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978-0-521-10327-5 - Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800-1980

Norman N. Lewis

Excerpt

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Introduction: the *Badiyah* and the transitional zone

This book is concerned with the people of two adjacent parts of Syria, one of them the steppe or semi-desert of the interior, where until recently most of the people were nomads, and the other the transitional zone between the steppe and the well-watered lands towards the coast. The steppe or semi-desert is the area in which the average annual rainfall is less than 200 mm (eight inches), and the transitional zone is the area, shaded grey on Map 1, where the average is between 200 mm and 350 mm (8–14 inches). Only certain districts of the transitional zone are discussed in the chapters below; they include parts of the Jazirah, the middle Euphrates valley, the plains east of Aleppo, Hama and Homs, Jabal ad Duruz, and the Balqa' of central Trans-Jordan. Most of the people of these districts are today village-dwelling farmers, some of them tribesmen, settled now but of nomadic origin, others of peasant descent.

Little of the transitional zone is well endowed country; only in the western parts of it, where the rainfall approaches 350 mm a year, can a wide range of winter and summer crops be grown without irrigation. As rainfall decreases towards the east the range narrows and yields decline. Where the annual average is between 300 mm and 250 mm little is grown without irrigation except wheat and barley, and towards the 200 mm line barley predominates and much of the land is left fallow. As the range and yield of crops diminish the importance of sheep in the rural economy increases. Even barley fails east of the 200 mm line and the cultivated land gives way to steppe. Rainfall continues to decrease and the natural vegetation becomes sparser further to the east and south, and the south-eastern borderlands of the country, where the rainfall averages less than 100 mm a year, is desert rather than steppe.

The whole steppe and desert interior of the country is often referred to locally as the *badiyah*, or beduin territory. Nomadic tribespeople do spend part of the year there, but in summer most of them move with their flocks of sheep (and some used to take herds of camels), westward to the transitional zone, where farmland and grazing ground, farmers and nomads mingle.

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Historically, the transitional zone has been a debatable area between the steppe and the settled farming country of western Syria, and often a zone of contention between nomads and peasants. Today, most of it is cultivated and, although some nomads graze their flocks there in summer, villagers predominate. This appears also to have been the case at certain periods in the past – in most of the first five centuries of the Christian era, for example – but at other times much of the zone has been uncultivated and occupied by nomads to the exclusion of villagers. As Chapter 1 shows, this was its condition at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Later chapters examine changes which ensued in the *badiyah* and in the transitional zone in the next 180 years, as the state extended and strengthened its hold on the countryside, the economy of the country developed, peasants and landlords moved into the transitional zone, and the nomads gradually changed their way of life.

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[More information](#)**Chapter 1****Nomads, villagers and the desert line about 1800****The nomads¹***The migratory cycle*

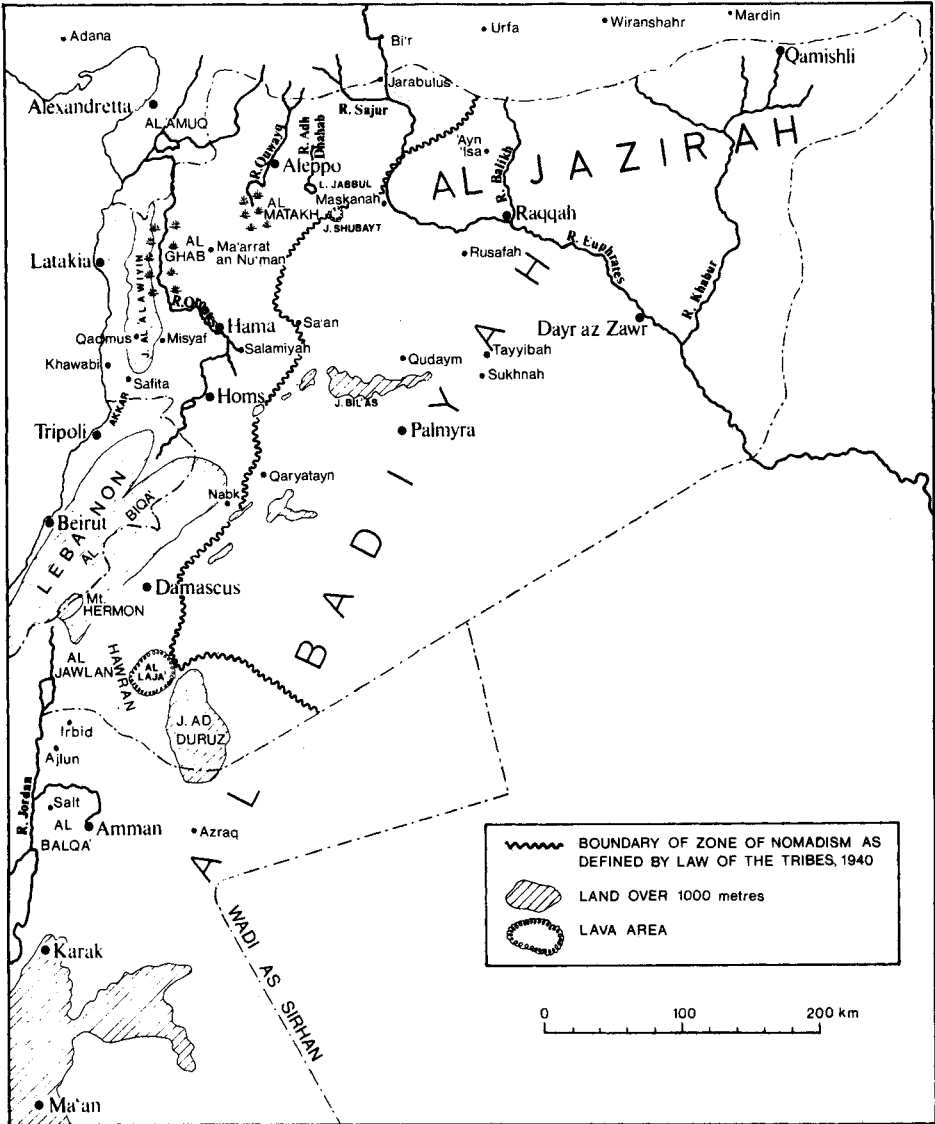
At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was, as there is today, great variety amongst the nomadic tribes of Syria. They differed from one another in their ethnic origin, history and size, in the proportion of sheep to camels in their inventory of livestock, in their migratory habit, economic status and social standing, their aggressive or peaceful inclination, the extent to which they were subjected to Ottoman authority, and in many other ways. Certain migratory pastoralists were also cultivators, either of rain-fed land in the transitional zone or of irrigated areas along the Euphrates and its tributaries, and some farming families of nomadic origin and tribal affiliation lived in more or less stationary tents, or in caves or huts, while their relatives remained nomadic. Such mixed economies were, however, less common than they were to become later in the nineteenth century, and most of the tribespeople were nomadic and primarily dependent on either camels or sheep.

Arab tribespeople were usually called 'arab by themselves and others, and this term differentiated them from people of peasant descent, as well as from Kurds and Turkuman. Within the wide category of 'arab only a limited number of tribes could properly be called beduin; their people were conscious of their 'noble' descent and nearly all of them were camel breeders and long-range nomads who spent much of the year in the *badiyah*. Most of the other 'arab tribes were predominantly sheep rearers, although they also kept some camels, if only to transport their tents and other gear.

The timing and distribution of rainfall was the major common factor which shaped the course of seasonal migration of the tribes. In a good winter season rain fell in many parts of the *badiyah* and throughout the transitional zone, and both beduin and sheep rearers could find water and grazing without difficulty. In late spring water pools left by the winter

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Map 2. Syria and part of Trans-Jordan: physical features, place names and the boundary of the zone of nomadism in 1940

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rains in the *badiyah* dried up and the ephemeral vegetation of early spring withered. Only those beduin who could find enough grazing for their camels within easy reach of a perennial well could stay deep in the *badiyah* in summer, and most of them moved to its fringes or into the transitional zone where water and grazing were more abundant. The sheep rearing 'arab who had spent part of the winter and spring in the nearer *badiyah* withdrew from it when water and grazing became short, and spent the summer in the transitional zone or the cultivated area west or north of it, where the sheep grazed on fallow land, stubbles and the then extensive areas of land left uncultivated between the villages.

Neither people nor animals wanted to stay in their summer quarters longer than necessary. By the end of the summer the area around wells and villages was over-grazed and once winter set in the western and northern parts of the country were liable to be cold, wet and muddy, conditions which neither camels nor their tent-dwelling owners could tolerate. Their sheep could survive the winter in the west or north and many village flocks did so, but between December and May, while wheat and barley were growing, there was little room or fodder there for large nomadic flocks. As soon, therefore, as rain was reported to be falling in one area or another of the steppe or desert there was a stirring and the tribes began to move east or south. The beduin and their camels usually left in the autumn. They could move further and faster than the sheep rearers and their herds needed less water than sheep and would eat desert vegetation which was unpalatable to sheep. Some of the sheep herders followed a few weeks later, but others waited until the early spring vegetation appeared. They usually kept to the northern part of the *badiyah*, where rainfall and vegetation were more abundant than in the south.

The tribes did not merely 'wander in search of water and grazing' during the winter. The people of each tribe were intimately familiar with their *dirah*, the area in which they normally moved with their flocks or herds, and this familiarity, together with intelligence gathered daily, enabled them to direct their movements to best advantage. They also took account of political factors, enmities and alliances, and negotiated or fought with each other if necessary to obtain access to the wells or grazing areas they needed.

Spring was the high point of the nomads' year; in a good season ample short-lived spring vegetation would appear, there would be milk in abundance and calves, lambs and foals would thrive. As spring turned to summer the beduin moved north and west and sheep rearing tribes withdrew before them; tribes of the Euphrates valley, for example, left the steppe for their irrigated fields by the river, and the central Syrian

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tribes moved into the transitional zone or to village territory. From here, lambs and other products of the flocks could easily be sold to city buyers, particularly by certain tribes, like the Hadidiyin, whose commercial relationships with city merchants were well developed. In May and June some tribesmen might help harvest grain and it would be moved, on the stalk, to the threshing floors by camels which were rented or sold to the villagers by beduin or other 'arab. The tribespeople also stocked up with grain during the summer and bought clothing and a few other manufactured goods for use during the coming winter.

Those were the movements typical of a good year. Only too often, however, the lives of nomads and of farmers were disrupted by drought. Rainfall in the transitional zone and especially in the *badiyah* was and is characterized by extreme variability. Figures of average annual rainfall like those shown on Map 1 obscure the fact that the amount of rain which falls at any one place varies greatly from one year to the next, and that the incidence and distribution of rainfall within each year is also very erratic. The resultant differences in crop yields, in the quality and quantity of natural vegetation which grows in the *badiyah*, and in the number of young animals which survive, are enormous. After good winter and spring rains growing crops cover the ground well to the east, and beyond them the semi-desert is green with short-lived spring pasture. In bad years the crops towards the margin of cultivation are stunted or do not grow at all and there is little pasture. 'Fat years' are, by local standards, years of superabundance; 'lean years' of desperate scarcity.²

Several dry years quite frequently occur consecutively and during such drought periods crops fail and farmers may have to desert their villages. In the past lack of water and grazing in the *badiyah* often drove nomads with their flocks and herds to 'invade' the cultivated areas. The worst years for the nomads were those in which winter and spring were both dry and cold, for then animals died wholesale, the worst losses being among lambs born in December and January. If severe and widespread drought persisted for several seasons tribes would have to compete for scarce resources and some might leave their familiar *dirahs* and move into new territory in hopes of finding better living conditions. Here they would clash with and perhaps displace weaker groups who were there before them. These and other effects of drought on settled people and on nomads will be discussed more fully below.

*The tribes*³

Kurdish and Turkuman nomads were found in northernmost Syria, but apart from them virtually all the nomadic tribes were Arabic-speaking,

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and the shaykhs and many of the tribesmen preserved some half-memory or tradition of a tribal origin in northern Arabia. Some of the tribes had been in Syria for many centuries; the Qays of the northern Jazirah, for example, believed that they had moved 'in the days of the Arab conquests', and the amirs of the Fadl and of the Mawali were well aware that their forebears had lorded it in the Syrian desert in mediaeval times. Others, notably the Shammar and 'Anazah, had moved north only in the last few generations, and some of them still divided their time between northern Arabia and Syria.⁴

Some of the older-established tribes had developed trading and political relationships with one or other of the Syrian cities. South of Damascus, for example, the Sardiyah, Bani Sakhr and others provided camels for the annual Hajj caravan, and in the eighteenth century shaykhs of the Sardiyah sometimes acted for the Ottoman governors of Damascus in collecting 'tribute' or tax and were dubbed 'Shaykhs of Hawran' or 'Shaykhs of the *'arab* of Syria'.⁵

The Mawali

The Mawali tribe and their amirs of the Abu Rishah family stood in a somewhat similar position *vis-à-vis* Aleppo. The Mawali were the largest tribe between Aleppo and Hama and had formerly been much more important. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they dominated the northern desert, and the amirs used their strength to extract the maximum advantage from the caravan trade which passed through their territory. They supplied camels and protection to merchants, and extracted 'duties' from them. In the second half of the seventeenth century dissensions developed within the tribe; there were frequent changes of leadership and amirs and tribesmen were often at loggerheads with each other and with the Turks. Trade between Aleppo and Persia fell off in the eighteenth century and tribesmen were more often tempted to raid caravans than to protect and so profit from them, and the power of the tribe and the amirs declined further.⁶

The Mawali were thus already weakened when newcomers, the 'Anazah and the Shammar, began to appear more frequently and in increasing force in the northern desert and steppe. The Mawali were eventually cut off from the Euphrates and more or less confined to an area bounded on the north-west by the road from Aleppo to Hama and on the south-east by Palmyra. The beginning of the nineteenth century saw them diminished in numbers and influence, although still a power in their limited area. Some of the tribesmen cultivated a little land haphazardly and a few used caves and ruined buildings as well as tents, but the great majority remained nomadic herders of camels and sheep. They acted for

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the Pashas of Aleppo as 'protectors' of part of the road between Aleppo and Hama in the vicinity of which many of them spent the summer. The leading amir of the tribe usually received an annual payment from the Pasha of Aleppo, was still entitled *Amir al Badiyah* and undertook to protect the villages and trade of the Pashalik from spoliation by other tribes. That they signally failed to do this was the unanimous opinion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century observers, many of whom singled out the Mawali for unfavourable mention, and noted that their depredations and exactions resulted in deserted farmlands and villages.⁷ Dissension within the tribe was fostered by the Ottomans who encouraged the amirs to fight between themselves for the leadership of the tribe and the honours and salary which went with it. Such internal strife weakened the tribe, which was what the pashas wanted, but it also frequently spread confusion, violence and destruction across the countryside.

The 'Anazah

The most powerful tribes in Syria were relative newcomers. They included the Shammar, about whom little will be said in the present study, and a number of tribes of the 'Anazah group, including the Wuld 'Ali, Hasanah, Fid'an, Sba'ah and Ruwalah. The first of the 'Anazah began to appear in Syria towards the end of the seventeenth century and some of the Shammar may have moved north before this. The northward movement quickened and strengthened in the eighteenth century. We do not know why the migration began, but the feebleness of Ottoman rule in the eighteenth century and the absence of defensive capability in Syria must have tempted the beduin to raid and to graze their flocks and herds ever further to the north. (It should be remembered that nomadic shepherds and herdsmen invariably follow the lure of good grazing as far as they are allowed and will not restrain their animals until obliged to do so by force or by agreement.)⁸ Droughts must also have been partly responsible for the migrations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as we know they were later, for severe or prolonged drought would always have caused tribespeople to move in search of better conditions.⁹

In the last few decades of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the next the Sa'udi-Wahhabi expansion in northern Arabia contributed to the unrest in the desert and added new impetus to tribal movements. Further tribal migrations followed Muhammad Ali Pasha's Arabian campaigns, which culminated in the capture of the Wahhabi capital of Dir'iyah in 1818.¹⁰

The Shammar moved generally north-eastward, crossed the Eu-

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phrates and eventually became particularly associated with the north-eastern Jazirah. Amongst the 'Anazah, the powerful 'Amarat tribe chose the Iraqi side of the desert, but most of the other 'Anazah tribes or sections of tribes which moved went north-westward towards Syria. Certain sections of the Wuld 'Ali seem to have been the first 'Anazah to migrate regularly to Syria. They began to make use of summer grazing in Hawran during the seventeenth century and overcame opposition from Bani Sakhr, Sardiyah and others in the eighteenth century. Some of their shaykhs then built up a profitable relationship with Damascus, as the Sardiyah had before them; they provided camels for the Hajj caravan and protected its march through their territory, for which they received a subvention.

Other 'Anazah elements, notably the Hasanah, bypassed Hawran and southern Syria and went on to use the steppe pastures between Homs and Palmyra, where they forced the Mawali to allow them room. In the eighteenth century their shaykhs reached an understanding with the Ottoman governors of Homs and they were accepted as a Syrian tribe, allowed to take dues from caravans before other 'Anazah groups came on to the scene. They were, however, not as numerous as any of the other major tribes of the 'Anazah and their power diminished as the Fid'an, the Sba'ah and finally the Ruwalah followed them into central Syria.

The Fid'an apparently moved soon after the Hasanah and disputed with them the grazing west of Palmyra. Fid'an pressure weakened the Hasanah but did not dislodge them, and the Fid'an extended the range of their migrations further to the north. The northern semi-desert, the Euphrates valley, the western Jazirah and the plains east of Aleppo became their summer grounds, and the villagers and people of the smaller tribes of these regions had to resign themselves to paying *khuwah* to them. In winter they migrated far to the south-east. Before the end of the eighteenth century the Fid'an had become the major tribe and the major security problem of the Aleppo area. The degree of control which the Ottoman authorities had been able to maintain over the relatively weak and half-subjugated Mawali was impossible to exercise over the more numerous and untamed newcomers. Sporadic attempts at repression and bribery were equally ineffective.

Almost every spring there was trouble as Fid'an moved north and west towards Aleppo; in 1811, for example, the neighbourhood of the city was 'infested' with 'Anazah, who 'declared war' on the townspeople and their 'hereditary friends', the Mawali. They were said to have ruined about forty villages and to have 'eaten up the whole harvest of the open country'. In the following year Raghil Pasha tried, unsuccessfully, to use their horsemen against the Janissaries and rebel governors. By 1816 they

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were raiding west of Aleppo as well as east of it; they seized an Antioch-bound caravan and had to be bought off. In 1818 Khurshid Pasha's troops skirmished with them repeatedly, but in the following year Khurshid and the Fid'an shaykh, Dukhi ibn Ghubayn, negotiated amicably and exchanged presents and the Fid'an were able to camp peacefully at Tall Sultan.¹¹

According to Burckhardt the main body of the Sba'ah left northern Hijaz about 1800, in consequence of the 'extortions of the Wahaby chief'.¹² They had also been affected by drought. They moved north to the area around Palmyra and with the help of their nearest relatives, the Fid'an, defeated Hasanah attempts to exclude them. Fighting between the Hasanah and the newcomers was particularly severe in 1812-14. In the latter year Sulayman Pasha of Damascus supported Shaykh Muhanna al Fadil and his Hasanah with a mixed fighting force against Fid'an, Sba'ah and other 'Anazah, said to total 20,000, who moved north from Najd. The Pasha thought that this incursion was probably inspired by Sa'ud the Wahhabi, whose aggressive designs were greatly feared. He ordered the newcomers to leave but they pleaded scarcity and drought in Najd and begged to be allowed to stay, if only for a few months' grazing. He refused and attacked them, but his force was defeated and the Hasanah were scattered.¹³ The Sba'ah eventually established their rights over summer grounds north of the Hasanah and east of the Mawali. They were formed of two main sections, the Butaynat and the 'Abdah.

All the earlier arrivals amongst the 'Anazah were to be challenged in their turn by the Ruwalah, the most formidable of the 'Anazah tribes. They began to move northwards from Najd before the middle of the eighteenth century. At first they seemed to have turned more often to the Iraqi side of the desert than towards Syria, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century some of them had begun to move up in spring of each year from Najd to southern Hawran where they sometimes camped peacefully with the Wuld 'Ali but were often in contention with them. In 1810 they guided a great raid of Wahhabi tribes directed by Sa'ud ibn 'Abdul 'Aziz ibn Sa'ud into southern Hawran. Sa'ud may have had conquest, loot or proselytization in mind and the Ruwalah were perhaps in revengeful mood after defeating a punitive expedition sent against them by the Pasha of Baghdad the previous year, but a contributory cause of the raid was a shortage of rainfall and grazing in Arabia that year. Yusuf Pasha of Damascus attacked some of the raiders near Muzayrib and forced them to withdraw, but they sacked thirty-five villages as they went.¹⁴ After that many Ruwalah came frequently to Hawran in spring and usually got the better of the Wuld 'Ali if the latter opposed them. The grazing there was not, however, enough to satisfy their great herds of