**Tribalism in Najd Prior to the Wahhabi Movement**

**Author’s Name and Credentials**

**Abstract**

The present article deals with Najd tribal society, the relations between sedentary and nomadic populations and their impact on the development of Wahhabi movement in the eighteenth century. Throughout that century, Najdi tribes were imbued with the religious zeal of Wahhabism that rose in 1744, fell in 1818, reconsolidated in the twentieth century and remains prevalent today. Saudi–Wahhabi power structures have relied on tribal coalitions led by the political leaders of the House of Saud and religious scholars headed by the Al-Wahhab family. The article situates Najdi tribal structure within models suggested by Western scholars and compares these to the theories of Ibn Khaldun. Some historians reject the use of theories and models, arguing that the historian’s job is simply to study, describe and explain past events. However, anyone interested in studying tribalism and related social phenomena will find that theories and models offer important insight for understanding historical events without subordinating the historical research to them. The article surveys ecological development in Najd during history to identify changing models from historical records.

**Keywords:**

**Introduction**

A number of anthropologists and historians of the Middle East and North Africa have studied tribal structures and their significant impact on society as a whole. Most researchers have formulated theories based on ethnographic and historical research conducted in the region. Some theories have provoked dispute, but some have fostered cooperation between anthropological and historical approaches. Scholars note that tribes and tribalism have played a salient role since before the rise of Islam up until today, with tribal structures persisting in many parts of the Arab world despite socio-political developments that have seen them disappear in other areas of the world. Tapper notes that, while anthropologists have conducted historical research by scouring archives and chronicles as well as oral narratives, historians ‘have enriched their interpretation with ethnographic, theoretical, and comparative insights from anthropology’ (Tapper 1990: 48). Al-Tayb, in his hefty ten-volume encyclopaedia based his research on almost all the written and many of the oral sources relating to Arab tribes. Although he claims that his constructions of tribal lineages according to the sources are reliable, he admits that such constructions cannot be definitively asserted as fact. He summarizes these findings in the introduction to the encyclopaedia, indicating that tribes are not only actual or putative kinship groups, but also extended families transformed into recognised tribes through the name of their ancestors. In his attempt to trace the heritage of these groups that are called tribes, he presents many examples since the pre-Islamic period until today where knowledge about lineage is confused, with sources providing sometimes controversial accounts. Even when he discusses tribes of ‘true lineage’ (*nasb* *sārih*), he acknowledges that tracing their lines can be an impossible task since external genealogical elements may have been introduced over time. This explains, for example, why researchers find Qahtani tribe lineages mixed with ’Adnani ones and *vice versa* (Al-Tayb 1997: 17-18).

Al-Tayb’s observation fits with the structure of a tribe as a social unit that gathers together several groups whose members claim descent from a common ancestor. Within this structure, a family is part of a larger body of more distant relatives which are, in turn, part of larger formations (Ibid.: 20-24). Under this hierarchy, brothers would fight against cousins unless outsiders fought them, as expressed in the Arab proverb: ‘My brothers and I against cousins, and my cousins and I against the world.’

 The historical record of Najd both before and after the emergence of the Saudi–Wahhabi movement shows that tribes whose members settled in the area sometimes adopted new names for their ancestry and even changed their lineal affiliations in accordance with the circumstances of sedentary life. Due to migration since fifteenth century, the tribal structure of the region had changed. Both old and newcomer tribes were never isolated from the wider political, social, and religious culture beyond and also had a great impact on that culture themselves (Al-Juhany 2002: 62-95).

In the conclusion to the edited collection *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, Hourani poses the following questions: What is a tribe in the Muslim world? What is the state in that world? (Hourani 1990: 303). In the context of this study, one can ask what the connection is between tribalism and the Saudi state that has enabled tribal structures to survive into modern times? Samin attempts to answer this question and, while acknowledging ‘the dynamic and contingent nature of tribal identity in modern Saudi Arabia’ (Samin 2005: 16), argues that ‘genealogical consciousness’ has ‘survived into the modern age relatively intact’ (Ibid.: 73). Samin contends that the genealogically-based culture that re-emerged in the Saudi state contributed to the rediscovery or invention of patrilineal affiliations to prominent Arabian tribes that would promote to individuals’ integration into the religious and administrative institutions of the state (Ibid.: 82-86). Samin’s findings echo those of Kostiner on the period from 1902 to the 1930s. Kostiner analyses the interaction between the tribal structure of the society and political, religious, and military developments. He underlines the role of tribal affinities in the formation of the modern Saudi state in 1930s and argues that the interaction between both processes determined the state’s territorial and institutional features. In his assessment of the role played by tribal chiefs in the consolidation of political power, he relies on many examples of the process of creating a military and a kind of governance system based on the leadership of the tribes. Incorporating chiefs into the military and the administration enabled the House of Saud to extend its centralised control over vast territories and to consolidate a state alongside economic, social and political changes in the Arabian Peninsula. The tribal chiefs who ran the administration and military also benefited from the economic and social prerogatives provided by the state to set up a socio-political system called ‘the chieftaincy’ (Kostiner 1990: 226-228). Crone, however, argues that tribes and states are two diametrically opposed phenomena, that tribes have to be destroyed in order to make way for state, and that the state undermines tribal organization rather than fosters it (Crone 1986: 72-73).

**Kinship as a Principle of Tribal Organization**

Tapper devotes a special passage to criticising Crone’s reassessment of the importance of kinship as principle of organization. He argues that kinship systems in the Middle East are socially-constructed models of reality and that researchers, administrators, political actors and travellers have different definitions of the tribe: in some arenas, tribes-people ‘are renowned as hardy mountain villagers, in others they are supposedly desert-dwelling pastoral nomads’ (Tapper 1990: 53-54) and that ‘elsewhere the stereotype is strong centralized confederacies under powerful and aristocratic chiefs’ (Ibid.: 63). He sees Middle Eastern tribes as undergoing evolutionary, cyclical and alternating change processes. Political evolution in scale and complexity from tribe to state or state-like confederacy ‘involving the unification of disparate groups, centralization of authority, and stratification has occurred again and again, as has evolution from kinship and descent to territorial allegiance and control of means of production as principles of organization’ (Ibid.: 67).

The centrality of kinship to society in Arabia, even after the establishment of the Saudi kingdom in 1932, recalls the point Schneider makes that some scholars see kinship systems as socially constructed models of reality, emphasizing the social over the biological significance of kinship, while others argue that socio-cultural relationships combine with biological relationships that are recognized and valued and which are, therefore, in themselves socio-cultural (Schneider 1984: 45-56; 127-132). Schneider defines kinship as relations that arise out of human sexual reproduction. According to him, any study of kinship should be based on the assumption that ‘blood is thicker than water’, and that ‘without this assumption much that has been written about kinship simply does not make sense’(Ibid.: 165). ‘Blood is thicker than water’ corresponds to the vernacular Arab proverb: *al-damm ma bisīr may* (‘blood cannot become water’). Although Schneider recognizes that ‘economics, politics, and religion can serve as idioms expressing certain social conditions’, he emphasizes that ‘they rarely serve as the all-purpose idiom that kinship is said to provide’ (Ibid.: 176). In order to understand the development of social relations and conditions where kinship plays the dominant role, Schneider advises researchers to look for ‘the rules of who could copulate with whom, who had rights over whom, who had social bonds with whom’ (Ibid.: 99). Despite the fact that reproduction exists in every form of social life, he stresses that biological kinship plays a dominant role in determining the social order in a kin-based society, stating: “Robbed of its grounding in biology, kinship is nothing’ (Ibid.: 112).

Schneider evokes the theory of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who based his work on a personal assessment of Middle East and North Africa’s social life in the Middle Ages, though a comparison between the two writers is complicated by their living in different times and cultures. Ibn Khaldun places kinship at the centre of his theory on *’asabiyya* (‘social solidarity’) which is a key concept in his theorisation of the development of societies. In his concept of societal bonds, Ibn Khaldun enumerates several groupings encompassed by *’asabiyya,* such as *qabīla* (‘tribe’), *sha’b* (‘people’ or ‘great tribe’), *qawm* (‘group’), *umma* (‘people’), *milla* (‘organized religion’) and *dawla* (‘state’). This *’asabiyya* consists of tribal spirit and loyalty, blood kinship, group adherence and collective consciousness. Ibn Khaldun devotes a special place in his *Muqaddimah* to the delineation of his concept of kinship and its implication for *’asabiyya*. He distinguishes between *silat al-raḥm* (‘biological kinship’) and *nasb* (‘lineage’), where the formeris the natural human relationship and the latter either pure or mixed. He states that *‘silat al-raḥm* is something natural among human beings, with the rarest exception’ (Ibn Khaldun 1986: 128-131). *Silat al-raḥm* ‘leads to affection for one’s relations and blood relatives, that no harm ought to befall them nor any destruction come upon them…This has been a natural urge in man for long as there have been human beings’ (Ibid.: 264). Ibn Khaldun distinguishes two categories of tribes by reference to lineage: pure or mixed/corrupted. He argues that pure lineage characterizes those tribes who live in desert, where there is no agriculture and little animal husbandry, while those tribes living in fertile pastures pay little attention to preserving lineal purity (Ibid.: 266).

 One can assume that *silat al-raḥm*,as articulated by both Ibn Khaldun and Schneider is key to the emergence of kinship groups such as tribes. However, any attempt to conflate the concepts of kinship and tribe raises many questions. Both concepts are controversial because ‘kinship’ is conceptual and ‘tribe’ social in character. Ibn Khaldun holds that true lineage is the vehicle by which a group achieves social cohesion. According to him: ‘a person comes to be known as having the same descent as those (to whom he is attached) and is counted one of them with respect to things that result from (common descent), such as affection, the rights and obligation concerning talion and blood money, and so on.’ However, he acknowledges that ‘[i]n the course of time, the original descent is almost forgotten...Family lines …continually changed from tribal group to another, and some people developed close contact with others’ (Ibid.: 267). Although the available sources do not provide sufficient information on the development of tribal lineage in Najd, they reinforce the impression that Ibn Khaldun’s lineage theory is appropriate to its study.

Events during the development of the three Saudi–Wahhabi states historically would be inexplicable without the insights provided by theories and models. From the eighteenth century until the establishment of the Saudi kingdom in the 1930s, the Saudi–Wahhabi state emerged in sedentary areas and passed through cyclical evolutions and devolutions accompanied by changing tribal alliances. This invites historians to seek explanations that draw on theories and models suggested by Ibn Khaldun, Schneider, Tapper and others, despite the differences between them. In fact, historians, anthropologists and political scientists who deal with issues of tribes and states in the Middle East have often compared modern theories with those of Ibn Khaldun.

Investigating the shifting affiliations of tribes and extended families in the region suggests that the formation and dissolution of alliances in Najd were the result of tribal structure. Tribal structure in Najd over the three centuries that preceded the emergence of the Saudi–Wahhabi movement radically changed due to constant migration from and to the region. Although Najdi settlements include people who cannot claim tribal descent, such as slaves, artisans, traders, and *al*-*jīrān* (‘neighbours’, people under protection), tribes and their substructures encompass the bulk of the sedentary population. They have invoked tribal pedigree, fostering solidarity among their members, leading to constant divisions between them and the emergence of new chiefs who strive diligently to consolidate their political and economic power. Such new chiefs have consistently sought to foster *’asabiyya* within groups by claiming tribal pedigree.

 The upheavals that characterised the second Saudi state (1824-1891) provide striking examples of the problems of political order in tribal society. The civil wars in Najd at the end of the nineteenth century recall Ibn Khaldun’s theory on *khulq al-tawāhush* (‘savage character’) and *siyāsat* *al-mulk* (‘political order’) (Ibn Khaldun 1986: 149-152; 1958: 304-305). Due to their *khulq al-tawāhush*, the Arab tribes are the most remote groups from *siyāsat* *al-mulk* and the least willing to subordinate themselves to others. The historical descriptions of the dispute between the Saudi brothers, their sons, and their dispute with the Rashids, as well as the fierce feuds between rival tribal chiefs show that anarchy prevailed in this period. However, the restoration of the Saudi state in 1902 under the banner of Wahhabism underlines the viewpoint of Ibn Khaldun that tribal *’asabiyya* could not maintain social cohesion and dynastic state power for long without such religious zeal. The emergence, dissolution and re-emergence of the Saudi state exemplify Ibn Khaldun’s model of states. States which are based only on tribal *‘asabiyya* are characterized by unsustainable anarchy, but those based on religious zeal can foster a religious *‘asabiyya* that enable them to survive longer. Despite tribal rivalries and external intervention, the ability of the Saudi–Wahhabi religious movements since the eighteenth century to survive has been preeminent.

Mojuetan addresses religious *‘asabiyya* and its impact on political entities that are based on dynastical rule, viewing it as a very effective tool in forging tribal coalitions and establishing dynastic authority. When a dynasty establishes its rule among many different tribes and groups, religious *‘asabiyya* supplies the dynasty with additional power and strength, enabling it to overcome the centrifugal posture of rivals. Religion adds to *‘asabiyya* the feeling of commitment, producing a state of fanaticism among the devotees ready to die for their objectives (Moujetan 1981: 99). This is also reminiscent of Lapidus’s analysis of the interaction between tribe and state in Islamic history, underscoring the importance of religion in maintaining dynastic rule. However, Lapidus emphasizes that the concept of tribe is controversial: It could relate to a kinship group, an extended family, a coalition of related families, or be the title of family from which some larger confederation gets its name. Although he sometimes uses the term tribe for convenience, he emphasizes the political and religious chieftaincies as they emerged in the course of Islamic history. According to him, the normal structure of Middle Eastern societies since ancient times has been a tripartite organization of parochial groups called tribes or clans, religious associations based on network of religious scholars, and states (Lapidus 1990: 25-47). With regard to the role of religion, he avers that over the centuries ‘Islam became the almost universal metaphor of social organization and political legitimacy and the ideological basis of state-chieftaincy relations. Religious zeal was behind the expansion of the Islamic states and served symbolically as mediating factor in organization of tribes and as a unifying factor in their relation to the rest of society’(Ibid.: 44).

This supports Ibn Khaldun’s theory about the power of religion to maintain a strong *‘asabiyya* which prolongs the lifetime of a polity. However, religion cannot completely overcome the tribal *‘asabiyya.* Tribal leaders continue to assume authority among the members of the tribe. However, one should bear in mind that the concept of *‘asabiyya* implies to every human grouping, such as *qabīla*, *sha‘b*, *qawm,* *umma, milla* and *dawla*. In this regard, it worth noting that the translation of *‘asabiyya* as simply solidarity, *esprit* *de* *corps* or group power does not encompass all of its meanings contextually. In politics, *‘asabiyya* is an instrument for consolidating group coherence which can become sovereign and be sustained predominantly by an element of coercion. However, when Ibn Khaldun analyses the successful spread of Islam, he considers religion the main factor in achieving *‘asabiyya* based on *al-milla* or *al-umma*, enabling Islam to build an organized and powerful state. Nevertheless, when *‘asabiyya* enabled *al-ummah* to form a state, weakness in its leadership was the cause of its decline (Ibn Khaldun 1986: vol. 1, 313-327).

 Ever since the rise of the Wahhabi movement, the Saudi leadership has relied on the element of coercion. By assuming political power, the leadership produces changes in *‘asabiyya* turning it into a consolidation of kinship, alliances, religion and other factors. In this sense, there is a substantial difference between *‘asabiyya* as a function of lineal affiliation within a tribal unit and *‘asabiyya* as a function of affiliation within a wider political unit that is based on a coalition of several groups bound together by religion (Al-Azmeh 1981: 27-35). The Wahhabi movement has combined religious and political dimensions, introducing a sort of *abiyyas* similar to that which prevailed during the first period of the Islamic state when religion reinforced the solidarity of the Muslim *ummah* as a force that transcended tribal affiliations. As in that first period of Islam, the Saudi leadership were able to the Wahhabi mission to create an *‘asabiyya* based on religious zeal and to forge an alliance between the sedentary and nomadic tribes in Najd while maintaining the leadership of the Saudi clan. In this sense, thanks to their close relations with Wahhabi religious scholars (*’ulama’*)*,* the tribal chiefs (*ru’asa’*) of the Saudis became legitimatized leaders of a tribal coalition in which each tribe considers itself equal to any other. Saudi—Wahhabi polity, since its foundation, was based on chieftaincy, ruling the different tribes by using religious zeal as a vehicle for attenuating antagonism among them. Although the ruleof such chieftaincy created a hierarchy, it continued to be based on tribal coalition. One tribe or tribal branch such as the Saudis could lead through a consensus of the chiefs (Kostiner 1985: 298-323).

An understanding of the tribes in Najd before and after the rise of the Saudi–Wahhabi movement should take in consideration that Najdis have been made up of several groups: some nomadic, some sedentary and some having become settled both before and after the rise of the movement. These different characteristics enabled some parts of tribes to re-coalesce into independent clans. The historical records show that some newcomers into sedentary areas of Najd expressed their identity using the metaphor of common descent, while others established political power in towns under new chiefs. In many cases, Najdi chroniclers refer to towns by the names of their chiefs rather than through the name of a tribe. Chiefs developed ideologies through which they exploited putative kinship as a basis for association. Some groups labelled tribes were larger confederations divided into clans and/or small groups.

 Thus, the terms *qabīla* and *‘ashīra* were interchangeable in accordance with the level of their organization. This means that Najdi tribal structure was not frozen but shifted, crystalizing around a strong chief and the chiefs of the clans played an important role in its stratification. They normally allied themselves by marriage to members of other clans in order to strengthen their competitive power in relation to nearby groups. The development of the Saudi-Wahabi movement attests to the importance of Wahabi religious leaders in mediating between rival chiefs and clans, especially those in sedentary areas, thus reinforcing the political power of the Saudis in their urban headquarters, with the chiefs involved in regional politics, imposing their authority under Wahabi religious doctrine. The historical records show that the rise of the Saudi—Wahhabi political entity passed through a process in which clans progressed from small groups to chiefdoms to confederations and then to a state. However, the intervention of the Egyptians at the beginning of the eighteenth century and the civil wars at the end of the nineteenth century created a contrary disintegrative process of the political entity into smaller competing chiefdoms with feuds between nomads. The role played by nomads in these events suggests that political order within tribal nomadic society always faces the potential to disintegrate.

**Tribal Society in Najd: the Lack of Sources**

Study of tribes and tribalism in Najd before and after the emergence of Wahhabism is difficult owing to the lack of sources. Most that deal with the pre-state Saudi–Wahhabi movement are chronologies by religious scholars focussing on historical events and religious issues that do not provide sufficient information about the tribes themselves and their structures.

Since 1960, Saudi publishers have made great effort to publish almost all of the available chronicle manuscripts, theological treatises and biographies written by Wahhabis that deal with the history of Najd. Six published chronicles exemplify the character of Najdi historical records. Ahmad Ibn Manqur (1657–1714)’s *Tarikh al-Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Manqur* (History of Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Manqur) was edited and publishedby‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Khuwatir in 1970 and examines sedentary settlements in Najd before the rise of Wahhabism. Muhammad Ibn ‘Umar Al-Fakhiri (1772–1860)’s *Kaba’ir al-Akhbar al-Najdiyya* (‘The Great People of Najdi Affairs’) was edited and published by ‘Abdullah Ibn Yusuf al-Shibil in the 1980s and surveys certain historical events relating to Wahhabism. Husayn Ibn Ghannam (d. 1811)’s *Rawdat al-Afkar wa-l-Ifham li-Murtad al-Hal wa-l-Iman wa-T‘dad Ghazwat Dhawi al-Islam* was edited and published by Nasir al-Din Asa focuses on the development of Wahhabism in the eighteenth century and was dedicated to its founder. ‘Uthman Ibn Bishr (1780–1873)’s *‘Unwan al-Majd fi Tarikh.* This is the most comprehensive historical essay on Wahhabism from its emergence until the period of Al al-Shaykh and combines history with theology. Ibrahim Ibn Salih Ibn ‘Isa (d. 1924)’s *Tarikh Ba‘d al-Hawadith al-Waqi‘a fi Najd* (‘History of Certain Events in Najd’) was edited and published by Hamad al-Jasir in 1965 and its importance stems from the fact that it covers the whole history of the three Saudi states. Abdullah Ibn Muhammad al-Bassam (1851–1927)’s *Tuhfat al-Mushtaq min Akhbar Najd wa-l-Hijaz wa-l-‘Iraq* deals with historical events in Najd and its neighbouring regions and covers Wahhabism from its emergence until the second decade of the twentieth century. Al-Juhany (2002: 27-34) adds to these some unpublished chronologies that describe pre-eighteenth-century events such as that of Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Bassam (d. 1630), which can be accessed by Saudi historians. Al-Juhany also refers to other accounts of the eighteenth century collected at the beginning of the nineteenth by ‘Uthman Ibn Mansur (1788–1865) and later compiled together with ‘Uthman Ibn Bishr’s above-mentioned work (Ibid.: 4-5). These chronologies largely only hint at aspects of tribalism without giving reliable details for analysing tribal interrelations and the development of the Saudi–Wahhabi movement. Only a few refer directly to tribes. One of these is an incomplete manuscript by Hamad Ibn La‘bun al-Mudliji (d. 1839) that deals with his own clan, al-Mudlij in the region of Sudayr, and provides some information about the tribes of Arabia before and after the rise of Wahhabism, including a brief reference to the Saudi family. Another is by Muhammad al-Bassam al-Tamimi (d. 1830) which deals with tribes in Arabia, Syria, and Iraq. Other than these two manuscripts, genealogical sources deal with tribes in modern times (Ibid.: 14-15).

Referring to social life in Najd, modern sources distinguish between two categories: *al-qabaliyūn* and *al-khadiriyūn*. The name of the first is derived from the word *qabīla* and refers to kinship groups that claim descent from one of two Arab ancestors, ’Adnan and Qahtan, and can trace their origins to a known tribe. The second term refers to tradesmen and artisans who cannot claim such descent. The Arab literature divides *al-qabaliyūn* into superior and inferior tribes: the former claim purity of their *‘asl* (‘origin’) and kinship and the latter are tribes the purity of whose ‘*asl* is questioned by the ‘pure’ tribes*.*

**The Characteristics of Najdi Tribe at the Dawn of Wahhabism**

Most records in this regard refer to the tribes of the Banu Hanifa who were the dominant presence in the Yamama area and the sedentary south-eastern area of Najd and its environs. Chronicles and genealogical records attempt to trace the lineage of the Banu Hanifa, relating them to an original ancestor called Bakr Ibn Wa’il. These records usually refer to the Banu Hanifa as several groups rather than a single larger body encompassing several sub-groups. These records trace the Banu Hanifa back to the eve of Islam, describing them as powerful tribes in Najd and elsewhere in the peninsula (Donner 1980: 19).

It is difficult to obtain substantial information on Najd in the pre- and early Islamic period since all sources are retrospective by later Arab chroniclers. Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir (1160-1233 CE) is one such chronicler and he refers to the Banu Hanifa in his account of the capture of the Najd area in 644 CE by Muslim forces led by the famous military leader Khalid Ibn al-Walid. Ibn al-Walid named Samara ’Amru al-Anbari as governor of Najd (al-Athir 1965: vol 4, 200-201). According to Ibn al-Athir, the region’s incorporation iin the early Islamic era brought stability, security, as well as commercial and agricultural prosperity to its settled areas (Ibn al-Athir 1970: vol. 2, 456). Al-Jasir claims, based on classical chronicles, that the Banu Hanifa had settled in the area of Yamama two centuries before Islam, establishing a capital in Hajr (Al-Jasir 1966: 87). Al-Jasir echoes Ibn al-Athir’s description of the prosperity of the area during the first Islamic rule, which endured as result of the rise of Umayyad dynasty (661-750 CE), the first ruler of which moved the capital to Damascus in 661 CE. From the Umayyad period until the rise of the Saudi–Wahhabi movement in 1744 CE, central authorities successively failed to incorporate Najd into their administrations. The Umayyad authorities would appoint *walis* (provincial governors) in Najd in an attempt to subdue the autonomous impulses of its inhabitants. Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan (685-705 CE), for example, dispatched Ibrahim Ibn ‘Arabi al-Kinani, a strong governor, who attempted in vain to consolidate Umayyad rule over Najd (Ibid.: 61).

 The tradition of appointing a *wali* in Najd from the central administration of probably endured for more than a century after the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE). However, the emergence of a local dynasty called Banu al-Akhaydir in the 860s CE ended this tradition and transformed Najd into quasi-independent political entity. Sources say that the founder of this dynasty was one of the great-grandsons of Imam ‘Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam, though it is unclear how he arrived in Najd (Surur 1964: 49; Al-Suba’i 1999: vol. 1, 189). From the emergence of the Banu al-Akhaydir until its dissolution at the end of the tenth or eleventh centuries, our only sources are somewhat fanciful accounts which sometimes use the same information. Remarkably, chroniclers writing about this dynasty make no mention of the historical context in which it established its rule; nor do they not refer to its relationship with the local Najd population . However, one can assume that this dynasty emerged at a time when the Abbasid Empire was losing control of many peripheral regions, enabling local chiefs to establish partially and fully independent regimes, especially in areas which, like Najd, had been under limited formal control for centuries.

Due to the scarcity and controversial character of accounts of Banu al-Akhaydir rule, modern historians still speculate on its rise, development and decline. Some historians try to link the Banu al-Akhyadir to the Qarmatian dynasty (899-1067 CE) founded in Bahrain by Hamdan al-Ash‘ath (Qarmat). The Qarmatians were Shiite-Ismaili extremists who attempted to propagate their creed beyond Bahrain and had extended their rule to many parts of Arabia(Encyclopedia of Islam 1960: vol. 4, 660-665). Al-Fakhiri’s *Al-Akhbar Al-Najdiyya*, in a brief account of the Banu al-Akhyadir and the Qarmatians, states that both lost their rule in the eleventh century. Based on this account, Al-Shibil, the editor of this chronicle, assumes that there were great similarities between their religious creeds. Without distinguishing between Isma’ili and other Shiite sects, he deems the two dynasties to be ‘Alawi and sharing the same goal of dividing the Muslims (Al-Fakhiri n.d.: 12). Al-‘Ajlani presents another account on the rise and fall of Banu al-Akhyadir’s dynasty. Relying on the famous Egyptian chronicler, Ahmad Abu al-‘Abbas al-Qalqashandi (1355-1418), he deuces that it established its rule in Yamama during the reign of Abbasid Caliph Al- Musta‘iyn (862-866) and was dissolved by the Qarmatians in 929 (not in the eleventh century) (Al-‘Ajlani 1966: 28). This account seems inaccurate, however, failing to take into account the important work of Persian traveler Khusraw, who visited the area in the middle of the eleventh century (Khusraw 2001: 3). Khusraw’s account testifies to the existence of Shi’ite rule in Yamama until at least the middle of the eleventh century. Although he does not mention the Banu al-Akhyadir by name, he makes explicit mention that Yamama was under Shiite rulers, calling them ‘‘Alid’ (affiliated to ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib). Khusraw arrived for short visit on 17 July 1050to Al-Aflaj, which comprised several villages and was considered locally as a wealthy area (Ibid.: 108). He then went to Yamama which was host to the larger settlements within Najd. Khusrow observed the economic difference between the two areas, comparing between the ‘decline’ of Al-Aflaj with the ‘prosperity and growth’ of Yamama:

In all those four months, I never saw maunds [measure of weight] of wheat in one place. Finally, however, a caravan came from al-Yamamah to take goat leather to Lahsa [Hasa]......To make a long story short, in four days and night we came to Yamama, which has a large, old fortress, and outside the fortress is a town with a market containing all sorts of artisans and fine mosque. The emirs there are Alids of old, and no one has ever been able to wrest the region from their control, since in the first place there is not, nor has there been a conquering ruler or a king anywhere near, and, in the second, those Alids possess such might that they can mount three to four hundred horsemen. They are of Zaydi sect, and when they stand in prayer they say, ‘Muhammad and ’Ali are the best of Mankind’, and, ‘Come to the best deed’. The inhabitants of this town are Sharifs, and they have running water, subterranean irrigation canals, and many palm groves in the district. They told me that when dates are plentiful, a thousand maunds are only one dinar [a coin] its forty leagues from Yamama to Lahsa (Ibid.: 110-111).

Synthesizing the above historical accounts, one can conclude that the Banu al-Akhaydir ruled Yamama for three centuries, on the assumption that religious solidarity held the sedentary population together rather than devotion to tribal *’asabiyya*. In other words, the Banu al-Akhaydir succeeded in establishing their rule in a hitherto anarchic area of Najd thanks to religious *’asabiyya*, in a way similar to the way the Saudis–Wahhabis succeeded in establishing their rule in the eighteenth century.

However, these historical accounts are silent on the role of Banu Hanifa tribes during the long period of Banu al-Akhaydir rule, especially given the fact that later accounts continually mention them. Travelling to Yamama in 1331 CE, Ibn Battuta (1304–69 CE) describes the city of Hajr as the economic and political centre of the area, the local capital and the headquarters of the ruling Banu Hanifa tribes. He gives hints as to the relationship between the sedentary and nomadic areas of Najd, indicating that local rulers failed to control the tribes outside the city (Ibn Battuta 1829: 66-67; Al-Juhany 2002: 27). On his arrival from eastern Arabic, he observed that Hajr was ecologically different from its surroundings, writing:

From this place [Hasa], I travelled to Yamama, which is also called Hajr, a beautiful and fertile city, abounding with water and gardens. The inhabitants, for the most part, are from the tribe of Banu Hanîfa; they are ancient possessors of the district (Ibn Battuta 1829: 66-67).

It could be that the Banu Hanifa continued to be the main tribal force in Hajr and its environs, but failed to establish a political entity like the previous one of Banu al-Akhyadir or the future Saudi—Wahabi one of the eighteenth century. Based on the available chronicles, Al-Juhany states that the Najdi sedentary population in Yamama could not establish any central authority after the disappearance of the Banu al-Akhydir dynasty in the middle of the eleventh century. Chiefs of clans or tribes had controlled towns and villages separate from one another and continued to dispute control of the resources of the sedentary areas (Al-Juhany 2002: 91-92). This opened the door for forces from other parts of Arabia to intervene in Najd. In the middle of the thirteenth century a tribal confederation led by the Banu ‘Amir Ibn ‘Uqayl emerged in Bahrain and extended its rule into Yamama. In the second half of the fifteenth century, Ajwad Ibn Zamil, the leader of one part of the Banu ‘Amir tribe, seized power over the other elements of the tribe, establishing the al-Jawad or al-Jabri dynasty which extended its rule over the settled areas of Najd. In the third decade of the sixteenth century, a dispute erupted among the chiefs, leading to disintegration of the al-Jarbids that prevented them from intervening in Najd (Ibid.: 51-55). However, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Banu Khalid, a segment of the al-Jarbids, led a confederation of previously unrelated groups to power in Al-Hasa. Under the leadership of Barrak Ibn Ghurayr, the Banu Khalid launched military campaigns against the Yamama settled areas. The presence of the Banu Khalid in Najd continued until the rise of the Saudi–Wahhabi movement, which succeeded in preventing their military campaigns succeeding (Ibid.: 66-67).

 In addition to the al-Jarbids, the Banu Khalid and other tribal forces, the Sharifs of Mecca, who claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad, also began to intervene in Najd. Relying on Ottoman support, the Sharifs reinforced their status as protectors of the holy places of Mecca and Medina, though they had insufficient power to expand their control beyond their environs. However, the Sharifs exploited the anarchic situation in Najd by launching sporadic military expeditions for the purpose of plunder. The towns and villages of Najd were spread out in such a way that they could not organize a resistance against foreign invaders. Thus, the Sharifs’ expeditions succeeded in subduing some localities (Al-Rasheed 2002: 31-32). Al-‘Uthaymin, like other modern Saudi historians of the destruction caused by the Sharif’s campaigns in Najd, emphasizes that the purpose was looting and confiscating crops (Al-‘Uthaymin 1995: 37). Ibn Bishr counts seventeen such Sharifian raids from 1588 until the end of the seventeenth century. He does not allude to any religious motive behind these raids but describes the Sharifs as chiefs who launched military campaign in the same way as other tribal chiefs in Arabia (Ibn Bishr 2002: 44-126). The Sharifs eased off on their raids around the end of the seventeenth century. Relying on the account of Meccan chronicler Al-‘Isami, one can conclude that the Sharifs at this period were preoccupied with internal disputes. These internal conflicts intensified to the point whereby some took refuge in Najd or solicited the aid of Najdi chiefs (Al-‘Isami 1959: 512–520). Al-Juhany, summing up the impact of the Sharifs’ interventions in Najd, arguing that settlers as well as nomads continued to be divided into small tribal political units. These interventions did not result in any change in the political system. The sedentary population and tribal groups were left alone to rule themselves as before. The Sharifs were no better than an exploiting tribal group than others before them (Al-Juhany 2002: 141-144).

**Socio-Economic Conditions and the Rise of the Saudi–Wahhabi Movement**

Due to climatic conditions, the population of Najd for centuries adopted two different social patterns: that of the nomads and that of thesedentary populations who cultivated the oases and built settlements in the desert. Although differing in both their economic activities and religious practices, they shared similar social structures based on tribalism. As already mentioned, the sedentary population of Najd had developed a certain level of religious scholarship that enabled some of its *‘ulama* to assimilate religious ideas from urban centres in the Islamic world. Wahhabi doctrine emerged from within the sedentary population as the cumulative result of religious study since the sixteenth century in the oasis of Najd. Although it is difficult to trace the settlement of the tribes in the oasis, historical records since the fifteenth century testify that tribal rivalries and alliances were the main factors in determining events.[[1]](#footnote-55) These historical records state that Najd had suffered from drought and war that caused the migration of several tribes toward the Fertile Crescent. However, the area began from the mid-fifteenth century to attract newcomers who built the cities of Dir‘iyya and ‘Uyayna which became important centres in Najd (Facey 1992: 61-61; Ibn Bishr 2002: vol. 2, 296).

This settlement process undermined the dominant power of the Banu Hanifa sedentary tribes, giving rise to competitors. The city of Riyadh developed on the site of Hajr, the old Banu Hanifa capital. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the rule of the Banu Hanifa was limited to three small villages:Manfuha, Muqrin and Dir‘iyya. As result of its decline, the Banu Hanifa split into several small sub-tribes, such as al-Murada (whom the Saudis claim as their ancestors), al-Zar‘a, al-Mudayris, al-Dughaythir (most descendants of these now living Riyadh) and al-Sha‘lan (whose descendants live today in Manfuha) Al-‘Ajlani 1960: 47–49). However, the Najdi Wahhabi chronicles describe the constant wars between tribes in the four centuries before Wahhabism as a period of chaos similar to the pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya*.[[2]](#footnote-59) Although Facey refers to these wars, he argues that the process of settlement in the oasis of Najd from the fifteenth century until the seventeenth century was behind these tribal conflicts over the natural resources of the area (Facey 1992: 66-85).

In the process of settlement, three cities became hosts to the Wahhabi–Saudi movement: Dir‘iyya, ‘Uyayna and Riyadh. Ibn Dir‘a, the chieftain of Hajr and nearby Jaz‘a, revived agriculture in the middle of the fifteenth century and invited newcomers to settle the area under his control. Among these newcomers were his relatives from the tribe of al-Murada (the claimed ancestors of the Saudis) who had lived in the area on the gulf coast of al-Qatif. In 1556, the al-Murada moved to Hajr, proceeding to the small village of Dir‘iyya. In addition to Dir‘iyya, these newcomers were allocated the lands of Ghusayba and al-Mulaybid, nearby villages. The establishment of the al-Murada in the area provoked tribal strife with the al-Yazid, a branch of the Banu Hanifa who had controlled the area for centuries. The al-Murada succeeded in ousting this rival tribe from the entire area, causing its fragmentation (Ibn Bishr 2002: vol. 2, 297). Under the control of the al-Murada, Dir‘iyya developed into one of the major cities of Najd (Ibid.: 36-47). This reduced the importance of old capital, Hajr, which, during the course of the sixteenth century, fragmented into several disparate quarters, such Muqrin, Mi‘kal, al-‘Aud, al-Sulaya, Jabra, and al-Kharab (Al-Jasir 1966: 87).

During the sixteenth century, the al-Murada split into three branches. The first moved to Darma, a village near Jabal Tuwayq; the second occupied the village of Abu al-Kabbash; while the third, the Ibn Man‘a branch, remained in Dir‘iyya (Ibn Bishr 2002: 34). The Saudis claim descent from this last branch. Al-Jasir, who accepts this claim, says that the Ibn Man‘a succeeded in consolidating its rule at the end of the seventeenthcentury, enabling its chief, Muhammad Ibn Saud Ibn Muhammad Ibn Maqrun Ibn Ibrahim Ibn Musa Ibn Rabi‘a Ibn Man‘a (d. 1765 CE) to extend his rule into adjacent areas. His alliance from 1745 with Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab resulted in the emergence of the First Saudi State, which ruled Najd until the Egyptian occupation in 1818 (Al-Jasir 1966: 86).

From its establishment in the fifteenth century, ‘Uyayna (70 kilometres west of Riyadh) attracted newcomers, to become, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, one of the largest cities in Najd. Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, was born in ‘Uyayna, in 1703 (Al-Fakhiri n.d.: 60). The break-up of the city of Hajr explains why chroniclers stopped mentioning it by name after 1578. Hajr was an extended city with several localities separated by orchards: *riyadh* in Arabic (Facey 1992: 67-68). In the seventeenth century, the orchards around Muqrin developed into separate city called Riyadh. It became the centre of a political entity in the eighteenth century ruled by Ibn Dawwas, who began to build a defensive wall around it in 1740 CE (Al-Jasir 1966: 95). Until its capture by the Saudis in 1773 CE, Riyadh was the centre of the anti-Wahhabi forces in Najd and so Wahhabi chroniclers portray Ibn Dawwas as an ardent enemy of Islam.[[3]](#footnote-69) However, Riyadh lost importance as a result of its capture by the Saudis and it was only from 1818, when the Egyptian occupiers situated their headquarters within its walls, that its importance rose again. In 1820, the Egyptians withdrew from Riyadh, leaving Turki Ibn ‘Abdullah Ibn Saud (1769–1833) able to choose it as his capital (Darwish 1990: 58). Turki was able there to resurrect the Wahhabi–Saudi alliance based on three constituencies: the sedentary peoples, the tribal nomads and the religious *‘ulama*. Thanks to this combination, Turki succeeded in subduing rival tribes in the area and establishing the so-called Second Saudi State in 1824 CE.

Combining chiefdom power embodied in the Saudi family and ideological power embodied in the religious preaching of the Wahhabis forged an alliance that merged the tribal *’asabiyya* of the former with the religious *’asabiyya* of the latter. This explains the success of Turki and his successors in keeping their political entity alive within Najdi tribal society. However, a simplistic interpretation of theorys such as that of Ibn Khaldun would posit that there was a dichotomy betweennomads and the sedentary populations, omitting other stages of social organization in the process of transforming nomadic life into a sedentary one. It is worth reminding ourselves that Ibn Khaldun’s cyclical theory considers the *’asabiyya* of nomadic tribes stronger than that of the sedentary population. His cyclical theory stems from his view that the power of *’asabiyya* to bond human collectivities depends always on factors such the socio-economic and cultural conditions. Writing about Bedouin societies and the ‘savage peoples’ (Ibn Khaldun 1986: 138-139), he classifies the Arab tribes as among the latter*,* having a strong sense of *’asabiyya* that enables them to conquer sedentary peoples. They can sustain a state as long as their *’asabiyya* is maintained (Ibid.: 145-146). With their savage nature, exaggerated sense of honour, and competitions among chiefs, it is only the power of religion that can overcome their negative characteristics (Ibid.: 149-152).

Al-Suwayda and al-Juhany work add other aspects to Ibn Khaldun’s general theory in this regard. Al-Suwayda divides the society of Najd into three: nomads, semi-nomads and the sedentary. The relationship between the latter two categories was stronger than the between nomads and the sedentary. The semi-nomads lived close to sedentary settlements and were dependent on their water resources. The semi-nomads occupied the Safilat Najd valley in the east part of the region near to the settled populations and moved from one village to another without settling. Only in Riyadh and its environs did settlements emerge, while the rest of Najd continued to be populated by nomads. Economic hardship and tribal ties between nomads, semi-nomads, and sedentary peoples created a network of between them all. Cooperation on the one hand and wars on the other involved the whole population in Najdi political affairs. Thanks to the established network, nomadic tribes could rely on sedentary areas to obtain their supplies such as dates, cereals, coffee, clothes and weapons. In exchange, the nomads supplied the settled populus with meat, cheese and leather. In general, exchange took place in special weekly or monthly markets held once a week or on certain days every month. In many cases, a single tribe would be divided into sedentary and nomadic groups (Al-Suwayda 1983: 120-122).

 Al-Juhany refers to this same network, emphasizing that sedentary tribes could usually withstand attacks from nomads, though the nomads could sometimes impose *ukhāwa* or *khūwa* (‘brotherhood’): a tax based on mutual agreement. The nomads levied this tax on small, vulnerable villages as compensation for their protection. That said, generally speaking, the sedentary tribes had the upper hand in the conflicts with nomads (Al-Juhany 2002: 145-147). The sedentary tribes probably possessed the same level of *’asabiyya* as the nomads, both Al-Juhany and Al-Suwayda argue and Facey draws similar conclusions. Facey describes constant conflict between the two groups until the nineteenth century, emphasizing the usual ability of the sedentary tribes to impose their will on the nomads (Facey 1992: 82-83).

 Facey, Al-Juhany and Al-Suwayda offer a different view that can fill in some of what is missing from the theory of Ibn Khaldun regarding the superiority of the nomads and inferiority of settlers in an area such as Najd. The sedentary population of Najd maintained its tribal characteristics both before and after the rise of Wahhabism. Although the new settlers in the towns and villages preserved their tribal identities, they adapted their tribal values to the Wahhabi creed, something which sustained the Saudi rulers’ legitimacy. The role played by Wahhabi religious scholars within a tribal society but in the modern state became all important ideologically. Pro-Saudi historians and intellectuals construct the Wahhabi movement’s past in according to the present, claiming that it emerged outside of Najdi tribal frameworks. The most obvious example of such claims is Al-Dakhil’s article depicting Wahhabism as anti-tribal movement which was born in sedentarily populated area. He argues that, from its outset, it represented urban political forces united by religious messaging. These urban characteristics are manifested in three ways: a universal message to all Muslims; an anti-nomadic content in the message; and the call for a centralized political state based on pure Islamic values (Al-Dakhil 2009: 25-35). Placing Wahhabism outside tribal frameworks shows, in a nutshell, how modern Saudis attempt to cultivate a Wahhabi legitimacy in order to maintain its religious authority. However, this can only be done by downplaying the accounts of the pro-Wahhabi chroniclers of the nineteenth century who have a different line of reasoning for legitimizes such religious authority. In a society divided between *al-qabaliyūn* and *al-khadariyūn*, it was necessary to situate the Wahhabis among the former, being superior seen as to the latter.

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1. On Najd in the pre-Wahhabi period, see Firro 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
2. See, for example, the description in Al-Fakhiri n.d.: 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
3. See, for example, Ibn Ghannam 1985: 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)