

The Role of Bedouin and Tribes in the Formation of the Modern State in the Arab East: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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Bedouin communities were instrumental in the transformation processes which affected the social, political, economic, and cultural landscapes of the Arab East from the late Ottoman period to the establishment of independent nation states. Mobile pastoralism and tribal organisation experienced profound change during this period, causing upheaval and migration, but also the emergence of new opportunities. Since the 1980s, new „Bedouin“ or „tribal“ identities have made themselves felt in the Arab public sphere. This is documented in political controversies concerning tribes as well as by the ever-increasing number of Arabic books, films, and websites that deal with Bedouin history, traditions, and values, many of which are produced by authors who have a Bedouin background themselves.

Organised by Stefan Leder (Orient-Institut Beirut), Massoud Daher (Lebanese University, Beirut), and Johann Buessow (University of Halle, Germany), the conference brought together participants from Britain, Germany, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Switzerland, and Syria. It was organised around four main themes which were dealt with in four panels.

Panel 1 dealt with the drylands of the Levant and the Arabic Peninsula as arenas of conflict over resources. The contributions showed how different states intervened in these essentially local conflicts in their struggle for influence in territories which throughout history have been difficult to control.

Drawing on data from nineteenth-century Sudanic Africa and eighteenth-century Syria, ASTRID MEIER (Zurich) discussed the reasons for violent clashes of mobile pastoralists and sedentary population groups which

are a frequent topic in local historical sources and in today's news media. Meier highlighted three major factors that need to be taken into account in order to understand the behaviour of mobile pastoralists: climatic fluctuations, competition for resources, and state intervention.

JIHAD AL MHEISEN (Amman) then introduced the impact of state-building into the picture which he exemplified by the case of Jordan during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Al Mheisen described how the modernising reforms since the late nineteenth century stabilised the supremacy of already dominant lineages within Bedouin communities and ultimately led to the emergence of new social cleavages.

RAMI ZURAYK and HAMRA ABU 'EID (Beirut) modified this picture for the present situation by presenting a case study on the contemporary livelihoods of two Bedouin groups settled in the Lebanese Bekaa plain. Their data stem from a joint research project at the American University of Beirut, in collaboration with TARIQ TALL (Amman). Zurayk and Abu 'Eid were able to document that mobile pastoralism continues to be an efficient economic strategy and that Bedouin communities which had been forced to give up livestock breeding were less resilient against shocks such as droughts and price rises and had a lower quality of life than those who continued to keep livestock breeding in their portfolio of resources. According to this study, the greatest obstacle to mobile pastoralism is the fragmentation of landscapes by national borders, roads and agricultural areas.

In the ensuing discussion it was stressed that we need more studies on the interplay of politics and climatic extremes. Several participants also emphasised the need to historicise the state, which should not be treated as a homogenous entity but as a field of power relations.

Panel 2 was devoted to the diverse ways in which social and political change in the drylands has been documented and commemorated in historical documents and narratives.

NORA BARAKAT (Berkeley) presented a study on property disputes in the district of Salt in Jordan during the late Ottoman period as they were recorded in the local court

registers. The registers show that the main fields of contestation were the state's determination to tax the rural population according to „tribe“ (Arab. 'ashira) and the boundaries of the respective tribes. Mobile pastoralists, designated as „tent dwellers“ in the documents, actively used the new Ottoman institutions, thereby contributing to a process by which 'ashira became firmly established as an administrative term.

MOHAMMED ABDALHAMID AL-HAMAD (Raqqa) showed how social transformations in the rural society of the region of Raqqa are remembered in oral history narrations. Al Hamad highlighted three pervasive topics in these narrations: the politicisation of the local ethnic categories of shawayya („sheep rearers“) and ahl al-ibl („camel breeders“) around the time of Syrian independence, the end of a „golden age of tribal shaykhs“, and, finally, the enduring validity of „true Bedouin values.“

Participants in the ensuing discussion repeatedly emphasised that we need to distinguish between purely administrative terms and vernacular terms that denote social groups capable of collective action.

Panel 3 dealt with trends of political and social change in the drylands. MASSOUD DAHER (Beirut) criticised what he termed „the new Khaldunism“ (Arab. al-Khalduniyya al-jadida) among modern Arab and Western scholars who assume that Bedouin and tribes to be timeless models of culture and social organisation and who often cite passages from the work of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) to affirm this assumption. Daher called for a perspective that assumes that the lives of Bedouin and other tribal communities are subject to constant transformations and that their present condition cannot be analysed without taking into account the interests of different national governments.

MOHAMAD AL DBIYAT (Damascus) presented a broad survey of the fluctuation between settled and nomadic lifestyles in the Syrian steppe from antiquity to the present. A persistent structure of this particular region was the insistence by successive political regimes to draw a clear-cut line between a zone of agriculture (Arab. ma'mura) and a zone of pastoralism (Arab. badiya).

MARTHA MUNDY (London) urged the participants to question the units of inquiry which they use in their work and highlighted the often overlooked importance of households as the basic unit of political organisation. Drawing on a detailed study of the tapu (property) register of Ajlun in northern Jordan, she was able to demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of the local society. The uniform category of „tribes“ as it was introduced by the British Mandate government obscured the actual complexity of local social relations.

In the discussion, it was pointed out that we need to distinguish between first-level units of political association, that are often based on contractual relationships, and political articulation at higher levels in which genealogies and „noble“ lineages often play a prominent role.

Panel 4 was devoted to social values and legal norms associated with Bedouin life in the societies of the modern Arab East.

The presentation by STEFAN LEDER (Beirut) was concerned with contemporary representations of the 'Anaza tribal confederation and their antecedents in classical Arabic literature. The inhabitants of the steppe (Arab. badiya) and the particular values assigned to them are a persistent topic since the beginnings of Arab history. Leder distinguished between six types of historical representations of the Bedouin which constituted different ways of making the complex reality of life in the steppe intelligible. In modern literature and scholarship, this rich discourse has often been reduced to a simple dichotomy between „nomadic Bedouin“ (Arab. al-badw) and the „settled and civilised population“ (Arab. al-hadar).

JOHANN BUESSOW (Halle) continued this line of enquiry with a case study of a recent history of the Hasana tribe which was written by a member of the tribe. The Hasana consider themselves a sub-group of the 'Anaza confederation and at present are distributed over the states of Syria and Saudi Arabia. BUESSOW showed that the author's presentation portrayal of the history of his group follows several political agendas simultaneously, thereby addressing the interests of the Hasana in both Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Speaking on tribes in politics in contemporary Kuwait, HAILA MEKAIMI (Kuwait) presented a case study of how tribal identities may be translated into party politics. In Kuwait's parliament, several tribal groups, which in the 1970s were purposefully recruited as pillars of support for the ruling dynasty, have become a major oppositional force. Some of these oppositional tribes have entered into alliances with Islamist movements and charitable organisations and are actively involved in party politics.

Finally AHAMD AL-'UWAIDI AL-'ABBADI (Amman), an academic and practising politician, presented his thoughts on a century of changing relations between tribes and state in Jordan.

The discussion in this panel revolved around the question of how one might understand the relationship between the modern tribal discourse and social reality. Some participants raised the point that the debate on the nature of „Bedouinity“ (Arab. *badawa*) in the Arab public sphere bears resemblance to the reflections of Arab historians on the contrasting nature of social milieus in the rural mountains and the coastal cities of the Levant (for example Albert Hourani on Lebanon and Salim Tamari on Palestine).

In conclusion, the conference highlighted several topics which might constitute fruitful topics for further research. Among them was the often striking contrast between the complex patterns of interaction between mobile pastoralists and sedentary populations and the remarkably stable tradition among Western and Arab authors to portray these population groups in terms of rigid dichotomies. It was also shown that integration into modern states often brought about more formalised and permanent tribal structures which tend to influence our notion of „tribes“ today. In order to counter such potentially misleading notions, we need more historical and ethnographic studies to demonstrate the actual fluidity and flexibility of tribal organisation in past and present. A new and important topic is the enduring importance of Bedouin society as an „alternative“ in Arab discourse, be it in the subcultures of contemporary youth, in the discourse of tribal elites, or in the reflections of Arab intellectuals. Last but not least,

the lively participation of Lebanese and foreign guests showed that there is a growing interest in *subaltern studies* and the history of the countryside in the Arab East. The contributions will be published electronically on the website of *Orient-Institut Beirut*.

Conference overview:

Mapping out the steppe as a social space

Astrid Meier (Zurich), Nomadic tribes, migratory cycles, changing ecological conditions and political contexts

Jihad Al Mheisen (Amman), Social geography of the Bedouin in the Arab East: The case of Jordan

Rami Zurayk / Hamra Abu 'Eid (Beirut), From pasture to pasteurized: Livelihoods and food economy of the Abu 'Eid Bedouins of Hawsh al Arab and Hawsh al Nabi (Bekaa, Lebanon)

Historical documents and narratives of change in the steppe

Nora Barakat (Berkeley), Contested categories in late Ottoman administration: The „tribe“ in land sales and property disputes in 19th century Salt

Muhammad 'Abdalhamid al-Hamad (Raqqa), The competition between shawaya and ahl-al-ibl in the Raqqa region, 1900-1960

Political and social change in the steppe

Massoud Daher (Beirut), Social transformations of Bedouin communities in the contemporary Arab East

Mohamad Al Dbayat (Damascus), Sedentarisation politics in central Syria and their relation with agricultural policies from late Ottoman times until today

Martha Mundy (London), Agricultural and pastoral land use and land tenure

Social values and norms associated with Bedouin life in societies of the modern Arab East

Stefan Leder (Beirut), Towards understanding contemporary representations of tribal history: The case of the 'Anaza

Johann Buessow (Halle), History as a contested field: Recent Arabic publications on the history of the 'Anaza tribes in Syria

Haila Mekaimi (Kuwait), Tribe and state

in the thought of the Islamic movement in Kuwait: The case of the 'Ibs International Foundation for Social Development (Munazzamat 'Ibs al-'Alamiyya li l-Tanmiya al-Ijtima'iyya)

Ahmad 'Uwaidi al-'Abbadi (Amman),
Bedouin and political culture in the modern Arab East

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