

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

The Politics of Tribalization in Syria

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International media outlets have covered the news of Syrian tribes since the beginning of the protest movement that erupted in the country in 2011. This started with the “Friday of Tribes,” when Syrian tribes participating in protests against the Syrian regime in the Syrian city of Dar‘a began chanting “*faz‘a*” (*chanting for support*), which meant that they were seeking solidarity from other tribes for defense against the regime’s aggression. As the Syrian uprising turned into a civil war that involved many players, some media outlets focused on the scenes of tribal leaders pledging allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or of others being summoned to Geneva, Switzerland, to hold talks with Western powers about the possibility of mobilizing against ISIS militants. One could only wonder exactly why tribal loyalties continued to play such a significant role in the everyday events of the Syrian civil war when many civil society advocates had argued that tribal affiliation in Syria had diminished.

This paper addresses two questions: Why did many Syrians not turn from their tribal loyalties to a national identity despite the processes of urbanization and education that had set in during the early 20th century? And what is the current relationship between the tribes and the Syrian state? I argue in this paper that the authoritarian state that has plagued Syria since 1970 used tribes and tribalism as tools to consolidate regime formation, which in turn played a major role in extending the longevity and the strength of tribes. Now, the weakness of the state during the civil war and the absence of its institutions in many marginal areas has led to the resurgence of tribalism, as people see their tribes as their source of protection. Due to the tribes’ military capacity and local knowledge, the Syrian government itself as well as many other parties involved in the war recruited members of the tribes to achieve their goals. This has divided the tribes into competing clans and lineages with multiple shaykhs that often have different, conflicting agendas.

Tribes in Syria and Their Relationship with the Nation–State, 1946–1970

Throughout Syria’s history the relationship between the state and the tribes has been confrontational. The state’s weakness led tribes to encroach on the state’s boundaries, and then the state’s possession of sufficient power would enable it to push the tribes back to the marginal areas and keep them at bay. Apart from the pure use of force against the tribes, the Ottomans and later the French initiated a system in which tribal leaders were co-opted by providing them with policing, a military, and financial means. In turn, these shaykhs were expected to achieve stability in their areas and neutralize any security challenges to the state’s rule in the periphery. To use the tribes against the nascent nationalist movement, French mandatory power granted tribal leaders tracts of lands and appointed many of them as deputies in the Syrian Parliament. When nationalist members submitted a bill calling for an end to the French mandatory rule in 1941, only one of these deputies appeared to vote; the rest abstained from taking a position.¹ In 1946 the departure of the French mandatory power from Syria and the rise of the Syrian nation–state constituted a strong blow against the tribes, as the state now had significant military and economic force.

From the time of Syrian independence in 1946 until 1970, successive Syrian governments considered tribalism an obstacle to achieving unity and socialism. Measures that were taken by successive Syrian

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

governments during this period to weaken the power of the tribes included the expropriation of tribal land for redistribution as part of land reform measures and the closing of tribal boarding schools so that children of the tribes had to join the same schools as other Syrians.² Tribal law was abolished and the government tried to apply state law to the tribes in the same way it did with other citizens.³ As a result of these measures, security was firmly established in the tribal regions, and the tribes lost a lot of their traditional authority, prestige, and influence. Suleiman Khalaf highlights this shift in the words of one of the shaykhs of the Fad'an, who described his situation after the measures taken by the state: "*Kunnā bi-l-na'im wa-surnā bi-l-jaḥīm*" (We were in paradise and now we are in hell).⁴ Instead of the shaykhs, a new generation of educated young men articulated the new national ideology in their regions.⁵ This period witnessed widespread migration of the tribes to the Arab Gulf as a response to the strict measures against shaykhs and their social status. This situation continued until Hafiz al-Assad came to power; he reversed the previous policies and gave life to tribes and tribalism again.

Authoritarianism and Tribalism

Hafiz al-Assad came to power in 1970 after a military coup that he called the "Corrective Movement" (*al-Haraka al-Tashiya*). Unlike previous leaders, he adopted pragmatic policies toward the tribes. To widen his support base, particularly in the Syrian rural areas (of which the tribal regions constituted a large part), he relaxed all stringent policies. First, some shaykhs who had left the country as a result of the strict socialist measures taken against them were invited to return. He personally sent Alawi messengers to Shaykh Faysal al-Sfuk of the Hadidiyyin tribe in Jordan, apologizing for the way he had been treated and asking him to return.⁶ Second, tribes were allowed to solve disputes among themselves in the traditional ways, methods the newly independent Syrian state had banned. Under al-Assad's rule the new state allowed disputes between tribes to be resolved using *'urf* (customary law). Third, the Syrian government decided to stop the policy of the "nationalisation of tribal land."⁷ As a result, some tribal leaders regained large areas that had been confiscated as a result of land reform.

Al-Assad distributed resources following a political calculus of power and loyalties.⁸ Tribal loyalties were used to counterbalance various challenges to the regime. The regime leveraged developing networks of patronage with the tribes against the Muslim Brotherhood revolt of the 1970s and early 1980s and also against Kurdish attempts to gain autonomy. In Aleppo's hinterland, where the Muslim Brotherhood had a strong presence, the Syrian regime sought the aid of the tribes to confront the Islamists. Shaykh Diyab al-Mashi, one of the leaders of the Busha'ban tribe in the countryside of Aleppo, admitted in the documentary *A Flood in Baath Country* (dir. Omar Amiralay, 2003) that he sent his tribesmen to Aleppo in the 1970s to help President al-Assad fight the Muslim Brotherhood.⁹ As a reward, the shaykh was granted a permanent seat in the Syrian parliament. The al-Assad regime also used its patronage networks with the tribes to Arabize a densely populated Kurdish area in the north of the al-Hassaka governorate. This was implemented by transferring members of the al-Walda clan whose villages were submerged after the construction of Lake Assad to the north of al-Hassaka, in the so-called Arab Belt project. The purpose was to create a barrier because of concerns that the Kurds of Turkey would encourage their fellows in Syria to join military action against the central government in Damascus. The al-Walda clan has become the eyes

²Mas'ud Dahir, *al-Mashriq al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir: Min al-Badawa ila al-Dawla al-Haditha* (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inma' al-'Arabi, 1986); John Shoup, "Hima: A Traditional Bedouin Land-Use System in Contemporary Syria and Jordan" (PhD diss., Washington University of St. Louis, 1990).

³Fadl al-Faour, "Social Structure of a Bedouin Tribe in the Syria-Lebanon Region" (PhD diss., University of London, 1968).

⁴Suleiman Khalaf, "Family, Village and the Political Party: Articulation of Social Change in Contemporary Rural Syria" (PhD diss., University of California–Berkeley, 1981).

⁵Raymond Hinnebusch, "Local Politics in Syria: Organization and Mobilization in Four Village Cases," *Middle East Journal* 30, no. 1 (1976): 1–24.

⁶Chatty, "Bedouin in Contemporary Syria," 29–49.

⁷Andrew Manzardo, *Bedouins in Agriculture* (Cleveland, OH: Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities, 1980), 25.

⁸Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Essays on Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993).

⁹Haian Dukhan, "Tribes and the Islamists in Modern Syria: A Short Introduction," Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St. Andrews, 2014, http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/fb1673_2d9d2119177745e797510148af3cfa83.pdf.

and ears of the Syrian regime on the Syrian–Turkish border and has been used to suppress continuous Kurdish protests in the region.¹⁰

The death of Hafiz al-Assad in June 2000 and the seizure of power by his son Bashar did not significantly change the way the Syrian state continued to use tribes and tribalism for its survival policies. The state facilitated the crossing of tribal youth into Iraq to fight there before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein. During this period, Bashar al-Assad visited the governorate of al-Hassaka to meet tribal leaders who had links with the Iraqi tribes. In Deir Ezzor he gave an unusual speech, praising the tribes' history of struggle against the French mandate as part of the Syrian national resistance.¹¹ The Syrian regime openly manipulated tribal ties between Syria and Iraq to prevent a stable American presence in Iraq that could threaten its existence. In 2004, a Kurdish revolt erupted against the Syrian regime in the al-Hassaka governorate. Because the small military presence in the eastern part of Syria could not handle the Kurdish uprising on its own, the government sought assistance from the Arab tribes in the governorate.¹² The al-Jabbur and Tay tribes were allowed to take up arms, surround government buildings, and protect them. The Kurdish movement was suppressed. Estimates suggested that around 40 people were killed, over 100 were injured, and more than 2,000 Kurds were jailed.¹³

Although these policies clearly enabled the regime to survive these challenges, they also led to the resurgence of tribal solidarity (*aṣabiyya*). To cultivate sentiments of tribal affinity, guesthouses (*maḍāfas*), which had been considered signs of backwardness by previous governments, reopened throughout the country. Members of the tribes meet regularly in these guesthouses to discuss issues of political and social relevance to their tribe, creating a sense of unity. Moreover, tribal poetry has become popular in Syria, where poets like 'Ummar al-Farra, who has composed many poems in the bedouin dialect, appear on TV during national celebrations. There has been a resurgence of Arabic tribal literature written by members of tribes themselves describing their genealogical roots and their historical roles in Syria. Behind the scenes, however, encouraging tribal solidarities has led to intertribal feuds in different parts of the country, such as the quarrel between the Hasana and Fawa'ira tribes in Homs in 1979.¹⁴

Cohesion and Fragmentation Among the Tribes During the Syrian War

The state's neglect of the peripheral areas and the resulting breakdown of patronage relationships in the new millennium prepared the ground for an uprising. Rural Syria, where the protest movement was most prevalent, is home to the majority of the Arab tribes that played an important role during the peaceful protests as well as later during the armed conflict of the Syrian civil war that has lasted from 2011 to the present.¹⁵ The situation of the tribes during the war has evolved in three phases, as related to the state, the tribal leaders, and other parties involved. The initial phase was one of cohesion among the tribes as networks of solidarity in their protest against the regime. In the second stage, the tribes fragmented into the tribal youth, who joined the Free Syrian Army brigades to fight against the regime, and the shaykhs with their families, who joined the regime's militias to suppress those in their tribe who had revolted. In the third phase, the tribes broke up into competing clans and families, with multiple leaders related to the multiple parties involved in the Syrian conflict.

The first demonstration in Dar'a was organized by networks of tribesmen from the al-Zu'bi and al-Masalma tribes.¹⁶ Tribal solidarity played an important role in recruiting more people in the early

¹⁰Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

¹¹"Bashar al-Assad's Speech to the People in Deir Ezzor," Syria RTV, 30 April 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6I8D9BsI_IQ.

¹²Eva Savelsberg, "The Syrian-Kurdish Movements: Obstacles Rather than Driving Forces for Democratization," in *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria*, ed. David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 91.

¹³Robert Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered," Briefing Paper, Chatham House, January 2006, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/bsyriankurds.pdf>.

¹⁴Thorsten Schoel, "The Hasna's Revenge: Syrian Tribes and Politics in Their Shaykh's Story," *Nomadic Peoples* 15, no. 1 (2011): 96–113.

¹⁵Haian Dukhan, *State and Tribes in Syria: Informal Alliances and Conflict Patterns* (London: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁶Islam al-Khafaji, "De-Urbanising the Syrian Revolt," *Arab Reform Initiative*, 6 March 2016, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/de-urbanising-the-syrian-revolt>.

days of the protests. As the protest movement intensified, tribesmen in Dar'a started chanting, requesting that other tribes in Syria protest in support of their demands for reform and an end to repression and arrests. After Dar'a, the governorates of Homs and Deir Ezzor played an important role in the uprising. Protesters in these places invoked the notions of tribal justice and dignity to explain their opposition to the regime.¹⁷ During the early stages of the uprising, the opposition gave a name to each Friday that protests took place against the regime. One of the Fridays was called the "Friday of the Tribes" (*Jum'at al-'Ashā'ir*) and was held in recognition of Syrian tribes participating in protests against the Syrian regime. For a brief period, there was unity and solidarity between the members of the tribes against the Syrian regime. This period of cohesion was fleeting and was shattered by the Syrian regime's use of force against the protesters. The regime's violence toward the tribes pushed many tribal youth to armed self-defense to take revenge for relatives killed or tortured by Syrian security forces. At the same time, soldiers and army officers of tribal origin started defecting from the Syrian army to establish militias under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. On the other side, strong clientele networks enabled the regime to employ many shaykhs for the creation of pro-government militias to suppress the protesters and fight against Free Syrian Army brigades. Although these acts enabled the regime to survive, they led to major divisions between those who supported the regime and those who opposed it within the tribes. For example, Shaykh Muhammad al-Faris of the Tay tribe played an active role in forming a pro-regime militia in the governorate of al-Hassaka to fight against the Free Syrian Army.¹⁸

The third and last phase that has characterized the tribal communities started in 2013 when the Syrian conflict gradually began to turn into a proxy war, with important roles played by Iran, Turkey, the US, and Russia. Lacher argues that violence opens rifts in the social fabric, causing fragmentation among groups that rely on solidarity among their members to defend themselves against threats.¹⁹ I will use the al-Baggara tribe as an example that testifies to this deep fragmentation among the members of tribes in Syria. The al-Baggara tribe is situated in the eastern part of Syria, particularly in the governorate of Deir Ezzor. Its leader is Shaykh Nawwaf al-Bashir, whose family has historically presided over the tribe. Currently, a large segment of the al-Baggara lives in areas under Kurdish control and is still supported by the US, despite President Donald Trump's orders to pull out.²⁰ Others live in exile in Turkey, and the rest of the tribe lives under the control of the Syrian government. All three segments identify different individuals within their area of control as the legitimate representative of the tribe, depending on their respective proxy relationships with outside powers. For example, Iran promotes Nawwaf al-Bashir as the legitimate representative, whereas the Syrian state recognizes his cousin Fawaz al-Bashir as the leader and has appointed him as a member of the Syrian parliament. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that control the eastern part of Syria (assisted by the US) support Shaykh Hajim al-Bashir as the leader in SDF-controlled territories. Turkey supports Shaykh Khalid al-Khalaf as leader for the members of the al-Baggara who have been displaced to Turkey during the conflict. These multiple parties attempt to use tribal bonds to destabilize each other's authority, which causes further divisions within the tribe when, for example, tribesmen who don't fully support their designated leader choose to listen to a shaykh from another region arguing against their shaykh's legitimacy and calling on them to refuse to join the militia.

Conclusion

Many analysts of Middle Eastern affairs view the persistence of tribalism in the region through the lens of development and modernization, arguing that it is due to the slow pace of industrialization and the overwhelming dominance of the agricultural sector until at least the middle of the 20th century. Although this argument may still carry significance, it often neglects the impact of state dynamics on the persistence of tribalism in the region. In this paper I have argued that the nascent nation-state in Syria took serious

¹⁷Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann, "Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers," *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 139–59.

¹⁸A. Holler, "The Leader of Tay Tribe Calls Arab Tribes in al-Hasakeh to 'Join' Regime Militias" ARA News, 22 March 2015.

¹⁹Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

²⁰Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Northern Syria," *The New York Times* 13 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/mark-esper-syria-kurds-turkey.html>.

steps to move its citizens beyond their tribal identities; however, since the 1970s the emergence of authoritarianism has halted and reversed these measures, contributing to the continuation of tribes and tribalism as political forces in Syria. As a result of this politicization and instrumentalization of tribalism for political survival, tribes have emerged as independent political actors during the uprising and civil war. The multiple regional and international actors that are involved in the Syrian conflict have fragmented tribal loyalties even among members of the same tribe. Nevertheless, the Syrian civil war has solidified tribal loyalties to a great extent, making any resolution of Syria's future highly reliant on including tribal representatives in any form of power sharing.