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978-0-521-77057-6 - The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East

Edited by Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam

Excerpt

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Introduction

The transformation of nomadic society

Pastoral nomadism was the classical form of human adaptation to the harsh yet fragile environment of the dry steppe lands and so, although this volume is mostly about its waning, it opens with reflections on the conditions of its emergence. At the beginning specialised pastoralism grew out of agriculture, and throughout history pastoralists have belonged to the societies about them, exchanging their products with agriculturalists and the cities, and serving the systems of empire and trade. Indeed, we should not think of the inhabitants of tents simply as pastoralists: all evidence from the past reveals that they also engaged in cultivation, trade and military pursuits. The bedouins (*badw*) are people of the *badiya* (the open country) who may live by more than one strategy. This book explores how their different activities were bound into wider systems of rule, trade and production. And it demonstrates that the forms of leadership and social solidarity expressed in an idiom of descent (which we know as tribes) were also not confined to pastoralists.

From the turn of the twentieth century bedouin movement and control over territory in the *badiya* came to be challenged by new and more powerful forms of central administration and law. The restriction of bedouin autonomy was hastened by the division of the former Ottoman lands into separate states under European control after World War I. The Ottomans built the first railways through the *badiya*, and the decades after the fall of the empire were to witness the still deeper revolution in the structure of space brought by the automobile. During these years appeared a vision that declared nomadic pastoralism a backward way of life antithetical to social and national development. This was to be institutionalised as policy in the independent states of the area after World War II. As this view of national development gained adherents the pastoral economy was penalised by agricultural policies which, from the 1960s onwards, would concentrate efforts on the zones of higher rainfall and irrigated agriculture.

Today rapid population growth, agricultural deficits and increasing demand for meat, all spurred by the oil affluence, have returned the dryland areas to the centre of debate. Since the 1970s agriculture and meat production have sharply expanded throughout the *badiya*, taking on forms perhaps best

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described as ‘mining’. The steppe scarcely presents a common aspect today, as some areas are given over to mechanised cereal production, others to the mining of hydrocarbons and phosphates, and yet others to construction, ubiquitously in cement. That these evident transformations with their dangers of environmental degradation are accompanied by deeper changes in the societies of the *badiya* is itself a central topic of this book.

In the first chapter Paul Sanlaville invites us to place a simple observation in context: nature does not set fixed bounds for pastoral production or for agriculture. Quite different areas appear propitious for pastoral or agricultural exploitation every year. What is most striking on the ground is not what the map suggests – gradually declining isohyets of average rainfall – but the variability of rainfall, both annually and between micro-regions. Given the mobility enjoyed and capital possessed by rural populations of the Near East today, this variability invites them to redraw the boundaries of cultivation and sheep-herding dramatically.

But the recent extension of cultivation and sheep-herding into ever more arid areas rests on a much longer integration of pastoral production within the wider economy. The archaeologists’ contribution to this volume serves to remind us that such integration has been true from the beginning. Thus Jacques Cauvin considers the emergence of pastoral nomadism within the general framework of the development of agriculture and animal husbandry. As is well known, animal husbandry began in association with settled agriculture well before the emergence of pastoral nomadism. On present evidence pastoral nomadism appears not, as so long believed, a subsidiary adaptation by people forced to exploit less promising lands, but rather a broad social movement entailing, through pastoralism, exploitation of wider territory.

Alison Betts and the late Kenneth Russell examine the issues involved in the domestication of pastoral animals in greater detail, and for periods well after the beginnings considered by Cauvin. Their study closes with the importance of the camel in restructuring relations between ‘the desert’ and ‘the sown’ in the Near East. Betts and Russell argue that whereas the important changes in nomad–state relations that occurred in the first millennium BC have often been explained on the grounds that ‘the camel, and more specifically a particular design of riding saddle, permitted the rise of “warrior nomads” who could threaten the settled lands from the security of the desert’, the more fundamental factor was the ‘greater trade activity throughout the Arabian Peninsula’ and the new roles this offered to nomads. In other words, change in the wider economy, not a single technical development, appears to have been very important.

Work on the steppe is particularly rare for the central periods of Islamic history, a silence which we hope may some day end. The documented history of the steppe begins in earnest only with the nineteenth century, and remains more political than economic. Norman Lewis continues his study of the extension of settled agriculture in nineteenth-century geographical Syria by

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focusing on two regions, the southern Hawran and the Palmyrena (on the latter see also the chapter by F. Métral). He demonstrates how the extension of settlement in the second half of the nineteenth century was matched by Ottoman regulation of bedouin movement. But radical curtailment of bedouin migration was finally to succeed only after World War I as political authorities were able to restrict movement across the newly imposed state borders.

The principles used by the post-World War I states to claim dominion over bedouin territory are discussed by John Wilkinson. In negotiations over borders between the British and the rulers of Arabia, primarily Ibn Sa'ud, several levels of right were invoked: that of the bedouin to wells and hence to territory about the wells; that granted by the bedouin to the Saudi rulers through the payment of *zakat* (often reciprocated by gifts to tribal shaykhs from the Saudi ruler); and that claimed by the British, usually simply a general undertaking signed with a local ruler, but in the case of South Arabia sometimes also principles recognised locally. Whatever the details of the negotiations, the imposition of new state boundaries after World War I, and the introduction of automotive transport, spelt the end of large nomadic movement between the Arabian Peninsula and geographical Syria, and everywhere marked the abandonment of camel-pastoralism for sheep-herding.

The three chapters by Christian Velud on north-east Syria, Ugo Fabietti on Saudi Arabia and Tariq Tall on Trans-Jordan discuss the impact of government policies on the society of the steppes after World War I. In each case, government policy encouraged the bedouin to settle (on Trans-Jordan see also the chapter by Bocco). In the Syrian Jazira, Velud shows how the Mandate authorities allowed certain bedouin leaders to register ownership to vast tracts of land. Here the 1920s saw not only the closing of borders to bedouin movement, but also the settlement of important new refugee populations. These populations were encouraged to settle in the recently developed zones of irrigated agriculture and the small towns of the Jazira. These developments, while they spelt wealth for the shaykhs, rendered a pastoral life more difficult for the common bedouin who increasingly sought work as agricultural labourers.

Fabietti notes that in Arabia, although the Saudi rulers had negotiated boundaries on the basis of tribal 'territories' (*dira*) and possessed close links with bedouin leaders, by 1925 the Saudi state formally abolished the right of any tribe to regulate access to its *dira*. In so far as management of territory was central to the very identity of the tribe, this spelt the death-knell of the tribe as an effective social unit. From then on the only unit for economic management of bedouin resources became the household, the very character of which was thereby transformed.

The analysis of Trans-Jordan by Tall reveals both parallels and differences to the Syrian and Saudi Arabian cases. On the one hand, government policy, particularly from the time of Glubb Pasha, privileged links with bedouin leaders and, like Saudi policy, incorporated men from the bedouin tribes in the

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army. Nevertheless, according to Tall, such political privilege does not entail support for the local economy of the 'tribes'. Quite the contrary: economic policy is made by an urban commercial and bureaucratic elite which has little interest in small-scale rural production. It is noteworthy that Tall's usage of the term 'tribe' differs from that of other authors. Tall does not restrict the term to former nomadic groups but applies it to all Trans-Jordanian rural society in a manner suggesting a more general political 'tribalisation' of the East Jordanian population.

In Jaubert's chapter on the arid regions of Syria since 1930 the drama and the actors are the same but their roles appear reversed. Far from the state simply remaking the rural economy according to its wishes, government policy appears quite as often as not simply reactive to the dynamism of productive systems in the steppe.

The chapters of the anthropologists Sulayman Khalaf, Françoise Métral, and Donald Cole and Soraya Altorki explore different dimensions of the interplay between local economy and public policy. Khalaf traces the story of one prominent family whose role shifted from that of local shaykhs who gained title to land developed for cotton production and so acquired the way of life of landlords, to that of politically marginalised 'feudalists' in the years of land reform and peasant unions, and finally back – through the avenues of education and the ruling party – to a position of regional prominence as professionals and members of the new political establishment.

The continuity of familial and social identity in the face of important political and economic change appears equally clearly in Françoise Métral's study of Sukhna. Métral's analysis allows us to understand, at the intimate level of partnerships, family and kin, the calculations permitting today's dramatic and ecologically corrosive extension of barley cultivation and sheep-herding deep in the arid zone.

Like Sukhna, the Najdi city of 'Unayzah described in the chapter by Cole and Altorki served as a market centre for trade with the bedouin. The change in 'Unayzah has proved yet more radical than that at Sukhna. Sukhna's economy still depends primarily on pastoral production, however transformed, whereas every aspect of 'Unayzah's economy appears reworked by the priorities of the political economy of petrol production. Métral writes of Sukhna's sophisticated marketing networks that allow producers of pastoral and agricultural goods to negotiate between the 'free market' and the powerful state purchasing agencies (see also the chapters by Jaubert, Treacher and Jones). But in 'Unayzah the marketing for what remains of local animal and vegetable production appears primitive by contrast with the sophisticated marketing of imported goods (compare likewise the study of Janzen). In a manner yet more dramatic than Tall's Jordanian case, government policy appears to reflect priorities of a commercial and bureaucratic elite for whom 'development' has another meaning than the development of a local vegetable or meat market.

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The last section considers ‘development’ in the steppe today – its institutional discourse, the dilemmas of its technical solutions, and the environmental degradation entailed in the financially rewarding forms of exploitation dominant today. Jorg Janzen presents a case study from a very different ecological zone, that of Omani Dhofar in south-east Arabia. In spite of the uniqueness of the monsoon-mist environment and the cattle-herding way of life, the broad lines of transformation he describes will by now be familiar: unrestricted access by trucking to pastures once distant, destruction of vegetation as the former pastures become feed-lots, incorporation of bedouin groups into the safety net of the state through military subsidy, failure to develop marketing structures for local animal production, and dominance of the local economy by an urban bureaucratic and commercial elite. Janzen forcefully emphasises the threat to the environment and to long-term productivity that lies in present systems of production in the more arid zones.

Michael Jones and Timothy Treacher’s chapters, when read alongside the earlier ones of Jaubert and Métral, provide a sharp picture of the interrelation of systems of barley production and sheep-raising in Syria today. They are aware of the unsustainable nature of contemporary productive systems, but by analysing the complex determination of these systems, they eschew the notion of an easy solution. Gone are the days when agronomic work could proceed in isolation from the economy and society in which it is to be introduced. But, as Jones notes, information on the productive systems in the more arid zones remains very poor, and although the funders of development work now pay lip-service to ecological sustainability, they still require their investment to produce quick results in a manner that will surely render the introduction of ecologically less destructive systems very difficult.

Finally, Riccardo Bocco reviews the discourse of development experts concerning nomads in the Arab Middle East since the 1950s. He demonstrates an unacknowledged continuity with Mandate policies and, more generally, the poverty of information and imagination that has permitted thinking to remain static for so long. It is only quite recently, after hardly a nomad was left to be ‘settled’, that the experts began to invoke the very principle that their predecessors sought to annul, namely tribal regulation of access to pastures – the native institution of *hima* or protected pasture, as a solution to the crisis of mounting ecological degradation. As Bocco points out, the existence, let alone the character, of this institution has not been documented by the experts. The magnitude of the difficulty in reversing the principle of free access to territory should not be underestimated.

The bibliography brings together the references of all the chapters in this volume to form, with Riccardo Bocco’s bibliographical note, a comprehensive overview of the literature on the steppes of Arabia and geographical Syria, and the current state of knowledge.

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Environment and development

PAUL SANLAVILLE

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Lyons

Most of the studies in this volume concern the steppe on the inner edge of the Fertile Crescent, adjoining the Arabian desert. Others, however, consider areas right in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, where conditions differ quite markedly, and for which the term 'steppe' is not appropriate.

The latitude and annual temperature variations of the Arabian Peninsula make it a tropical area, in spite of the fact that winters can be cold, particularly at high altitude. Most of the peninsula is desert, with very low rainfall, generally below 100 mm except in certain mountainous regions. These less arid regions are: (a) the western edges of 'Asir and Yemen, where rainfall on high ground exceeds 200 mm (sometimes even 500 mm); and (b) the mountains of Oman (see map 1.1). Rainfall occurs in winter and is caused by cooler air masses. Rain also falls in summer (June–July) on the mountains in the south, when the intertropical weather front moves northwards. These are monsoon rains. This area is perceptibly more arid than the inner edge of the Fertile Crescent. Summer temperatures are very high indeed and rainfall occurs only a very few days a year and varies greatly from year to year. As a result the local vegetation looks very different: the climate is Saharo-Sudanese and is favourable to trees but not to grasses. Rather than being steppe, the landscape consists of very open scrub jungle, mainly acacias and thorn bushes concentrated in the wadis. This strip of desert margin within the Arabian Peninsula is fairly narrow and extends between the mountainous zones stretching through the Hijaz, 'Asir, Yemen, Hadramawt and Oman and the vast dune-covered depressions in the centre, the Nufud and the Rub' al-Khali. The strip consists of sand and pebble foothills traversed by a dense network of wadis, whose sporadic outpourings quickly disappear into the sand (see map 1.2). These inner foothills are used as thoroughfares by nomads but, except in exceptional cases, agriculture is confined to the oases and is always irrigated.

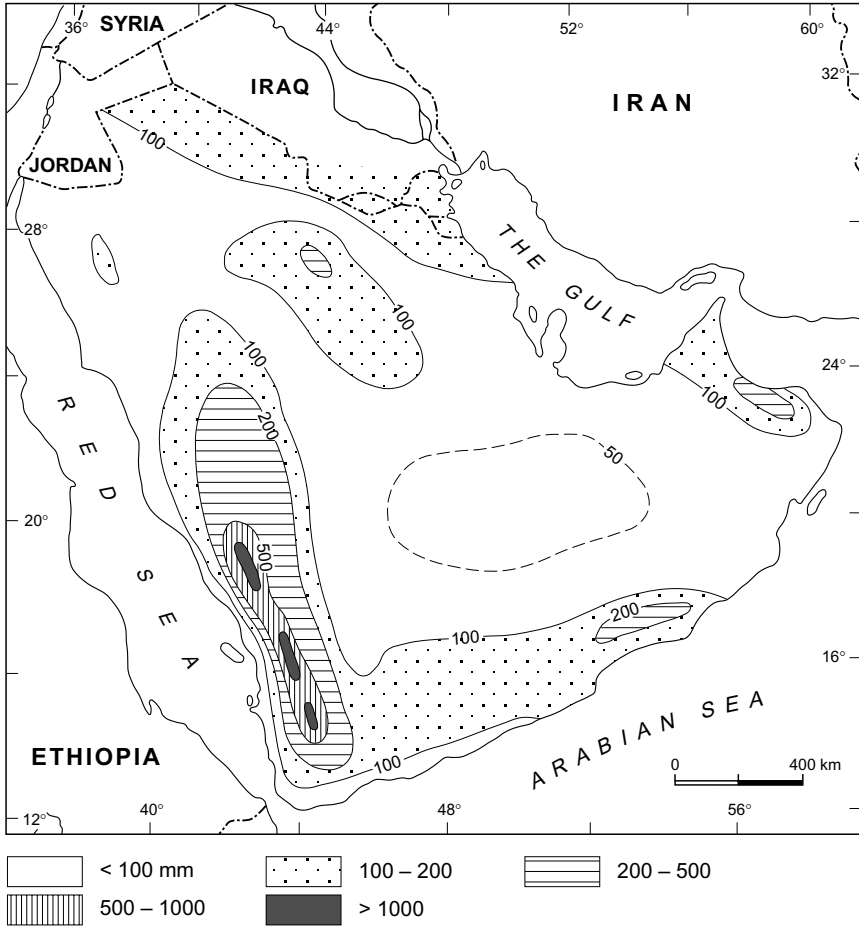
The inner edge of the Fertile Crescent, on the northern border of the Arabian desert, presents quite a different picture. It covers a great arid and semi-arid arc extending right through Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Lying as it does between the desert, used by the nomads as pastureland, and the areas occupied since neolithic times by settled agriculture, this inner border is difficult to

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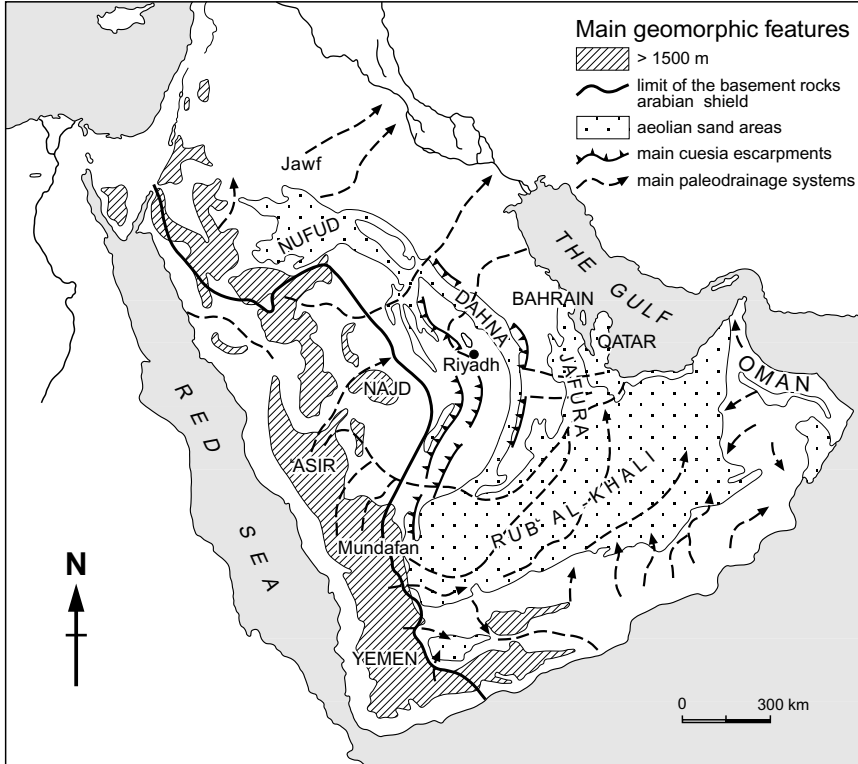
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Map 1.1: Average annual precipitation in the Arabian Peninsula

demarcate exactly. In appearance the area consists of vast plains and plateaux broken by limestone hills (the mountains of the Palmyrena and Jabals Bishri, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz and Sinjar) or volcanic outcrops (the Druze mountain); a dense network of wadis covers the plain, which dips gradually southwards in Iraq and northern Syria, less gradually eastwards in southern Syria and Jordan. The vegetation best adapted to local climatic and soil conditions is steppe grassland, comprising a rich variety of species. In well-watered areas this steppe also supports oak and pistachio trees. Very early exploitation of the steppe by mankind has caused progressive damage to the vegetation and has led to the almost total disappearance of trees.

During the most recent glacial period in the northern hemisphere the

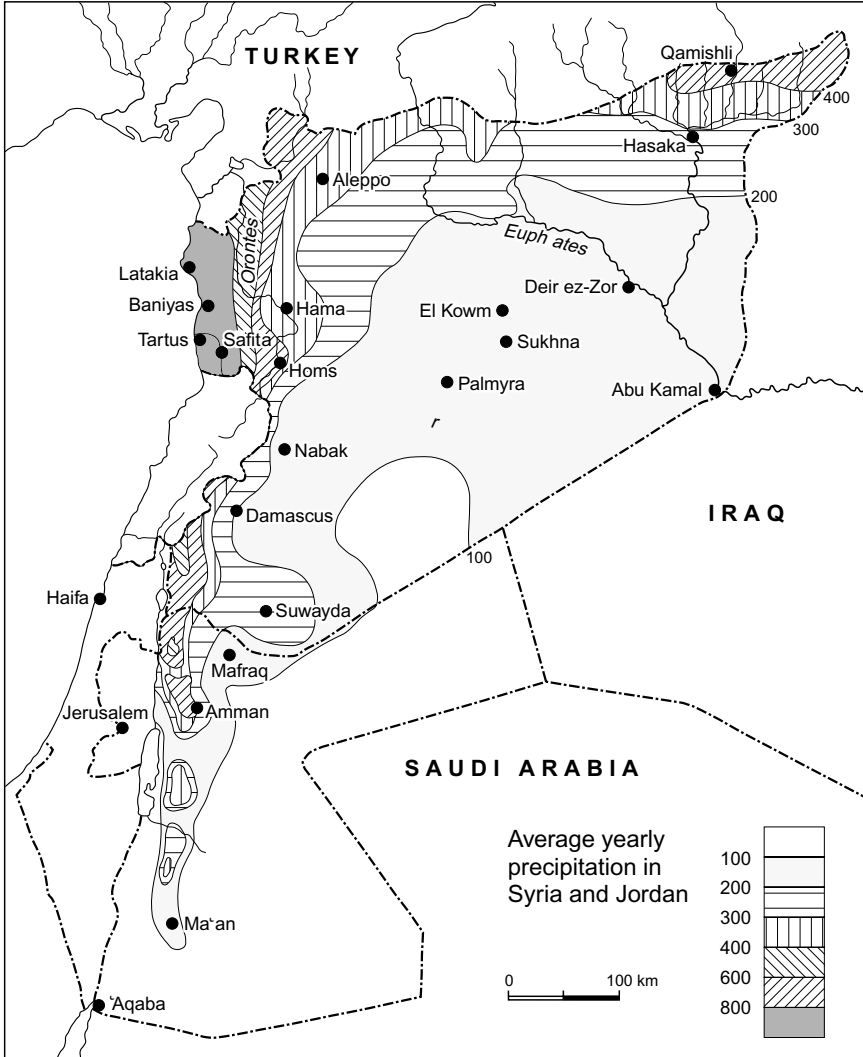


Map 1.2: Main geomorphic features of the Arabian Peninsula

climate of this region was one of extremes of heat and cold, but this has gradually changed over the past 12,000 years into the climate that we are familiar with today. As the climate there grew warmer, the Fertile Crescent played host to the neolithic revolution; the population adopted a settled way of life and began progressively to domesticate both plants and animals, growing crops (wheat, barley and pulses) and raising sheep and goats. From the fourth millennium BC the region witnessed the birth of the urban revolution. It is a region that has played a key role in the history of mankind. Land occupancy and land use in this transitional area have changed quite radically over the millennia, keeping pace with climatic changes and political and economic vicissitudes.

Climatic uncertainty

The steppes on the northern border of the Arabian desert enjoy a Mediterranean climate with two principal seasons. The rainy season extends over a seven-month period, from October to April, with the maximum rainfall in December, January and February. The summers are extremely hot and dry, and their length increases the further south one goes. Rainfall varies both



Map 1.3: Average annual precipitation in Syria and Jordan

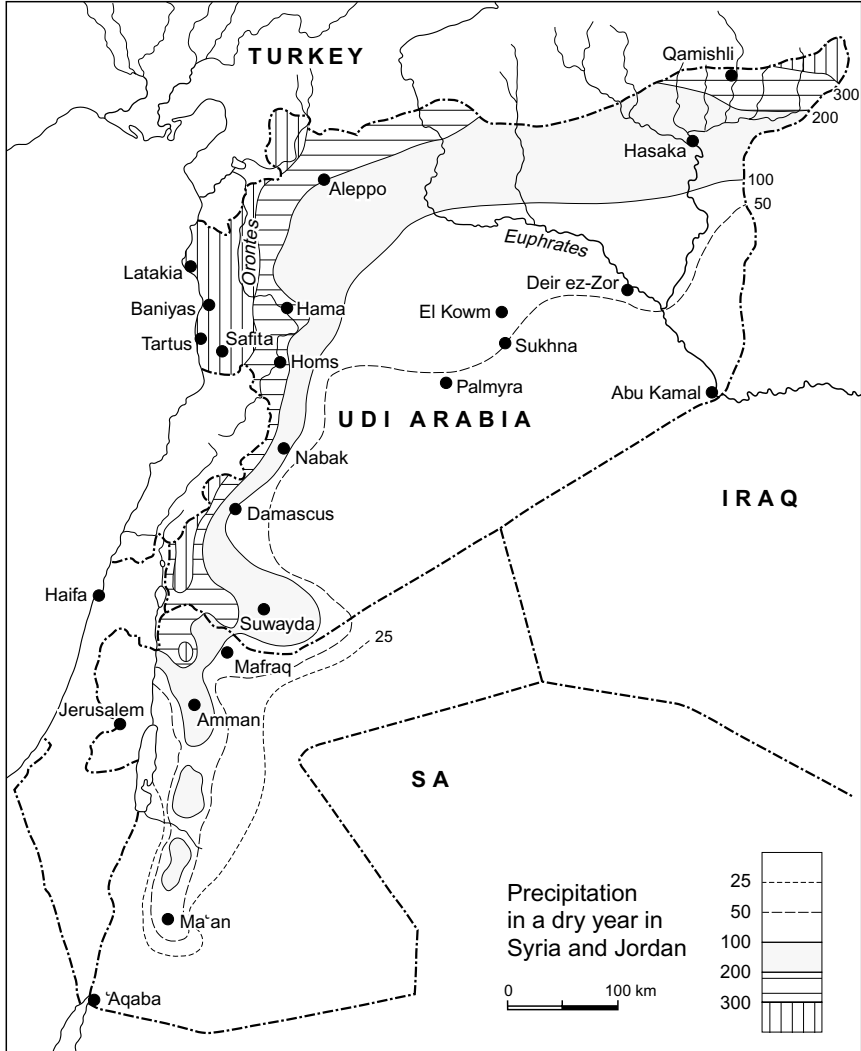
in annual quantity and in its distribution throughout the year. It is not easy to describe this transitional zone, between the cultivated belt and the desert, in statistical terms. The data available on climatic matters are inadequate because statistical records are too recent and rainfall observation stations too widespread; the data that do exist have never been properly interpreted, and the readings available are marked by great irregularity, both temporal and spatial. Some idea can be gained from a series of statistics which emphasise the irregularity of the annual rainfall and its general unpredictability (see map 1.3).

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Map 1.4: Precipitation in a dry year in Syria and Jordan

Schematically, the zone falls between the curves representing twenty-five and forty days rain per annum, and between the isohyetal lines representing 100 mm and 250 mm average annual rainfall, i.e. well short of what is needed for growing normal cereal crops. Harvests in this area, when crops are sown, are extremely risky. In fact rainfall varies extremely from one year to the next and can be as low as the desert norm (less than 100 mm) or relatively high (300 mm, sometimes more); the latter figure allows cereal crops to prosper, but the variation in rainfall gives rise to some terrible disappointments in drought