

Why Human Geography Matters Middle East and North Africa

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1. Introduction

Human Geography data is critical to regional understanding especially in the Middle East and North Africa, because tribal allegiances do not follow political boundaries.

As we see with current events, the Middle East and North Africa are fraught with conflict given the diverse religious and ethnic heritage. At the same time, these regions boast the largest producers of oil in the world and serve as major players in fueling the global economy. As a result, disruptions here can cause serious impacts to the U.S. and global economies. GSI is at the forefront of creating Human Geography data showing this content.

The Middle East including the Arabian Peninsula

Because conflicts and power in these regions may stem from tribal, ethnic, and religious allegiances, understanding the human landscape is important. For example, tribal alliances may be a key component of the current Sa'dah conflict in north Yemen involving Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Two of the most influential tribes in Yemen are *Ḥāshid* and *Bakīl*. According to the International Crisis Group, the *Ḥāshid* tribe is taking the Yemeni government side and supporting the Saudi intervention in the war; in contrast, the *Bakīl* alliance is taking the side of the *Houthi* rebels, which are fighting for rights as Yemeni citizens.¹

Geographic Services Inc. (GSI) is currently producing Yemen and Somalia Human Geography (HG) databases, has produced an Iraq (version 2.0) HG database, and has just launched production of a Libya HG database. All of these datasets fall under our *Human Atlas*TM product line. From our Yemen Human AtlasTM dataset, **Figure 1** shows an example of the *Ḥāshid* and *Bakīl* tribes (orange and green respectively) in two Yemeni districts, Raydah and Khārif.

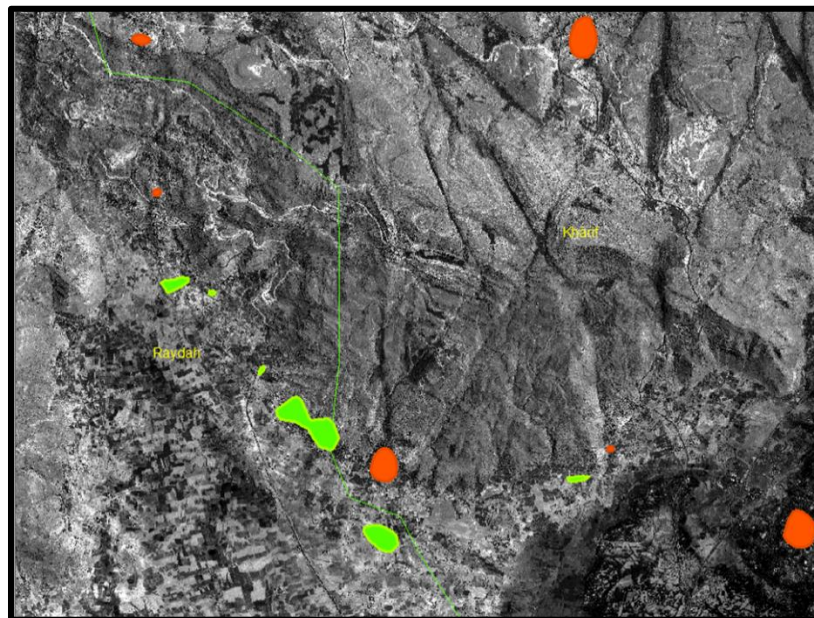


Figure 1. Tribes in Conflict. *The Ḥāshid and Bakīl tribes have taken opposing sides in the recent Yemeni conflict (Sa'dah Insurgency). Knowing their locations relative to one another may help in conflict management.*

While GSI's Yemen Human AtlasTM data provides a useful footprint in understanding the tribal hierarchies within the country, expanding this to the greater Middle East and North Africa will uncover the extent of tribal influence irrespective of international boundaries, shedding light on the under-currents of the political landscape. In the case of the Yemeni conflict, GSI has identified tribes affiliated with *Ḥāshid* and *Bakīl*. Showing an international linkage, the *Yām* tribe resides in the border city of Najrān, Saudi Arabia and this tribe is linked to the Yemen-based *Ḥāshid* tribe. Additionally, the Yemeni president is of the *Sanḥān* tribe belonging to the influential tribe, *Ḥāshid*. Mapping these cross-border tribal linkages, especially in light of the current conflicts helps to better understand the regional politics and improves policy and military decisions in the region.

¹ <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iran-gulf/yemen/yemen-disorder-on-the-border.aspx>

Yemen and Saudi Arabia had disputed their border since 1934. In May 2000, the countries resolved their sixty-six year border dispute through the Jeddah treaty. According to Al-Rammah and Awass from Sheba Center for Strategic Studies, political boundaries do not necessarily reflect tribal allegiances. They explain:

“The 2000 Jeddah treaty divided some of the tribes living on both sides of the frontier into two parts; one part is inside the Yemeni territories, and the other inside Saudi territories. Some tribes opposed to such division claim that it separated the tribesmen of the same tribe and the common grazing lands.”²

They further describe how these tribes pressured the respective governments into giving them special access to the other country as well as tax exemptions for grazing³.

Among those who have disputed the treaty are the *Wa'ilā* and *Yām* tribes, given their 241-year-old agreement describing tribal boundaries⁴. Clearly, the arbitrary political boundary determined in 2000 does not break the tribal affiliations on either side of the international border.

In addition to better understanding the conflicts such as in Yemen, GSI's Human Atlas™ data is useful in:

- tracking cross-border terrorist movements;
- monitoring the smuggling of weapons, explosives, drugs, untaxed goods, and people;
- tracking illegal immigrants coming up from the Horn of Africa through Yemen to Saudi Arabia⁵;
- linking humans with attacks on critical assets such as oil pipelines.

In the case of the terrorist attack on the “USS Cole” in October 2000 and on the French oil tanker “Lumberg” for example, the source of the attack was traced to Yemenis who had been living in Saudi Arabia. Given the glut of weapons and explosives in Yemen and the lack thereof in the greater AP, smugglers have found this activity to be a lucrative venture. These weapons sources were used in recent terrorist attacks including the 2003 Riyadh explosions and the 2004 attacks against the American Consulate in Jeddah⁶. Furthermore, economic disparities drive illegal immigration from Yemen and the Horn of Africa to Saudi Arabia. With its rich oil revenues, Saudi Arabia boasts nearly a 900% higher 2010 per capita Gross Domestic Product (Purchase Price Parity adjusted) than Yemen⁷. Human Geography data can help in understanding this movement of people around the Arabian Peninsula, and also tie it into the Horn of Africa with GSI's Somalia database that is currently under production.

There are a number of other groups within the AP and the greater Gulf region that have influence through religious or financial control or simply through sheer numbers. For instance, the Kurdish people represent a large population primarily in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. According to the CIA World FactBook⁸, Kurds make up 15-20% of Iraq and 20% of Turkish populations. With its concentration along the Iraq-Turkey border, this group is often seen as a threat to Turkish homogeneity⁹. Furthermore, Kurds have taken control of oil-rich northern Iraq including Kirkuk, a potential source of conflict. Other important groups include the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries cartel. These groups are regional power players with deep roots in the AP. Further underscoring the religious heterogeneity in this region, the eastern part of Saudi Arabia (where the oil is) is mainly inhabited by Shī'ah citizens. In addition, Bahrain's population is mainly Shī'ah (some estimates claim that Shī'ah in Bahrain are close to 90% of the population), though Bahrain is ruled by the Khalifah family who are Sunni. There is also a significant minority of Shī'ah in Kuwait as well as in the United Arab Emirates. Given their often turbulent history, this Sunni and Shī'ah mix living together is important to understand.

North Africa including Libya

Like the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa is fraught with conflict and unrest as demonstrated by the recent uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia; thus, understanding the Human Terrain is critical to policymaking, military, intelligence, as well as investment and economic development. To address this need, in March 2011, GSI kicked off its Libya Human Atlas™ project. As a NY Times article noted, “*Tribal leaders will play a central role in a post-Qaddafi Libya, including creation of a provisional government, promulgation of a constitution, and the conduct of*

² Al-Rammah, K. A., & Awass, A. A. (2009). Yemeni-Saudi Experience of Joint Border Management. Sheba Center for Strategic Studies.

³ (Al-Rammah & Awass, 2009)

⁴ The Estimate. (2000, June 30). The Yemeni-Saudi Border Treaty. The Estimate - Political & Security Intelligence Analysis of the Islamic World and its Neighbors, XII(13). <http://www.theestimate.com/public/063000.html>

⁵ (Al-Rammah & Awass, 2009)

⁶ (Al-Rammah & Awass, 2009)

⁷ www.imf.org

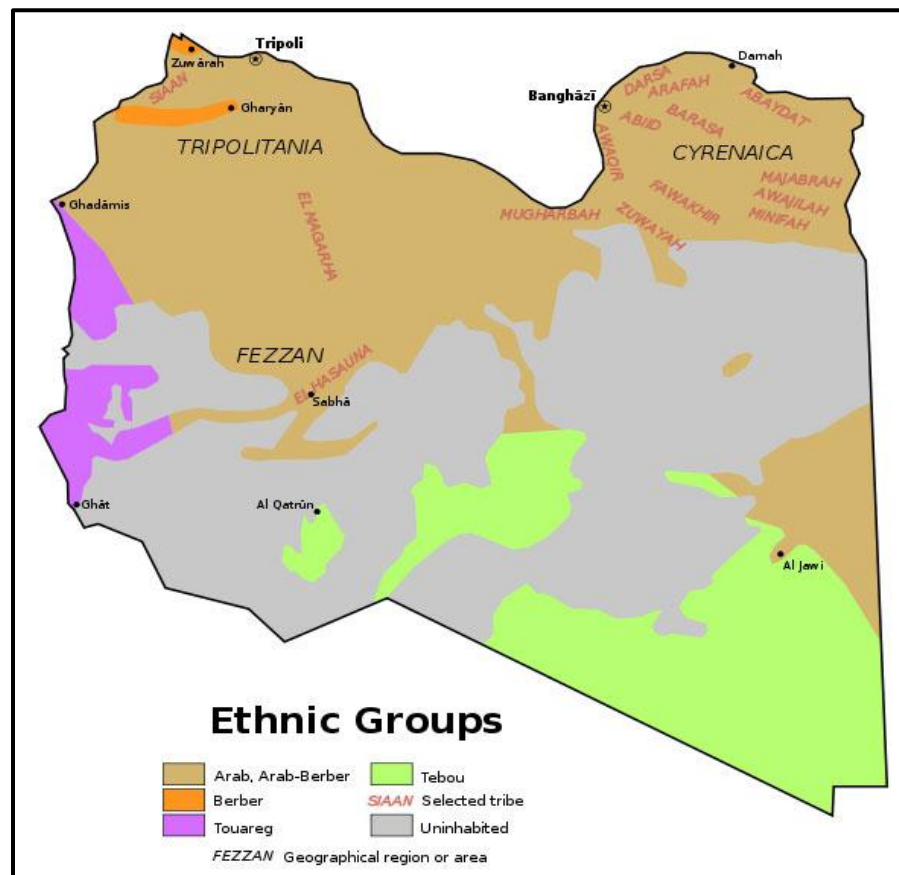
⁸ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

⁹ <http://countrystudies.us/turkey/26.htm>

free elections."¹⁰ As demonstrated by Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia Human Atlas™ projects, GSI's expertise in developing HG databases that reveal tribal dynamics, ensures that vital information in dealing with the turmoil in Libya and its aftermath will be available to analysts, policymakers, and investors alike. The tribal system in Libya has a great deal in common with that of Yemen. In Libya as in Yemen the regime has a long history of manipulating the tribes and buying their loyalties. As in Yemen the "tribe" in Libya is not defined by only blood lineage but also by territorial presence.

By Libyan standards, Qadhafi's own tribe, the Ghadafa [Qadhadhfhah], is a small and insignificant tribe. The Qadhadhfhah is an Arabized Berber tribe, tracing its roots to Sidi Qadhafaddam, a well-known wali (saint) buried in Al-Gharyan, south of Tripoli. The Qadhadhfhah consider themselves murabitoun (saintly) and Ashraf (of the lineage of the Prophet). The Qadhadhfhah were driven to the desert around Sirte by an alliance of tribes from the Sa'adi confederation, led by the Bara'sa (the tribe that Qadhafi's wife, Farkash al-Haddad al-Bara'sa, comes from) and the Maghara. Qadhafi's Qadhadhfhah tribe relies on a confederation with other tribes to remain in power. The degree of political allegiance to the ruling regime in Tripoli varies from one tribe to the next, particularly over the forty-two years that Gaddafi has been in power. The tribe which has the strongest, and longest, ties to the Gaddafi region is the Magariha tribe.

Libyan tribes played an important role in the country's fight against Ottoman, and later Italian, colonialism, with many Libyan tribal members sacrificing their lives in this war. It is believed that there are currently around 140 different tribes and clans in Libya (see graphic below), many of which have influences and members outside of the country, from Tunisia to Egypt to Chad; however, Libyan tribes and clans that have genuine and demonstrable influence on the country number no more than 30 tribes and family clans.



Given the tribal connection across borders, GSI is actively producing data for this area and plans to expand to other critical areas within North Africa to ensure comprehensive regional coverage.

¹⁰ St. John, Ronald Bruce, Why Tribes Matter, New York Times online edition, 23 February 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/02/23/libya-after-qaddafi/why-tribes-matter-in-libya>