# Saudi Arabia's Neom Project, the Howeitat Conflict and Tribe-State Relations

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/08/24/saudi-arabias-neom-project-the-howeitat-conflict-and-tribe-state-relations/

CHELSI MUELLER AND HELENA SCHMIDT, AUG 24 2023

A conflict between some tribesmen and the Saudi regime over land earmarked for development has garnered much attention from the media as of late. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman plans to construct a futuristic "smart city" called Neom, in the northwestern Tabuk province of Saudi Arabia adjacent to the Red Sea. This would require the application of the controversial law of eminent domain to appropriate land that has traditionally been the home to an Arabian tribe known as the Howeitat (al-Ḥuwayṭāt). A number of Howeitat tribesmen have paid a high price for defying eviction orders or protesting the development plans. One was killed in a confrontation with Saudi security forces, three face harsh prison sentences and three face execution. Much of the media attention has focused on the trampling of human rights. An important angle of the story that has not received much attention is the infighting between different members of the Howeitat tribe.

The conflict centers around the land on which the megacity "Neom" is being built. The Neom project has been depicted as "the city of the future" replete with flying taxis, robotic maids, and an eco-friendly habitat functioning off of solar and wind energy. To understand how Neom is driving a wedge between different factions of the Howeitat, it is critical to understand that Neom is just one component of Bin Salman's "Vision 2030." Vision 2030 is an ambitious plan to prepare the Kingdom for a low-carbon future by diversifying the production of goods and services, developing the private sector, and fostering a self-sufficient economy that will support the standard of living that citizens have become accustomed to. Another integral aspect of Bin Salman's drive to prepare Saudi Arabia for the transition away from the oil rentier economy and toward a market-based economy is the promotion of territorial nationalism in a country in which it has always been weak. For Bin Salman, strengthening nationalist sentiment involves attenuating some tribal and religious power centers and strengthening the direct linkages between the state and its citizens. This article will apply insights about tribal politics drawn from the anthropological literature about tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and present the Howeitat's response to Neom as a case study that can shed light on the changing relationship between tribes and the Saudi state under the new leadership of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

Mohammad bin Salman will one day inherit the throne held by his elderly father, King Salman, but he is widely regarded as the Kingdom's de facto ruler, owing to the suspicion that his father has been incapacitated by dementia. Mohammad bin Salman will be the youngest to rule Saudi Arabia and he will also be the first grandson of Abdulaziz ibn Al Saud (Ibn Saud), the Kingdom's founder, to inherit the throne. Until now, Ibn Saud's predecessors have all been his sons. Poised to rule for the next fifty years or so, Bin Salman faces the unique challenge of maintaining domestic stability and regime security during the era in which the world moves away from fossil fuels and toward renewable sources of energy. Since the discovery of oil in 1938, the Saudi royal family and its state apparatus have used oil to maintain stability by providing an extensive social welfare system as well as employment in the security services and public sector. Public sector jobs are mediated by patron-client relationships with tribes, clans and important business families. For example, the patron-client relationship between the Al Saud and the Howeitat is prominently expressed in the inclusion of the Howeitat in the Saudi Arabian National Guard.

The Howeitat are a large tribe whose traditional territory fans out from Aqaba in all directions. Today they inhabit Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Egypt and Iraq. The Abu Tayyi segment hails from a group of camel-breeding nomads

that played a prominent role in the "Arab Revolt" during WWI under the leadership of 'Awda Abu Tayy. An early history (Peake 1958, 212-14) tells us that their historical rivals, the Ibn Jazi, were a semi-sedentary branch of the Howeitat that dwelled north of Aqaba. The oppositionists to Neom hail from the al-Taqiqa segment whose shaykhs traditionally ruled from Duba and became settled along the Red Sea coast before the First World War.

The creation of the Palestine Mandate after WWI, and its subsequent partition into Palestine and Transjordan, laid a new colonially determined and arbitrary boundary through the desert and through the tribal abode of the Howeitat. The new lines on the map neither reflected nor determined the political orientation of the tribes nor did they obstruct their movements. Joseph Kostiner (1993, 129-30) who chronicled the role of tribes in the establishment of the Saudi state tells us that the Abu Tayy section supported Ibn Saud though they dwelled in the Emirate of Transjordan. The history of the tribe in the early 1930s was characterized by shifting allegiances and cross-border raiding, especially from the north to the south. When the Al Saud from the Najd conquered the Hijaz they subsequently divided it into administrative districts. The al-Taqiqa tribal land was circumscribed within the Duba district and later attached to the Tabuk Province. In 1932 the Kingdom of Hejaz and Najd was unified as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Due to their migratory way of life, the collective identity and organization of tribes have been remarkably resilient even as modern boundaries have been drawn and state structures have swallowed up the land that they have traditionally dwelled in. The Howeitat are a pertinent example. Though they found themselves straddling new borders, they maintained their tribal values and did what they needed to do to survive in the traditional sense and as a unit. Ibn Khaldun, the renowned 14$^{th}$ century Arab historian, explained in his seminal work, the *Muqaddimah*, that Bedouin place high value on *'asabiyya*, the social cohesion of the kinship group. Bedouin also have a special relationship with the desert. The solitude of the desert provided a means by which tribes could most effectively preserve their autonomy and distinctiveness as a social unit. Its harsh environment and limited resources taught them to move about in search of grazing lands for their livestock, water sources, and favorable climactic conditions. Migration patterns also brought them in contact with settled populations with whom they engaged in trade and exchange; however, nomads regarded the settled lifestyle with contempt and extolled their own way of living as superior and as the way that people were created to live. Traditionally, they addressed their need for security and quest for autonomy by entering into *ad hoc* arrangements with other tribes as well as local and external political actors. These arrangements were temporary transactions, whose dynamics were shaped by the relative power of one group to another and the tribal balance of power in the area. As states were carved out of the Arabian Peninsula, new power centers were consolidated, and hydrocarbon-based rentier economies took shape, Bedouin often resisted urbanization, and continued in their traditional livelihoods. Even as individual tribesmen became de facto citizens of states, they maintained and prioritized their association with their kinship group, ranking tribal identity and solidarity as the most important social and political marker in their dealings with each other and with outsiders.

When it consolidated power, the House of Saud infused the state ethos with tribal values, placed an emphasis on its own tribal identity in the national narrative, and relied on patronage and tribal modes of administration for political legitimacy. At the outset, tribes and the Saudi state enjoyed a relatively symbiotic relationship that involved give and take on all sides. Subsequent processes, such as the consolidation of the oil-based economy, urbanization, globalization and changing gender roles, have slowly eroded the this "social contract" as well as the salience of kinship ties. Today, Mohammad bin Salman, is writing a new chapter in this process as he works to centralize power in his own hands while at the same time modernize the country. Bin Salman's policies have sought to weaken and control older structures such as the Wahhabi establishment, clientelist business networks and tribes. An integral part of that drive has been his promotion of civic nationalism as a solidarity framework and point of reference that is more modern and thus superior to Wahhabism and tribalism. This nationalization campaign which has been waged in digital, economic, social and cultural arenas connects nationalism with the future and coalesces handily with futuristic projects such as Neom. The futuristic smart city is being promoted by Saudi royals as a "great victory for the Saudi nation."

Modernity, however, is a two-edged sword; it cuts both ways. The modern experience has also strengthened the bonds of solidarity within tribes. For example, the rise of social media and digital platforms has enabled tribes to unite and communicate more efficiently than ever. Tribal message boards which have been used to construct and document tribal lineages and glorify tribal values, have served to reinforce tribal particularism and association even

as the regime works to promote a broad and inclusive civic identity framework. These digital platforms have also been used to strengthen the bonds of solidarity within tribes and deliberately counteract the regime's nationalization project. Most recently, social media channels such as Twitter, Signal and Telegram have been leveraged by some members of the Howeitat to fight back against the regime's seizure of their property.

The Saudi state's plans to develop its northwestern Tabuk province into a planned linear city styled "Neom," required the appropriation of private property through the application of eminent domain. But a lack of transparency and perceived fairness in the compensation policies has widened divisions within the tribe by enriching the pockets of some to the tune of up to 1.3 million, while allegedly short-changing others. Some of the dissatisfied tribesmen made it known that they refused to leave their property and prepared for a confrontation with the security services. Things escalated very quickly on 13 April 2020 when Saudi security services shot and killed Abdul Rahim al-Hwaiti after forcing their way into his house, while his supporters viewed a video that he posted to Twitter hours before in which he anticipated the raid and denounced "state terrorism." His wife, who launched a protest campaign from London, posted footage of his funeral, showing that it drew a large crowd despite the presence of state security. In response to the crisis, ten shaykhs, representing different sub-sections of the Howeitat tribe provided a letter to the Saudi government which was subsequently published in the Arabic press on 27 April 2020, in which they distanced themselves from the Howeitat oppositionists, declared allegiance to the King and Crown Prince, expressed their support for the Neom project and hailed the myriad ways in which Neom would promote human development, prosperity and progress for generations to come. This was reinforced with a televised "march of loyalty" in which the "shaykh of shaykhs" Aoun bin Abdullah Abu Taqiqa was interviewed by a television reporter against a backdrop of camel-mounted tribesmen waving the Saudi flag and displaying a portrait of the King.

Buoyed by the show of support, Bin Salman adopted a decisive and heavy-handed approach toward the Howeitat youths, sanctioning additional arrests and even the imposition of the death penalty. The London-based Howeitat opposition appealed to the international community to intervene on humanitarian grounds alleging that they are being displaced from their traditional tribal land, and that the appropriation of their property is predicated on serious shortcomings in Saudi Arabia's laws of eminent domain. They are also calling upon foreign countries and businesses involved with the Neom project to use whatever leverage they can to protect the human rights of the Howeitat. The Howeitat number about 40,000 in Saudi Arabia and comprise about 8 percent of the population in the Tabuk province. The opposition to the Neom project is centered in al-Khurayba and its vicinity, on the coast of the Red Sea near the border with Jordan, whereas the paramount shaykh is based further south in port Duba, the historical center of the Huwaitat.

The Neom project and the state's policies for appropriating the land on which it is being built have deepened a rift within the Howeitat tribe and undermined the ability of its leadership to lay claim to a powerful constituency. This gives testament to the erosion of the authority of tribal leaders in Saudi Arabia, especially over young people. Moreover, the regime is learning that the promotion of nationalism works in antithetical ways. Encouraging civic engagement and the notion that individuals have responsibilities toward their nation, raises expectations about the individual rights they ought to enjoy, such as the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The case of the Howeitat's division over the issue of Neom brings into view the dramatic restructuring of state-society relations and portends a decidedly weaker role for tribes and kinship groups in Mohammed bin Salman's "new Saudi Arabia."

**References**

"Al-Huwaytat," Mawsuʿat al-Waṭan, n.d., https://shorturl.at/gzABX (accessed 18 June 2023).

ALQST (London), "Death sentence upheld for three men who resisted neom project." 24 January 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yzsru9yv (accessed 17 August 2023).

ALQST (London), "The Dark Side of Neom: Expropriation, Expulsion and Prosecution [sic] of the Region's Inhabitants," February 2023, https://alqst.org/uploads/the-dark-side-of-neom-expropriation-expulsion-and-prosecution-en.pdf (accessed 17 August 2023).

al-Sumayri, Fayez, "Qabaʿil al-Huwaytat: Neyom wa Amala, mashariʿa khayr lamanatina wala yaqif amaʿaha illa 'muflass' wa 'hasid' [Al-Huwaitat tribes: NEOM and Amal are good projects for our region, and only "bankrupt" and "envious" people stand in their way]," Al-Madina (Jeddah), 27 April 2020, https://shorturl.at/vwNQX (accessed 18 June 2023).

Al-Zawati, Mustafa, "Naskun huna qabla al-dawla …" Raseef22 (Beirut) 6 May 2020, https://shorturl.at/ahkHO (accessed 21 June 2023).

Arab News, "Saudi Arabia to host the 2029 Asian Winter Games at NEOM," 4 October 2022, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2174656/sport (accessed 11 June 2023).

Dawood, N. J., ed., *Ibn Khaldun: The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1987).

Elphinston, W. G., "The Future of the Bedouin in Northern Arabia." International Affairs (The Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-45), 21 (3), pp, 370-375. https://doi.org/10.2307/3018800

Horton, Michael, "Saudi Arabia's heavy-handed approach to tribesmen will backfire." The Jamestown Foundation, 15 May 2020, https://jamestown.org/program/saudi-arabias-heavy-handed-approach-to-tribesmen-will-backfire/ (accessed 2 March 2023).

Kostiner, Joseph, *The Making of Saudi Arabia, 1916-1936: from Chieftancy to Monarchical State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 129-130.

Lawrence, T. E., Revolt in the Desert (England: J. Cape, 1927).

Lybyer, Albert H., "Ibn Saud Crushes Arab Revolt." *Current History*, 36, September 1932, pp. 752-755.

Maisel, Sebastian, "The new rise of tribalism in Saudi Arabia," *Nomadic Peoples*, 18(2), pp. 100-122, 2014, https://doi.org/10.3197/np.2014.180207

Peake, Frederick Gerard, *A History of Jordan and Its Tribes* (University of Miami Press, 1958), pp. 212-214.

UN Human Rights Office, "Saudi Arabia: UN experts alarmed by imminent executions linked to NEOM project," 3 May 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/saudi-arabia-un-experts-alarmed-imminent-executions-linked-neom-project (accessed 21 May 2023).

Sabq Online (Riyadh), "'al-Huwaytat: tanzim musiara wala' lil-qiyada yataqaddamuhum shaykh mushayyikh al-qabila' [Al-Huwaitat: The organization of a march of loyalty to the leadership led by the shaykh of shaykhs," 26 April 2020, https://sabq.org/saudia/23sfx4 (accessed 18 June 2023).

Saleh, Nassir A., "The emergence of Saudi Arabian administrative areas: a study in political geography," PhD thesis (Durham University: 1975) http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/8115/ (accessed 18 June 2023).

Zalayat, Ilan, "Saudi Arabia's New Nationalism: Embracing Jahiliyyah," TA Notes, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2022, https://dayan.org/content/saudi-arabias-new-nationalism-embracing-jahiliyyah (accessed 21 May 2023).

---

**About the author:**

**Chelsi Mueller** is an assistant professor in the Department of Security Studies and International Affairs at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida. She earned her PhD in Middle Eastern History from Tel Aviv University in Israel. She is the author of *The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict: Nationalism and Sovereignty in the Gulf* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

**Helena Schmidt** earned her B.A. in Homeland Security from the Department of Security Studies and International Affairs at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida.