arabia's patronage policy

Since the Ṭā'if Treaty of 1934 has been concluded as a temporary settlement, it had to be renewed every 20 lunar years. These renewals took place in 1953 and 1973 after periods of severe tensions and deep disagreement between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Kingdom's predisposition and vulnerability towards violence and instability in Yemen became evidence during the Yemeni 1960's war that led to the abolition of the imamate and a profound power shift. Saudi Arabia's initial

considerations of the Yemeni war as a national matter changed when Egyptian troops targeted Saudi border towns in air raids in November 1962. During the civil war, the established patronage networks with the borderland tribes proved highly beneficial for the Saudi government because loyal border tribes functioned as buffer zones between Saudi Arabia, Yemen's republicans and its Egyptian aides (Badeeb 1986).

After the civil war, Ṣa'da's tribal leaders benefitted further from Saudi subsidies that contributed to the image of the Saudi Kingdom as supporting and protecting the interests of Yemeni borderland tribes. Its major financial concessions to the borderland shaykhs granted Saudi Arabia an influential stake in Yemen's north and solidified a secure boundary. From a tribal perspective, Saudi subsidies enabled border shaykhs to extend their local power and to acquire additional sources of income (Brandt i.pr.).

### 3. The implementation of the boundary

Under the government of president 'Alī 'Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ, the Treaty of Jeddah was signed in 2000, in which the border was defined. In addition, Yemen abandoned its territorial claims to the regions of 'Asīr, Jizān and Najrān, although parts of the opposition parties resisted. The Jeddah Treaty integrated the regulations and all appendices of the Ṭā'if Treaty altering the terms as final, permanent and non-renewable. It was defined that the three contested regions of 'Asīr, Najrān and Jizān permanently belong to the Saudi Kingdom and the former undefined segment of the land and the sea border were now stipulated by its exact location in geographical coordinates rather than by tribal affiliations. The provisions of the Treaty of Jeddah, like the Treaty of Ṭā'if, concede to the borderland residents the right to cross the border unrestricted through designated border checkpoints (al-Enazy 2005). Nevertheless, the final demarcation of the boundary obliterated the former active involvement and participation of the border tribes in the political debates and negotiations on the border. The Saudi argument for justifying this step was the need to improve the security and stability situation (Brandt i.pr.).

### 4. The fortification of the border

As a result of Saudi Arabia's increased perception of the cross border movements as a threat to Saudi internal affairs and security – such as a flow of economic refugees, al-Qaeda fighters, smuggled weapons and drugs as well as the potential spillover of political events inside Yemen – the Kingdom started to complete the border demarcation as concluded in the Treaty of Jeddah. As a step further, the Kingdom also constructed a border fortification which further induced the physical implementation of the boundary. The implementation of border fortifications marked another turning point in Saudi border policy. The long undefined and unimplemented border – open for borderland residents' crossings and partly dependent on tribal territorial negotiations – was now fixed by state authorities and no longer negotiable. With this controversial measure, Saudi Arabia provoked some of the borderland tribes who reacted with fierce resistance and sabotage of the border fortification works. According to the provisions of the Treaty of Jeddah, the Saudi border fortification project is a violation of the border tribes' legal rights to cross the border in exchange for their loyalty to the Saudi Kingdom (Brandt i.pr.).

Since the eruption of armed conflict in the border region in 2004, the Yemeni regime increasingly lost control of its northwestern periphery. The emerging power vacuum led to the expansion of the Houthi movement in Yemen's north. Many of the important tribal leaders in Ṣa'da and especially the

border region were displaced and fled to Saudi Arabia. The expulsion of the borderland shaykhs override the tribal cooperation and securing practices in the border regions that have been established by Saudi Arabia and existed for decades.

## **Conclusion**

In the first years after the initial border formation, the character of the border and the mutual relationship to its surrounding borderland residents can be characterized as relatively “fluid” and flexible. Provisions of the bilateral peace treaty (the Treaty of Ṭā’if) and its appendices only partly demarcated the location of the Yemeni-Saudi border. It also left the remaining undefined border sections open to tribal negotiations, which resulted in temporary shifts of the international boundary based on tribal disputes in the border region. Moreover, the borderland tribes endeavored vital cross-border activities facilitated by exclusive rights to transcend the borderline without visa restrictions granted by the Saudi Kingdom. The Saudi government’s central objective – implementing and securing the border with its southern neighbor – could only be pursued by establishing and maintaining close cooperation with the Yemeni borderland tribes.

The Treaty of Jeddah marked a new era in the Yemeni-Saudi boundary’s history that has been triggered by a shift in Saudi Arabia’s policy towards the common borderland. From 2000 onwards, the Saudi main objective of ensuring the border tribes’ loyalty was replaced by ambitious efforts to secure, police and fortify the border in order to prevent threats from Yemen entering the Saudi kingdom. The borderland tribes continued to play a significant role in securing the Yemeni-Saudi border – some whom were deeply involved in documented and undocumented trade border activities (al-Rammah / Awass 2009) – and in supporting Saudi interests until Saudi Arabia took the next step forward. In 2003, the Kingdom attempted to fortify the boundary by erecting a border fence; an endeavor that resulted in fierce opposition from some of the local borderland tribes. Since 2011, the so-called Houthi rebels have expelled the most influential tribal leaders from their border regions. Thus, this has disrupted the patronage networks established since 1934 between the Saudi Kingdom and the Yemeni borderland tribes, which depended on the cooperation and co-optation of the local tribes (Brandt i.pr.).

The Yemeni-Saudi border from 1934 onwards has developed through several stages and consequently permanently transformed the relationship between the boundary and its borderland tribes. The initial close co-operation between the Saudi government and the border tribes, which were granted exclusive rights and integration into border negotiations, has been increasingly characterized by monitoring and control of border crossing activities from the Saudi side. Furthermore recently, central rights of the borderland residents have been violated by the fortification of the boundary – a condition that has provoked some tribes to actively resist. As this evaluation has shown, the development of the Yemeni-Saudi boundary is affected by the transformed relationship between the Saudi state and the borderland residents. The more tribal interests and participation were included into Saudi policies, the more the common borderline has been accepted and supported by the borderland tribes. With the successive roll back of the border tribes from securing the border and therefore the exclusion from the bordering process (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002), the border dispute have become even more complex.

The fact that Saudi Arabia now welcomes expelled border shaykhs with open arms, can be seen as further attempt of renewing close relationships to local tribal authorities of the border region in order to gain support for future Saudi plans in Yemen. The strategies the border tribes develop to overcome this fortified boundary remains to be investigated in my ongoing PhD project for the next years.

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