

The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control

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Little information is available regarding contemporary relations between Bedouin tribes and the Syrian state apparatus. These ties are mainly expressed through relationships of patronage and clientism between tribal leaders and state operatives. The Bedouin tribes of Syria continue to function as groups tied in networks of real and fictive kinship; these bonds provide the tribal members with a solidarity and cohesiveness which the state has not been able to suppress despite decades of effort.

This article merges two interests: one revolves around concepts of Bedouin identity, revisiting the meaning of being tribal, nomadic, and pastoral; the other is taken up with what can be called development studies but is, in effect, Syrian government policy efforts at managing a previously uncontrolled tribal entity which often regarded itself as a “state within a state.”¹ Very little information is generally available regarding contemporary relations between the tribes and the apparatus of the state in Syria. These ties are mainly expressed through the relationships of patronage and clientism between tribal leaders and state operatives. It is argued here that the Bedouin tribes of Syria continue to function as groups tied in networks of real and fictive kinship and that these bonds provide the tribal members with a solidarity and cohesiveness which the state has not been able to suppress despite decades of effort.

Much of the following analysis of the transformations of the past few decades is based on personal experience and communications.² Fieldwork was conducted in the semi-arid steppe land (*Badia*) of central Syria, as well as on the Lebanon-Syria border, where significant tribal activity and interaction with the state takes place. This article commences with a brief review of the nature of the (Bedouin) tribes in Greater Syria

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1. For most of the last century an “evolutionary,” Western-based model of progress dominated the way the Bedouin were perceived by government and international experts. Typologies based on movement (e.g., fully-nomadic, semi-nomadic, semi-settled) were used to break down the organization of the Bedouin and to confirm ideas of modernization theory that settled existence was far superior to a mobile one.

2. Bedouin, as a term, is increasingly disappearing in contemporary government and international reports and studies: instead, these people are generally placed under the broad category of “stakeholders, users, local community,” and as “rural poor.”

(*Bilad al-Sham*). It then examines the 20th century history of pacification, rejection, and revival (1900-70). This is followed by a discussion of the significant changes to Bedouin tribal society in Syria during the past three decades under the Ba‘th regime and, in particular, after the “Correctionist Movement” of Hafiz al-Asad and his son Bashar. It posits that, despite the formal annulling of the Bedouin tribes’ legal status in Syrian law in 1958 and the determined effort to wipe out tribalism in the Ba‘th Party Constitution, alternative perceptions of authority and power attached to tribal leaders have continued to exist in the *Badia*. These allegiances and preferences for customary law (*‘urf*) in contrast to state law (*qanun*), have been informally acknowledged and tolerated by the state. By doing so, the state has avoided having its own authority tested in these tribal territories. This relationship was made more explicit when the Asad family called upon tribal leaders to assist in the Hama Blockade of 1982, which followed the rise of the Islamic fundamentalist opposition to the Ba‘th regime in the late 1970s. This article contends that post-1982, a marked change in government attitude permitted the Bedouin leadership to manage and transform critical state development efforts to support their own status and customary leadership.

THE NATURE OF BEDOUIN TRIBES

The social organization of Bedouin tribes has been described by many as based on the opposing and parallel segmentation of units at various levels of reality and fiction. The Arab expression “I against my brother; my brother and I against my cousin; my brother, my cousin, and I against the world” perfectly describes this layered outlook on alliances and enmity among tribes. The entire tribe ascribes to an origin based on real and fictive blood ties going back to an apical ancestor — Adnan or Qahtan — giving it a pyramid-like structure with real, living units at its base and the mythical ancestor at the top. The segmentation refers to the way in which the tribe is divided into smaller parallel sections — *‘ashiiras* and *‘afkhadhs* — sub-tribes or clans and lineages, and then at the base, large extended groups of related households sometimes called *bayts* or *qawm/qaqam*.

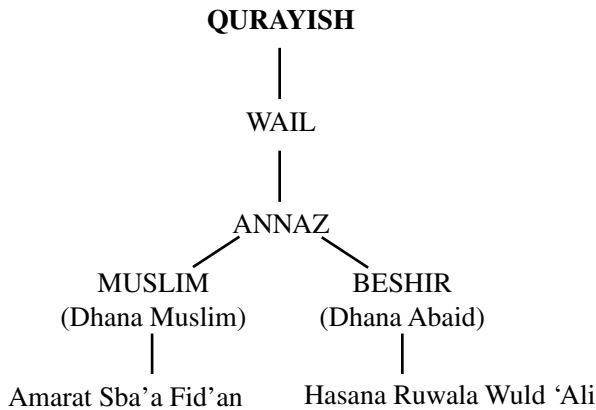
In the 18th and 19th centuries, the great Aneza and Shammar camel raising tribes of the Nejd began moving north to conquer the *Badia* and *Jazira* (steppe land across the Euphrates River) of Greater Syria. In part, this was an opportunistic move to establish patron-client relationships (pay tribute [*khuwa*] or be raided [*ghazu*]) with agricultural settlements in the *Ma‘mura* (transitional zone between agriculture and grazing). The movement north also was to escape a growing unitarian reform movement in Islam based in central Arabia.³ The Shammar confederation moved into the region first, unsuccessfully challenged the long-established sheep herding Mawali and Fadl tribes in the *Badia*, and then moved north and east, establishing themselves across the Euphrates River in the *Jazira*.⁴

3. See Anthony Tooth, “The Transformation of a Pastoral Economy: Bedouin and States in Northern Arabia, 1850-1950,” PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 2000.

4. Tribal genealogies are meant to explain the past, but, in fact, generally serve to justify or rationalize present conditions of inter-tribal strength and weakness. The relationships between the tribes are generally reduced to an idiom of kinship even when explaining the expulsion of a lineage (or extended set of related family groups) and its re-attachment to another tribe. See Max Oppenheim, *Die Beduinen [The Bedouin]*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1939).

The sheep herding tribes already established in the *Badia* attached themselves to local patrons such as the Ottoman Governor in Aleppo and paid taxes to the state authority in order to protect their interest. In the mid-19th century, 100 such sheep herding tribes were registered with the city of Aleppo and regularly paid taxes — in lieu of paying *khuwa* to more powerful, camel raising Bedouin tribes. Each unit listed a recognized shaykh whose formal role (in the Ottoman view) was to mediate between his tribe and the government. The camel raising tribes such as the Fid'an and the Sba'a did not see themselves as subjects of the Ottoman Sultan. They did not pay taxes and were regarded as “free.” Large and organized, they were sometimes a threat to the central government, but they also had a role in the state's regional security strategy. Those tribes controlling a main military district were granted “control” of these areas against a payment from the Sultan. Invariably control of a security district also gave the tribe rights to levy taxes on passing traffic.⁵

Aneza Confederation of Tribes



See: Glubb, Handbook of Nomads, Semi-Nomadic, Semi-Sedentary, and Sedentary Tribes of Syria, G.S.I., Headquarters, 9th Army, 1942.

By the middle of the 19th century, the Aneza tribes had established themselves firmly in the *Badia*. Both the Aneza and Shammar were “marginal” tribes as conceptualized by Ernest Gellner and James Scott,⁶ in that they controlled the margins (the frontiers) and thus the important trade and pilgrimage caravans between Damascus and Baghdad and Damascus and Mecca. Among the Bedouin elite, little actually changed in their relations with the central authority. Bedouin leaders have bridged both worlds for several centuries; they are comfortable in desert tents as well as the cosmopolitan salons of the elite urban leaders. In the 19th century, a special boarding school for sons of tribal leaders throughout the Empire was established in Constantinople (Istanbul).

5. See Jonathan Rae, “Tribe and State: Management of the Syrian Steppe,” PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 1999, p. 64.

6. See Ernest Gellner, “The Role and Organization of a Berber Zawiya,” PhD dissertation, University of London, 1958 and James Scott, “Zomia: A Zone of Resistance. The Last Great Enclosures and Stateless Peoples in Southeast Asia,” in Annual Elizabeth Colson Lecture, Refugee Studies Centre (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2008).

By the early 20th century, many of the Bedouin tribal leaders had been educated there.⁷ The shaykhs of the Hadidiyin, Mawali, and Sba'a, for example, who had been schooled in Istanbul, went on to serve in the Imperial Ottoman Army.⁸ Their presence in the major cities of the Ottoman Empire was not unusual and their urbane sophistication was frequently commented on by Western travel writers, explorers, and political agents.⁹

RECENT HISTORY OF PACIFICATION, REJECTION, AND REVIVAL (1900-70)

During the closing decades of the Ottoman Empire (1880-1915), the Bedouin elite became involved in the new political ideas of Arab nationalism. Some Bedouin leaders supported the establishment of an independent Arab state under Amir Faysal over a part of Syria.¹⁰ The leaders of three tribes with close proximity to Damascus — the Ruwala, the Fadl, and the Hasana — were particularly active in supporting first the Hashemite Kingdom in Syria (1919-20) and later rejecting the imposition of the French Mandate. The Fadl threw their support behind Amir Faysal's movement for independence from Ottoman rule; Nuri Sha'lan of the Ruwala cooperated with both the Ottoman authorities and later the British.¹¹ Trad al-Malhim of the Hasana took an active part in the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans and in 1918 both Nuri Sha'lan and Trad al-Malhim entered Damascus with the troops of Amir Faysal to establish the Kingdom of Syria.¹² These Bedouin leaders' involvement with the various Ottoman, French, and British agents marked a shift in emphasis from their earlier efforts to assert their "marginality" or independence from central authority to a willingness to participate in regional politics.¹³

7. See Aref Abu-Rabia, *A Bedouin Century: Education and Development among the Negev Tribes in the 20th Century* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2001).

8. See Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

9. c.f. Gertrude Bell, *Syria, The Desert and the Sown* (London: W. Herman, 1907), pp. 134-35.

10. The British did as well, as was documented in the Husayn-McMahon correspondence of 1915-6.

11. Nuri Sha'lan was reported to receive a monthly allowance of 20,000 gold pounds from Ahmad Jamal Pasha. After a clash with an Ottoman official in 1910 he was exiled to Spain. He returned to Damascus in 1916 and changed sides, accepting T.E. Lawrence's overtures to support Amir Faysal's claim to Syria. See Dawn Chatty, *From Camel to Truck: The Bedouin in the Modern World* (New York: Vantage Press, 1986), p. 19.

12. 'Abd al-Salam Al Ujayli, a Raqawi historian, claimed that for a short while between 1920 and 1921, Raqa, not Damascus, was regarded as the spiritual, if not physical, capital of the Arab (Bedouin) forces in the fight to set up a Kingdom of Syria under Amir Faysal. The leader of this movement was the Fid'an Shaykh Hajim ibn Muhayd. See Meriem Ababsa, "*Ideologies Et Territoires Dans Un front Pionnier: Raqa Et le Project De L'Euphrate En Jazira*" ["Ideologies and Territories in the Frontier: Raqa and the Project of the Euphrates in the Jazira"], PhD dissertation, University of Tours, 2004, pp. 358-59.

13. While the Bedouin leadership was negotiating the political future of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, their own homeland, the *Badia* of northern Arabia, was being carved up by Mark Sykes (via the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916). Lines through the open desert created a British corridor between Trans-Jordan and Iraq and separated the Syrian *Badia* from its natural southern half in Saudi Arabia. These new borders separated people from fundamental elements of their economic and social universe.

After the defeat of Amir Faysal by the French in 1920 and the establishment of the French (and also British) Mandate over the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, each of these tribal leaders and their supporters went their own separate ways. The French Mandate was considered by many as illegitimate and opposition to French rule was expressed through general strikes and armed struggle. In their Mandate, the French sought to increase their strength and followed the classical policy of “divide and rule.” Thus they explicitly supported all religious minorities in an effort to weaken the nascent Arab nationalist movement. They created the predominantly Christian country of Lebanon by attaching parts of Greater Syria to Mount Lebanon. The rest of Syria they divided into five semi-independent parts accentuating religious differences and cultivating regional rather than national sentiments (e.g., Jebel Druze, Aleppo, Lataqiya, Damascus, and Alexandretta). The Bedouin tribes were separated out and encouraged to set up their own nation in the *Badia*, supervised by a special French unit, the Contrôle Bedouin. This semi-autonomous department maintained good order in the desert with a policy of arms control and social services.¹⁴

The French needed the cooperation of the Bedouin for particular reasons. First, they could not leave two-thirds of their newly acquired Mandate territory (the *Badia*) out of their control. They needed to guarantee a continuous and safe passage through the region for commerce and travel to Baghdad. Furthermore, the petroleum line to Mosul had to be secured, as did the oil pipeline to Haifa. The French had two options. They could either pacify the area by force of arms or they could “buy” the support of the tribes by catering to their leaders. They implemented both approaches at the same time with a number of unexpected results.

The Contrôle Bedouin, set up in 1920, attempted to settle Bedouin disputes and regulate their migrations. Although working directly under the French Territorial Command of East Syria, the Contrôle Bedouin encouraged the Bedouin to conduct their affairs in their traditional manner. This meant urging the Bedouin not to carry arms in settled regions, and to fight only among themselves. But the Bedouin ignored these requests and in 1921, the French set up the first Compagnies Légères du Désert, locally raised troops commanded by French Officers, or Camel Corps (*Méhariste*) in order to give clout to their demands. By 1927 the French had imposed enough authority on this marginal land to call for an “Assembly” of shaykhs at Hama in order to effect a reconciliation between tribes to end hostility and threats to local security. This peace effort was supplemented by monthly subsidies to each tribal leader. At the close of this conference, a peace was concluded between the Hadidiyin and Mawali, the Ruwala and the Sba’a, the Fawara and the Beni Khalid, and the Fed’an and the Shammar.

However, as hostilities between the Aneza confederation and the Shammar continued, another peace conference was called for in 1930 and took place in Palmyra, resulting in more stringent French measures to control the Bedouin, such as a system of crime control which placed the affairs in the *Badia* under the Contrôle Bedouin.¹⁵ Disputes that involved tribesmen in the cultivated zone were placed under the jurisdic-

14. See Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1958), p. 283.

15. “*Rapport Sur La Situation De La Syrie et Du Liban soumis au Conseil De La Société Des Nations, 1923-1938*” [“Report on the Situation in Occupied Syria and Lebanon to the Council of the League of Nations, 1923-1938”], Ministère Des Affaires Etrangères, 1930.

tion of the ordinary government tribunal.¹⁶ Many tribesmen refused to accept this subordination to the Contrôle.¹⁷ Sections of tribes broke away and sought refuge beyond the borders of the French Mandate. Some sub-tribes of the Ruwala joined the forces of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud in the Nejd. Others lineages of the Fid’an and the Aghaydat also moved to central Arabia. Those tribal leaders who remained “loyal” to the French were granted automatic representation in the French Mandate National Assembly. Nine seats were allocated to the more powerful tribes including the Hadidiyin, the Mawali, and the Fid’an.

By the 1940s, the French had effectively broken the political relationship between the tribesmen and their leaders. The French formally recognized the leaders who were prepared to deal with them by establishing a system of subsidies; each monthly French subsidy further distanced the Bedouin leaders from their popular power base.¹⁸ In addition, the French arrested the once fluid social and physical universes of the Bedouin in order to better administer and manage this region. Tribal rights to particular pastures and water points were recognized as belonging to specific leaders and their tribes and were patrolled by the French to ensure no further return to contestation and violence. The 47 sub-tribal sections of the Hadidiyin, for example, were divided into three distinct groups by the French in 1943 and assigned *diras* or migration areas roughly corresponding to their existing internal grazing areas and water points.¹⁹ Yet the very nature of the tribal way of life in these arid lands revolved around recognizing the need for constant flexibility and adaptation in order to negotiate access to resources when environmental conditions made it necessary.

During this period, the French replaced a system of communal land ownership

16. The French divided the tribes of Syria into nomadic and semi-nomadic. Those classified as nomadic included the Aneza and Shammar confederations as well as the more powerful sheep herding tribes such as the Hadidiyin, the Mawali, and the Hayb. The semi-nomadic category comprised all the other sheep herding tribes. Until 1934, this distinction meant the nomadic tribes were free to carry arms and only had to lay them down when entering the *Ma’mura*. Classification as a semi-nomad, on the other hand, meant that they were required to have government permits to carry arms and they could be charged and tried under state law, not tribal customary law.

17. The French “sweetened” this infringement of the shaykhs’ authority by building new wells and restoring old underground water systems (*qanats*) and by setting up mobile schools and health clinics. See “*Rapport Sur La Situation De La Syrie et Du Liban soumis au Conseil De La Société Des Nations*,” 1931.

18. At the time of the French withdrawal from Syria, some tribal leaders were receiving considerable subsidies. It was largely the “noble” sheep raising tribe which supported the French, with the exception of the Hadidiyin. While in the second half of the 20th century, it was largely the “common” sheep herding tribes which cooperated with the Syrian Ba’thist government.

Shaykh	Tribe	Subsidy in Syrian Lira
Nuri Sha’lan	Ruwala	3,600
Fawaz Sha’lan	Ruwala	2,400
Mihjim ibn Muhayd	Fid’an Wuld	3,400
Daham al-Hadi	Shammar	2,400
Nuwwf al-Salah	Hadidiyin	2,000
Trad al Malhim	Hasana	1,400

Adapted from Jonathan Rae, “*Tribe and State: Management of the Syrian Steppe*,” p. 151.

19. Fifty-three years later, a study by Rae indicated that these migration zones, or *diras*, have essentially not changed. See Jonathan Rae and George Arab, “Continuity is the Cousin of Change,” in *Caravan 3* (Aleppo: ICARDA, 1996).

and use rights with private land registration in the names of tribal leaders. In the Homs-Hama area, for example, land encompassing 20 villages was registered in the name of Shaykh Trad al-Malhim. Unregistered land (state land) east of the frontier of cultivation was assigned to tribal authority in the “emergency decrees” of 1940 and 1941. In this manner, the Shammar registered in the name of their tribal leaders over 2 million hectares (ha)²⁰ of land in the *Jazira*. The *Jazira*, once classified as state domain and restricted from agricultural exploitation, was now officially registered in the name of tribal leaders.

This rapid agricultural push at the expense of grazing land had numerous effects on the Bedouin tribes. Some left Syria and removed themselves from the political sphere of the French. These included sub-tribal sections and lineages of the Hasana, Ruwala, Sba’a, and Fid’an.²¹ In 1928, Rakan ibn Muhayd, Shaykh of the Sba’a Butaynat, established an estate for himself near al-Sa’an including Wadi Hasna and Wadi al-Azayb. This was the region that had been granted as their tribal summer grazing area by the Ottoman authorities in the late 1860s. Furthermore, in the 1930s camel raising, as it became less lucrative, was progressively being abandoned for sheep raising.²² Many of the formerly “noble” tribes took up sheep herding, resulting in increased competition — where once there had been none — between them and the traditional sheep herding tribes such as the Mawali, the Fadl, and the Hadidiyin.

On June 4, 1940, *Arrete* (Decree) number 132/LR was entered into the statute books. Often called the Law of the Tribes, it brought together all the previous relevant laws which had been introduced over the past two decades to support the Bedouin “state within a state.” When nationalist deputies soon after submitted a bill calling for an end to French Mandatory rule, only one of the nine Bedouin deputies, the Amir of the Mawali tribe, appeared to vote. By and large, the French had succeeded in bringing most Bedouin leaders around to their side. Instead of fighting to free Syria from French Mandatory rule, they largely withdrew and abstained from taking a position, content to hang on to the special status which had been accorded them by the French.²³

By the time the French actually left Syria in 1943, their policy of divide and rule had deeply disturbed the psyche of the newly independent state. The Bedouin did not rise up, but they remained unwilling to submit to Syrian authority (many had said they would only take orders from Amir Fawaz Sha’lan of the Ruwala, the son of the famous Nuri Sha’lan). In turn, the special and separate status accorded the Bedouin tribes by the French Mandatory authority resulted in the newly independent government’s great suspicion of them. If the French Mandatory authority had planned to create a separate pastoral nation, as some Contrôle Bedouin officers seem to have attempted in 1937,²⁴ the independent government wanted only to integrate all elements of the country into a single united whole.

20. One hectare equals 2.45 acres; one donum equals one-tenth of a hectare.

21. See “*Rapport Sur La Situation De La Syrie et Du Liban soumis au Conseil De La Société Des Nations*,” 1938.

22. See “*Rapport Sur La Situation De La Syrie et Du Liban soumis au Conseil De La Société Des Nations*,” 1931.

23. See “*Rapport Sur La Situation De La Syrie et Du Liban soumis au Conseil De La Société Des Nations*,” 1938, p. 104.

24. Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

THE INDEPENDENT NATION STATE AND ITS RELATIONS WITH THE BEDOUIN TRIBES

The separate "state-like" status which the French had granted the Bedouin tribes was a thorn in the side of the independent nationalist rulers of Syria at the end of the French Mandate. The physical and administrative separation which the French had instituted between the Bedouin and the rest of the Syrian population underscored the unsympathetic, if not contemptuous, attitude of the intelligentsia and Arab officialdom to Bedouin pastoral life and needs.²⁵ Where the French had used the tribes as leverage against the nationalists, the new Syrian government wanted to convert this wild population into Syrian citizens liable to common law (*qanun*). The nationalist government thus pursued an aggressive tribal policy aimed ultimately at abolishing all tribal privileges and power. Settling the Bedouin was regarded as a key part of this process. Furthermore, it was felt that the mobile Bedouin method of sheep raising was not only primitive but also not viable given the "scant" resources of the *Badia*. A move to agriculture and intensive sheep ranching was considered the appropriate model; it was supported by various international development agencies.²⁶ What the new Syrian nationalist government failed to account for was the strength of tribal ties and culture which Bedouin society — now transnational — was able to maintain despite these extraordinary pressures in the urban environment and along the *Ma'mura*.

In 1947, the Nationalist Party came to power under the leadership of Shukri Quwatli. Its rule was generally unpopular given the failure of the Syrian Armed Forces in the War for Palestine (1948).²⁷ The following decade was one of numerous coups and counter-coups. Nevertheless, in 1950 the Syrian Constitution was produced, which established the framework for tribal policy. Chapter X — Transitory Measure: Article 158 stated that:

1. The government shall undertake to settle the nomads.
2. Pending settlement a special law shall be enacted safeguarding Bedouin custom among nomads, and it shall specify the tribes that shall be subject thereto.
3. A programme for progressive settlement of the Bedouin shall be laid down in a law that shall be voted together with the funds necessary thereof.

In 1953, the French Mandate Law of the Tribes (1940) was annulled and replaced with a new "Law of the Tribes" in Decree No. 124, which continued to permit the Bedouin to carry arms in the *Badia*, but only those tribes classified as "nomadic" (the Aneza and Shamar confederations of tribes as well as the Hadidiyin and Mawali and a further 15 semi-nomadic tribes). The Minister of the Interior was empowered to re-

25. Chatty, *From Camel to Truck: the Bedouin in the Modern World*, p. 32.

26. See Riccardo Bocco, "The Sedentarisation of Pastoral Nomads: International Experts and the Bedouin Question in the Arab Middle East," in Dawn Chatty, ed., *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2006).

27. They had been opposed by the People's Party and the Ba'th Party, both of which continued to challenge and contest government activities. See Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

move tribes from this list as he saw fit and re-register them as a settled community. No reversion to nomadic life would be permitted. The nine seats which had been granted to the Bedouin tribes during the French Mandate were now reduced to six. Of these, four were specified for particular tribes: the Mawali and Hadidiyin from Aleppo, the Shamar from the Jazira, and the Hasana for Damascus.

The sudden availability of capital, the introduction of tractors and combine harvesters, the necessary demand, and economies of scale meant that large areas of cultivable land in the *Badia* and the *Jazira* became particularly vulnerable to exploitation by urban entrepreneurs who often partnered with Bedouin tribal leaders. Urban businessmen entered into partnership with tribal notables who controlled the land. Under sharecropping agreements which generally gave 80% of the crop to those who provided the capital, vast estates were created, primarily in the *Jazira*. Around Aleppo and Hama, the scale of such ventures was more limited and guided by the 1944 tribal treaty negotiated among the Sba'a, Hadidiyin, and Mawali. Partially in an effort to curb the expansion of these large estates, Government Decree 135 (1952) was passed, abolishing the prescriptive rights of the category of *mawat* (desert or unused land) land and instead turned the *Badia* into "state land" or *miri* land. As another step in undermining customary land tenure and common property, the decree made provisions for the allocation of 50 hectare plots of land to Bedouin households who decided to settle. A mission of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) looked into government settlement policy and acknowledged that much had been done to establish the legal framework, but it noted that the impact on the Bedouin was negligible to non-existent.²⁸ In its concluding statement, referred to in a later ILO report, it underscored that success rested on the essential step that: "traditional chiefs ... be brought under close administrative control, [and that] customary law and native courts ... be abolished."²⁹

The new Law of the Tribes, the land reform laws, and this settlement policy were deeply offensive to the Bedouin leadership. In 1956, the People's Party and the Ba'ath Party introduced a bill in Parliament to further dilute tribal privilege. After heated debate the tribal deputies, now unified in the *kitlat al-asha'ir* (Tribal Bloc) and supported by the National Party, were able to negotiate changes to this bill in their own favor returning certain powers to the tribes and their leaders.³⁰ It would now require two-thirds of a tribe's population to settle before they could be struck off the list of "nomads" held by the Ministry of the Interior; also, shaykhs were to be elected by the tribal elders rather than by appointment by the Minister of the Interior.

In 1958, after nearly a decade of political turmoil, the Syrian Parliament voted for a union with Egypt — the United Arab Republic (UAR). This was a crushing blow for the Bedouin tribes and their leaders. On September 28, 1958, UAR President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser repealed the Law of the Tribes of 1956 and proclaimed that henceforth tribes would cease to possess any separate legal identity, thereby seeking to end the power of

28. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), *Syria Report* (1955), p. 56.

29. See International Labour Organization (ILO), "Report of Technical Meeting on the Problems of Nomadism and Sedentarisation" (Geneva: ILO, 1964).

30. See "Minutes to the Damascus Tribal Conference, the Damascus Treaty, between the Sba'a, Mawali, Hadidiyin and Dependent Tribes," Syrian Ministry of Interior, August 6, 1956 and "Statement on the Tribal Division of the Syrian Badia, made by Haza al-Fakaki and witnessed by the Commander of the Steppe Forces, Adnan Osman," Syrian Ministry of Interior, 1956.

the Tribal Bloc in the Syrian Parliament. This was the last legislation to deal specifically with the Bedouin tribes and marked the final legal act in the long struggle between central governments and the Bedouin tribes and their leaders. It was an effort to curtail, if not destroy, the power and jurisdiction of the Bedouin leadership. For some Bedouin tribes this was a signal for their departure from Syria. Some sections of Aneza tribes left for Saudi Arabia, particularly the Fid'an and the Sba'a. Others continued to leave until 1973.³¹

Along with the union between Syria and Egypt (and Yemen) came new land reform measures and a greater emphasis on settlement and land registration. Law No. 161 of 1958 limited ownership to 300 ha of rain-fed land and 80 ha of irrigated or orchard lands. The union with Egypt sparked much disillusionment, and it collapsed in 1961. It was replaced by a government with strong traditional nationalist leanings. Two years later, in 1963, the Ba'ath Party came to power. In a desire to shift the balance of power from the city centers to the rural areas, the Ba'ath Party set out to establish a radical policy of land reform as well as social transformation in rural areas. The ultimate aim was to break the power of the city notables as well as the tribal leadership in order to establish a national identity among all citizens which melded them into a single nation overcoming all religious, communal, tribal, racial, or regional factors.³² The tribal leadership was seen as part of the old order, an anachronism in the modern state the Ba'ath Party was building. By this time, however, many of the Bedouin leaders had built up substantial land holdings and maintained political control over large numbers of Bedouin households.³³

The Ba'ath Party set out to strip the Bedouin leaders of their power and their land, much the same as they had done with other landowners. Loyalty to any other organization or institution than the state was considered subversive. An official party document on sectarianism, regionalism, and tribalism stated that the Party:

Considered that any social struggle that was based on regionalism, sectarianism or tribalism would be a struggle that threatened the livelihood and existence of the people. ... Arabism in its humanitarian sense is the fundamental bond which binds people together and that any other loyalty is a deviation because it is at the expense of that bond and is incompatible with the principles of nationalism which guarantee

31. The outflow of the tribes slowed down as Hafiz al-Asad consolidated his power between 1970 and 1972. By 1973, the livestock cooperative movement also had turned a corner and tribal leadership had come to be accepted in the organization of livestock associations.

32. Article 15, Constitution of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. See Sylvia Haim, ed., *Arab Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962). Further evidence of this assimilationist state policy can be found in the 1958 Syrian endorsement of ILO Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations. This was superseded in 1989 by ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal peoples, which affirmed their rights to natural resources, land, health, and education within their particular cultural framework. Syria has not endorsed ILO 169.

33. The al-Brahim family of the Hadidiyin (Kawmah), for example, was estimated to hold around 40,000 ha while Rakan ibn Muhayd of the Sba'a cultivated around 30,000 ha; the estates of Shammar Bedouin leaders in the *Jazira* were considerably larger. Also in this early period, the Ministry of the Interior's Directorate of Tribes produced an estimate of the number of individuals in the major tribes. These included: 30,500 Hadidiyin; 6,000 Sba'a Btayinat; 13,000 Fid'an Wuld; and 16,000 Mawali. These figures appeared in a supplement to the 1956 Damascus Tribal Conference. They are not based on any census figures but rather are estimates which reflect the relative strength of one tribal leader and his people to other tribes and ultimately to the government.

the progress of the Arab people.³⁴

This document ended by pledging that it would be a criminal act for those in the Party to view affairs from a sectarian, regional, or tribal standpoint. The desert and its people came under specific attack for their nomadic and semi-nomadic economy. The Ba‘th Party considered nomadism to be a primitive form of production, and thus inherently inefficient. Article 43 of the Ba‘th Constitution stated:

Nomadism is a primitive social state. It decreases the national output and makes an important part of the nation a paralysed member and an obstacle to its development and progress. The party struggles for the sedentarisation of nomads by the grants of land to them [and] for the abolition of tribal custom.

This language was in harmony with Western modernization theory and, indirectly, assimilation theory which was being promulgated by Western nations and international development aid agencies. The emphasis was on the singular evolutionary progress of humanity from “savagery” to civilization. The Bedouin and their way of life were considered far from the civilizational ideal and in need of guidance to reach civilized existence. The Ba‘th Party further introduced land reform and pushed for more settlement schemes.³⁵ By 1970, more than 1.5 million hectares had been expropriated, much of it from tribal leaders.

The Bedouin shaykhs and other tribal notables fared badly in the 1960s, losing much of their land and any vestiges of formal political power *vis à vis* the state. Dismayed by these measures, Shaykh Nuri of the Fid’an Wuld left Syria for a second time for Saudi Arabia in 1967 after having lost the majority of his land in the *Jazira*. Shaykh Faysal of the Hadidiyin was imprisoned in that same year on allegations that his father (Shaykh Nuwaf al-Salah) had assisted the French 20 years earlier during the French Mandate and that he, himself, remained a large landowner. Two months later he was released when these allegations could not be upheld. But he was advised by the Governor of Aleppo to leave the country for his own safety. Faysal and his extended family left for Jordan where he was welcomed by King Husayn, offered a stipend of 3,000 Jordanian dinars, and given land around Mafraq for himself and his family.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE BADIA AND STATE TRANSFORMATION OF BEDOUIN LAND USE

The period of the 1950s had been one of rapid economic growth and investment to

34. Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 146.

35. Land was appropriated from the tribal elite and given to tribal families so “that they could benefit from the conditions of settlement.” See Ahmad Mouhamad El-Zoobi, “Agricultural Extension and Rural Development in Syria 1955-1968,” PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbia, 1971, p. 120. These schemes, however, were not entirely successful. An internal government review of the second phase of these settlement schemes undertaken in 1967 reported that “the Bedouin who did settle and received reformed land regressed and returned back to their previous way of life.” See “Annual Report *Badia* Directorate,” Syrian Ministry of Agriculture, 1967. The review suggested that this regression was the result of pressure exerted by tribal leaders on their followers to stand up to and oppose the reforms of the Ba‘th Party.

expand the margins of cultivation into the *Badia*. But concerns that agricultural expansion had gone too far were emerging and reports from the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and other international agencies expressed serious concern that “dust bowl” conditions were growing and the *Badia* was being seriously degraded by this activity. IBRD reports began recommending a change of emphasis and greater efforts to raise the productivity of sheep husbandry in the *Badia*. These recommendations, coupled with the emerging FAO ecological reports which described the rapid steppe vegetation degradation in the *Badia*, led the government to establish the first of a number of research stations in Wadi al-Azayb near Hama on land confiscated from the Hadidiyin. In 1959, a ban on any further extension of cultivation in the *Badia* was imposed through Decree No. 1773. Before long, however, the blame for degradation had shifted from those opportunistic farmers of the 1940s and 1950s to the Bedouin pastoral herders. The degradation came to be viewed by government (and international development agency experts) as a result of the assumed-to-be primitive nature of sheep raising systems of the Bedouin, rather than due to the practices of the modern state, which promoted modern and often mechanized farming on delicate semi-arid land that could not support it.

Between 1958 and 1961 northern Arabia experienced a severe drought. According to official estimates, 80% of the camel population died, while the sheep population dropped nearly 50% from 6 million in 1957 to 3.5 in 1961.³⁶ Many Bedouin households lost all their herds and had no other option than to take up government offers of settlement on “reform land” and commence new lives as cultivators. In response to this crippling loss, the government created the Steppe (*Badia*) Directorate within the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. Official responsibility for the *Badia* and its Bedouin tribes was transferred from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Agriculture. Its main concerns were the effective modern management of the *Badia*, range and pasture research, drilling of government wells, and the organization of emergency feed. With cultivatable land on the margins of the *Ma'mura* and in the *Badia* thought to be exhausted, the government supported substantial intervention in the *Badia* to revive the livestock industry but without also restoring authority to Bedouin tribal leaders, or returning their traditional lands to them. A United Nations sponsored project was set up with the explicit aim of revitalizing the pastoral sector of the Syrian economy. Its foremost goal was to stabilize the mainly pastoral livestock population. This proved extremely difficult since the agricultural and livestock technicians running the project — mainly trained in the West — did not understand Bedouin methods of animal husbandry.³⁷ In turn, the Bedouin had little trust in government — especially in light

36. JPH Van de Veen, “Report to the steppe Directorate: Grazing Trial, Wadi Al ‘Azib Range and Sheep Experimental Station, 1963-1966” (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization, 1967).

37. Bedouin animal husbandry is based on risk minimalization rather than profit motivation, which is more common in the Western market. The Bedouin method is more focused on maintaining healthy herd sizes, keeping the family in milk, and selling off the unwanted young, male livestock — as opposed to purely maximizing herd size, which calls for keeping most of the male young and fattening them up for larger profits. In the Bedouin case, herd numbers which can be managed by the household alone are preferred, although some families do hire shepherds when they don’t have the necessary manpower themselves. The rationale behind the Bedouin method is that too rapid growth in herd size can lead to unacceptable losses in the event of a drought. See John Shoup, “Middle Eastern Sheep Pastoralism and the Hema System,” in John Galaty and Douglas Johnson, eds., *The World of Pastoralism: Herding Systems in Comparative Perspectives* (London and New York: The Guildford Press, 1990), p. 200.

of the recent confiscation of grazing land, and the explosive expansion of agricultural development over nearly a third of the best rangelands of the *Badia*.³⁸ The Bedouin “dry farmed”³⁹ cereal crops during years of good rain, but the large scale cultivation in this arid zone had never occurred before.

Without any empirical studies or baseline data from which to judge, international development experts joined the government chorus in declaring the *Badia* severely degraded due to overstocking and poor indigenous range management practices.⁴⁰ By 1968, after four years of poor results, the government grazing projects collapsed.⁴¹ Trying to isolate and ignore local Bedouin herders and their traditional practices had resulted in government failure. In the same year, a handful of specialists with the FAO launched a campaign to convince the Syrian government of the importance of considering Bedouin traditional herding practices. These experts argued that unless development programs took traditional Bedouin practices into account all these *Badia* development schemes would ultimately fail. One clever proposal, put forward by Omar Draz,⁴² entailed that the Bedouin tradition of resource conservation, which he identified as a Bedouin practice called *Hema*,⁴³ be restored. This, however, would mean formally returning control over the management of grazing lands from the Ministry of Agriculture back to the Bedouin. The government and its international advisors had assumed, as was common throughout international development circles at that time (and still today), that with access to the grazing lands of the *Badia* no longer controlled by the Bedouin, a “tragedy of the commons”-type situation was occurring, resulting in these areas becoming degraded from overstocking and overuse.⁴⁴

However, this assumption was incorrect as it was based on a false understanding that the government “nationalization” program actually had taken effect and access to

38. Hazim Al-Sammame, “*Al-Birnamij al-Suri li Tahsin al-Mara’i wa Tarbiyat al-Aghnam*” [“Syrian Program for the Improvement of Range and Sheep Production”] (Damascus: Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, 1981).

39. “Dry farming” refers to a system of agriculture whereby there is no irrigation of the crops other than what is obtained through natural rainfall.

40. See Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), “Land Policy in the Near East” (Rome: FAO, 1965) and International Labour Organization (ILO), “Report of Technical Meeting on the Problems of Nomadism and Sedentarisation,” 1964.

41. See Rae, “Tribe and State: Management of the Syrian Steppe,” p. 212.

42. Omar Draz, “An Approach for the Settlement of Nomads through Revival of the Ancient Hema System of Range Reserves in the Form of Co-Operatives within an Integrated Programme of Range Improvement in Syria,” paper presented at the UN Expert Consultation of the Settlement of Nomads in Africa and the Near East, Rome, 1971 and “Role of Range Management and Fodder Production” (Beirut: UNDP Regional Offices for Western Asia, 1977)

43. The term *Hema* means to protect or to safeguard. It is said that in the early Islamic tradition, large swathes of pasture areas and grain fields were set aside as “*Hema*” in order to provide feed for the herds of the Bedouin military units serving in the expansion of the empire.

44. Garrett Hardin’s article on the “Tragedy of the Commons” profoundly influenced international “rangeland experts” and government in the Middle East and North Africa. See Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, Vol. 162 (1968), pp. 1243-48. Hardin’s argument that “common land” open to all users in the West would suffer as each rational man rushed to pursue his own best interests was curiously accepted as the fundamental explanation for the degradation of the steppe land in Syria. No consideration was given to the very real collective action of Bedouin society and its long history of communal land use to sustain livelihoods.

pasture in the *Badia* was open and free to use on a first come, first serve basis. In fact, the Bedouin continued to use the *Badia* as they had done for centuries, negotiating inter — and intra — tribally for access to resources and maintaining traditional systems of social capital and cooperation to support their common livelihoods. The basis for this system of land use had been undermined by the recent government decrees, but it had not been destroyed. Draz's recommendations for a return to a system of communal ownership was an indirect recognition of the *de facto* existence of an, if technically illegal, alternative tribal system of resource allocation. His suggestion appealed to the Syrian government's socialist orientation and the proposal to establish government livestock cooperatives based on the principle of *Hema* was accepted.

A program of *Hema* sheep cooperatives was implemented in 1970. Applications from Bedouin for membership in these cooperatives were slow to come in. There were a few block applications by closely related Bedouin tribal sections (and thus "control" over their former traditional grazing lands) which the government eagerly granted. However as power and responsibility within a cooperative was meant to be in the hands of cooperative members, government fears were that the tribal leadership would take over the committees where the cooperative membership was largely made up of one tribe. Thus, the government decreed that all positions on cooperative committees should be filled by government employees, who would have a role in determining the price of animal fodder, feed supplements, and in its earlier days, credit facilities for members. Though Western approaches to range management were meant to be instituted in the *Badia*, these never actually came into effect. Some tribal groups, particularly among the "common" traditional sheep herders, accepted this government administrative superstructure and cooperated with the restricted access to tribal lands which such membership demanded in order to gain access to free or highly subsidized animal fodder.⁴⁵ Others, mainly among the former "noble" camel herders, however, did not accept these government cooperatives and their restrictions on access to tribal lands. Among the latter, a number of tribal sections moved away to Saudi Arabia and Jordan.⁴⁶

Between 1970 and 1973, only six *Hema* co-operatives were formed; a poor showing which alarmed the government. In 1974, in an effort to boost this program, the government agreed to shift control of the cooperative movement from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Peasant's Union.⁴⁷ Under the leadership of the Peasant's Union, the position of cooperative leader became an elected one. Immediately in these few existing *Hema* co-operatives, the shaykhs and tribal notables were "elected" to leadership. Other Bedouin tribal leaders then began to encourage their tribesmen to post applica-

45. Interview by author with Omar Draz, Damascus, October 1977. See also Draz, "Role of Range Management and Fodder Production."

46. Movement between Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia tended to be easy for the Bedouin given the inherently porous and artificial nature of the borders drawn by Sir Mark Sykes in 1918. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and Jordan were comparatively welcoming to the Syrian Bedouin because of long-standing (and ongoing) kinship and marriage ties with the Bedouin of Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In the Saudi case, it should be noted that the Al Sa'ud belong to the Aneza Confederation of tribes (a branch of the Hasana). Indeed, it can be inferred that the borders of 1918 were drawn in part to limit King 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud's influence among the tribes of the northern *Badia*.

47. Interview by author with Omar Draz, Damascus, October 1977.

tions to register new cooperatives and the *Hema* movement soon took off.⁴⁸

HAFIZ AL-ASAD, THE CORRECTIONIST MOVEMENT, AND THE BEDOUIN

By 1970 the Ba‘th Party had split into two opposing policy groups. One side emphasized the importance of socialist reforms within the country, while the other side looked outward and sought to establish a pragmatic, credible force to challenge Israel. Hafiz al-Asad led the latter group, which succeeded, by an internal coup, in removing its opponents in the Ba‘th Party. Asad needed to broaden support for his own regime and reconcile the disaffected social classes through a liberalization of Syria’s politics and economy. He moved to distance himself from the immediate political past by paying tribute to the unity of the 1925-7 Arab Revolt against the French Mandate, which had been led by the Druze leader Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, and in which many of Syria’s Bedouin leaders had participated. He also set out to invite tribal shaykhs and other dissidents to return to Syria — including Shaykh Faysal al-Sfuk of the Hadidiyin, who was in exile in Jordan and under the protection of King Husayn.⁴⁹ Asad felt that national unity and reconciliation were paramount if Syria were ever to challenge to Israel.

A related effort at consolidating power took place through the inclusion of disaffected groups, including his own minority community, the ‘Alawites. Within a short period of time, Asad moved to guarantee that the majority of the members of the Central Committee of the Ba‘th Party, as well as the crucial military elite, were all ‘Alawite.⁵⁰ Tapping into and expanding the traditional patronage networks of Syrian society, Asad, as the absolute head of an oligarchy/military and political dictatorship, was able to dominate resources and thus determine access to economic opportunity. He also was able to negotiate the relative advantages and powers of these various social groups. What he was able to create was a system of distribution of national resources based on the political calculation of powers and loyalties and the pre-emption of threatening alliances.⁵¹ In order to shore up such a system, he expanded the military and security apparatus of the country so that, by the 1990s, these services employed 15% of the country’s total workforce.⁵²

Relations with the Bedouin tribes became more flexible and the Asad era herald-

48. By the mid-1990s, the government claimed to have over 400 *Hema* cooperatives covering approximately 5 million ha of the *Badia*. See “Directorate of the *Badia* Annual Report” (Damascus: Ministry of Agriculture, 1996). In a survey conducted by Rae in 1995-6 among herders in the *Badia* between Aleppo and Hama, 96% of them said they had joined the cooperatives to access the subsidized feed on offer. The other 4% said they had joined because their shaykh had instructed them to do so. See Rae, “Tribe and Steppe: Management of the Syrian Steppe,” p. 228. These findings throw into doubt the reported successes of the cooperatives in managing the utilization of the *Badia* along principles of modern ranching in the works of John Shoup and other observers. Instead, it points to the persistence of traditional tribal systems in managing natural resource allocation.

49. After Hafiz al-Asad had launched his internal coup within the Ba‘th Party in October 1970, he personally sent ‘Alawite messengers to Shaykh Faysal in Jordan acknowledging his poor treatment and asking him to return, which he did.

50. Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 122.

51. Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), p. 164.

52. Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p. 147.

ed a pragmatic approach to conflict resolution. The public face of government authority — maintaining law and order — could not risk defeat or humiliation with unresolved disputes or failure in the courts. Thus, in contradiction to the Law of 1958, stripping the Bedouin tribes of their right to settle disputes among themselves on the principles of customary law, Asad encouraged disputes between or involving tribal members to continue to be solved through traditional channels.⁵³ In 1977, for example, Asad was reported to have sent a close advisor, ‘Ali ‘Adil, to the Hadidiyin to settle a decades-long blood feud in which more than ten tribal members had been killed.⁵⁴ This example underscores the complexity of Asad’s rule and his recognition of the potential power of Bedouin tribal society and social structure. Although the Ba‘th philosophy was meant to do away with sectarian and tribal interests in the progression to a higher socialist vision, Hafiz al-Asad instituted a reform which permitted the Bedouin tribes, among other minority groups, to continue to operate an alternative system of authority and thus also power, but power allied to the state.

THE HAMA UPRISING AND THE HADIDIYIN-‘ALAWITE ALLIANCE

Between 1979 and 1981 the regime of Hafiz al-Asad experienced its only serious internal challenge. This anti-regime movement was almost exclusively fuelled by the fundamentalism of the Muslim Brotherhood. Increasing violence, bombings, and the assassinations of key government figures in 1979 and 1980 finally culminated in the army quashing the Islamist insurrection centered on Hama in 1982. The loss of life in this operation has been estimated at as little as 3,000 and as much as 30,000.⁵⁵ There is some evidence and certainly a strong belief among the Bedouin elite that during the government’s three-year battle with the Muslim Brotherhood, one, if not more, of the Bedouin tribes were called upon to assist the regime. In conversations with key informants among the Hadidiyin, Rae was able to establish that Jamil al-Asad, the brother of the President, visited Buaydar, the capital of the Hadidiyin, to ask them to be the government’s eyes and ears in the *Badia* and to monitor movements around the cities of Hama and Aleppo.⁵⁶ The tribal leadership was requested to encourage the tribesmen to check the flow of arms being run in from the Iraqi border as well as to prevent the *Badia* from becoming a refuge for Muslim Brotherhood members. This request — even the rumour of such a request — gave many Bedouin confirmation of the importance of their tribal leadership in managing internal security matters in the vast spread of the *Badia*. It was a recognition they had long awaited; that the *Badia*

53. Syrian Arab Republic, “The Minutes of Meeting to Resolve Dispute between Muharrab Rukan al-Murshed the Representative of the Sba’a Tribe and Members of the Hadidiyin, represented by Faysal al Sfuk” (Ministry of the Interior, Homs Provincial Administration, 1975) and “Minutes of a Meeting between the Sba’a and the Hadidiyin over the lands of al Del’a al Gharbieh” (Ministry of the Interior, 1981).

54. The intervention of a respected “elder” — in this case Asad’s advisor — is a traditional method of arbitration in tribal disputes. See Rae, “Tribe and State: Management of the Syrian Steppe,” pp. 219-20.

55. For more on the Hama Uprising and its historical context, see Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* and Seale, *Asad*.

56. Rae, “Tribe and State: Management of the Syrian Steppe,” p. 221.

could not be managed by the regime's security forces alone but required the cooperation of the Bedouin. It was the *de facto* recognition of the tribal presence and power in the semi-arid steppe land of Syria. The Hadidiyin are said to have agreed and to have joined an alliance called 'Ali al-Murtadd. The organization's push into the *Badia* near Hama and Aleppo was justified on the common belief that the people from these regions were originally 'Alawites who had been forced by the Ottomans to become Sunni.⁵⁷ Whatever the origins of the Hadidiyin, their relations with the 'Alawites have been historically strong.

In the years since 1982, the Asad regime seems to have suspended any clear tribal policy. There have been no new settlement schemes for semi-nomadic or nomadic Bedouin. Laws forbidding cultivation, especially of barley, in the *Badia* have been passed in order to protect traditional grazing areas. The ban was meant to prohibit large-scale agricultural activity. However, those most affected were the small-scale Bedouin settled farmers who had traditionally grown enough barely to feed their own herds. Increasing areas of barley cultivation emerged throughout the 1970s and 1980s, until in 1989 there was a final and absolute ban of all cultivation in the *Badia* imposed by the President himself. Yet even this presidential decree has not been systematically applied in the areas of the *Badia* where rain-fed agriculture is occasionally possible. Once in a while, a Bedouin is prevented from growing barely but, by and large, these tribesmen continue to plant barley when conditions permit in order to feed their own herds. The ban on cultivation is continually imposed and then reversed, often depending on who holds the position of Minister of Agriculture and what kind of patron-client relationship he has with the Bedouin tribal leadership.⁵⁸

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, BA'TH PARTY RHETORIC, AND BEDOUIN REALITIES

Between 1958 and 1970, the Bedouin tribal leaders of Syria were politically isolated from government. State policy was aiming to redirect the loyalty of the individual Bedouin from his tribal shaykh to the state. It was with the ascendancy of Asad and his pragmatic "Correctionist Movement" in the 1970s that political contacts between the state and the tribes were tacitly re-established with more formal channels of communications and patronage created under the veil of the *Hema* cooperative movements.

This realistic approach to the alternative system of authority and power in the *Badia* remains a core feature of the Asad governments. The Asad regime has continued to invite Bedouin to return to the country and has played an active part in setting up cus-

57. See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 123. Some tribes' members consider that one of the shaykhly tribal families was originally from the 'Alawite family or "tribe," the Haddadun. Such "historical" associations are common in explaining contemporary political alliances among the Bedouin. Also see Albert de Boucheman, "La sédentarisation du désert de Syrie" ["The Sedentarization of the Syrian Desert"], *L'Asie Française*, No. 320 (May 1934), pp. 140-43.

58. In recent years, the Minister of Agriculture has been of Bedouin origin (Hadidiyin) and regularly has come down on the side of the Bedouin in disputes between the tribes and the Directorate of *Badia* Affairs. In 1997 and again in 2001, I was present when the Minister of Agriculture overruled the ban on cultivation and permitted the limited growing of barley by small farmers in the *Badia* where rain-fed cultivation was possible.

tomary arbitration over disputed claims to grazing areas and water. Between 1978 and 1981, the government mediated the dispute between the Sba'a and the Hadidiyin over wells the former had abandoned during their exile in Saudi Arabia. It was involved in a dispute between the Haib and the Hadidiyin as well as an intra-tribal dispute between the northern and southern branches of the Mawali — which only was concluded in the 1980s. In the 1990s, a major re-adjustment of the borders of the *Ma'mura* and the lands which had belonged to the Haib came into effect after months of arbitration, culminating with some Haib land being sold to the Hadidiyin. Among the Bedouin it is dominance rather than formal ownership which is the basis underlying resource control and notions of territoriality in the *Badia*. Possession is nine-tenths of the law; the remaining percentage comes through legitimizing the claim through occupation or investment. Thus, among contemporary Bedouin leadership in the *Badia*, power and authority derives not only from the allegiance of individual tribesmen, but also the *de facto* recognition by the state of the tribal leaders' ability to smoothly manage natural resource allocation as well as customary processes for conflict resolution. This recognition is not codified in law (the 1958 abolition of the legal category of tribe still stands, and the Ba'th Constitution's negative vision of nomads also remains). It is the working relationship which characterizes the military and security services, the Ministry of the Interior, and parts of the Ministry of Agriculture as well as the Presidential Offices. In all these areas, Bedouin have begun to emerge as important. The presidential appointment of the Minister of Agriculture is frequently made to a Bedouin, as are senior appointments to the Ministry of the Interior and the Ba'th Party Regional Command.⁵⁹

Despite this ever-more obvious relationship of Bedouin tribal leadership to the Ba'th regime and state institutions, some ministries and international agencies working in the country rarely use the term Bedouin or tribe when engaged in work with these populations. For government and Ba'th officialdom this trend is understandable given the "official" position of the Ba'th Party regarding tribal or minority identities. Among international development experts this trend makes little sense and has different roots. A rhetoric of "users," "stakeholder," and "local communities" has become common in international development literature,⁶⁰ reflecting a global trend to homogenize the indigenous, the traditional, and the local in an effort to promote general notions of participation and equity. Yet when applied to Syria, this trend is dangerous and liable to failure. It is as though by no longer mentioning the Bedouin and the tribal system, it is possible to deny, let alone identify, the alternative system which has continued to exist and regulate land and resource use in the *Badia* throughout the early years of the Syrian state, the Ba'th Party takeover, and finally the Correctionist Movement of the Asad family.

No official statistics exist in Syria regarding the size of the Bedouin population in the country. The national bureau of statistics does not have a category of "Bedouin." But it is possible to extrapolate from livestock figures a sense of the Bedouin pres-

59. Interview by the author with retired senior Syrian government official, Damascus, June 12, 2007.

60. Lisa Truilzi, "The Bedouin between Development and the State: a Syrian Case Study," *The Arab World Geographer*, Vol. 5, No 2 (2002), p. 99.

ence and importance to state politics and the economy.⁶¹ Estimates made in 1999 by the then-Minister of Health put the number of Bedouin in the country at 900,000. As the Syrian Rural Health Service and its WHO-supported “healthy village” program is perhaps the most successful in the region at providing rural health care throughout the country, its own Ministry of Health statistics unit has fairly rigorous statistics to support this estimate. The Bedouin are 5-7% of the total population of the country. If one considers that in 1943, ten seats out of 135 (7%) were set aside for Bedouin representatives (a carryover of the French Mandate policy), then the current situation is much changed.⁶² Today, 30 of the 250 elected members of Parliament (12% of the total) are Bedouin.⁶³ This is not a reflection of government policy, but rather an expression of Bedouin strength in the *Badia*. The size of this representation suggests that the Bedouin voice in Parliament is twice of what would be expected if seats in Parliament were based solely on population size rather than on territorial control.

CONCLUSION

Bedouin tribes have occupied the semi-arid and arid steppe land of Syria for centuries. They always have maintained relations with populations on the margins of their territory. Their lack of total self-sufficiency has meant that they always have been linked to other non-pastoral societies by economic, social, and political relations. In the local Syrian context, a “Bedouin” can be a regional specialist in livestock breeding whose closest social and political ties are with his/her pastoral kinsmen (i.e., tribes). He also may be a merchant, a transnational transportation specialist, and even an agricultural worker. Change and adaptation are key aspects of Bedouin livelihood strategies, and in the current global economy, many Bedouin have sought out multi-resource strategies, seeking wage labor in related activities such as transport and commerce in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states.⁶⁴ Some Bedouin women and men enter into the unskilled daily wage labor market in agriculture. Some Bedouin men migrate for jobs in construction. Others have settled and become less mobile, refocusing their livelihoods on farming. However, regardless of their multiple occupations and residence patterns, they remain culturally Bedouin as long as they maintain close social ties with pastoral kin and retain the local linguistic and cultural markers that identify them as Bedouin. The term “Bedouin,” originally regarded as meaning a desert dweller, has taken on an important sense of cultural identity derived from the association with tribal genealogies and myths of origins.



61. See, for example, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), “The Badia Rangelands Development Project” (Rome: IFAD, 1998) and United Nations Development Programme, “Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004 Diagnosis and Pro-Poor Policy Considerations” (Damascus: 2005).

62. British 9th Army, “Reports to HM’s Government,” FO 226.271, 1943.

63. Interview by author with senior tribal elder and retired government official, Damascus, June 12, 2007.

64. It should be noted that in addition to these regional paradigms, in the Iraqi case, Syria has become a safe haven for a number of Iraqi tribes who are members of the Shammar tribal confederation — which populates the northern *Jazira* of Syria — since 2003. A significant number of Iraqi Shammar tribes have moved their herds into the Syrian *Jazira* and have found markets for their livestock in Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

For those Bedouin who have remained focused primarily on herding, the past 30 years have seen immense transformation. Much of the land they have regarded as theirs to use has been legally stripped from them and given away or sold off to urban entrepreneurs or tribal elites. For some Bedouin it has meant the transformation from a mobile lifestyle to a more settled existence of cultivating barley and other crops while managing a dwindling herd of sheep. In the 1970s, trucks and other motor vehicles came to replace camels as beasts of burden,⁶⁵ making some Bedouin even more nomadic than in the past, as they used motorized vehicles to sustain their pastoral livelihoods.⁶⁶ Today the truck is often used to bring feed and water to the herds deep in the *Badia* or to take livestock to distant markets. Modern trucking also has come to be identified with Bedouin, particularly interstate commerce and trade. The movement of goods from one market to another when significant price differentials appear is commonly a Bedouin activity, particularly when it is between countries (even watermelons and lemons fall into this category). Furthermore, the truck has allowed the Bedouin to be more mobile than in the past, permitting some to settle for much of the year in permanent villages (especially the young and the old), while still maintaining access to water, pastures, herds, and places of employment beyond the arid steppe land that is their home.

Most contemporary conflict in the semi-arid zones today is between the state and Bedouin society. It focuses on two related areas of concern: degradation of the arid steppe land and global interests in preserving the world's biodiversity. For decades, the Syrian government, like other governments in the region, has encouraged the Bedouin to move off of the arid steppe land and settle. At times this policy is couched in terms of the "damage" which Bedouin do to their environment and derives from theories of land use (equilibrium systems) which are inappropriate to the semi-arid and arid lands of the Middle East and North Africa. Though little, if any, empirical evidence exists to confirm this position, Bedouin tend to be pressured by modern governments to give up a way of life which is regarded as backward, primitive, and out of step with modern, settled society.⁶⁷

Recent government biodiversity activity has hastened the decline and growing poverty of already poor Bedouin families inhabiting the *Badia* as well as the transition zone between the desert and the *Ma'mura*. The Syrian government, both interested in protecting the environment and developing and extracting benefit from this large tract of land, has permitted the region to become a focus of international development aid activity. In the past decade, both the Food and Agricultural Organization as well as the International Fund for Agricultural Development have led the way with a series of studies aimed at introducing biodiversity conservation and modern Western ideas to improve traditional range management practises.⁶⁸ The goal of these efforts is to make

65. See Chatty, *From Camel to Truck*.

66. See Marina Leybourne, Ronald Jaubert, and Richard Tutwiler, "Changes in Migration and feeding patterns among Semi-Nomadic Pastoralists of Northern Syria," *Pastoral Development Network*, No. 34a (Overseas Development Institute, 1993).

67. See Dawn Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

68. Stephan Baas and Dawn Chatty, *Sourcebook: Training Guide in Participatory Processes in Co-management of Natural Resources* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2003), pp. 1-240 and "Rangeland Rehabilitation and Establishment of a Wildlife Reserve in Palmyra Badia," Document No. GCP/SYR/003 (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1995).

the *Badia* more productive and to teach its “beneficiaries” (its largely Bedouin tribal inhabitants) how to manage the resources in their environment, while at the same time lifting them from a “poverty” associated with this steppe land. As was the case decades before, these measures, often dressed in the fashionable vocabulary of participation, take no account of traditional knowledge, custom, or leadership.

The Bedouin tribes of contemporary Syria have managed to maintain their authority for decades in the face of formal legislation, but with very little real interference in their affairs and their management of resources in the *Badia*. Over the past few decades, the government increasingly has been drawn into agreements with various Bedouin leaders to maintain law and order in the *Badia*. The *cordon sanitaire* which the Bedouin threw around Hama and Aleppo in 1982 to limit the movement of arms for government authorities (i.e., the Ministry of the Interior) was undertaken with an ulterior motive. Bedouin tribal shaykhs were given the re-recognition that they craved as traditional leaders in the *Badia* of Syria. This was followed by government recognition of their place as elected functionaries of government *Hema* cooperatives. Today, the authority and power of Bedouin tribal leaders is recognized in the *Badia* by local residents as well as the security apparatus of the state. Many of these leaders are now also parliamentarians.⁶⁹ Some of these leaders, particularly of the Hadidiyin, the Mawali, the Sba’a, and the Fid’an are particularly powerful because of the size of their tribes as well as the strategic location of the villages, grazing areas, and water wells they control. The Bedouin leadership remains a force to be reckoned with and to ignore or play down the influence and authority that they possess is foolhardy.

69. Between 1943 and 2008, Bedouin tribal representation in Parliament nearly doubled from 7% to 12%.