

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

Making “Tribes” in the Late Ottoman Empire

Nora Elizabeth Barakat*

Department of History, Stanford University, Stanford, CA USA

*Corresponding author. E-mail: nbarakat@stanford.edu

Oymak. Al. Boy. Cemaat. Taiife. Aşiret. These are the terms Ottoman officials used in imperial orders (*mühimme*) to describe diverse human communities linked by their mobility and externality to village administration in Ottoman Anatolia between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1924, Turkish historian Ahmet Refik compiled Ottoman imperial orders concerning such communities into a volume he titled *Anadolu'da Türk Aşiretleri, 966–1200 (Turkish Tribes in Anatolia, 1560–1786)*. His use of the term *aşiret* (tribe) in the title is striking, because this term was only used in 9% of the orders in his volume (23 out of 244 total).¹ However, by the late nineteenth century and in Refik's early Republican context, *aşiret* had become the standard term for these rural, extra-village, mobile human communities, which he understood as similar enough to include in his painstaking effort of compilation.

Such an effort was hardly limited to Turkey. In the post-Ottoman, postcolonial states of the Arab world, especially in the late 1940s and 1950s, historians, lawyers, and social scientists penned similar compilations listing the “tribes” within their national territory, using the by-then-ubiquitous term for “tribe” in Arabic, *‘ashīra*.² While they largely relied on locally produced chronicles and oral histories rather than Ottoman imperial orders, these volumes were, like Refik's, attempts to consolidate historical knowledge about communities constructed as comparable to one another. These volumes have made important contributions to the formation and contestation of “tribal” identity in the Eastern Mediterranean and Arabian Peninsula since the second half of the twentieth century.³

I would like to suggest that these similar uses of *aşiret* in Turkish and *‘ashīra* in Arabic to denote the idea of “tribe” in the early days of new nation-states are not accidental, and relate to the shared post-Ottoman context of the Eastern Mediterranean and Iraq. Refik's painstaking work shows that *aşiret* became the preferred term for a diverse group of human communities rather late in the history of Ottoman administration. In late Ottoman codified law and administrative practice, *aşiret* became a residual category used to organize human populations understood as external to an increasingly regularized rural administration that centered on the category of the village in a broader context of modern state formation.

In this context, the *aşiret* became a modular, standard category that could create neat columns in census forms, registers of property ownership, and inventories of weapons-holders.⁴ It was through this process of imagining *aşirets* as human collectives in relation to an increasingly bounded, territorial

¹Ahmet Refik, *Anadolu'da Türk Aşiretleri, 966–1200: Anadolu'da Yaşayan Türk Aşiretleri Hakkında Divani Hümayun Mühimme Defterlerinde Mukayyet Hükümleri Havidir* (Istanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1930).

²Wasfi Zakariya, *‘Asha’ir al-Sham* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1983); ‘Abbas Azzawi, *‘Asha’ir al-Iraq* (Baghdad: Mabba’at al-Ma’arif, 1947); Other examples of mid-twentieth-century compilations include ‘Umar Rida Kahhala, *Mu’jam Qaba’il al-‘Arab al-Qadima wa-l-Haditha*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risala, 1982); and Baha Tuqan's translated and expanded edition of Frederick Peake's *A History of Jordan and its Tribes*, Baha al-Din Tuqan, trans., *Tarikh Sharq al-Urdunn wa-Qaba’iliha* (Amman: al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya, 1935).

³Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 221–30.

⁴See for example a map of the winter grazing grounds of *aşirets* in Iraq and Najd created by the Ottoman Sixth Army in 1909/1910, with an accompanying table listing population, dwelling type, sect, and weapons holdings of each *aşiret*, held at the Rare Sources Library at Istanbul University (Harita # 93667). I thank Camille Cole for bringing this source to my attention, and the Historical Texts Analysis team of the [OpenGulf project](https://open.gulfproject.org/) for our discussions of its implications for late Ottoman conceptions of “tribe”: David Joseph Wrisley, Camille Cole, and Nada Ammagui. See also, Camille Lyons Cole, “Empire on Edge: Land, Law and Capital in Gilded Age Basra” (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2020), 199–205.

state that these communities became comparable to each other and compile-able in lists, no matter the size of their purported membership, the territory they claimed to control, or their loyalty to the Ottoman cause. In fact, documenting and comparing *aşirets* became an urgent task for an imperial administration attempting to maintain threatened sovereignty through its ability to count, tax, and monopolize dispute resolution within every community in its territory, especially in the final quarter of the nineteenth century.⁵ At the same time, the term *aşiret* marked particular communities as problematic for modern state administration. From the perspective of the modernizing officials who constructed administrative hierarchies, *aşiret* was a category to be transcended. It marked communities to-be-improved in the relentlessly future-oriented discourse characterizing modern state endeavors. In this sense, the ambivalence around and imprecise nature of the meaning of the term was and is quite similar to the English term “tribe.”⁶

My historical excavation of the term *aşiret/’ashīra* as an administrative category does not deny the importance of “*ashīra*” as a means of organizing human collectives and difference, particularly in genealogical terms, outside of state-documented historical and contemporary contexts. However, I emphasize the ways in which administrative categories came to be a crucial element in defining legal individuals and collectives in relation to a territorial national-imperial state through novel processes of political representation, property administration, taxation, and dispute resolution. These processes intruded into the daily lives of increasing numbers of people beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century. Most ethnographic studies of identity formation in communities described as “tribal” were researched generations after this process of state expansion began in the Ottoman imperial context. Understanding the salience of “tribalism” in the present necessitates an engagement with the ways in which the “*ashīra*” became a means of organizing humans, property including land and animals, and territory in historical perspective.

Refik’s work itself is a logical place to begin with such an excavation. The term *aşiret* does come up in early Ottoman imperial orders, but 13 out of the 23 mentions in his volume referred to a very specific historical project: the attempt to settle particular communities, like the Reşwan, in the Raqqa region in the late seventeenth century in the context of Bedouin migrations northward from the Arabian Peninsula that were thought to destabilize the region. As Cengiz Orhonlu, Stefan Winter, and Yusuf Halaçoğlu have shown, the regime’s attempts to change the demography of northern Syria produced an unprecedented volume of documentation about the communities involved.⁷ This early usage links the term *aşiret* to central state attempts to monitor mobile populations, transform them into village-dwelling cultivators and use them to shift existing demographic realities.

What distinguished this earlier usage of *aşiret* from its employment in the nineteenth century? Like other targeted settlement campaigns in early modern Ottoman contexts, the Raqqa campaign made no attempt to count and settle *every* tent-dwelling rural community in Syria. This much more comprehensive and explicitly territorial project would begin in the aftermath of decades of imperial crisis at the turn of the nineteenth century that included losses to the Russian Empire, French invasion, the deposition of two sultans, and secessionist and rebellious movements from Greece to the Arabian Peninsula to Egypt and Syria. As in other Eurasian imperial contexts in the aftermath of the Age of Revolutions, the military-fiscal state-making attempts following this period of heightened inter-imperial competition aimed at developing a new relationship between the imperial state and its subjects.⁸ The reforms that

⁵Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

⁶David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Richard Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians and Tribespeople on Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East,” in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, ed. Joseph Kostiner and Philip Khoury (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 48–73.

⁷Stefan Winter, “The Province of Raqqa Under Ottoman Rule, 1535–1800: A Preliminary Study,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 68, no. 4 (2009): 253–68; Stefan Winter, “Alep et l’émirat Du Désert (Çöl Beyliği) Au Xviiie-Xviiiie Siècle,” in *Aleppo and Its Hinterland in the Ottoman Period/Alep et Sa Province à l’époque Ottomane*, ed. Stefan Winter and Mafalda Ade (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 86–108; Cengiz Orhonlu, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Aşiretlerin İskanı* (Istanbul: Eren, 1987); Yusuf Halaçoğlu, *18. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun İskan Siyaseti ve Aşiretlerin Yerleştirilmesi* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1991).

⁸Ali Yaycıoğlu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Peter Hill, “How Global Was the Age of Revolutions? The Case of Mount Lebanon, 1821,” *Journal of Global History* 16, no. 1 (2021): 65–84; Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha’s Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

followed involved new articulations of a model Ottoman subject population, ideal types of rural settlement, property relations and tax collection, and commerce and dispute resolution. For the Ottoman provinces, an emergent corpus of codified law outlined a rural landscape populated by settled, cultivating villages with individuals owning (almost) fully alienable and mortgageable plots of land and paying taxes on them. Seasonal migration, tent-dwelling, part-time farming, and full-time herding were not a part of this consolidated and standardized vision of state space.⁹

As Reşat Kasaba has shown, it was in the 1830s and 1840s that a comprehensive effort to count, codify, and settle *aşirets* across Anatolia began.¹⁰ The overall reform effort included a programmatic decree issued to the Anatolian provinces in 1844. This decree gestured to the multiple lifeways of the communities it lumped together as *aşirets*, noting that some groups had settled in particular districts but took their animals to pasture seasonally across provincial borders; some migrated annually between particular winter and summer grazing grounds; and some moved between unspecified grazing grounds as they liked. Even so, the decree ordered them all to settle on their winter pasturing grounds and emphasized that they should be governed “like the rest of the local inhabitants” (*ahali-i saire misillü*).¹¹ This decree linked the *aşiret* to a number of practices considered undesirable for the transformed Ottoman imperial state. In particular, while allowing for some level of mobility to maintain the health of livestock, the decree forbade movement across district boundaries, which would complicate revenue collection.

This decree is one of the earliest expressions of the *aşiret* as a standard category for rural populations whose tent-dwelling and mobility were seen as problematic for the ideal rural landscape. Kasaba and Yonca Köksal have detailed the numerous attempts in the mid-nineteenth century to monitor and settle “tribes” along the lines articulated in the decree, with widely variable results.¹² These projects advanced in tandem with increasingly frequent waves of imperial administrative reorganization. The Provincial Administration Regulations, issued in 1864 and 1871, envisioned a rural landscape composed entirely of settled villages. This vision corresponded with the preferred future expressed in the 1844 decree: one that would be free of mobile “tribes.” By the late 1860s, the prominent statesmen Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, deeply involved in codifying imperial legislation, directed a military force aiming to settle nomads, with disastrous results.¹³ In 1870, Midhat Paşa, one of the architects of the Provincial Administration Regulation, tried out these settlement policies as governor of Baghdad Province in Iraq.¹⁴

By the late 1870s, in the aftermath of territorial and fiscal crisis, Midhat Paşa and others had become disillusioned with the project of transforming tent-dwelling *aşirets* into house-dwelling villages. In 1879, while governor of Syria, Midhat Paşa advocated for the gradual integration of *aşirets* into regular administration through measures like land registration and judicial reform.¹⁵ This was part of a broader vision of increasing the productivity of the interior regions of Syria through revenue collection that would allow for the establishment of schools, transport routes, and courts.¹⁶ Midhat Paşa articulated this change of approach in reference to his experiences in Iraq, where he felt settlement campaigns had been unsuccessful. However, his position also responded to the inter-imperial status of the Ottoman state in the aftermath of the military and financial crises of the 1870s. These crises not only reduced the feasibility of

⁹This vision is articulated comprehensively in the Provincial Administration Regulation (*Vilayet Nizamnamesi*). *Düstur: I. Tertib*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Matbaa-yi Amire, 1289), 625; For the concept of state space, see Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, ed. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

¹⁰Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire*, Chapter 4; For efforts in Iraq, see Eubekir Ceylan, *The Ottoman Origins of Modern Iraq: Political Reform, Modernization and Development in the Nineteenth Century Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 134–40.

¹¹Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter B.O.A.) I.MSM 69/2005, 8 Z 1260/19 December 1844, Page 2.

¹²Yonca Köksal, “Coercion and Mediation: Centralization and Sedentarization of Tribes in the Ottoman Empire,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2006): 469–91.

¹³Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire*; Andrew Gould, “Pashas and Brigands: Ottoman Provincial Reform and Its Impact on the Nomadic Tribes of Southern Anatolia, 1840–1885” (PhD Dissertation, Los Angeles, University of California, Los Angeles, 1973); Meltem Toksöz, *Nomads, Migrants and Cotton in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Making of the Adana-Mersin Region 1850–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹⁴Midhat Paşa, *Hayatım İbret Olsun*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Hilal, 1908); Ceylan, *The Ottoman Origins of Modern Iraq*; Chris Gratien, “The Ottoman Quagmire: Malaria, Swamps, and Settlement in the Late Ottoman Mediterranean,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 583–604.

¹⁵BOA.ŞD 2272/27 31 Mart 1295/April 12 1879

¹⁶Fethi Gedikli, “Midhat Paşa’nın Suriye Layihası,” *Divan*, no. 2 (1999): 169–89.

expensive and invasive settlement operations, but increased the imperative to connect with all of the empire's human inhabitants and secure both their loyalty to the Ottoman cause and their taxes. After the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 transformed the southern part of Syria into an imperial borderland, maintaining the loyalty of tent-dwellers and town-dwellers alike became an even greater priority.

It was in this context, in line with Midhat Paşa's recommendations, that the *aşiret* became integrated into standardized provincial administration alongside the village in the interior region of Syria. To demonstrate how important this moment was to constructing and maintaining this category as a mechanism of resource distribution, even as prominent Ottoman lawmakers envisioned its transcendence, I will zoom in on the district of Salt, one of the better-documented districts of the Syrian interior. Beginning in the 1870s, in accordance with imperial law, representatives of local communities were appointed and elected as "headmen" (*mukhtâr/muhtar*) for three different "segments" (*sınıf*) of local inhabitants in Salt: villages, town quarters, and *aşirets*. Importantly, the size of these "segments" were approximated to local villages. For example, within the wider Abbad community, representatives were appointed/elected for the Manasir, the Fuqaha, the Duwaykat, the Zuyud, and other groups that administrative reforms rendered comparable as "*aşirets*."¹⁷

These headmen acquired extensive powers of local administration, especially in the realms of property relations and taxation. When individual members of administratively-defined *aşirets* wanted to obtain a title deed to a particular piece of land, they needed approval from their elected headmen stating that they had been in uncontested possession of the land and had been cultivating it for at least ten years. According to codified law, if they could not procure this approval, they would have to pay the treasury for the market price of the land (*bedel-i misil*).¹⁸ Rural taxation was also deeply dependent on the person of the headman of the *aşiret*. Court cases from the district of Salt show members of administratively-defined *aşirets* borrowing money from their headmen in order to pay their shares of collectively-assessed taxes.¹⁹ They also show litigants contesting headmen's implementation of particularly unpopular Ottoman policies, like confiscating livestock for unpaid tax debt.²⁰ Codified law constructed headmen as the "access points" (*vasite-i tevsil*) between the treasury and rural communities like *aşirets* in the late nineteenth century.²¹

Historians have largely argued that Ottoman policy empowered pre-existing tribal leaders by granting them high-level positions in expanded Ottoman administration.²² While this pattern prevailed among large camel-herding communities in the Syrian interior, especially those with longstanding connections to the pilgrimage administration, what happened in districts like Salt was more complex. The process of establishing a district in Salt had entailed exiling, albeit temporarily, leaders of groups like the Adwan who had grown rich during the wheat boom of the mid-nineteenth century.²³ In their place, leaders of smaller communities with much closer ties to dynamics of local production became headmen. This process of administrative expansion therefore also entailed an important reconfiguration of political power within some tent-dwelling communities, rendering the "tribe" a new kind of collective entity in relation to a broader imperial whole.

In the early twentieth century, headmen in the Syrian interior also became important figures in struggles to maintain control over land in the face of aggressive state attempts to dispossess Bedouin. The imperial state's practice of settling Muslim refugees displaced after the Congress of Berlin on land that

¹⁷References to the *mukhtârs* of these communities are scattered in the Salt sharia court records (SSCR). For example, see Muhammad 'Abd al-Qadir Khuraysat and Jurj Farid Tarif Dawud, *Sijill Mahkamat al-Salt al-Shar'iyya: 5 Dhi al-Qa'da 1302 H-Ghurraat Rabi' al-Thani 1305 H, 1885–1888 M* (Amman: Ministry of Culture, 2007).

¹⁸See the Title Regulation (Tapu Nizamnamesi), *Düstur*, 1289, 1:200–8.

¹⁹SSCR Volume 5, Page 122, Record 124, n.d.

²⁰SSCR Volume 18, page 159, 25 R 1330/13 April 1912.

²¹See for example the 1867 Regulation on Financial Affairs (*Umur-u maliye dair nizamname*) *Düstur: I. Tertib*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Matbaa-yi Amire, 1289), 4.

²²Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes & The Revolutionary Movement In Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2004); Samira Haj, "The Problems of Tribalism: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Iraqi History," *Social History* 16, no. 1 (1991): 45–58.

²³Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

officials deemed “empty” and legally unused (*mahlul*) was particularly problematic.²⁴ In the district of Salt, Bedouin headmen organized their communities together with town and village-dwelling men to protest new Circassian and Chechnyan settlements, sometimes violently. In the context of the Ottoman Empire’s weakened inter-imperial status and extreme anxiety about local unrest that could be used as a pretext for foreign intervention, these protest tactics were quite effective. Where Ottoman officials had envisioned settling 50,000 Muslim refugees in the southeastern interior, only about 5,000 maintained settlements there.²⁵ On the eve of World War I, the landscape of the southern Syrian interior continued to be dominated by tents, with a few quickly growing villages. Through these conflicts, the *aşiret* became an important mechanism for struggles over resources in the Syrian interior.

By the final years of Ottoman rule, the *aşiret* had been fully integrated into codified law governing rural property relations across the empire, indicating that the situation in Salt district and the Syrian interior more broadly was not anomalous. A 1913 law outlining the procedures for addressing livestock theft discussed the responsibility of the *aşiret* to collectively reimburse a stolen animal’s owner if an investigation of tracks led to the conclusion that the animal had disappeared in its territory. In this law, the *aşiret* appears as Midhat Paşa envisioned, as a bureaucratic entity comparable to the village, with legally bounded territory and population.²⁶

For all its aspirations to standardization, the project of remaking *aşirets* within an imperial administrative hierarchy, as human collectives formed in reference to a territorially-bounded whole, was uneven in the late Ottoman period. The processes of political reconfiguration I have described were more prevalent in sheep-herding communities closely involved in markets for agricultural and pastoral commodities. Elites from large camel-herding communities like the Bani Sakhr, who enjoyed longstanding and high-level political connections to the Ottoman administration because of their historical involvement with the pilgrimage, entered the ranks of rural administration as officials with military titles.²⁷ Their political leverage aided them especially in negotiating tax burdens and land disputes with the Ottoman authorities.²⁸ Even so, the remaking of the *aşiret* through modern administration had a significant effect on how tent-dwelling groups were conceptualized in the following decades: as modular, comparable communities on the margins of the modern state.

Although it administratively separated them from villages, the Ottoman approach to *aşirets* in the Syrian interior was integrative: the regime aimed to gradually incorporate *aşirets* into village-based administration by convincing them to settle and cultivate full time. However, the standardization and modularity of the Ottoman “tribe” laid the foundations for the divisive British and French colonial policies that juridically isolated them.²⁹ It also informed their re-incorporation into the standardized body politic under national governments in the postcolonial period. It is this project of re-incorporation that brings us back to the work of Refik and other compilers in the mid-twentieth century, which aimed to repair the divides between urban and rural that they saw as effects of colonial governance within new national spatial frames. The Syrian agricultural expert and nationalist Wasfi Zakariya was most explicit about the importance of his compilation effort for the future of a strong, independent, economically developed Syria:

²⁴Ella Fratantuono, “Producing Ottomans: Internal Colonization and Social Engineering in Ottoman Immigrant Settlement,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 21, no. 1 (2019): 1–24.

²⁵For the Ottoman projection that the southeastern interior could support 50,000 settlers, see BOA.DH.MKT 217/23, 13 February 1894. For the eventual outcome, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Circassian Refugees and the Making of Amman, 1878–1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 607.

²⁶Nora Barakat, “Marginal Actors? The Role of Bedouin in the Ottoman Administration of Animals as Property in the District of Salt, 1870–1912,” *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 1/2 (2015): 115. The text of the law is at BOA.DH.ID 104-2, p. 49, 18 Ca 1331/25 April 1913.

²⁷Yoav Alon, *The Shaykh of Shaykhs: Mithqal al-Fayiz and Tribal Leadership in Modern Jordan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

²⁸Nora Elizabeth Barakat, “An Empty Land? Nomads and Property Administration in Hamidian Syria” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2015), 105–9.

²⁹Joseph Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The time has come to lift the obstacles and barriers the passage of time has placed in the way of these relations, to reunite our urban (*ḥaḍr*) and Bedouin (*badū*) communities, and strengthen the harmony and brotherhood between them. They will contribute their hard work and products (*sawā'idhum wa nawā'tijhum*), and we will contribute our knowledge and talents (*ma'ārifnā wa mawāhibnā*), and they will increase our strength and ability to follow the path of national goals and patriotic aspirations.³⁰

In its effort to standardize a national population, Zakariya's integrative urge recalled that of late Ottoman reformers. "Tribe" was a useful category to render legible communities understood to exist beyond the realm of the *ḥaḍr* and incorporate them into the national polity through an infusion of "knowledge" in exchange for labor and commodities. Through late imperial, colonial, and early national policies that stemmed from this discourse, administratively-defined tribes became important distributors of resources from education to electoral power to land and water. In many cases, these functions have endured beyond the aggressive attempts of subsequent national regimes to abolish the category.³¹ Fundamentally, these practices stemmed from a late Ottoman moment in which "tribe/*aşiret*" came to mark the always-unfinished nature of an emergent modern state.³²

³⁰Zakariya, 'Asha'ir al-Sham, 6.

³¹Dawn Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 29–49.

³²Veena Das and Deborah Poole, "State and Its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies," in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Oxford, UK: James Currey, 2004), 7.