Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan are countries tied together by a fragmented colonial past and a violent present - the hot-spots that international actors return to again and again. While their present woes are a complex intersection of the failure of domestic politics and the after effects of empire, one factor emerges repeatedly through the domestic chaos as a contributory factor : Tribalism.

By Charlie Pratt

In these turbulent countries, tribes , a form of kinship-based social grouping, have emerged as key political actors. For external commentators, the anti-modern impact of the tribe is clear to see, acting as a retardant on the development of the modern, political state and systematically undermining the development of security and stability.

This analysis almost wilfully underplays the complex dynamic that exists in these states between the tribe and the state. The truth is that, in these countries, the tribe and the state remain locked in both competition and an embrace. This dynamic, once enclosed within the borders of these turbulent countries, has taken on deadly ramifications as they have come to host radical groups who look outside their borders. As AQAP take residence in Yemen, al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is the embrace/competition dynamic that allows their existence. While traditional security-based action will ensure that the radical groups remain, at least, under pressure, they will never be defeated until the destructive dynamic is also understood and confronted.

The fragmented colonial past of these countries, due to the inability of the British and Italian Empires to fully control territory dominated by tribes, is vital to understanding the dynamic. The weakness of the Empires frequently resulted in a desire to support strong local rulers, such as Afghanistan's "Iron Amir" 'Abdul-Rahman, as tools of imperial policy. This policy, enacted from imperial pragmatism, sustained the tribal system, simultaneously weakening the development of political traditions, such as state representation, that would favour the post-colonial state.

These states steadily weakened, due to the inherent political weakness and corruption of the state, tribal competition and, in the case of Yemen and Afghanistan, the actions of the Soviet Union in supporting Marxist rulers, until brutal civil war erupted in the early 1990s in all three. As they slowly recover from this, the weakness of the central state has either forced them to co-opt tribes and give them representation within every layer of the state, such as in Yemen and Afghanistan, essentially accepting that the state is just another tribe, or be unable to challenge them but attempt to remain close to them, as in Somalia. Thus the state attempts to embrace the tribes.

This is not an ideal situation; the underdevelopment of these states strengthens tribes, as "they supply a modicum of security and the rule of law via the semi-private provision of tribal law, which serves as an imperfect substitute for state law, an undersupplied public good" . Similarly,

the co-option of the tribes strengthens them, as the state privileges the tribe as THE key actor in nominally state-owned territory.

At the same time, the inherent weakness of tribes strengthens the case for the state. Tribes cannot emulate a state by dominating territory or resource, nor can they provide for their members in a way that a state can; so they remain in a state of dynamic flux, defined by their competition with other tribes for territory and resource. With the exception of Somalia, this weakness allows the state to exist in the majority of its territory as it provides, but only just, basic resources. Thus, the state acts as a competitor to the tribe.

This dynamic creates the condition for the existence of radical groups. The Taliban, al-Shabaab and AQAP exist because of the weakness of the state and the strength of the tribe. The competition and embrace means that tribes will utilise radical groups to further local grievances or solve local issues, such as access to basic resources, which the state is too weak to do, as seen in Abyan in Yemen and large areas of Afghanistan and Somalia. Mostly, these radical groups cannot survive without the tribe; AQAP in Yemen has found itself moved on by tribes, while al-Shabaab is still rooted in clan rivalries which it plays to "establish power among a Somali population that focuses internally on parochial clan interest" . The indigenous political characteristic that allows these groups to exist is not the vacuum of power, it is the competition for it.
This dynamic between tribe and state must be understood by international actors. Simply channelling funds into a broken state structure will not change this dynamic, as they are too rooted in it. Equally, ensuring that the state has the ability to militarily dominate radical groups will not address the underlying causes of their existence.
This may seem to give little hope to international actors. Yet there is one factor to recognise within the dynamic that provides an opportunity for action; there are no eternal, unchanging tribal institutions. Instead, tribes are "dynamic social constructs that can be subject to different interpretations and are used to describe and validate changing social and political relationships" .

This recognition means two things. Firstly; if the state can be posited as a political actor above the tribe, then the tribe can actively support it, not compete against it. Secondly; that while the tribe should be recognised as an important political actor within a territory, it should never be treated as THE political actor.

Whilst it remains critical for international actors to provide some element of security for the state in continuing to tackle radical groups, international action must work to ensure that the state begins to break its close ties to the tribes, challenging the "embrace" dynamic, while at the same time confronting the tribal characteristics of the state; particularly through targeting corruption and patronage. International actors must also encourage civil society as a way to transfer loyalty from the tribe to the state. In rural areas, the opportunity for the state to develop certainly exists where the tribe cannot provide. The development of a corporate, non-tribal state capable of fulfilling basic functions, such as provision of water, which is so often damaged by corruption, will gradually weaken the tribe's strength as a provider of social goods, breaking the "competition" dynamic. Rather than being contested, the ability of the state to improve life will see it be supported; the tribe will not disappear, but it will validate this changing political

relationship.

In Yemen, Afghanistan and Somalia, states and tribes/clans understand each other, but their familiarity has not bred a constructive political situation. International actors must accept this reality, and the difficulty of changing it before operating in these areas. Yet they must act to change the destructive dynamic, for its by-product is a competition that allows insecurity and instability to become endemic. It is not just for international security that they must act, but for the security of those individuals caught up in a dynamic that is not of their own making, but structures their every move.