



Political Islam Online

The Tribe Defies the *Ummah*

The message of Osama Bin Ladin released last week cautioned against favoring tribal and national affiliation to the detriment of a unified Muslim *Ummah*. **PI Online** examines the positive and negative perceptions of this reawakening of tribalism in the Middle East through a spate of recent articles on several Websites.

An article by 'Ali Al-Khushayban analyzes the positive role that tribalism may play in counteracting terrorism perpetrated in the name of religion. The author suggests that the economic and political developments in the Arab World provided the fertile ground which gave birth to radical political Islam, and to its animosity toward all that is not Muslim. These negative developments contributed to Islamizing all aspects of the culture, including scientific thought and social behavior, resulting in the isolation of Arab societies from the rest of the world. To restore a sense of normalcy, which would encourage a more peaceful environment, *Al-Khushayban* suggests that pre-Islamic history should serve as an example of how tribal wisdom can be the nucleus of Arab society and at the same time be instrumental in counteracting insurgency and terrorism. The author argues that tribal affiliation must be preserved, even though he acknowledges that the challenges of the twenty-first century require a different perspective on the role of the tribe. He sounds a cautionary note, for example, when discussing the increase in competitive “camel shows“ throughout Saudi Arabia which have given rise to bitter rivalries among tribes. Nevertheless, he does not condemn these contests, which have been criticized in numerous recent articles and blogs.

In contrast, writing in “Al-Saha” under a pseudonym, “Akay” sees tribalism as a negative influence. He accuses U.S. Intelligence of seeking to “divide and conquer” by fermenting tribal allegiance in Afghanistan and Iraq to counteract Muslim unity generally and the *Mujahidin* specifically. For him, the latest surge in tribal competition in the Saudi Kingdom is far from benign. Rather, he sees it as an extension of that “divide and conquer” policy, fragmenting the Kingdom into competing factions. The author concludes that the focus on tribal allegiances will be detrimental to the accomplishments achieved under the banner of a unified Islam.

Other writers took a more pragmatic approach toward these tribal rivalries, avoiding any direct implication that foreign countries may be a threat to Islam. They did, however, criticized the lavish spending on these tribal competitions as contributing to the spread of tribal fanaticism, the misallocation of resources and the destruction of national unity.

Old habits die hard and the power of tribal affiliation, with the exception of Egypt, can still be observed to different degrees in almost every country in the Arab World. The evolution of these allegiances will most likely have a significant impact on politics in the Middle East, including Iraq.

Source: 'Ali al-Khushayban 10/22 in Alriyadh - Pseudonum: Akay 10/18 in Al-Saha
<http://www.alriyadh.com/2007/10/22/article288293.html>
<http://alsaha.fares.net/sahat?14@128.oRYGiMcshmf.25@.3baa7332>
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