

RESEARCH REPORT

TRIBES AND THE RULE OF THE “ISLAMIC STATE”: THE CASE OF THE SYRIAN CITY OF DEIR EZ-ZOR


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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, tribes in Syria and Iraq have had to cope with severe changes and regional challenges, among them the rise and expansion of jihadist movements. In that light, the discussion about the transformation of tribes has become increasingly relevant. From here, a series of questions arises: What are the similarities and differences between today’s tribes and those of the past? What remains of tribal *Asabiyyah* and its sovereignty over land and inhabitants? How did this affect the relationship of tribes to external structures, namely the state, local authorities and even globalized forces?

A great deal of anthropological research studies have tackled the issue of tribes in the Arab and Islamic world, but very few field studies focus on tribes in the “land of jihad.”¹ For that reason, this report focuses on the transformation of the concept of “tribe” in Arab societies, the structural changes of tribes and their relations with the state, the local authorities, and the jihadi movements in Syria and Iraq. The research also includes a geographical and social overview of the Syrian tribes in Deir ez-Zor: their main branches (*fukhdhs*), tribal leadership houses (*bouyoutat*, single: *beit*) and powerful families.²

This report focuses mainly on tribes in the context of events following the outbreak of the popular uprising in Syria against the regime of the Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad in 2011, analyzing in detail the positions of tribal leaders (*sheikhs*) on the protests. Ultimately, the paper examines the relationship between tribes and jihadi organizations with special focus on the tribes’ situation after the fall of the “Islamic State” organization (IS).

The study was supervised by Dr. Hosham Dawod. Ms. Rudayna Al-Baalbaky coordinated the research project and wrote the first part of the paper, while the second part was written by Mr. Ahmad Mhidi. The literature review was conducted by Mr. Khalil Issa.

The research is based on two field works, one conducted by Ms. Rudayna Al-Baalbaky in Istanbul between September and October 2017, and the second one by Mr. Ahmad Mhidi for a month in the southern Turkish city of Şanlıurfa during the second half of 2017. The report is also based on a roundtable organized by the Arab and International Affairs team of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) in Beirut in March 2018, as per Dr. Hosham Dawod’s proposition. This roundtable was organized with the help of Ms. Sara Abdel Latif, and with the intensive follow-up of Dr. Tarek Mitri, the program and institute Director.

Our thanks go to the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung represented by the Syria/Iraq Office, which funded and facilitated the research project and the roundtable organization, while constantly giving its feedback and suggestions for improvement.

1 Kheder Khaddour, *Eastern Expectations: The Changing Dynamics in Syria’s Tribal Regions*, (Carnegie Middle East Center, February 28, 2017), accessed October 11, 2017: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/02/28/ar-pub-68108>, & Hosham Dawod, “Iraqi Tribes in the Land of Jihad, in *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, by Olivier Roy and Virginie Colomblie (London, Hurst, 2017).

2 See Figure 1 page 7.

PART I: TRIBES AND JIHADI MOVEMENTS: HISTORIC OVERVIEW AND MODERN DYNAMICS

Changes in the Concept of “Tribe” in Arab Societies: The Cases of Syria and Iraq

At first, the traditional anthropological definition of the tribe within Arab communities was simple. The tribe was defined as “a form of society, consisting of a body of people linked together by kinship, whether in the male or in the female line, which may be real or imagined, through birth or marriage, with the aim of controlling a territory and appropriating its resources, which they invest collectively or individually, and are ready to defend with weapons. This tribe has always a name of its own”.^{3,4}

However, this definition does not clarify the fact that tribal identity operates and is employed on four different levels:

On the first level, the tribal identity is used from a fundamentalist perspective by individuals, to explain their sociopolitical organization. The second level is administrative, where tribal identity code is used by the authority and administration of the ruling state. The third level falls within the scope of practical concepts carried, but not formulated by individuals through formalist ideologies. The fourth level is related to the above mentioned traditional anthropological definition.⁵ Few are the cases involving the use of only one level of tribal identity.⁶

Conceptual Framework and Research Question

Scholars are often vague and unclear when referring to the concept of tribes in Arab and Middle Eastern societies. We notice confusion on two levels:

Between the terms “clan” and “tribe”:

The terms “clan” or “tribe” might sometimes be used interchangeably or have different meanings depending on the region. While researchers on African affairs

3 The research team was supported by Khalil Issa in the literature review.

4 Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes, Vols. 1: Economie, parenté, société* (Paris, Minuit, 1969).

5 Dale F. Eickelman, *Middle East An Anthropological Approach* (London: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

6 Benveniste, op. cit.

distinguish between the tribe and the clan, the two terms are often used interchangeably in the Iraqi and Syrian contexts.

Between the terms “tribes” and “tribalism”

The terms “tribes” and “tribalism” are often confused, which is problematic. In doing so, Arab and Middle Eastern societies are treated as if they were fully tribal communities, operating and organizing themselves according to tribal standards. This, however, is scientifically unacceptable. In these societies, there are tribes who undeniably play a major role in certain areas and intervene in the relationship between various social actors, but this does not lead to the entire society being governed by a tribal system. Therefore, tribalism must be seen as only one aspect of these societies.

Most researchers face a methodological challenge related to what they mean by the term “tribe” when studying this topic. In our research, we have adopted the local labels and the terms used by local groups in Iraq and in parts of Syria.

The tribe in Syria and Iraq is anthropologically defined as a group of people (ranging from one thousand to hundreds of thousands) that shares the same origins, a common history and blood relations.⁷ As a result, members of the same tribe form a patriarchal community in terms of administration and leadership and have reciprocal obligations. Upon this background, tribes promote their concept of solidarity (*Asabiyyah*), which makes tribesmen (within a tribe) stand together and defend themselves at times of crisis, as individuals and as a community. The tribe is known for controlling and managing the specific geographical area in which it lives, and its members feel they need someone from the tribe to represent them to resolve disputes, negotiate with other groups, interact with local authorities and negotiate with central authorities. The tribe is, hence, different from other intra-state and supra-state social units (ethnicity, sect, culture, etc.) since it presupposes the existence of a regulatory system for internal and external administration and representation.

It also assumes sovereignty over its territory, has the ability to produce a local political reality and dynamism, manages part of the wealth, and aspires to participate in the management of water resources and transit of goods and persons among other things.⁸

These characteristics distinguish tribes from other social actors, since they are political units as well.

7 Hosham Dawod, *The Tribe in the Land of the Jihad, the Case of Iraq*, (Presentation, roundtable Tribes in Jihadi Lands: The Case of Syria and Beyond, Beirut, Lebanon, March 12, 2018).

8 Ibid.

The concept of authority within the tribes is broad and falls into two main fields: “social organization” and “established customs” The social organization of Arab tribes is based on sedentarity and ways of living, which means they are divided by the lifestyles of their members (i.e., sedentary or nomadic). As for tribes and tribal divisions such as the tribe, faction, *batn*, *fukhdh*, *hamula*, *amara*, *rahat* and others, they are all expressions that indicate different levels of social organization and do not necessarily imply the ways of life and the economic activities adopted by one tribe or another. In fact, these tribal divisions and subdivisions exist among sedentary (living in urban areas) as well as nomadic tribes (living in agricultural rural areas). Apart from this, the tribe plays an organizational role in providing benefits and sometimes financial support to some of its members and houses (which assumes some degree of hierarchy and social disparity). However, up until recently, the tribe was a small society with rights and sovereignty, and did not recognize any other sovereignty over its territories. Many scholars still use this description when referring to tribes in their

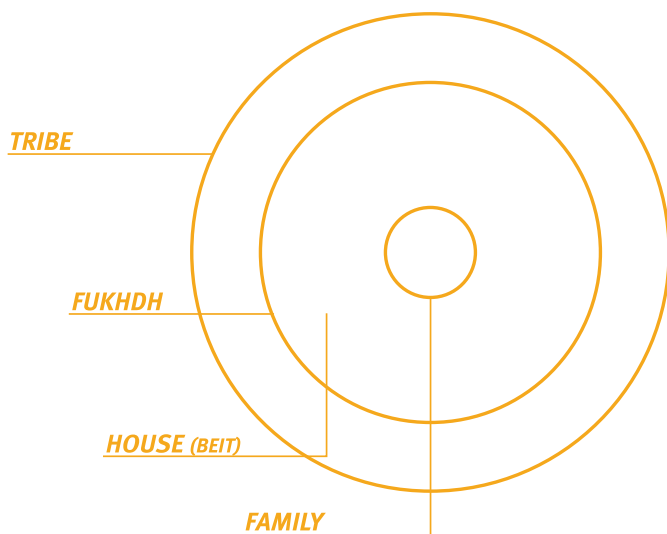


Figure 1: The internal structure of Syrian and Iraqi tribes

literature. Yet, central authorities in the second half of the twentieth century were eager to impose their rule upon the tribes and integrate them into their own power structures. This left the tribes without any sovereignty over their traditional lands.

This transformation of power, in addition to the social changes and reforms throughout the twentieth century led to a reshaping of tribal unity. The change in the role and status of individuals within the same tribe and in society has contributed to weakening the tribe’s political unity. Solidarity among some of its internal units (at the level of *fukhdhs* and houses [*beit*]), however, remains relatively active. The most important asset that tribes

have lost in recent decades is their sovereignty over their members and lands. In order for tribes to regain their traditional role, they must henceforth receive support or some sort of legitimacy from larger institutions and structures such as the state, local authorities or even globalized forces.

Tribes and Jihadism in Syria

The contemporary structure of Syrian tribes

Few scientific field studies tackled the issue of tribes in Syria from the second half of the last century until the rise of the so-called “Islamic State” (hereafter referred to as IS) in Syria. To understand the internal dynamics and structure of tribes in Syria today, three main points can be emphasized:

The first point is solidarity on the basis of locality. This means that given that parts of the tribes have evolved around the locality, which is smaller than the region (or *lqim*), and can be a village, a neighborhood or a number of neighboring villages, solidarity can often be seen there. Localities have clear geographical boundaries that define where they begin and end.

Individuals’ solidarity on the basis of localities means that tribe members have a stronger sense of belonging based on their local affiliations and areas they inhabit than on the larger tribe as a whole. However, this does not eliminate the greater sense of belonging to the tribe. Nevertheless, during the war in Syria (and in Iraq and other similar cases), local solidarity seemed more evident than solidarity on the basis of customs and tribes as a whole.⁹ Several examples from eastern Syria confirm this historical dynamic, such as the case of the Al-Bousaraya tribe in Deir ez-Zor, in eastern Syria. Geographically, the tribe is located in the eastern and western parts of Deir ez-Zor, as if the city is at the center.

During the Syrian uprising that started in 2011, the ensuing civil war and rise of armed groups, and later the rise of jihadi organizations and IS, one could easily notice local solidarity and deals between members and parts of the Al-Bousaraya tribe, on the one hand, and the dominant force, on the other. Since the Al-Bousaraya tribe is spread over two distinct parts of the city, the tribal divisions would deal with different military factions according to their local interests, and therefore have different deals and agreements per tribal division.

This behavior was one of the factors that helped IS expand and dominate the region. In fact, the support by members and families at sub-tribe levels was evident

⁹ Kheder Khaddour, *Syrian Tribe in the Land of the Jihad*, (Presentation, roundtable Tribes in Jihadi Lands: The Case of Syria and Beyond, Beirut, Lebanon, March 12, 2018).

whenever IS came to control lands through military force. It was difficult for IS to deal with tribes as one large extended structure, thus relying on concluding local and sometimes even extremely narrow deals with small villages to be able to expand and exercise its hegemony. It wasn't IS that created this situation; in fact, this structure, characterized by a "locality-based" relationship with tribes, was already in place before the emergence of IS and dates back to the days of Hafez Al-Assad's regime and even before it.

The second point focuses on the so-called Ansar es-Sheikh (partisans of the *sheikh*) phenomenon, which became more evident with the rise of the "Islamic State".

"Ansar es-Sheikh" are the tribesmen who decided to support the traditional leader (*sheikh*) of the tribe, in opposition to the new authority centers that were created, powered and enhanced by an external power to the Tribe (in the past, the Baath party, and more recently, IS organization).

This leads us to the problematic representation of the *sheikh* inside and outside the tribe: Have *sheikhs* lost the ability to mobilize and lead? Historically, the *sheikh*, or a member of his family, used to represent the clan or tribe when dealing with two main parties: external authorities historically represented by the Ottoman bureaucracy or the French mandate, and later on the Syrian regime. The *sheikh* has always been the tribe's representative when dealing with these bodies and other tribes in neighboring or distant regions. But after the Baath party took power in 1963, a radical shift in the relationship between the *sheikh* and the tribesmen took place. At the time, many tribe members joined the Baath party; and this was when the Ansar *Sheikh* phenomenon (which is not a scientific term, but rather a term used in the field) began to form. Within the same tribe, there were supporters of the *sheikh's* partisans and factions and supporters of the tribe's members belonging to the party.

Since 1963, this division within the tribes has not turned into a conflict, but led to a redistribution of power among "Ansar Sheikh" on the one hand, and new leaders who joined the Baath party in the 1960s, on the other. Although IS and the Assad regime did not necessarily adopt the same tactics in their relationship with tribes, both opted to play the intra-tribal divergences to "divide and rule". This "Ansar Sheikh" Phenomenon recurred with the emergence of IS. There were members who supported the new authority, i.e., IS, while others remained loyal to the tribe and its *sheikh*, but with one fundamental difference from the regime rule. In fact, despite IS's dominance over local resources such as oil, the import of external resources and its semi-state

control of broad swathes of territory, it did not succeed in changing the tribe's structure. Therefore, IS did not impulse a new organizational phenomenon modifying the structure of the tribes.

The third point is related to the tribe's relationship with external authorities, whether IS, the Assad regime, or any other external power – and the nature of the relationship with the tribal structure itself, meaning the relationship with the *sheikhs* and various localities, as well as the relationship between tribes and foreign powers in eastern Syria. In 2014, both IS and the Nusra Front (now known as Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham or Organization for the Liberation of the Levant), two translocal ideological jihadist organizations, relied heavily on tribal networks to gain control of lands in eastern Syria. Once IS achieved victory in Deir ez-Zor and the region as a whole, the two organizations sought central hegemony over all networks of armed groups and social networks that existed before the rise of IS, including tribal networks. Of course, seeking control of these networks would not have been possible without the control of local communities and their lands, which forces us to look into power relationships between tribes and external authorities.

Tribes in The Modern Syrian society and history

Post-colonial Syria and Iraq viewed tribes as social structures that were to be contained, supported and sometimes reprocessed by the central authority.¹⁰ But even in the case of two neighboring countries such as Iraq and Syria, the transformative paths of the relationship between tribes and the central authority vary greatly according to each case that acquired its own dynamics. This is further illustrated when we take into account the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the 1991 Gulf war, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the ensuing civil war, and the rise of IS. The Syrian situation was characterized by a static rule under Hafez Al-Assad (1970-2000) and Bashar Al-Assad (since 2000), before the Syrian uprising erupted in 2011 and IS gained control over large parts of Syria thereafter.

However, differences between the two countries existed even in the French (in Syria) and the British (in Iraq) colonial past, for they had different ways of dealing with the Arab tribes during the Mandate (In the 1900s). Since the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, camel-herding tribes have stretched to the north of the Arabian Peninsula, forging alliances between the Shammar and the Aneza tribes and consolidating tribal alliances. Non-indigenous sheep-herding tribes used

10 Maurice Godelier, « Formes et fonctions du pouvoir politique, » *La Pensée*, 2001, 9-20

to pay them sums of money in exchange for protection.¹¹ The Grand Vizier (or Al-Bab Al-Ali, literally The Sublime Porte) later relied on large “indigenous” tribes such as Shammar and Aneza to secure the desert and assigned them a security role in exchange for gifts and supplies from the state.

These tribes started imposing transit taxes within the areas they controlled.¹² Tribal leaders maintained excellent relations with the urban centers to the extent that the Ottoman Empire established a private boarding school for tribal leaders throughout the Empire. Notable graduates included the future *sheikhs* of the Mawali, Hadidiyeen and Sbaa tribes among others, who served in the Ottoman army before the *sultan* appointed them *sheikhs* of their tribes.¹³ Arab tribes, especially the Ruwallah, Al-Fadl and Hassana, later supported King Faysal’s efforts to establish the Arab Kingdom. However, pre- and post-World War I agreements ended with the division of the Badia regions (Southeastern Syria) between Syria and Saudi Arabia, and the Shammar-Aneza Tribal Alliance overnight became split between two different countries. The French and the English later worked to weaken Arab tribes, pitting their leaders against each other and buying the influence of large tribe leaders such as “Ajil al-Yawar,” *sheikh* of the *sheikhs* of the Shammar tribe, in order to protect the borders and secure the pipeline to Mosul in Iraq.¹⁴

In order to gain allegiances through the distribution of privileges, the French invented unprecedented “administrative” divisions that would play a major role in fragmenting tribal bonds. They classified tribes as nomadic and semi-nomadic Bedouins. The Shammar-Aneza alliance and other stronger sheep-herding tribes such as the Hadidiyeen, Mawali and Al-Laheeb were considered nomadic Bedouins, while all other sheep-herding tribes, such as the Bani Khalid tribe, were considered as semi-nomadic, and only nomadic Bedouins were allowed to carry weapons.

In the same context, tribal leaders who were loyal to the French were given seats in the Parliament under the French mandate while others left the country. In their attempt to tighten their grip on Bedouins, the French

embarked on a policy of settling tribes in defined areas. Thus, they registered more than two million hectares of land as the private property of tribal leaders, even though these used to be collectively owned by the tribe. During the conflict with the French mandate in Syria, dignitaries and politicians in Damascus lost confidence in tribal leaders that were considered too close to the French, who were playing on the widening gap between the two sides. In fact, the French issued in 1940 Law of the Tribes No. 132 to support the “Bedouin state within the state” and succeeded in neutralizing tribal leaders, who generally maintained an impartial stance, preventing them from taking part in the fight against the Mandate.¹⁵

In post-colonial Syria, the Syrian nationalist leaders inherited a great bias towards the tribes, considering that the status of financial and administrative independence from the central authority granted to them by the French had to be changed. Therefore, Damascus pursued an aggressive policy towards tribes that aimed at undermining their authority, eliminating their privileges and working on their resettlement. In 1953, the Syrian Parliament abolished the Law of the Tribes (1940) and replaced it with the “Tribes Decree” which allowed the removal of tribes from the list of nomad bedouins and the registration of their members as a stable community that is not allowed to return to the Bedouin life. After September 28, 1958, following the union between Egypt and Syria (the United Arab Republic, 1958–1961), the United Republic’s President Gamal Abdel Nasser abolished the tribes’ law, declaring that there would no longer be any independent legal identity for tribes, thereby driving some of them to leave Syria. As a result, the Fedaan and Sbaa *fukhdhs of the Aneza* tribes left for Saudi Arabia, while parts of the Shammar tribe went to Iraq. In the early 1960s, many of the Bedouin leaders had become big property owners and still remained politically in control of large numbers of Bedouin families. In 1963, the Baath party took power in Syria and began implementing a radical agricultural reform policy. Tribal leadership was, hence, considered as part of the old system and nomadic pastoral economy.¹⁶ The Baath party started stripping Bedouin leaders of their lands and authority, as it did with other landlords. The desert and its inhabitants were systematically attacked, with the aim of dismantling their nomadic and semi-nomadic economy. During

11 Anthony B. Toth, *The Transformation of a Pastoral Economy: Bedouin and States in Northern Arabia, 1850-1950* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2000)

12 Jonathan Rae, *Tribes and State: Management of Syrian Steppe* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1999).

13 Eugene L. Rogan, *Asiret Mektebi: Abdülhamid II’s School for Tribes (1892-1907)*, *IJMES* 28, no. 1 (1996): 83-107.

14 Martin Thomas, *Bedouin Tribes and the Imperial Intelligence Services in Syria, Iraq and Transjordan in the 1920s*, *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 4 (2003): 539-561

15 Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

16 Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Bathist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989).

this period, many leaders of Aneza and Shammar and their partisans left mainly for Iraq and Saudi Arabia, where they maintained their kinship ties. By the end of the 1960s, the land which had mostly been extracted from tribal leaders had exceeded 1.5 million hectares, some of which were distributed to destitute peasants or earmarked for the settlement of Bedouin families.¹⁷ When Hafez Al-Assad came to power in Syria in 1970, the relationship between Damascus and the tribes became more practical and pragmatic, and the regime sought to persuade the tribes to support Assad's rule in exchange for flexible relations with them accordingly.

The relationship with the regime in Damascus has always been marked by a certain margin of "freedom" already given to tribal leaders by Hafez Al-Assad in order to solve problems among themselves in the traditional way; the regime had even contributed to achieving several tribal reconciliations. For example, in 1982, the tribes reportedly participated in the siege of the city of Hama (central Syria), maintaining a security cordon around it and controlling the flow of weapons from the Iraqi border.¹⁸ Under the rule of Bashar Al-Assad, more members of the Baath party started acknowledging their tribal origins and the position of Minister of Agriculture was appointed to a Bedouin several times. Faisal Kulthum, who was appointed governor of Daraa in 2010, was the *sheikh* of the Al-Ageidat tribe. After the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, tribes were split between pro-regime and anti-regime. Fahd Al-Fraij, the Syrian Defense Minister, belonged to the Hadidiyeen tribe of Hama, while Ahmad Al-Jarba, head of the Opposition National Coalition (2013-2014), shared a special kinship with one of the most famous Shammar historical *sheikhs*, Ajil Al-Yawar, whose grandson Ghazi Al-Yawar was President of Iraq for a short period after the U.S. invasion in 2003. Abdullah Al-Melhem of the Hassana tribe in Homs was one of the first *sheikhs* who declared their support for Syrians demanding to live in dignity and freedom, in addition to Sheikh Amir Dandal (Ageidat), *Sheikh* Nawaf Al-Bashir (Baggara), *Sheikh* Abdul Hamid Al-Musrab, grandson of Majul Al-Musrab, and Mohammad Chaalan (Ruwallah).¹⁹ Generally speaking, large tribes such as Aneza were mostly against the regime because of their foreign relations and close ties with the ruling family in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, smaller and less influential tribes in terms of locality and international relations were largely

divided between loyalists and opponents of the regime, who created divisions inside dynasties.

The researcher Dawn Chatty wrote:

"Ageidat, which spread like other tribes in central and eastern Syria, from Deir ez-Zor to Hasakah and Salamiyah, has been actively engaged in forming local fighting groups, often with the support and arming of Saudi Arabia. Members from the Hadidiyeen tribe were fighting alongside the opposition in the vicinity of Aleppo and Idlib, and members from the Mawali tribe in Maarrat Al-Naaman next to Idlib, Hama and Raqqa. In addition, the Bani Khalid tribe has several battalions fighting with the Free Syrian Army in and around Homs, and it is said that they are actively involved in protecting a number of neighborhoods. The regime will need to mobilize tribal support in any attempt to settle social and political differences in order to rebuild the crumbling Syrian political structure because the Bedouins still support the idea of a Syrian Arab State, exactly like their ancestors did after World War I".

Tribes in Upper Syrian Euphrates (Upper Mesopotamia): the case of Deir ez-Zor

The middle Euphrates River *Jazeera* including Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Al-Hasaka lies between the upper course of the Euphrates, located in the mountainous region of Turkey, and the lower course of the Euphrates located in Iraq, ending at the city of Tikrit on the Tigris River. This geographical distribution is advantageous to the Arab tribes controlling the Diyar Modar (around Raqqa) and Diyar Rabia (around Mosul) areas. Throughout history, the city of Deir ez-Zor has been deemed important for its strategic location, being at the junction of roads coming from Aleppo, Damascus, Baghdad and Anatolia.²⁰ Contrary to what it might seem, the history of Deir ez-Zor has witnessed many revolutions against the central authority, starting with the revolution against Ibrahim Pasha Al-Malli (1880), who was the commander of the Kurdish cavalry battalion under Sultan Abdul Hamid II. His tasks were to protect the Ottoman states that were close to the Russians at that time, to control the Kurdish and Armenian tribes, and to encourage nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurds to live in agricultural lands. After his victory over the Shammar tribe and after turning Deir ez-Zor into a semi-state, which he would govern, he was killed by the Turkish army after four years of military campaigns.

In the first years of the French Mandate, the Syrian *Jazeera* was completely isolated from its natural

17 Ahmad M El-Zoobi, *Agricultural extension and rural development in Syria, 1955-1968* (Diss., Ohio State University, 1971).

18 Rae, Op. cit.

19 Mohammed Jamal, Barout, *The last decade in the history of Syria, the dialectic of stagnation and reform*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (2012).

20 Dawn Chatty, *Syria's Bedouin Enter the Fray*, Foreign Affairs, November 13, 2013, accessed March 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2013-11-13/syrias-bedouin-enter-fray>.

extension of Diyarbakir, which became part of Turkey. There were increasing cases of eviction of both Bedouins and sedentary tribes, while Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians and other Christian communities that were displaced after the Ottoman Empire’s divisions were arriving to Syria and Lebanon successively. Around 40,000 Bedouin families from the Shammar tribes arrived to the Syrian *Jazeera* and to Iraq after being defeated in Najd (central region of Saudi Arabia), and *batns* of Bedouins irritated with the French mandate left the Syrian Badia (southeast Syria) to the Arabian Peninsula, including *batns* from the Ruwallah, Hassana, Fedaan and Sbaa tribes in the Aneza alliance. During the French Mandate, the colonizer’s policy explicitly supported religious minorities, including Christian and Armenian minorities that settled in Deir ez-Zor, as well as the Kurdish tribes that suddenly emerged in 1926 fleeing Turkish oppression, and who settled in the city and many of the *Jazeera*’s agrarian towns.²¹ The emergence of Kurdish tribes increased tensions with the Arab tribes regarding grazing and ownership over agricultural lands. The debts that Christian Armenian merchants, who had come from Anatolia not long ago, had bought from farmers and tribal leaders in Deir ez-Zor, also increased tensions between Arab tribes and the wealthy dignitaries of the urban centers. All this led to rising separatism among the *Jazeera*’s predominantly Christian and Kurdish urban populations, while the national government, which was hostile to the French and sought independence, strove to forge alliances with Arab tribal leaders such as the Shammar tribe leader Daham Al-Hadi, who stood up to the separatists. On the other hand, members of the Baggara and Charabiyin tribes stood with Christian and Kurdish capitalists, thus supporting the separatists. After the military victory of Daham Al-Hadi against the separatists, the French supported the Kurdish-Christian alliance and bombed Al-Hadi forces.

The Hafez el-Assad regime resumed the French mandate legacy of imposing increasingly drastic neoliberal policies on the Syrians of the *Jazeera*, to the extent that the relationship between Damascus and Aleppo (the two main urban centers) from one side, and the *Jazeera* inhabitants was perceived as an “internal colonization” by the latter. International migration from the *Jazeera* as well as internal migration to other provinces increased and it became harder for tribal farmers to stay in their lands due the profound changes that occurred. The *Jazeera*’s inhabitants of tribal origin, whose labor force increased between 1994 and 2001 to 60,000 people, declined between 2001 and 2008 to an average of 18,000 persons. Indeed, between 2003

and 2004, half of the wells turned from shallow to deep, a severe drought hit the region in the years 2007 and 2008, fertilizer prices were liberalized in 2008, and the policy aimed at rationalizing irrigation had failed during previous years. All of this led to the failure of land reform efforts, to the salinization of a large part of the fertilized lands, and to allowing agricultural investment without any limit to land ownership in 2007, in addition to the participation of multinational corporations in the food industry in Syria. In 2010, the *Jazeera* was considered the poorest region in Syria, which greatly destabilized the tribal structures in Deir ez-Zor that were now looking forward to a drastic change in the central authority in Damascus.²²

“Salafi jihadism” in Syria and its intersection with tribes

A number of academics have developed theories trying to establish a link between the spread of Salafi jihadism in eastern Syria and western Iraq and the inter-tribal relations. Some of these theories emphasize economic factors when trying to explain this relationship, while others stress on ideology or even climate-related factors. The researchers Dukhan and Hawat believe that the presence of Sahrawi tribes contributed to the spread and development of terrorist networks in the Middle East, exemplified by Osama bin Laden, who had succeeded in recruiting members of Yemeni tribes to Al-Qaeda. They believe that tribes living close to borders are well-suited to the growth, assistance and strengthening of terrorist movements, seeking refuge and protection. Moreover, they argue that since tribes in eastern parts of Syria live far from and are indifferent to the central authority, this enabled IS to recruit members of these tribes. Dukhan and Hawat add that the “Islamic state” was more effective than the Nusra Front in winning over the tribes’ allegiance, through a combination of violent coercion, the construction of ports and the provision of public services that the central state used to provide. However, the two researchers stress that not only economic need, but also tribal identity enabled this collective mobilization of tribes.²³

The scholars Kaplan and Costa build on primordial postulates that do not take into account historical developments or reforms. They believe that the success of IS did not stem from a jurisprudential renewal, but

22 Samir Al Aita, *North Eastern Syria (the Syrian Jazeera) between socioeconomic challenges and regional planning*, (Presentation, Association of Economic Sciences, January 12, 2010), accessed July 2017, http://www.mafhoum.com/syr/articles_10/aita.pdf.

23 Dukhan Haian and Sinan Hawat, “The Islamic State and the Arab Tribes in Eastern Syria,” in *Caliphates and Global Islamic Politics*, ed. by Timothy Poirson and Robert Oprisko (Fife: University of Saint Andrews, 2014), 60-69.

from the very essence of Islam in the seventh century. Islam, according to Kaplan and Costa, works as a desired tribe, meaning that Islam provides the same level of safety and tranquility as the tribe to which the individual belongs, but more broadly and under one banner with no exceptions. They believe that IS phenomenon can be compared to the alliance between Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab and Al-Saud in the Arabian Peninsula, or to the Muslim Brotherhood in its attempt to form a state within a divided society. The researchers claim that some of those who observed the roots of “the Islamic State Phenomenon” described IS as the new Muslim Brotherhood vanguard and consider that there are two levels of tribal identity: the desired identity and the affiliation identity.

The affiliation identity relates to the “anthropological traditional sense”, while the desired identity seeks to unify people through a common religious or ideological subordination regardless of their identity of affiliation. In the scholars’ view, IS tries to reach this goal through transcending the affiliation identity.²⁴

Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss remind us in their book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* how flexible and dynamic tribal networks in eastern Syria are, and how much bribery by IS has facilitated the shift in tribal allegiances. The two researchers provide substantial evidence that the leadership of IS took advantage of young tribal leaders by giving them a share of the oil resources and smuggling proceeds, or even by appointing them leadership positions that were usually given to more important and older tribal leaders. Hassan and Weiss believe that the younger generation of tribal leaders, because of its eagerness to change, was more inclined to confront the regime than older tribe leaders, who by their very nature are conservative and inclined to stand against change. They also argue that ideology has less to do with the spread of IS in eastern Syria than the weapons that the organization could secure in the cities it entered.²⁵

Researcher Lina Al-Khatib, who has a different opinion, considers that IS is a “hybrid jihadist organization” which does not differ from Al-Qaeda on the ideological level, but has a “central leadership like Hezbollah”. She believes that the goal of the latter is to also “build an Islamic state”, but nevertheless has a very high level of pragmatism compared to the ideological puritanism of other groups. Khatib adds that the regime facilitated the growth of IS in the belief that it would fight the

enemies of the regime, including the Nusra Front. In her view, IS considered these organizations a priority, because victory over the regime could be achieved later. Priority was, hence, given to fighting other groups and to administrative matters, which allowed IS to build its state-like entity. As a result of all these developments, the other parties such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian regime were forced to purchase wheat, oil and water from IS, thereby developing a clientelistic relationship that helped IS achieve a degree of self-sufficiency. Khatib believes that IS needed local breeding points, which were secured by encouraging the tribes to cooperate, especially in areas that were neglected by the Assad regime because of the neoliberal policies implemented in large urban centers at the expense of the outlying areas such as eastern Syria. She adds that the tribes cooperated with IS because they normally tend to support stronger players since their priority is protection. Although the tribes’ pledge of allegiance to IS can be interpreted as retaliation for decades of neglect by the central authority for the rights of the marginalized regions and the lack of security, Khatib argues that the tribes’ decisions emanated purely from the need to protect their interests, and were only temporary.²⁶

Gareth Mathews-John presents ideas inspired by Ibn Khaldun’s concept of “*Asabiyyah*” (social solidarity) to explain the spread of “the Islamic State” in eastern Syria and western Iraq. He argues that politics in remote areas is not dominated by a set of rules that everyone must abide by, but rather by local kinship systems based on tribal ties, consanguinity and dialects that preferentially differ according to their religious affiliation and observance to rituals. He describes eastern Syria and western Iraq as “safe havens” where human populations have chosen to stay in order to preserve their traditions, customs, religions and rituals, adding that half of Syria can be classified as such. The Iraqi Baath Party marginalized tribes that relied on agriculture through inadequate “socialist” policies in western Iraq at first. Thereafter, the repression of Iraq’s Sunni Arabs by several successive governments after 2003, particularly the government of Nuri Al-Maliki (2006-2014), prompted those people to search for safe havens, especially after terrible droughts that hit the country. Mathews-John believes that strong *Asabiyyah* in eastern Syrian and western Iraqi societies made individuals lose their sense of loyalty towards cities such as Baghdad or Damascus, and this is what made enrolment in IS look like “the revenge of people

24 Jeffrey Kaplan and Christopher P. Costa, “The Islamic State and the New Tribalism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 5 (2015): 926-969, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2015.1094306.

25 Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2016).

26 Lina Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy: Lasting and Expanding,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 2015, accessed October 11, 2017, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/islamic_state_strategy.pdf.

in rural areas against the people of urban areas”. He also considers that IS’s fanatic version of Salafism facilitated the representation and simplification of the conflict in some places, leading many groups to unite in order to take control of their fate after decades of oppression under the Baath party rule and leadership.²⁷

The researcher Carl Wege presents a climate-related theory to explain the control exerted by IS over eastern Syria and western Iraq. He believes that a major breakthrough occurred in Syria because of an unprecedented drought in 2007. Moreover, the untimely agricultural policies, which led to the displacement of millions of farmers – especially from the eastern regions of Syria such as Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Hasaka – who migrated to towns and cities all over Syria in search of work. This movement drove approximately two to three million people of a population of 24 million into extreme poverty. The regime’s policy encouraged the cultivation and export of cotton to world markets, despite the fact that this is a cultivation that consumes large quantities of irrigation water. This led to a 60% decrease in the levels of water in Syrian artesian wells. This, according to Wege, explains how climate change has disproportionately affected eastern regions. He completes his theory by trying to prove that the protests began in the countryside of the Syrian cities (Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, Deraa and others) and then moved to the city, which made the city of Deir ez-Zor revolt against the regime.²⁸ It is worth mentioning the policy of incentives and sanctions adopted by IS in dealing with the Syrian tribes by resorting to tribal ties (incentives) at times, and to the jihadi authority at others (sanctions), especially behind closed doors.²⁹ Abu Abdullah Al-Shammari, a Saudi leader from the Shammar tribe in IS, who was appointed head of the “Tribes’ Office” in Raqqa at the end of 2014, is one of the most prominent examples of this policy, who was put in charge of the reconciliations and deals with tribes in eastern Syria. He has in fact a contradictory behavior: sometimes, he would emphasize his tribal belonging, while he would show a tough and “brutal” jihadist personality, typical of a leader in a cross-regional jihadist organization. Thanks to this method, he has succeeded in arranging many reconciliations and deals.

The “jihadist” behavior or personality of IS leaders is demonstrated in particular through their political rhetoric which seeks to reprimand Syrian tribes that

receive any form of external support. In fact, they describe them as Sahawat, or awakening movements, in reference to the US support of Iraqi tribes in 2007. Tribes are sometimes accused of dealing with “the Crusaders”, with the latter being a reference to foreign powers.

Looking at the permanent scolding policy adopted by Al-Shammari when describing the opponents as Sahawat, IS appears to be apprehensive about the replication of the experience in Syria. Despite the fact that there were no signs at the time that the U.S. were intending on repeating their Iraqi experience in the neighboring country, such apprehension remained. This reflects, however, the deep effects left by the Iraqi Sahawat experiences in defeating Al-Qaeda and the “Islamic State in Iraq” on the organization’s leadership and illustrates the lack of trust between IS and Syrian tribes. This fear of a potential repetition of the Sahawat experience led IS, after having gained the control of the region, to gradually seek to strengthen the role of tribal *sheikhs* and promote tribalism in the areas under its control, because it saw in tribal ties a means to influence tribes’ members and serve its mobilization policy.

Thus, after IS took control of eastern Syria in 2015, it opened the doors of reconciliation and started dealing again with the traditional tribal *sheikhs* who belonged to well-known families. These were treated as local IS leaders and tribal leaders at the same time, while maintaining good and friendly relations with the new IS leaders.

IS tried to imitate the Baath Party by infiltrating tribes. However, both were unable to challenge their traditional heritage and authority. The tribal structure, hence, remained in place, albeit weaker. However, intervention in the tribes’ structure, whether by creating new leaderships or giving influence to some tribal leaders or groups within the tribe itself or to certain tribes over others, has led to divisions between the *sheikh* and his family, within the *sheikh’s* family and its partisans, or between the traditional *sheikh’s* partisans and the external force trying to infiltrate the tribe.³⁰ Apart from these two converging experiences, the Democratic Union Party’s (PYD) strategy stood out as remarkable. This strategy was set forth by the “Qandilians”, the leaders of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), who are holed up in the Qandil Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Qandilians had completely new approach to dealing with the tribes that was contrary to the strategy of the regime and IS. While IS opted to deal with the tribes as a “fait accompli” and to work with them from within, the Qandilians sought to destroy the existing structure and create a new reality by mobilizing people through

27 Gareth Mathews-John, “The Conflicted Geography of ISIS,” *Rebel News*, 2015, accessed September 11, 2017, <https://rebelnews.com/garethjohn/the-conflicted-geography-of-isis/>.

28 Carl Wege, “Urban and Rural Militia Organization in Syria’s Less Governed Spaces,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6 (2015): 35-61.

29 Khaddour, op. cit.

30 Khaddour, op. cit.

a bottom-up strategy and appointing new leaders on local bases – only sometimes from tribal backgrounds – while respecting the basic principle of naming leaders who do not descend from traditional families.

In fact, the Qandilians adopted a completely different “bottom-up” approach by empowering new leaders and by dealing with unknown members of the tribes. The Qandilians constantly and deliberately ignored traditional leaders and big families of tribal leadership, which is the PKK’s policy since the 1980’s. Following their experience in the Kurdistan region, they applied the same approach in the Syrian *Jazeera*, specifically in the Al-Hasaka governorate. This policy has succeeded to some extent in attracting new tribe members, but based on two approaches: locality and concerns about the rise of new forces.

The social structure of a tribe generally consists of a *sheikh*, a locality and external forces such as the Assad regime or IS. Under the authority of the *sheikh* and the locality, the Assad regime and IS recruited tribes’ members to serve their interests within the tribes’ internal structures.³¹

As a result, when one examines the relationship between jihadist movements and tribes, one must differentiate between the actions of these organizations, such as “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” and IS when they were fighting the central authority and their actions when they aspired to become a state. When these organizations initiated their state-building project (the Caliphate), they took a pragmatic approach with the existing actors they wanted to control, because they needed to create a legitimacy of sorts. For that reason, they tried to retract their “puritan discourse” in favor of reconciliation and compromise, as long as their authority and sovereignty were recognized. This made the tribal factor a source of confusion for the “Islamic State” in its attempt to reconcile the authority’s relations and power relations with the compromises it sometimes had to make.³²

Tribes and Jihadism in Iraq

Tribes in the Iraqi society

Since the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the Ottoman reforms, which included administrative divisions (*wilayas*) and the granting of titles to governors of provinces (*Pasha*), the governing authority has been in charge of determining not only geographic relations with the tribe, but also internal relations. This development has made the state an essential actor in determining the tribe through its legislative capacity to define the tribe’s

31 Khaddour, op. cit.

32 Harith Qarawi, “Tribes, Jihad and State in Iraq: Rents Seeking and Dynamics of Sectarianization” (Presentation, roundtable Tribes in Jihadi Lands, The Case of Syria and Beyond, Beirut, Lebanon, March 12, 2018)

scope of authority and to endorse its representative in the negotiation process with the state. As an example, the Ottoman Empire allowed Al-Sadoun to lead the “tribal union” of the region and stopped recognizing the Shammar tribe as head of this union because the latter refused to deal with the new organizations that the state had approved at the time.³³ The state, through the introduction of the land ownership and land use systems (the so-called *tabo* and *bazna* systems), has been able to impose a kind of new system and relationship with the market on tribes. Thus, the Ottoman Empire’s policy, its land ownership laws, and the Empire’s accession to the world market changed the economic relations within the tribes, transforming some *sheikhs* into landowners, and dismantling and weakening the equality within the tribe.

On the political level, the relationship between the national post-colonial state and the tribes in Iraq can be divided into four phases:

The first phase is the founding phase (from 1920 to 1958), when the monarchy was still weak compared to the power of other non-state entities, most notably tribal entities. In this phase, the monarchy had to resort to entering into inclusive settlements and alliances with tribal leaders. Short of being able to dominate and weaken the tribes, it opted to play an influential role on the balance between tribes. Therefore, the state tried to adapt to them, and tribal *sheikhs*, at the time, became allies of the modern state.

The second phase is the republican phase, characterized by “revolutionary modernization” which produced a new political elite that dominated the state and adopted a “progressive” speech and vision that sought to weaken tribal identities by favoring more abstract identities such as the nation.

The third phase is the late stage of Saddam Hussein’s regime (1991-2003), during which the regime, due to successive wars, decline of state power, economic sanctions and decrease in oil rent, began to change

its policy towards the tribes. It delegated local security authority to some of them in exchange for prestige, money, weapons and turning a blind eye to smuggling activities (especially across the Iraqi, Syrian and Jordanian borders).

The fourth and final phase covers the period after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of the Sahawat. Some of these movements initiated contacts with international forces and armies, especially with the Americans (from 2004 until today), while others, voluntarily or reluctantly engaged with cross-locality jihadist movements (e.g., Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in

33 Ibid.

2006), or jihadist movements with radical sectarian projects (such as IS).

The change in the relationship between the Iraqi regime and tribes in the 1990s

The international blockade and sanctions period during the 1990s that followed Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was the turning point that led the regime to change its policy towards the tribes. The punishing sanctions weakened the regime and obliged it to support many tribes, especially Sunni tribes who aimed at strengthening their influence in return for political loyalty and security.

Besides coaxing many tribes, the Iraqi regime adopted in the 1990s a policy of retribalization, which produced a new role for the tribes, namely security control. Despite its apparent weakness, the state also intervened in the structure of inter-tribal relations, even “creating” modern tribes and *sheikhs* (but with a traditional appearance), who owed their existence and influence to the regime. The regime rewarded the tribes that supported it through a so-called “rentier baskets system”, the Bu Alwan tribe being one of most powerful examples. This tribe enjoys significant government support following the position of its *sheikhs* and some of its partisans in the uprising that took place in Shia and Kurdish regions against Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s. The state rewarded loyalist tribes by increasing their security and social control functions, in addition to granting them funds and weapons to guarantee this much-needed loyalty towards the state. Nevertheless, the state still played a key role in determining the tribes’ scope of authority and functions.³⁴

The disintegration of political and social power systems in the Middle East in recent years, particularly in Iraq and Syria, has led to the rise of intra-state actors and new phenomena in terms of identity reproduction. The relationship between jihadist movements and tribes in Iraq can hence be approached from this standpoint.³⁵

The process of building a modern state has been proportionately associated by scholars with the disintegration of tribes in their traditional form. One of the key elements is the role of the modern state as a major external actor in determining the nature of tribes and their relations with the central authority and with other tribes. Here are, therefore, four elements to be highlighted in the Iraqi case:

First, how the central state started playing an influential role on tribal balances and intra-tribal relations.³⁶

Second, how the decline of authority and disintegration of the central state after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq led to the emergence of new actors, such as Shia and Sunni jihadist movements which developed new ways of dealing and managing relations with tribes.

Third, a comparison between the Syrian and Iraqi cases shows that in spite of many similarities, there are major differences between the two cases, the most important of which is rent in the case of Iraq. In fact, as Iraq became an oil-producing country, its rents were concentrated in the hands of the central authority, creating “rentier tribalism” i.e., competition between and within tribes to obtain state rents. This cemented the state’s position as an essential actor in shaping social relations.

Fourth, the accelerated process of “confessionalization” and “sectarianization of identities” in Iraq after 2003 in particular, and, thus, the emergence of confessional identities imposed on tribes or on those who believe that they are tribal actors.³⁷

Tribes’ transformations after Saddam Hussein: the confessional identity

The post-2003 period saw the disintegration of the Iraqi state and consequently a decline in its ability to determine and shape the role of tribes. This decline took a sharp turn in the first four years following the fall of the regime in 2003.³⁸ At this stage, other non-state actors emerged trying to crowd out or share the sovereign functions of the state, especially the authority to practice legitimate violence. Jihadist groups - Sunni and Shia - were among the most prominent non-state actors at this stage.³⁹ Roles of local tribes varied between compensatory roles in the absence of state authority in some areas, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas, and between limited roles in the more urban areas.

Iraq has been through three stages since 2003:

The first, between 2003 and 2005, was characterized by the presence of jihadist movements of a local Iraqi nature.

The second, between 2005 and 2009, when the Iraqi and regional facet of Al-Qaeda appeared (Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and Abu Ayyub Al-Masri).⁴⁰ The third, between 2009 and 2010, witnessed the emergence of the so-called community-based local cultural expression. During this phase, a social acceptance of fighting alongside jihadi organizations grew. The latter began for their part to acknowledge the existence of tribes in Iraq and the necessity of dealing with them.⁴¹

34 Ibid

35 Ibid

36 Hosham Dawod and Faleh A. Jabar, *Tribes and power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2003).

37 Qarawi, op. cit.

38 Hosham Dawod, *La constante « tribu », variations arabomusulmanes* (Paris: Demopolis, 2013).

39 Qarawi, op. cit.

40 Dawod, op. cit.

41 Dawod, op. cit.

Mutual influence between jihadi organizations and internal tribes' structure

When examining the relationship between jihadist groups in Iraq and tribal military factions, there is a need to distinguish between jihadist groups in which kinship played a secondary and marginal role, and groups formed because of kinship relations. The role of kinship and the importance of tribes for jihadi organizations have been linked to the local or global scope of these organizations. The more local the organization, the greater its dependence on the local social structures, namely tribes and their connections with marginal and peripheral urban dwellers. The more cross-border the organization, the less its reliance on tribes as key partners in determining the organization's policy and options.

The "1920 Revolution Brigades", among the most prominent local jihadi organizations that fought against the Americans in Iraq, largely resembled the Zobaa tribe and were even named after a national and tribal symbol *Sheikh* Dar Zobaa, who played a major role in the 1920 revolution against the British. These brigades merged the tribal dimension with the jihadi and national identity dimensions, but did not last long due to the strength and dynamism of jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda, IS and others that did not position themselves in specific local areas, and succeeded in adopting a cross-national discourse, thus attracting more followers.

In the Shia sphere on the other hand, the "Mahdi Army" emerged and was located within a specific socio-geographical area, allowing the influence of tribal kinship relationships; but its experience differed from that of the Sunni "1920 Revolution Brigades". Despite the support from the majority of tribes such as Albu Muhammed, Aswael, Ezirdj, Bani Ram, Sudan, Al-Budraj and Fartous (all southern Shia tribes), the "Mahdi Army" could not incorporate the tribal dimension, since the supportive tribes had migrated from Amara district since middle of the last century due to modernization.

Since then, their tribal *sheikhs* have turned into landowners. Therefore, their emigration was not a migration of tribes to a specific area, as it used to happen in the old Bedouin migrations. They were displaced from their regions and forced to find a new location. Once they resettled, they started the process of reproducing the tribe. These tribes were never able to merge into the modern urban space. They were now living in a "post-tribal" situation, which is neither tribal, nor urban, but rather a fluid situation. These developments played a role in the formation of the Mahdi Army, which acted as a container that accommodated these tribes mainly because of its composition as a jihadist movement.

Syria's "Ahrar Al-Sham" movement is a similar case, in

that most of its fighters come from southern tribes (in Syria), and the economic dimension played a key role in the movement's recruitment.

In addition to the Mahdi Army, the Iraqi "Hezbollah" brigades, one of the most prominent Shia ideological organizations, is a model of a cross-border Shia organization following its embrace of the cross-national Shia jihadist ideology, in which kinship plays a minor role. This organization is not limited to a single geographic space or social framework and draws its strength from foreign international support, namely Iran.

The dual identity crisis: sectarian dynamics and tribal dynamics

The US initially did not care about tribes in 2003, considering them weak, and thinking that the basic dynamic in Iraq was sectarian. This was related to the culturalist bias of the American decision-makers, who simplified the view of the situation and the conflict: Sunnis ruled Iraq and mistreated the Shiites, and since Shiites form the majority in Iraq, we must withdraw power from the Sunnis and hand it over to Shiites.⁴² In fact, Iraq witnessed the emergence of identities competing with the tribal structure, and underwent a process of Islamization and sectarianization that accelerated after 2003 for two reasons:

First, the Sunni-Shia jihadist violence emboldened these identities and demarcated sectarian borders.

Second, the representation paradigm of the new political order – which viewed sects as sociopolitical groups that must be represented within the regime – can be defined as the "Lebanonization of Iraq".

As a result, tribal members were presented with a dual identity: The tribal identity must also pass through the "filter" of sectarian identity.

Many of the tribes were thereafter obliged to become more sectarian in order to align with the nature of the sectarian identity conflict on the one hand, and the new representation mechanisms, on the other. Integration into the sect as a wider space led to further weakening of tribes and their distinct identity, reflecting a social and cultural fluidity, due to the decline of tribes in favor of sects. This process of integration of tribes into the sect's wider space is still ongoing, especially in the Sunni case with the absence of an independent religious authority that can at least reflect the will of the community and its leadership as a whole. This provided new Sunni jihadist groups an opportunity to present themselves as an alternative to the vacuum, by using a physical and symbolic violence to assert their control.⁴³

42 Dawod, op. cit.

43 Qarawi, op. cit.

Tribes’ insurgency against Maliki’s rule intensified, especially by the tribesmen who were connected to the former regime of Saddam Hussein. These fighters were allowed to control their areas, benefitting economically from cross-border smuggling.

Since the end of the Ottoman period and the reign of the monarchy, large tribes that were often cross-border tended to preserve their interests by entering into alliances with an external force such as the central state. The Shammar tribe is a good example of that. On the other hand, members of small tribes relied on joining the state’s military and security institutions to earn a living. These tribes that are smaller and more prone to *Asabiyyah* (tribal solidarity), and whose members lost their sources of income, were in the vanguard of the confrontation with the new authority in Iraq after 2003. The Abu Richa tribe was the most prominent example of tribes leading the confrontation against the Americans first and then against the jihadists with the Sahawat.⁴⁴

The interaction between tribes and jihadi movements

The distribution of oil revenues by Iraq’s central authority played a direct and indirect role in shaping the tribes’ positions towards the central state and the jihadist groups alike. This factor put an end to the tribes’ traditional function as independent socio-economic actors, which, combined with the decline in the role of land ownership and agricultural production, redefined the socio-economic power of the tribes. Thus, access to state-distributed rents became crucial, not only to determining the balances between tribes and the position of a certain tribe towards other tribes or towards external forces (the state or jihad for example), but also to the internal power relations between members and houses of the tribe itself.

Hence, after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, some tribes were somewhat open to the presence of jihadists in the context of battling the new socio-political system, given the jihadist groups radical opposition to the government in Iraq. In this context, the tribes of Bou Hamdoun, Tayy, Bou Matiout, Khatuniyoun, and Hadidiyoun, who benefited from the rents of Saddam Hussein’s regime that allocated financial shares to tribes for them to strengthen their tribal networks, became a source of support for the rebellion against the new regime after 2003. In contrast, there were many tribes that clashed with the jihadists at an early stage, even though they had adopted a reconciliatory approach with the new regime, such as the Jaghayfah, Abu Nimr, Bou Assaf, Jur and others. These tribes had endured the harshness of the former regime that

favoured the *sheikhs* it had “created” at the expense of traditional *sheikhs*.

However, this could not stop the process of integrating tribes into the sect. The further weakening of the tribe was then accelerated by the emergence of Sunni jihadi groups, as sectarian policies increased against Sunnis, prompting them to hang on to tribalism as a safety and survival net in rural areas. This made tribes more powerful to their members.

In view of their radical religious ideology, “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” and “the Islamic State in Iraq” with Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, believed that political affairs must be fully administered by Islamic Shura Councils and that allegiance to any other political or social system is against Sharia. This weakened tribes even further, since any allegiance to a tribe would be incompatible with obeying a religious authority. Zarqawi granted himself the right to condemn and execute anyone found to be a “traitor”; reasons included participating in the new political process, dealing with US forces, or allowing tribal ties to supersede one’s commitment to jihad.

The conflict with Iraqi Islamists emerged when the disagreement about the Islamic identity became radical. As a result, local and tribal mobilization followed. Zarqawi and the jihadists believed that political participation and tribal allegiance contradict the religious principles of Islam. Nonetheless, Iraqi Islamists demonstrated their awareness of local sensitivity and did not attack tribal ties as such, since they are intrinsically linked to the identity of many Sunni Arabs, especially after 2003 when tribal loyalties turned into a basic social safety net because of the chaos.

In response to Zarqawi’s influence and excessive use of force, the movement led by Sunni Arab tribes against Zarqawi, especially in the west of the country, already resorted to “shadow wars” two years before the United States supported the Sahawat in 2007.

The Sunni tribes realized that the Zarqawi-imposed boycott of the 2005 elections was a mistake since it led to the formation of a government of pro-Iranian Shiites and Kurds. Indeed, the elected government, that was in fact internationally recognized, issued a new constitution and formed a new Iraqi army, excluding these tribes from being involved in the decision-making process. Zarqawi’s threats and assassinations prevented tribal members from participating in the elections. The shadow wars were initiated by the tribes’ rebels to avenge the assassinations carried out by Al-Qaeda and IS against Sunni leaders who participated in the elections or individuals who joined the newly formed Iraqi army. These shadow wars also aimed at regaining control of the insurgency against Americans from the radicals.

The main leaders of this early awakening movement (the Sahwa) belonged to the tribes of Abu Mahal in Qa'im and Abu Nimr in Hayth (violently targeted later on by IS), Abu Jaghayfah in Haditha, Abu Richa, Abu Thiab, Abu Assaf, Abu Alwan and Abu Fahd in Ramadi and Abu Issa in Falluja. Many of these tribal leaders later formed the backbone of the Anbar Awakening, announced in September 2006. These rival tribal groups created vertical allegiances at different levels of the same tribe and among different tribes, each pledging allegiance to different tribal leaders with conflicting positions on the insurgency against the Americans and Zarqawi. These group leaders received support from Sunni figures who opposed both the Americans and Al-Qaeda, becoming targets of the jihadist organization.

Since 2004 - 2005, hundreds of jihadis started arriving in Iraq from abroad, and as a result, IS organization became more complex and sophisticated. Since the new regime was politically Shiite, the ensuing jihadism that came to Iraq was not cross-confessional and cross-locality but rather sectarian, hence the difference between these movements and many other jihadist movements in various parts of the Islamic world. Thus, the Iraqi situation was no longer merely limited to the local factor, but rather transformed into a Weberian-like "ideal type" (named after Max Weber), although the mobilization remained local.

Jihadi groups in Iraq appealed to tribes by presenting an Islamic ideology under a local Sunni cover, and by offering administrative support in western Iraq in particular, where the majority of the population is Sunni. Al-Qaeda and IS were the most prominent of these groups, some of whose leaders derived their experience from Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Until 2007, foreign figures played a key role in leading the jihad in Iraq, until the emergence of Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi, who became the first Iraqi leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Despite the obvious Iraqi domination of the organization's political leadership, Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi's "Minister of Defense" happened to be Egyptian (Abu Ayyub Al-Masri), strengthening the concept of a jihadist movement transcending local and tribal identities.

This influenced the internal structure of tribes, with the Islamic bonds looking stronger than the tribal bonds, which allowed the young generation in tribes that pledged allegiance or were allied to the "Islamic State" to play a more important role, becoming cornerstones in the armed groups and even more powerful within tribes than traditional *sheikhs*. This eventually created an intergenerational conflict within the tribes. Therefore, the infiltration of tribes by IS and the approach it

adopted that collided with their traditional structure created a conflict between tribes and the imported jihadism.⁴⁶

Sectarianization of the Iraqi conflict

The sectarian dimension played a role in dismantling the tribal Sahawat movements after 2011, as it experienced the rise of a competing and more comprehensive force in the form of IS. Abandoning the Sahawat movements and their fighters through Maliki's crackdown as a prelude to getting them out of the security forces and the police, and arresting some of them, made the Sunni Arab tribes lose confidence in continuing to engage in the political process. With the withdrawal of U.S. forces under President Barack Obama, the government of Nuri Al-Maliki continued to oppress Sunni leaders and issue arrest warrants against many of their local figures. Examples of leaders who received arrest warrants include Tariq Al-Hashimi, served as the general secretary of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) until May 2009, Atheel Al-Nujaifi, governor of Nineveh Province from April 2009 until May 2015, Rafah Al-Issawi, former Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Ahmed Al-Alwani, former member of parliament. On the other hand, this was accompanied by pressure from jihadist groups, specifically IS, which wanted revenge over the Sahawat movements which were trying to weaken them. IS thus launched a campaign of assassinations against leaders and members of the Sahawat movements, and between 2009 and 2013, the numbers of fighters that were assassinated by IS reached 1,345.

The Sahawat movements collapsed due to pressure from both the government as well as the jihadists. Nuri Al-Maliki and the militias supporting his government's policies pursued operations of sectarianization due to their doubts of the Sahawat movements' loyalty. The vacuum that was left following the abandonment of the Sahawat movements was this time filled by IS.⁴⁷

Iraqi tribes had two options in 2014, either support Maliki and Iran against IS terrorism, at the risk of tightening Iran's grip on the country and increasing the marginalization of Sunnis and tribes, or fight alongside IS, which was forcibly the choice of weak tribes. Many Sunni Arab groups affected by Nuri Al-Maliki's policies first looked positively at IS's progress in Iraq in June 2014, all the more so as IS did within an alliance of other local Sunni forces that it had subjugated faster than Al-Qaeda years ago. In 2014, IS endeavored to strengthen its investment in intergenerational relations within each tribe by promising young generations that it would replace the traditional *sheikhs* in the territories soon

45 Dawod, op. cit.

46 Dawod, op. cit.

47 Qarawi, op. cit.

to be controlled by IS.⁴⁸ This was IS’s way of attracting the youth in tribes to join and fight in its ranks. This led to a counter-mobilization and to the Iraqi government sending thousands of Shia combatants to fight IS in Sunni areas. Moreover, the Iraqi government used these intergenerational tribal divisions as a pretext to its refusal to supply tribes with weapons to fight IS, pretending that there is a risk that these weapons would fall into the hands of jihadist groups.

Many of these tribal leaders allied with IS indicated that their alliance with the jihadists was circumstantial and would end when the dispute with Baghdad was resolved; they claimed that as soon as they get rid of Baghdad’s oppression, they will devote themselves to fighting IS. This did not happen simply because IS was the strongest party in this alliance.

Conclusion

Despite having different forms and specificities, the interaction between tribes and jihad in Iraq was contrasted with the tribes and jihadi situation in Syria. Tribal *Asabiyyah* in Iraq and Syria is no longer the main large-scale source of mobilization and solidarity. Of course, *Asabiyyah* can be a source of mobilization in local conflicts, whereas for jihadist movements it represents the intellectual vessel to accommodate feelings of rejection and direct them towards a specific ideological path that transcends tribes and their traditional structures.

Therefore, the level of integration of a jihadist group with a tribe depends on the local or global character of the jihadist group.⁴⁹ After changing their way of managing economic resources, the tribes now have to derive their influence from the alliance with “external forces” on which they depend to get political, security and financial benefits. This relationship with “external forces”, whether jihadist organizations or central states, shows that tribes in Iraq and Syria have lost their self-leadership role.

While the specific location of the tribes affects the behavior of their members as well as the structure and relationships within and between tribes, competition between and within tribes over rents is the most effective source of strengthening one party at the expense of another, whether in fighting other tribes or in supporting and creating new leaderships. Nowadays, one can distinguish between tribes that receive state rents and tribes seeking to seize these rents from external forces, whether the state, jihadist organizations or even globalized firms. Tribes in Iraq always tend to support the “strong horse”. An example of that are some tribes in Basra, in southern Iraq, which threaten oil companies with violence unless they receive financial royalties or jobs for tribal members in these companies.

Although tribes in Iraq seemed more politically effective, clearly manifested in their initiative to fight Al-Qaeda before any American support or emergence of the Sahawat movements, the relationship of Syrian and Iraqi tribes with the jihadi organizations differed considerably from that of Afghan and Pakistani tribes. Tribes in Syria and Iraq allied with IS and Nusra Front in certain stages and fought them in other stages when tribal legitimacy clashed and collided with jihadist legitimacy.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, a phenomenon of “Talibanization” occurred. The constructivism theory provides an explanation of how jihadist movements

48 Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2016).

49 Qarawi, op. cit.

such as the armed Taliban movement managed to create safe havens in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan.⁵⁰

The researchers Gunaratna and Nielsen discuss the “Talibanization” in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, whose topography and socio-political landscape do not suggest their receptivity to groups with different socio-cultural practices. Nevertheless, a gradual “Talibanization” facilitated not only the acceptance of external elements but also their integration. Amitav Acharya explains that in the conflict between globalized and local values, instead of replacing local values with globalized ones, the latter are adapted to the former.

However, most of the Al-Qaeda fighters shared a similar experience with the tribes when fighting the Soviets during the 1980s. Most of the fighters belonged to the Pashtuns, who mainly live in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which facilitated the integration process. Although sharing the same ethnic background, the Pashtuns played a role in determining the behavior of anti-American groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The tribal affiliation among fighters in jihadist organizations, whether Al-Qaeda, Taliban or even “the Haqqani network” remained an essential factor, considering how traditional Pashtun *sheikhs* remained sufficiently influential to affect the choices of the majority of young tribesmen involved in these jihadi organizations.

Indeed, a closer look at the depth of the conflict between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar shows the magnitude of the tribal conflict that Al-Qaeda has exploited between the two largest Pashtun tribes. It supported, in fact, the Ghilzai tribe (Mullah Omar’s tribe) against the Durrani tribe (of which Karzai is a descendant), which had controlled the fertile lands in central Afghanistan and from which almost all the leaders of the country descend.

One of the lessons learnt from the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Iraq by the Sahawat movements in 2007 and 2008 is that jihadist groups should be engaging with tribes, getting closer to them and trying to win their allegiance by showing that they are an integral part of them, rather than subjecting these tribes by force. IS, which did not learn this lesson in Syria, adopted mainly a policy of subjugation with significant force and brutality.

Thus, both Al-Qaeda and IS learned contradicting

lessons from Al-Qaeda’s defeat in Iraq at the hands of the Sahawat movements.

In fact, Al-Qaeda concluded it had to be more patient in dealing with the local population while interfering less in their affairs and that imposing Sharia must be compatible with the society’s nature, otherwise, the society will reject religion and the Mujahideen. IS, on the other hand, considered that the collapse of Al-Qaeda in Iraq was caused by its failure to suppress the opposition, and thus, contrary to Al-Qaeda, IS considered that tribes to be a potential threat that might undermine its authority.

50 The theory of constructivism, which is outside mainstream IR theoretical debates, argues that international relations depend not only on material factors, but are shaped by subjective and inter-subjective factors like culture, identity, and norms.

PART II: CASE STUDY OF DEIR EZ-ZOR

Tribes in Deir ez-Zor: Geographic Distribution, Sheikdom and Tribal Leadership

Geographical and local context

Since 2011, various intrastate identities (sectarian, ethnic and tribal) have emerged as violence escalated during the war between the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and the opposition. Many tribal tendencies protruded in the areas where tribes are spread, especially in Deir ez-Zor, where the successive events and conflicts in the governorate revealed that tribes are still one of the basic social dynamics and norms in eastern Syria.

The Deir ez-Zor governorate is located on the borders of eastern Syria and spans an area of approximately 33,000 km². The Euphrates River that runs through the governorate divides it into two parts; one to the south that extends to the Syrian Desert Badiyat As-Sham colloquially called *Shamiyyah*, and one to the north linked to the Syrian peninsula called “the island”

(*Jazeera*). The majority of the population lives on the banks of the Euphrates and Khabur rivers, where fertile agricultural lands are located. Around 1.69 million people live in Deir ez-Zor governorate which is divided into three administrative regions: Deir ez-Zor, Mayadin and Bu Kamal. It is also divided into 14 sub-districts (*nahiya*), 25 towns, 40 municipalities, and 76 villages.

There are several major rural sedentary tribes in Deir ez-Zor, such as the Ageidat, Baggara and Bousaraya; and secondary tribes such as the Bakaan, Obeid, Jhaish, Bu Hardan, Marasma and Jaghayfah. Moreover; there are tribes that branch out of Bedouin tribes such as the Bu Layl (a small branch of the Shammar tribe in Al-Hasakah); the Dulaim (a branch of the Dulaim tribe in Iraq); and the Fedaan (affiliated to the Aneza tribe in eastern rural Homs and Hama).

A number of tribes is also located in the governorate’s three main cities such as the Kharshan, Zafir, Jweihseh and Maamra tribes in Deir ez-Zor; Rawiyeen and Aniyyen in Bu Kamal; and Kalaayeen in Mayadin. These tribes that shared tribal bonds later developed family-like dynamics.

The local community in the Deir ez-Zor governorate is traditionally tribal. In fact, tribes began to settle on the

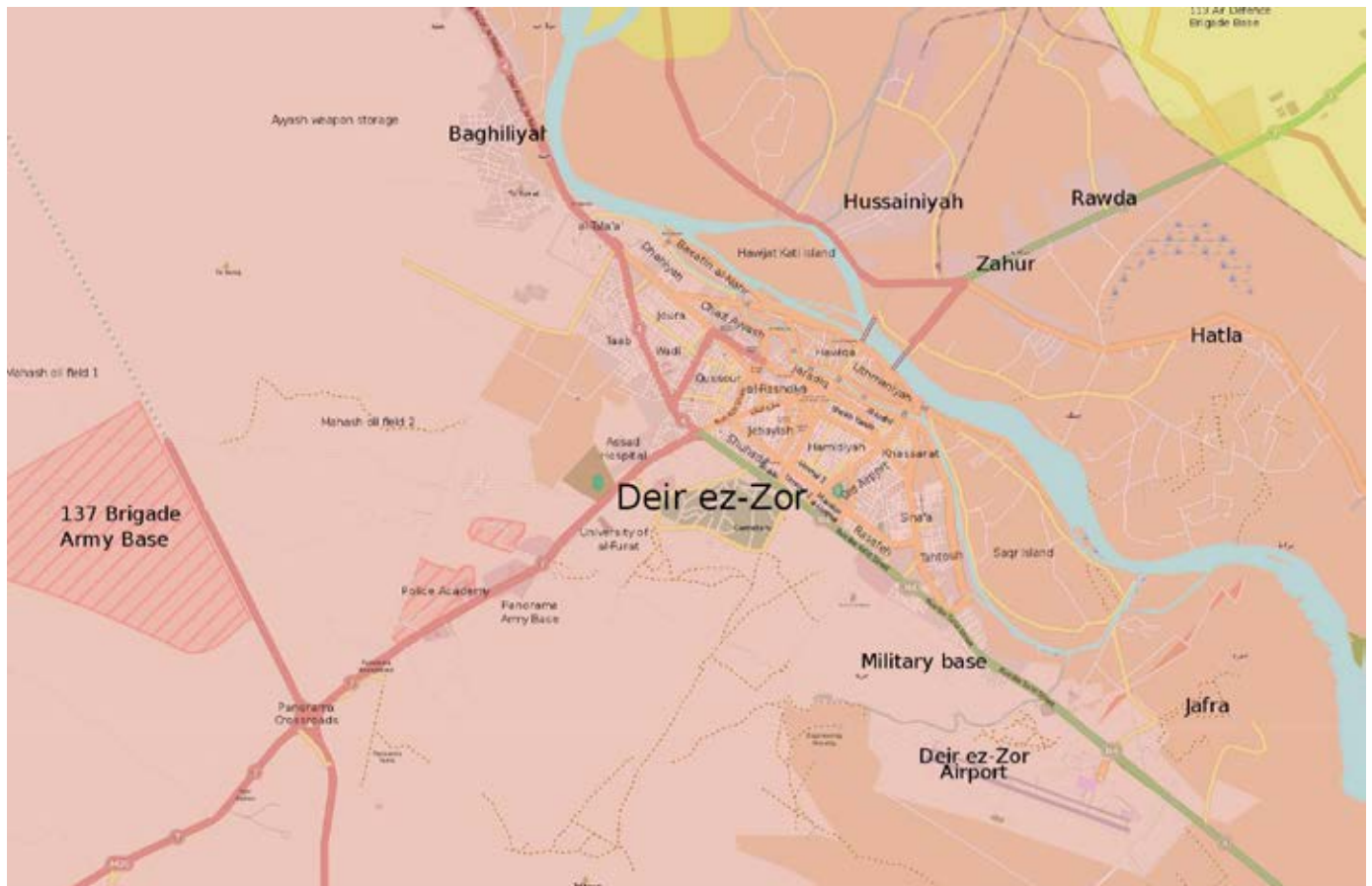


Figure 2: A Map showing the Deir ez-Zor governorate

riverbanks during the second Ottoman Tanzimat period in 1856 which sought to make conflicting tribes and clans settle down and transform into stable agricultural communities. Tribes began to settle down gradually until the beginning of the French mandate after the end of World War I, and were distributed geographically on the banks of the Euphrates River as follows:

The Ageidat tribes: They spread geographically from the city of Deir ez-Zor to the Iraqi border in the east and Sour sub-district to the north on the banks of the Euphrates and Khabur rivers, known as the eastern line. They are divided into three large branches: the Bu Chmal, Bu Chamel and Zamil (Shaayat tribe), the largest of the Deir ez-Zor's tribes.

The Baggara tribes: they spread from the city of Deir ez-Zor to the administrative border of the Raqqa governorate to the West. They are divided into three main tribes: the Abed, Ubaidat and Bu Sultan.

The Bousaraya tribe: it spread from the city of Deir ez-Zor to the administrative border of the Raqqa governorate to the west on the southern bank of the Euphrates River.

Some tribal groups emerged from within these tribes and formed independent tribes. This was due to the increase in tribesmen's numbers and in their spread over a wide geographical area. The newly formed tribes had an independent leadership and merged with other tribes in those areas.

Tribal leadership and sheikhdoms in Deir ez-Zor

Tribal leaders in Deir ez-Zor

Most *sheikhdom* houses of Deir ez-Zor's tribes have been entrenched in the families ever since tribesmen settled on the Euphrates basin. This trend applies to both the traditional *sheikhdoms* and the houses that rose to prominence and developed into *sheikhdoms* after the settlement. This development dates back to the middle of the 19th century when the Ageidat tribe (Bu-Chmal, Bu-Chamel and Zamil/Shaaayat), which had kinship relations with tribes from other origins (Bousaraya) and with small tribal groups such as the Marasma, the Ubaid, the Bu Hardane and the Bu Layl, formed an alliance to repel the attacks of the nomads coming from the *Jazeera* and the *Badia*. This alliance was led by Hafl Al-Hafl of the Al-Thaher *fukhdh* from the Al-Bu Chamel tribe based on a consensus with the leaders and dignitaries of other tribes.

The tribes' settlement and widespread geographical distribution contributed to the decline of Jadaan Al-Hafl's authority, which he had inherited from his father Hafl. This decline was in favor of the rise of the authority of the tribal *sheikhs* that had formed an alliance. Each one of these *sheikhs* had made a plan that would guarantee

the interests of his respective tribe. However, this did not eradicate the symbolic status of *Sheikh* Jadaan Al-Hafl as *sheikh* of the *sheikhs* of the Ageidat. The Ottoman policies based on the allocation of resources and privileges played a leading role in ensuring the consecration and independence of tribal *sheikhs*. These *sheikhs* were competing among themselves for more gains which often led to fighting between the *fukhdhs* of the same tribe, prompting some weak tribes to ally among themselves to defend their interests from the attacks of stronger tribes. The alliance between Al-Bu Hasan, Al-Gu'ran and Al-Bu Rahmah is the most prominent example of tribal alliances that arose: in this case, to counter the attacks of their cousins from the Bu-Chamel tribe. The alliance is called "one-third" because the tribes forming this alliance together make up about one-third of the Bu Chamel tribe.

The sheikhdom house

The tribal *sheikhdom* is concentrated within a single family called "the *sheikhdom* house" whose male members inherit the leadership, with no specific inheritance hierarchy. This leads to intense competition within the *sheikhdom* house to win the tribe's leadership. In fact, the *sheikhdom* of the tribe or the *fukhdh* may move according to vertical or horizontal lines inside the *sheikhdom* house, this being related to considerations and balances within the family and personal characteristics of the individual himself such as financial capacity, links to the authority, and strength of character. However, all the members of the *sheikhdom* house are referred to as "Sheikh". Successive authorities in tribal regions have taken advantage of the competition for the tribe's leadership to consolidate their power and implement their policies through the allocation of resources and privileges to attract tribesmen.

The tribes' location and sheikhs

The tribes have a fluid internal structure that varies from one to another. The terms used in this paper are based on the respective tribes' reference to themselves; however, there are no set academic criteria to address this question yet.

There are various *fukhdhs* that are mentioned below, though, some are not. This is mainly due to the *fukhdhs'* demographical, social, and political weight. There is also a variation between leaderships within *fukhdhs*. Some *fukhdhs* have *sheikhs* while others do not.

The Ageidat tribes

Bu Chmal:

Among the tribes that branched out of the Bu Chmal were the Dmeem, Hassun and Bu Mreih tribes. The distribution and leadership of the tribes that were

located in the Bu Kamal area are as follows:

1. Al-Dmeem tribe: The tribe is located in the villages of Al-Abbas, Al-Salihiya and Al-Jalaa on the southern bank and Al-Bahra on the northern bank. The Al-Dmeem tribe is divided into several *fukhdhs*: Al-Hussein Al-Dmeem in Al-Jalaa and Al-Hasan Al-Dmeem (Al-Ajarjah) in Salihiya and Al-Alaywi Al-Dmeem (Al-Izhar) in Al-Bahra. The tribe’s sheikhs are from the Al-Jrah family of the Al-Hussein Al-Dmeem *fukhdh*.

The sheikhdom in this tribe was passed down vertically from Sheikh Kassar Al-Jarrah to his son Faris, and then to Abboud Faris Al-Jarrah who was succeeded by his son Naji Abboud Faris Al-Jarrah. After the latter’s death the tribe entered a state of polarization marked by dispute between his son Kamal Naji Abboud Faris Al-Jarrah and his brother Naif Abboud Al-Jarrah. This conflict was resolved thanks to Nawaf Abboud Al-Jarrah’s intervention in favor of his nephew Kamal. The former was a prominent member of the tribe and had held high positions in the state administrative, security and executive bodies during the regimes of Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad.

2. Al-Hassun tribe: The tribe is located in the villages of Al-Susah, Al-Baghuz, Al-Ghbrah, Al-Hasrat and Al-Suwayiyah on the southern bank of the Euphrates and in Al-Shaafah on the northern bank. The tribe is divided into several *fukhdhs*: Al-Ali Al-Hassun in Al-Ghbrah, Al-Muhammad Al-Hassun in Al-Susah and Al-Hammud Al-Hassun in Al-Hasrat. The Dandal family of the Al-Ali Al-Hassun *fukhdh* leads this tribe.

The sheikhdom in this tribe moved according to horizontal and vertical lines from Mushref Muhammad Al-Dandal to his nephew Daham Raja Muhammad Al-Dandal. Due to his strong character and position, as well as being his uncle’s right-hand man, Daham had a vast network of political and social relations and was widely respected and appreciated by the governorate’s other tribal sheikhs. He was also a member in the National Bloc of the Arab Socialist Baath Party. After Daham, the sheikhdom moved to his son Ayman Al-Dandal, despite the dissatisfaction of the latter’s uncle, Mojhem.

3. Al-Bu Mreih tribe: The tribe is located in the villages of Al-Sayyal (situated south of the river) and Al-Shaafah (situated north of the river). It is divided into the Al-Alaywi, Al-Khalil and Al-Iraqiya *fukhdhs*. The *sheikhdom* is concentrated in the Al-Harsa Al-Arab family. The Al-Bu Mreih tribe remained affiliated with the Al-Hassun *sheikhdom* until Ayman Al-Dandal became the tribe’s *sheikh*, but his power

was weakened by his uncle’s and his cousins’ rivalry to power. This is when the Al-Harsa family, one of Bu Mreih’s noble families, took over power and became an independent *sheikhdom*. The Al-Dandal family of the Al-Hassun tribe enjoys a remarkable social standing among the Al-Bu Chmal and in the region. This is due to the role *Sheikh* Mushref Al-Dandal and his nephew Daham Al-Dandal played during the Ottoman rule, the French mandate and after independence. After the decline of the role of the Al-Dandal family following the death of Daham and the emergence of Nawaf Al-Fares Al-Jarrah as a strongman of the Assad regime, a rivalry emerged between the Al-Dandal and Al-Jarrah families over the social status and leadership of the tribe’s *sheikhdom* in particular and the Bu Kamal region in general.

Bu Chamel

Generally known to be the largest branch of the Ageidat tribes in terms of number and geographical spread, it includes the tribes of Al-Showeit, Al-Bu Rahmah, Al-Bu Hassan, Al-Gur’an, Al-Thaher, Al-Bu Ezzeddin, and Al-Bkayyer. These tribes are distributed as follows:

1. Al-Showeit tribe: The tribe is mainly located in the villages of Sabikhan and Al-Kashmeh south of the river (*Shamiyah*) and Abu Hardub north of the river (*Al-Jazeera*), as well as to a lesser extent in the village of Dablan on the south bank and Gharibah in the north. It is divided into the Al-Hamdiya, Al-Mjaleeb and Al-Hamzat *fukhdhs*, with the Al-Jeijan Al-Wakaa family (which does not belong to any *fukhdhs*) in Sabikhan being considered Al-Showeit’s *sheikhdom* house.
2. Al-Bu Rahmah tribe: The tribe is located in the villages of Al-Jurthah Al-Sharqi and Al-Jurthah Al-Gharbi on the northern bank and the village of Al-Duwayr on the southern bank. It includes the Al-Adeelat, Al-Taween, Al-Za’abi and Al-Rahimah *fukhdhs*. The tribe’s *sheikhs* are from Al-Jabara family belonging to Al-Rahimah *fukhdh*.
3. Al-Bu Hassan tribe: The tribe is mainly located in the city of Al-Asharah south of the river and the villages of Suwaydan and Darnaj north of the river as well as to a lesser extent in Al-Duwayr south of the river. It is divided into the *fukhdhs* of Al-Shweit Al-Jaadan in Darnaj and Al-Mohammed Al-Jaadan, Khalid Al-Jaadan, Nasrallah Al-Jaadan, Thaher Al-Jaadan in Suwaydan and Al-Asharah and Al-Ahmad Al-Ali in Al-Duwayr. The family of Al-Najres belonging to the Nasrallah Al-Jaadan *fukhdh* is the *sheikhdom* house of the Al-Bu Hassan tribe. Al-Bu Hassan’s *sheikhdom* was passed down from Abdul Kareem Pasha Al-

Najres, who was the first in the region to receive the title of Pasha from the Ottoman authorities, to his brother Turki Bek Al-Najres, a graduate of the military academy in Astana (known to have trained notable tribal figures) and an officer in the Ottoman army.

It was then handed down to his son Ismail, who was succeeded by his cousin Faisal, who later handed it to his son Safuk Faisal Al-Najres. After the death of Faisal Al-Najres, disputes arose over the *sheikhdom* among Safuk and his cousins Kassar and Theeb Al-Najres.

4. Al-Gur'an tribe: The tribe is located in the town of Al-Quriyah on the southern bank and the villages of Al-Tayanah and Al-Shinan on the northern bank. It is divided into the *fukhdhs* of Al-Shinan in the village of Shinan, Al-Bu Awad and Al-Hassan Al-Aqraa in Al-Quriyah and the *fukhdh* of Al-Hamad Al-Mohammed in Al-Tayanah. The families of Al-Mnadi in Al-Tayanah and Al-Hajji and Al-Abd Al-Mohammad in Al-Quriyah – not issued from any *fukhdh* – are considered to be the dignitaries of the Al-Gur'an tribe.
5. Al-Thaher tribe: The locals refer to the Al-Thaher tribe as Bu-Chamel. This is because the *sheikhdom* house of the Bu-Chamel branch specifically, and Al-Ageidat tribes generally, are within the Al-Thaher tribe. The Al-Thaher tribe is mainly located in the villages of Dhiban, Al-Hawayij, Al-Shuhayl and Al-Muwaylih and to a lesser extent in the villages of Gharibah, Al-Huraiji, Tkehi, Al-Huraijiyah and Sour sub-district, all of which are located on the northern bank of the Euphrates River and the banks of the Khabur River. The Al-Thaher tribe includes the *fukhdhs* of Al-Moussa Al-Thaher in Dhiban, Al-Shahab al-Hamad, Al-Tlaa Al-Hamad, Al-Moussa Al-Hamad and Al-Saleh Al-Hamad in Al-Shuhayl, Al-Tkehi and Al-Huraijiyah. The tribe's *sheikhs* belong to the Al-Hafel family from the Al-Moussa Al-Thaher *fukhdh*. Throughout this study, the researchers refer to the Al-Thaher tribe by its commonly used name, Al-Bu Chamel. Al-Thaher's *sheikhdom* passed down from Hafel to his son Jadaan then to his son Abboud, who is considered one of the most prominent *sheikhs* of the dynasty because of his strong alliance with the Assad regime. In fact, the Syrian president Hafez Al Assad had allocated a permanent seat in the People's Council (the Syrian Parliament) to Abboud Al-Hafel and later to his son Khalil Abboud Al-Hafel. Under the latter's rule, competition was evident within the Al-Hafel family, with his brother Hammud Al-Hafel and his sons Mutshar and Munir standing against his cousins Jamil Al-Rashid Al-Hafel and Abdulaziz Al-Rashid Al-Hafel from the village of Al-Muwaylih. Khalil was

succeeded by his son Musaab, who took over the *sheikhdom's* leadership during a ceremony which was considered questionable by the *sheikhs* of the Bu Chamel tribes given that it was held in Qatar. Nevertheless, a large number of the members of the Al-Thaher tribe acknowledge his *sheikhdom*.

6. Al-Bu Ezzeddin tribe: The members of this tribe live in Al-Zir village to the north of the river. There is no traditional *sheikhdom* in this tribe that is affiliated to Al-Thaher leadership. Therefore, Al-Bu Ezzedin and Al-Thaher are two different tribes that form a small federation under one leadership, the Al-Thaher leadership. This explains the confusion, with some believing that the tribe is affiliated to the Al-Thaher tribe.
7. Al-Bkayyer tribe: This tribe is the largest of the Bu Chamel tribes in terms of number and spread. It is mainly located in Bsayra city in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor and in the villages of Khasham, Ruwayshid, Barihah, Tib Elfal, Al-Kassar, Al-Hilwe, Mashekh, Al-Hussein, Al-Sabha, Al-Hajna, Jadeed Ageidat, Al-Jasmi, Muayjil and Al-Namliyah, and to a lesser extent in al-Harijiya, al-Hariji, Dablan, Tkihi and Sour sub-district. These are all located on the northern bank of the Euphrates and the banks of the Khabur, as well as the village of Saalo on the southern bank. The Al-Bkayyer tribe is divided into three main *fukhdhs* which are the Al-Kbisa, Al-Faraj and Al-Khalaf. Its *sheikhdom* is concentrated in the Al-Hamadeh family belonging to the Al-Kbisa *fukhdh* in the town of Mashekh. Al-Bkayyer's *sheikhdom* passed down from Suleiman Al-Hamadeh to his son Daoud Al-Hamadeh, then to Daoud's son Abdulaziz. However, because of its lack of influence within the regime, this *sheikhdom* is neither considered to be well-grounded nor prominent. This situation weakened the *sheikhdom*, the continuity of which was dependent on its ability to maintain social relations, such as marriages, with the dignitaries in the tribe's *fukhdhs*.

The Bu-Chamel tribe is the mainstay of the Al-Ageidat tribe and includes two major leaderships in the Al-Hafel family from the Al-Thaher tribe and the Al-Najres family from the Al-Bu Hasan tribe. The rivalry between these two families and their alliance with successive authorities played a major role in promoting polarization within the tribe, which hindered the emergence of any other *sheikhdom* in the Bu Chamel tribe. However, the Al-Hafel family symbolically remained the *sheikhdom* house of all Al-Ageidat tribes.

Zamel (Shaayat)

This is a large tribe known locally as Shaayat. It is mainly located in the villages of Abu Hamam, Al-Kishkiyah and Gharanij on the northern bank of the Euphrates River. It includes the *fukhdhs* of Al-Khanfur in Abu Hamam, Al-Shahab Al-Zamil in Gharanij and Al-Aliyat in Al-Kishkiyah. Although it is a large tribe, it has neither a traditional *sheikhdom* nor any well-known dignitaries.

The Baggara tribes

The Al-Baggara tribe is the second largest tribe of Deir ez-Zor with the Al-Bashir family (from the Al-Abed tribe) being the *sheikhdom* house of all Al-Baggara tribes. The *sheikhdom* passed down from Assaad Al-Bashir to his nephew Ragheb Hammud Al-Bashir, then to the latter's son Nawaf Al-Ragheb Al-Bashir. Following Nawaf's rise to the leadership of the tribe, a rivalry over the tribal *sheikhdom* emerged between his brother Salih Ragheb Al-Bashir on the one hand and his cousins Jassem and Hajem Assaad Al-Bashir on the other. In addition, competition increased between members of the Al-Bashir family and the Al-Salman family (from the Ubaidat tribe's Al-Bu Masaa *fukhdh*) over the roles to be assumed inside state institutions. These disputes contributed to the weakening of the *sheikhdom* house and the tribes' dignitaries in general. They also made it easier for the regime of Hafez Al-Assad to rally the various competing members.

The *fukhdhs* of the Baggara tribe did not differentiate themselves as independent tribes. Ever since the Baggara tribe settled on the banks of the Euphrates, the *fukhdhs* have respected tribal hierarchy. The tribe is concentrated mainly on the northern bank of the Euphrates, west of the city of Deir ez-Zor with a modest presence in the east of the city. It is divided into three major tribes, namely:

Al-Abed

The Al-Abed tribe is located in the villages of Marat and Mazloun to the east on the northern bank and the villages of Muhaymidah, Al-Husayniyah, Al-Hssan, Shaqra and Al-Ji'aa. It is divided into several *fukhdhs* which are the Al-Bu Arab in Muhaymidah, Al-Khanjar in Al-Ji'aa, and Al-Abd Al-Jader, Al-Hamad Al-Abed, Al-Muslem Al-Abed and Al-Rashed. The *sheikhdom* of the Al-Abed and all the Baggara tribe belongs to the Al-Bashir family of the Al-Bu Arab *fukhdh*.

Al-Ubaidat

The Al-Ubaidat tribe is located in the villages of Al-Harmushiyah, Hamar Al-Ali, Zaghir Jazirah, Hawayij Bu Masaa and Al-Kasrah on the northern bank. It includes the Al-Bu Musaa, Al-Jassem, Al-Obeid, Al-Ali, Al-Hlamy and Al-Mnasrah *fukhdhs*. The *sheikhdom* of the Al-Ubaidat tribe is concentrated in the Al-Salman family which

belongs to the Al-Bu Musaa *fukhdh*. However, the Al-Jilat family – which belongs to Al-Jassem *fukhdh* – often competes with the former family for the *sheikhdom* of the Al-Ubaidat tribe.

Al-Bu Sultan

The Al-Bu Sultan tribe is located in the villages of Al-Dahlah, At-Tabiaa and Jadeed Baggara in the eastern countryside on the northern bank and Al-Saawah, Al-Kubar and Al-Shate' in the western countryside north of the river. It is divided into the *fukhdhs* of Al-Bu Rahmah in at-Tabiaa, Al-Bu Salih in Al-Kubar, Al-Mash'hur in Al-Saawah, Al-Bu Shams in Al-Shate' and Al-Abd Al-Karim in Jadeed Baggara. It is worth mentioning that there is no traditional *sheikhdom* in the Al-Bu Sultan tribe.

Al-Bousaraya tribe

The Al-Bousaraya tribe, which is split into three branches according to its geographic distribution, includes the *fukhdhs* of Al-Bu Muhammad in the villages of Buqrus Tahtani and Buqrus Fawqani in eastern rural Deir ez-Zor on the southern bank of the Euphrates River, Al-Bu Azzam in the village of Al-Shula southwest of Deir ez-Zor, Bu Shuaib in Al-Kharitiya, Al-Bu Thiab in Al-Shumaitiya, Al-Bu Matar in Al-Buwaytia, Al-Bu Hamza, Al-Bu Ezzeddin and Al-Assaf in Al-Masrab in the western countryside of Deir ez-Zor. This geographic distance led to the severing of relations between the Bu-Muhammad and Bu-Azzam *fukhdhs* on the one side, and the main center of the tribe on the other. This branching led to the emergence of specific dignitaries for the Bu-Muhammad and Bu-Azzam *fukhdhs* apart from the Bousaraya *sheikhdom*, which is concentrated in the Bu-Thiab *fukhdh* in the village of Al-Shumaitiya, namely in the Al-Fayyad Al-Nasser family.

The Al-Bousaraya tribe's *sheikhdom* was historically assumed by the Al-Shalash family from the Al-Bu Thiab *fukhdh* in the Shmaitiya village; the son of *Sheikh* Hammud Al-Shalash even received the title of *Pasha* from the Ottomans. However, the *sheikhdom* moved from Hammud Al-Shalash to Fayyad Al-Nasser from the Al-Bu Thiab *fukhdh*, who was one of the tribe dignitaries during the French mandate. He handed over seven rebels from the Al-Bousaraya tribe that had killed two French officers in the region of Ain Bujomaa to the French authorities in 1925.

After that, the *sheikhdom* moved from Fayyad to his son Ahmad and then to his son Faisal who was succeeded by his son Muhanna. After the death of Faisal in 2010, a dispute erupted between Mezer Daham Al-Fayyad and Ahmed Suleiman Al-Fayyad over the appointment of Muhanna Al-Fayyad as *sheikh* of the tribe, but Mahmoud Al-Abrash, then Speaker of the People's Council, was the one who enabled Muhanna to consolidate power as the *sheikh* of the Al-Bousaraya tribe.

Structural Changes in Tribes

Although the Ottoman and later the French policies of forcing tribes to settle down disbanded tribal federations, the approaches – namely the ones related to agricultural properties – maintained the unity of these internally fractured tribes and consolidated the authority of tribal *sheikhs*, who turned into land owners (arguably a late eastern feudalism). This increased their control over their tribes' members, their rivalry over their status and role in these official authorities as well as their economic and political alliances with major traders in the cities and with senior state officials. The economic pattern of tribes has shifted from an economy mainly based on invasion, spoils and grazing to one that is based on agricultural production and tax collection. Prestige, influence, power and *sheikhdoms* have become linked to land ownership and relations with the authorities. After the independence, the Syrian state failed to implement the Agrarian Reform Law and dismantle these social structures. This failure contributed to preserving these structures and consolidated the exploitation of the tribe members by their *sheikhs*, which fed public anger against these traditional leaders. This development was manifested in the rebellion of Al-Muhasan farmers from the Al-Bu Khabur tribes against tribal dignitaries in their village, who were allied with feudalists and merchants. They were able to organize themselves under the leadership of communist figures, regain their lands from Muhammad Saleh and Saeed Al-Hnaidi and establish the first agricultural cooperative in Deir ez-Zor in 1953.

After the unification of Syria and the Arab Republic of Egypt in 1958 during the mandate of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Agrarian Reform Law – Law No. 317 related to cooperative associations and Law No. 129 concerning the organization of the agricultural chambers' work – was promulgated. After that, the state began to implement agricultural reforms and distribute lands to the peasants through confiscation, leading to the gradual weakening of tribal *sheikhs'* power.

From the day the Baath Party came to power in 1963 until the coup of then-Defense Minister Hafez Al-Assad in 1971, the Agrarian Reform Law continued to apply to tribe members, while the tribes' economic, political and security functions were fully transferred to the state. Therefore, tribal *sheikhs* lost many of their advantages and their authority shifted from political to social. This made them resort to the state's favoritism to guarantee their position in power and their access to new privileges, while tribes' members grew more independent from the *sheikhdom* houses.

Deir ez-Zor Tribes under Hafez Al-Assad

The regime of the late Syrian president Hafez

Al-Assad mobilized tribesmen to join the Arab Socialist Baath Party as well as the trade unions and professional associations supervised by the state's security apparatuses. In 1974, Assad suspended the implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law and established the General Farmers' Union and the General Federation of Workers. He then addressed the tribes, building strong relations with tribal *sheikhs*, on the one hand while investing in the tribal structures through employing tribesmen based on tribal identity through the distribution of roles and functions, on the other.

The Assad regime has benefited from internal rivalry within the *sheikhdom* houses of some tribes. It even reinforced this rivalry by rallying one of the competing parties for the *sheikhdom*, and by luring others through offering them limited roles at the local level. In the Al-Bu Chamel tribe, for example, the Assad regime allocated a permanent seat in the People's Council to *Sheikh* Abboud Jadaan Al-Hafl until his death in 1987, and then to his son and successor *Sheikh* Khalil Abboud Al-Hafl until his death in June 2016. After the death of Daham Al-Dandal, the *sheikh* of the Al-Hassun tribe, the Assad regime sought to rally some members of the traditional *sheikhdom* in the Al-Hassun tribe, namely Muhjim Al-Dandal, Ayman Al-Dandal and Sattam Al-Dandal through a rotation of seats in the People's Council for many legislative terms. Not only did the regime's policy concentrate on dealing with tribes through their leaders, but the Baath Party and the state's security apparatuses and administrative authorities also provided roles for other levels within the tribal structure.

In fact, the mayor's position (*mukhtar*) in the villages was assigned to the heads of some houses ranked third in the tribe's leadership structure, namely after the *sheikh* of the entire tribe and the *sheikhs* of *fukhdhs*, in addition to other positions in agricultural associations and guidance units.⁵¹ Hafez Al-Assad strengthened his authority within the social structure in the tribal regions for monitoring and control purposes and to weaken the advocacy and mobilization capacities of traditional *sheikhs* within each tribe. This was achieved by having tribesmen join the ranks of the Arab Socialist Baath Party, which was an essential condition for employment in state institutions. It allowed for their career progression within the bureaucratic and administrative hierarchy. They also linked farmers, cultivators and workers with trade unions, federations, directorates and banks that supervise the implementation and financing of economic activities in the country. This policy has led to a decline in the relationship between tribal members and their leaders in favor of their relationship to the

⁵¹ Service-oriented structures for supporting farmers and cultivators affiliated to the Ministry of Agriculture.

authority. This caused a dissent between the tribesmen and their tribal leaders, the results of which appeared decades later, following the outbreak of the protest movement in Syria in 2011.

Tribes under Bashar Al-Assad

During the rule of Bashar Al-Assad in the 2000s, various dynamics played a role in further dismantling the tribal structures. The economic liberalization policy, the elimination of subsidies for agriculture and years of drought in the eastern region led to the migration of tribes' members internally to the cities and externally to the Gulf States and Lebanon. These migration flows ensured economic independence for the members of some tribes, giving them social roles within the tribal structure. This decreased the importance of traditional *sheikhdoms*. During this period, some members of tribes also began to show an increasing interest in education, thus contributing to the creation of Al-Furat University in Deir ez-Zor in 2006. This move followed the assassination of late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. In 2007, Bashar Al-Assad visited Deir ez-Zor for the first time and gave a speech about the importance of tribes and their role in resisting the French mandate.⁵²

The economic situation of tribes ahead of the anti-Assad protests

Tribal members have shifted from relying on agriculture as their primary source of livelihood to working in government departments and the education sector. Immigration to the Gulf also provided funds to some tribesmen who have invested in the construction and contracting sector in Syria. Bashar Al-Assad's accession to power contributed to the emergence of a new class of traders and investors who worked with public officials. Their work varied and sometimes included assisting in money laundering. Some members of the tribes played a role in this new class, such as the businessman Khalil Al-Sultan, a representative of the Iran Khodro Company, who is believed to have worked for a senior regime officer.⁵³

The new investors' class thus played a role in the decline of the traditional function of the *sheikhdom*, which was supposed to be at the service of tribe members. The role of the *sheikhdom* thus became limited to mediations with the authorities to solve security problems or to secure employment opportunities in government departments.

51 Syria RTV, “Bashar Al-Assad's speech in the Deir ez-Zor governorate on April 30, 2007 during which he commended Deir ez-Zor's tribes for their role in resisting French occupation,” YouTube, April 30, 2007, accessed January 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=618D9Bsl_IQ.

53 An Iranian company that manufactures cars in Iran and sells them in the local market in Syria.

Tribes in Deir ez-Zor during the protests against the Assad Regime

The 2011 uprising revealed a structurally disorganized, economically unstable and socially marginalized tribal reality, which prompted a number of tribal members to engage in these protests. Most of the tribes' members did not take sides in the beginning. Moreover, the early favoring of Al-Baggara tribe's leader, *Sheikh* Nawaf Ragheb Al-Bashir, for the Syrian revolution did not have a popular impact among tribesmen; it was rather a warning to the Assad regime.⁵⁴ Tribesmen from the Al-Bu Khabur, Al-Gu'ran and Al-Bu Chamel tribes later participated in protests in the cities of Al-Muhasan, Al-Quriyah, Al-Tayanah and Al-Shuhayl, which were considered focal points of the protest movement in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor. Protestors in these areas were demanding freedom, democracy and social justice. These demonstrations also attracted marginalized groups (namely certain tribes) that participated for various reasons. They wanted to showcase the segregation they were victim to due to highly centralized state policies. In addition, they wanted to highlight the local and tribal identity dimensions of the problem as these groups struggled to establish their presence within their tribes. In an attempt to contain the uprising of tribesmen and prevent more protesters from taking part in the demonstrations, the Assad regime, through the local authorities in Deir ez-Zor, promptly mobilized tribal *sheikhs* and pro-regime dignitaries. Influential tribal members within the Baath party, the state authority, and the army such as Nawaf Faris Al-Jarrah from the Al-Dmeem tribe, Humaidan Al-Ursan from the Al-Bu Khabur and Taha Khalifa from the Al-Bu Amr, were also mobilized.⁵⁵ The regime promised to carry out political reforms provided that the tribesmen refrain from participating in the protests. Moreover, it organized pro-regime protests. This led to direct clashes between anti-regime and pro-regime protesters from the Al-Baggara and the Al-Bousaraya tribes, who were members of partisan groups and farmers' associations. The most prominent of these clashes was during the “Great Friday” protests on April 22, 2011, which led to rising resentment among protesters towards the regime and its sympathizers.

The position of tribal sheikhs on the protests

During the protests, divisions clearly surfaced inside the *sheikhdom* houses of some tribes such as the Al-Hassun tribe, whose *sheikh* Ayman stood by the regime while

54 Demonstrators in Deir ez-Zor chanting “Where is your sense of honor, Nawaf” during the “Great Friday” protests on April 22, 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YMbK7BoP4I>

55 Then-secretary of the Arab Socialist Baath Party's branch of Deir ez-Zor.

his cousin Amir Al-Dandal opposed it. Other divisions were exposed in the Al-Bu Chamel tribe, with Abdulaziz Al-Hafil supporting the regime while the great *sheikh* Khalil Al-Hafil remained silent, and the Al-Bu Hassan tribe, with *Sheikh* Safuk Al-Najres being pro-regime and his brother Saud Al-Najres opposing Assad. These developments revealed the extent of competition in the *sheikhdom* houses over tribal leadership. Nonetheless, the majority of tribal *sheikhs* and dignitaries either remained neutral or were supportive of the Assad regime. However, there were a few exceptions, namely Nawaf Al-Bashir, the great *sheikh* of Al-Baggara tribe, who continued to oppose the regime; Arhiman Al-Jabara, *sheikh* of the Al-Bu Rahmah tribe; and *Sheikh* Abdulaziz Al-Hamada, *sheikh* of the Al-Bkayyer tribe. In fact, in early May 2011, Bashar Al-Assad met with a number of tribal *sheikhs* and dignitaries, including Abdulaziz Al-Hafel from the Al-Bu Kamel tribe, Fawaz Al-Bashir from the Al-Baggara tribe, Muhanna Al-Fayad from the Al-Bousaraya tribe, and Raja Al-Dandal from the Al-Hassun tribe. They guaranteed Assad that they would stand against the revolution or at least remain neutral.⁵⁶ While the efforts of some tribal leaders failed to stop the protests, the security services tried to orchestrate a direct clash between tribe members and protesters. They supplied those loyal to the regime with light weapons to suppress the protesters, such as in the city of Al-Bu Kamal, where groups from the Al-Hassun tribe attacked protesters from the Al-Mchahda tribe. The attitudes of tribal *sheikhs* and dignitaries were a source of indignation among tribe members involved in the protests and revealed the limited power of tribal *sheikhs*, who were mobilized by the regime to stop the protests but did not succeed.

Tribes after the Peaceful Protests

In August 2011, regime forces raided the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor in order to stop the protests by force, leading to an increase in the number of protesters and the mobilization of new villages against the government. This prompted a large number of protesters in rural Deir ez-Zor to choose armed struggle as a means of opposing the regime.⁵⁷ Armed protesters organized themselves into groups, which later became military forces in the Deir ez-Zor governorate upon the formation of the Free Syrian Army in late 2011. These groups did not take on a tribal character. However, they became economically independent thanks to the

56 SyriansOnUtube1, "Syrian tribe sheikhs confirm their support for the reform process," YouTube, December 15, 2011, accessed January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tb0mejlphJU>.

57 Al Ittihad, "6 dead and Syrian tanks storm into the countryside of Deir ez-Zor," Al Ittihad, August 26, 2011, accessed February 2018, <http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=79408&y=2011>.

external support provided by countries and community-based groups from tribal members living in the Gulf. This newfound independence allowed for the establishment of a new network, away from the traditional framework of tribes. For example, this happened in the case of the Ahfad Al-Rasul brigades (Grandsons of the Prophet brigades), comprising four major tribe-based forces, namely the Ahfad Mohammed brigade from the Al-Bu Khabur tribe in Al-Muhasan, the Al-Qaqaa brigade from the Al-Gu'ran tribe in Al-Quriyah, the Al-Umma brigade from the Al-Shaayat tribe in Abu Hamam, and the Allahu Akbar brigade from the Bu Chmal tribe in Al-Bu Kamal.

By the end of 2012, the regime forces had withdrawn from the majority of the oil-rich eastern countryside, following the attacks of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This development inaugurated a new phase in the history of the tribes of Deir ez-Zor.

Tribes and Oil

After the regime lost control over the countryside of Deir ez-Zor, chaos emerged in light of the disruption of public service provision due to the withdrawal of all state bodies from the region. Amid insecurity and the desire of tribes to control the region's resources, some tribesmen and factions seized oil wells, justifying their actions by claiming that this region now fell within their respective territories. The Shaayat tribe seized the Al-Tenek oil field located in the tribe's territory in the Badia, while members of the Gu'ran tribe seized some oil wells found in their tribal homeland. Members of the Al-Bkayyer tribe from the Al-Kbisa and Al-Mechref *fukhdhs*, together with members of the Bu Kamel, gained control of the Conoco gas plant in the town of Khasham. While some inhabitants and military factions of the Alanabza *fukhdh* (a small *fukhdh*) affiliated with the Al-Bkayyer tribe seized the Conoco oil field. The Bu-Chamel tribe gained control over some oil wells in the villages of Al-Shuhayl and Al-Hreiji in addition to the Al-Omar oilfield with the military support of the Nusra Front (currently known as Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)). Some FSA factions belonging to the Baggara tribe seized the Al-Malha oil well, while some members of the Al-Mash'hur *fukhdh* from the Al-Baggara tribe took over the Deiro oilfield. Besides, some members of the Shweit tribe seized some wells in their region. The Military Council Battalion (Kataeb al Majles al Askari) in Muhasan, made up of members of the Al-Bu Khabur tribe gained control over the Al-Taym field and its power plant, along with the Al-Ahwaz brigade from the Annabza *fukhdh* of the Al-Bkayyer tribe.

After taking over oil fields, military groups opted for different policies:

1. Some brigades continued to receive support from abroad and did not have to control any oil wells, such as the Basha'ir Al-Nasr brigade from the

Al-Bu Hassan tribe and Al-Qaaqaa from the Al-Gu’ran tribe. Basha’ir Al-Nasr brigade factions later defected to join brigades in the city of Al-Quriyah.

2. Some military factions defected from the existing factions and started relying on oil wells to fund their activities, such as the Al-Hamza brigades formed by Al-Shaayat tribesmen in the village of Abu Hamam. There, the Al-Hamza brigades broke away from the Jaafar Al-Tayyar’s. Likewise, the Al-Ikhlās brigades, formed by Bu Chamel tribesmen from Al-Shuhayl defected from the Jaafar Al-Tayyar brigades.
3. The following newly formed factions relied on oil as means of financing their activities: The Mu’tah brigade from Al-Bu Chamel in Al-Shuhayl; the brigades of Ibn Al-Qayyim and Ahfad Aisha from the Al-Shaayat tribe in the village of Ghraneej; the Saif Al Umma brigade from Al-Shaayat in Al-Kashkiya; and the Abdallah Ben Zubeir group from Al-Bkayyer tribe in the village of Khasham.
4. Some tribal groups formed heavily armed forces with the aim of appropriating and exploiting oil wells such as members of the Al-Bu Hassan tribe in the village of Darnaj and members of the Al-Bu Rahmah tribe in the village of Al-Jerzy.⁵⁸

The struggle over oil led to tribal conflicts and changed the network of relations within the tribes. Tribal groups’ control of oil wells depended mainly on the geographic location of the well in respect to that of the tribe. Therefore, the tribes’ control over oil has witnessed three different forms:

Before IS’ takeover of the governorate, the most common case was the control of oil wells by certain houses from the tribes that did not share their resources with other houses within the same tribe. This control, however, depended mainly on the number of members within the house. One can note two instances of this: First, in the case of the Al-Mazaal oil well (in the village of Al-Hurajji) which is controlled by members of the Al-Bkayyer tribe; second, in the case of the Al-Baher oil well named after Al-Baher family of the Al-Shaayat tribe.⁵⁹

The control of oil wells by local tribesmen who do not share their resources with fellow tribe members living in other areas. This is what happened with Al-Tayanah members from the Al-Gu’ran tribe who seized oil wells located next to their village and refrained from sharing them with their relatives in the village of Al-Shinan and the city of Al-Quriyah.

Tribes taking control of oil wells with the help of the Nusra Front in return for granting the Nusra Front a share of the

58 Ayn Almadina, “Deir ez-Zor’s oil from the revolution to the Islamic State,” Ayn Almadina, July 25, 2016, accessed February 2018, <https://goo.gl/ouuZPT#>.

59 Named after the Al-Mazaal family that controlled it. Check Ayn Almadina’s report “Deir ez-Zor’s oil from the revolution to the Islamic State”.

oil profits. This is best demonstrated by the attempt of members from the Al-Bu Hassan tribe in the village of Al-Suwaydan to regain control over oil wells near their village from an armed group that was controlling them. In order to prevent any direct conflict with this group.⁶⁰

The control of oil wells led to the reshuffling of the networks of relations inside the tribes, as it acquired a territorial nature. Furthermore, the economic gains from the oil trade prompted members of the tribes to race for arms to protect their oil wells and their tribes from any attack. This period witnessed the outbreak of armed conflicts among members of the same tribe on several occasions. Conflict has risen among tribesmen from the Al-Shaayat, leading to the entrenchment of factions in their regions, like the Al-Hamza brigade in Abu Hamam and the Ahfad Aisha in Ghraneej.⁶¹ Other conflicts manifested between different tribes such as between the Al-Bu Hassan and the Al-Bu Rahmah tribes, and between the Al-Gu’ran tribe in Al-Tayanah and the Al-Bu Chamel in Dhiban, in which dozens of tribe members were killed.⁶²

Tribes and the Nusra Front

Overview of the relationship between tribes and the Nusra Front

Tribal conflict as well as the diffusion of extremist religious inclinations played a major role in the growing presence of the Nusra Front (Al Qaeda’s Syrian branch at the time) and its later control over large parts of the governorate’s oil resources. The Nusra Front benefited from the network of relations provided by tribes to infiltrate and spread in the region. It succeeded in creating affiliated groups in most of the Deir ez-Zor regions, where each local group consisted of members of the tribe or the *fukhdh* in their respective region only.

As IS officially announced its disassociation from the Nusra Front in April 2013, the subsequent divisions in the Nusra Front led to the withdrawal of a large number of foreign fighters and their adherence to IS. This was undoubtedly a major cause for members of local tribes to join the Nusra Front, allowing them to resort to Nusra in their own conflicts. Since foreign fighters were joining IS, there were spots to fill in the alignment of the Nusra Front. Accessing power within Nusra and forming this newly born link was a tool that they later used to help resolve tribal feuds.

Once tribes had infiltrated Nusra, they used it to resolve inter-tribal conflicts. Members of the Al-Bu Chamel tribe from Al-Shuhayl, for example, attacked the Al-Bu

60 Interview conducted by the researcher with one of the dignitaries of Al-Suwaydan village.

61 Interview conducted by the researcher with some Al-Shaayat tribe members.

62 Interview conducted by the researcher with one of the dignitaries of Al-Gu’ran tribe.

Ezzeddin tribe in Al-Zir village in the name of the Nusra Front to settle an old dispute between the two tribes. Furthermore, groups from the Al-Bousaraya tribe in Al-Kharita village took advantage of a dispute between the Nusra Front and their cousins in the village of Al-Masrab to launch a ten-day attack against them in April 2013.⁶³ The relationship between Nusra and the tribes, which is based on the desire to control tribal areas and resources, was manifested on three levels:

- ▶ In tribes marked by a solid internal cohesion, the Nusra Front would form an alliance with one of the tribal leaders, as it was the case with Amer Al-Rafdan of the Al-Bkayyer tribe. The Nusra Front gave him privileges in exchange for his help in controlling the Conoco gas plant located within the Al-Rafdan family's area of influence.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Al-Rafdan later pledged allegiance to IS.
- ▶ In fragile tribal structures, the Nusra Front attracted tribesmen from marginal parts of the tribes and provided them with weapons, money and protection to open Nusra headquarters within their areas, as was the case in the village of Sabikhan with the Shweit tribe.⁶⁵
- ▶ In tribal areas, whose inhabitants had formed military opposition factions, the Nusra Front worked to establish military alliances to ensure their support during operations conducted by the Nusra Front inside and outside the governorate. For example, the alliance of the Nusra Front with FSA factions in the Al-Shaayat tribe helped it in launching an attack on the houses of Al-Rafdan from Al-Bkayyer tribe after the latter had pledged allegiance to IS in the village of Jadeed Ageidat.⁶⁶

Cases illustrating the relationship between tribes and the Nusra Front in Deir ez-Zor

The Al-Shuhayl village was considered an important stronghold for the Nusra Front in mid-2012 because its residents constitute the fundamental base of the Al-Bu Chamel tribe. In addition, some of its inhabitants had taken part in the jihad in Iraq from 2003 to 2010 and, therefore, had long-standing relations with jihadist groups in this country. The fostering of the Nusra

Front by some members from the Al-Bu Chamel tribe in the Al-Chuhayl village emanates from mere mutual interest. In fact, for the Nusra Front, this was the choice of Al-Qaeda since the Al-Bu Chamel tribe has a certain symbolism for the Al-Ageidat tribes. However, for the Al-Bu Chamel tribe, the desire of the tribe members to control the Al-Ageidat tribe, in general, was the main motive for their alliance with the Nusra Front in order to seize oil wells located outside their areas of control. The Nusra Front, represented in Deir ez-Zor by its leader Abu Mariya Al-Qahtani who was dispatched by Al-Baghdadi's group in Iraq (the Islamic State in Iraq) granted many privileges to Al-Shuhayl's citizens. This later led other tribes and factions to rally and pledge allegiance to IS as a retaliation against Nusra. In fact, many tribes felt marginalized and started calling Nusra the Bu Chamel Front or Al-Shuhayl's Front given its members' large influence in the organization. Nonetheless, the Nusra Front tried to maintain tribal balances in the region of Deir ez-Zor.

The Nusra Front sought to control the governorate and its resources through the formation of a Sharia Council in the eastern region, which included a group of factions such as the Al-Ikhlās brigade, the Mu'tah brigade from Al-Shuhayl, the Ibn Al-Qayyim brigade from Al-Shaayat and the Al-Qaaqaa Islamic brigade that had seceded from the Al-Qaaqaa brigade in Al-Quriyah.⁶⁷ The council was meant to resolve the disputes arising between tribal members, fill the security vacuum, mobilize other tribal members, and delegate to tribesmen the management of special headquarters of the Nusra Front in their respective regions like in the villages of Al-Jerzi, Suwaydan Jazirah, Al-Quriyah and Buqrus and the cities of Al-Asharah and Al-Mayadin.

This aimed at breaking through tribes and giving the Nusra Front the opportunity to intervene in case of an armed conflict, exploiting the failure of the region's dignitaries to prevent and resolve armed confrontation. Indeed, in August 2013, the Ahrar Al-Ageidat Battalion, comprising inhabitants from Darnaj, was in control of one of the oil wells in the village of Darnaj. The tribe's dignitaries failed to convince the battalion to abandon the oil well and distribute its revenues equally to villagers. Consequently, armed crowds came out from the village in large numbers and headed to the well to seize it from the battalion. Hence, a dispute which led to the killing of one of the Darnaj villagers ensued, after which the Nusra Front leader, Abu Mariya Al-Qahtani, intervened to resolve the dispute.

The Nusra Front held a meeting at the time, which included dignitaries and residents of the village,

63 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "37 people killed in clashes in the village of Al-Mesrab," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, April 20, 2013, accessed February 2018, <https://goo.gl/AqTiis>

64 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, op. cit.

65 Interview conducted by the researcher with a number of inhabitants from Sabikhan village.

66 Mosa Ahmed, "The bombing of Amer Al-Rafdan's house with the photographer's comments on the participation of Al-Hamza brigade from Al-Shaayat tribe in the attack," YouTube, February 10, 2014, accessed January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TM4GJFqA0qo>.

67 Ayn Almadina, "Deir ez-Zor's oil from the revolution to the Islamic State," op. cit.

and decided they would take back control of all four wells that were then controlled by the villagers, while allocating a share of the profits generated by the wells to the villagers.⁶⁸ As for the Ahrar Al-Ageidat Battalion, it waited several months before pledging allegiance to IS and restoring its control over the well.

In September 2013, skirmishes between the Nusra Front and IS resulted in an attack launched by the former on the headquarters of IS in the village of Jadeed Ageidat, expelling the Al-Rafdan family from the Al-Bkayyer tribe, who was hosting IS, and blowing up their houses. This aroused the resentment of all the *fukhdhs* of the Al-Bkayyer tribe, pitting them against their cousins from the Al-Bu Chamel (Thaher) tribe that were associated with the Nusra Front. In conjunction, the Nusra Front announced the formation of the Central Sharia Commission based in the city of Al-Mayadin and launched a program aimed at controlling the oil wells in the governorate and reducing pollution caused by refining oil using primitive methods. It attacked the Al-Gu’ran tribe in the Tayanah village, and the Al-Bkayyer tribe in Khasham and Saalo with the aim of controlling oil wells and confiscating oil combustion machines (primitive oil refining equipment). This provoked the discontent of tribe members, especially since this attack was not directed at the Al-Thaher tribe of the Bu-Chamel tribe, whose members control a number of oil wells north of the village of Al-Shuhayl.

In conjunction with their attempt to control the oil wells, the Nusra Front attacked the remaining regime forces in the Al-Omar oilfield. That attack led to the end of the oil field agreement among the tribes, its military factions and the regime forces. They had agreed that the latter would continue to supply the region’s villages with electricity produced in the gas plant of the Al-Omar field as long as the tribes do not to attack the regime forces in the field. While the region’s military factions were busy preparing for a battle against the regime forces at Deir ez-Zor’s military airport, the Nusra Front took advantage of the situation to launch an attack aimed at taking over the Al-Omar field, the richest oil field in Deir ez-Zor, in cooperation with the Al-Ikhlās, Al-Mu’tah and Al-Haqq brigades from Al-Shuhayl. Inhabitants of the village of Dhiban from the Al-Bu Chamel tribe tried to claim a share of the oil of the Al-Omar field since most of the wells are located in their lands. However, the Nusra Front, at the request of Al-Shuhayl’s inhabitants, rejected their demand, a move that later led many of Al-Dhiban inhabitants to pledge allegiance to IS.⁶⁹

68 Interview conducted by the researcher with three inhabitants from Darnaj.

69 Interview conducted by the researcher with one of Al-Dhiban’s dignitaries.

The Control of Deir ez-Zor by IS

IS’ battles to take over Deir ez-Zor began with an attack launched in September 2013 on Ahfad Al-Rasul’s factions in the governorate. The conflict later developed to involve Ahrar Al-Sham that came from the Raqqa governorate after IS had driven them out. At the time, Ahrar Al-Sham was struggling to take over the Conoco gas plant, which was then under the control of the Jadeed Ageidat inhabitants. Thus, the former found support from the Nusra Front, while the latter pledged allegiance to IS. After the Nusra Front launched an attack against the village in cooperation with factions from the Al-Shaaytat tribe, IS withdrew from the region to the city of Al-Shaddadi in the countryside of Al-Hasakah, where it built tribal alliances at three levels:

- ▶ A basic alliance with the Al-Bkayyer tribe, especially the Al-Rafdan family in the village of Jadeed Ageidat, led by Amer Al-Rafdan, who later became a prominent emir in IS. Al-Rafdan took advantage of his cousin’s humiliation after the Al-Shuhayl attack on the Al-Rafdan houses, which provided a fresh impetus to IS.
- ▶ Secret alliances with individual opponents of the Nusra Front from members of the region’s tribes and factions. This included the Al-Gu’ran tribe from the Al-Tayanah village, which held a grudge against the Nusra Front after its attack on oil wells. One example of an alliance was Saddam Al-Chmal (commander of the Allahu Akbar brigade in Al-Bu Kamal), whose brother was killed by the Nusra Front. Another is Hussam Al-Chaluf (commander of the Saddam Hussein brigade in Al-Mayadin), who belongs to the Al-Bu Chamel tribe and whose house was targeted by the Nusra Front with a car bomb.
- ▶ Secret alliances with tribal groups seeking to play a more prominent role such as the Al-Bu Ezzeddin tribe in the village of Al-Zer, which suffered from marginalization under the control of the Nusra Front. IS appointed Abu Dujana Al-Zer, from the Al-Bu Ezzeddin tribe as a military commander in battles launched against the region’s Nusra Front factions. IS also exploited a dispute between the Al-Shaaytat and Al-Bu Khabur tribes in the city of Muhasan to establish an alliance with armed groups from the city. This later helped it control large parts of the governorate without previous fighting, after the military council composed of factions from the city of Muhasan pledged allegiance to IS.⁷⁰

70 DeirEzzor 24, “The military council’s betrayal off the free army in Deir ez-Zor,” DeirEzzor 24, October 19, 2015, accessed February 2018. <http://deirezzor24.net/archives/3186>.

During the early days, only the Nusra Front and Ahrar Al-Sham were involved in the fight against IS; but after IS took control of the town of Markada in the north of the governorate, the series of confrontations expanded, marked by a tribal character and fueled by the conflicting members of the region's tribes. After six months of clashes, IS tightened its grip on the governorate after the withdrawal of the Nusra Front, Ahrar Al-Sham, FSA factions and tribal groups hostile to IS. Some tribesmen tried to rebel against IS' domination of the region, and clashes broke out in several villages. The most prominent clash was in Al-Shaayat, whose inhabitants decided to stay and confront IS. A horrific massacre ensued, claiming the lives of hundreds of Al-Shaayat members, while those who survived were displaced by IS and prevented from returning to their villages for over a year.

The influence of tribes within IS

The greater the number of tribe members who pledged allegiance to IS was, the more important the tribe became for IS. In fact, while the organization took strict measures to prevent the circulation and trade of cigarettes, the village of Al-Khasham was a key center for tobacco trade. Attempts of various IS bodies to limit this trade failed because of the influence of Al-Khasham inhabitants in IS' apparatuses.^{71 72} Thus, the higher the affiliation of tribe members to IS was, the less the organization was able to practice authority over them. The *Hisbah* (IS police) office for instance, restricted its activities to advocacy, roaming the streets and turning a blind eye to Sharia violations in tribal areas with a high concentration in pledges of loyalty.

However, in other areas with low levels of pledges of loyalty, the *Hisbah* offices would tighten their grip on the tribesmen and impose harsh sanctions for minor offenses. These sanctions included obliging detainees to dig trenches on the fighting fronts, which many did not survive.⁷³ The tribes' influence also played a role in easing the constraints imposed by IS security department.⁷⁴ A year and a half after imposing its control, IS decided to prevent internet cafes from operating without the approval of the security department; later banning the Internet permanently. Violations were punished by execution.

71 In eastern rural Deir ez-Zor, from Al-Bkayyer tribe.

72 Interview conducted by the researcher with one of the tobacco retailers in Khasham.

73 Roaming the streets during prayer time and not respecting the religious dress code.

74 One of the most important apparatuses in IS in charge of security in its areas of control and of planning and implementing operations outside its areas of control.

Nevertheless, some tribes whose members pledged allegiance to IS in great numbers were able to continue using the Internet, taking advantage of their members' influence in the organization. Not only did members of tribes who had pledged allegiance to IS avoid the organization's retribution and obtain privileges, they were also involved in the decision-making process of the organization. In fact, IS had prohibited the work of international organizations in its areas of control. Nevertheless, Abu Abdelaziz, emir of the medical department in Wilayat Al Khayr had allowed some organizations that work in the medical field and continue to provide services. However, this took place under certain conditions, such as appointing a number of his relatives as employees and coordinating with IS' medical bureau in the *wilaya*.^{75 76} This decision remained in force until the removal of Abu Abdelaziz from his position.

The same applied for the relief work. While providing assistance was the exclusive responsibility of IS, which would punish any other party for doing so, some influential tribesmen in IS have intervened to obtain the security office's approval for some agencies to distribute aid in their areas of control in exchange for the allocation of part of the aid to families identified by the organization. In the education sector, the education bureau (*Diwan Al-Ta'alim*) suspended schools in most regions of Deir ez-Zor in the early days of its control, with the exception of the city of Al-Quriyah.⁷⁷ Arguments erupted in Al-Quriyah between Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Masri and some of its residents, who had pledged allegiance to IS when the former requested to close all schools in the city until the issuance of a special curriculum for IS.⁷⁸ Ultimately, Al Masri's request was to no avail.

One can say that tribes enjoyed relative sovereignty over their territories based on the number of their members who had pledged allegiance to IS. It was mainly because the organization did not attach great importance to some of its organs such as the *Hisbah*, the Islamic police, in addition to other issues such as education and health.⁷⁹ Consequently, it enabled

75 Mohammed Ubaid Al-Daham, brother of Abu Dujana Al-Zer that was appointed Wali of Deir ez-Zor. He belongs to Al-Bu Ezzeddin tribe in Al-Zer village known for its allegiance to IS.

76 A region in Deir ez-Zor spanning from the western countryside of the governorate to the city of Hajin in the eastern countryside, to north of the Euphrates River and Al-Salihiya south of the River.

77 In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, from Al-Gu'ran tribe and many inhabitants from Al-Quriyah had pledged allegiance to IS.

78 Emir of Diwan Al-Ta'alim in Deir ez-Zor after IS's control.

79 A police agency in charge of theft, alcohol use, drug use, adultery and conflicts.

a number of tribe members to gain relative influence by taking on leadership positions in their regions, which strengthened the tribes’ sovereignty over their lands in many cases. This sovereignty converged with the policy of IS in most cases and diverged in some, as happened when some residents of the Sabikhan village attacked members from the *Hisbah* and killed one of the foreign fighters. The attack occurred after the *Hisbah* had seized homes belonging to villagers that were not living there at the time, on the pretext that they were apostates.⁸⁰ IS then launched a military retaliation campaign arresting dozens of Sabikhan inhabitants, despite a mediation process aimed to stop the campaign conducted by many members of the tribe who had pledged allegiance to IS.⁸¹

The relationship of IS with tribes

The Islamic State featured two entities that represented two conflicting tendencies on how to deal with tribes. The first was represented by the security department of the organization and was known for its violence. The second, represented by the Public Relations Bureau (*Diwan*) called for openness towards tribesmen and for giving tribes symbolic roles in the organization.⁸² After the declaration of the “Caliphate” in June 2014, the security department prevailed in IS’ policies. The decline of the role of some tribes and the hostility of others towards IS played a major role in the failure of the Public Relations Bureau in its main task of convincing tribes to be involved in IS’ organs. The local tribal conflicts also contributed to this failure, with all three factors resulting in strengthening the role of IS’ security apparatus.

The policy of IS during the first periods of its reign relied on brutality, the spread of terror and abuse of its enemies, clearly illustrated in the campaigns of mass displacement of some of Deir ez-Zor’s rural tribes. In fact, it deported the residents of Al-Shuhayl belonging to the Al-Bu Chamel tribe after surrendering to the organization. It also punished members of the Al-Shaayat tribe by displacing them for more than a year and a half after they resisted the organization. IS turned a deaf ear to the pleas of tribes’ sheikhs imploring them to forgive Al-Shaayat. Quite the contrary, IS tortured the tribe’s members, published pictures and videos showing members in the organization carrying out mass executions of Al-Shaayat tribesmen and

80 In the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, from Al-Shweit tribe whose members largely pledged allegiance to IS in Abu Hardub village.

81 Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office, “Clashes erupt between Daesh’s and the people of the Sabikhan town in east of Deir ez-Zor,” Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office, December 8, 2016, accessed April 2018, <https://goo.gl/xi6qSQ>

82 Office in charge of tribal affairs.

ordered all checkpoints to arrest each adult member of Al-Shaayat.⁸³

Months after asserting its control over the region, IS had eliminated all the tribal groups that were opposed to it. It also began to impose itself as a central force outside and above the tribal conflicts and network of alliances that had allowed it to control Deir ez-Zor. It started showing a great deal of ingratitude towards its allies and stripping them of the privileges it had previously given them. In fact, IS confiscated all weapons from the battalions and brigades of the Free Syrian Army, specifically the factions that had pledged allegiance, such as the Al-Qaaqaa from Al-Quriyah and the factions of the Military Council in Muhasan, in addition to the weapons of tribal groups that were protecting the oil wells in Al-Tayanah. IS was keen not to repeat the mistakes of the Nusra Front, which was used as a tool by some tribal groups in their internal conflicts or in their search for economic and social gains. For this purpose, the organization implemented several actions, such as removing Amer Al-Rafdan of the Al-Bkayyer tribe from office after it had appointed him wali (IS mayor) of Deir ez-Zor when it first took control of the region. It also transferred the fighting groups that had given impetus to some tribal figures to different fighting fronts, thus isolating them and stripping them of their tools. IS hence laid the foundation of a new phase, in which tribes played no more role as intermediaries between the organization’s authority and tribe members.

There were three different stages in IS’ treatment of the tribes across time: before the proclamation of the “Caliphate,” during the rule of IS, and after its decline. These stages started with establishing alliances and granting concessions at first, then brutally dealing with the tribes, and, finally, seeking their support once the organization started losing control of Mosul.

The first episode preceded IS’ battles to control the Deir ez-Zor governorate during which IS forged alliances with tribal groups, taking advantage of tribal conflicts to serve the interest of its ideological war. This was demonstrated by the organization’s alliance with the Al-Bkayyer tribe. Al-Bkayyer, which is one of the largest tribes of the Al-Ageidat tribes, was originally a fukhdh from the Al-Bu Chamel tribe. However, historical conflicts date back to the time of feudalism when some of Al-Bkayyer members used to work as peasants for their feudalist cousins from the Al-Bu Chamel tribe.⁸⁴

83 Alexander Ayyoub, “Tribe sheikhs implore Al-Baghdadi to forgive Al-Shaayat tribe,” Al Arabi Al Jadeed, August 28, 2014, accessed March 2018, <https://goo.gl/KBcwus>

84 Interview conducted by the researcher with members from Al-Bu Jamel and al-Bkayyer tribes.

Moreover, the strong bond between Al-Bkayyer tribe members reinforced their independent tribal identity. On the other hand, the Nusra Front forged an alliance with Amer Al-Rafdan of the Al-Bkayyer tribe with the aim of controlling the Conoco gas plant. Al-Rafdan had, in fact, formed an armed battalion to fight the regime. However, the influence of the Al-Bu Chamel tribe within the Nusra Front provoked Al-Rafdan who, after the declaration of IS, seized the opportunity and pledged allegiance to it in order to prevent Al-Bu Chamel tribe members from benefitting from the plant and getting a large share of its production. In addition to its alliance with Al-Rafdan, IS held a meeting with prominent figures and *sheikhs* from the Al-Bkayyer tribe, during which Iraqi emirs dispatched by the organization offered Al-Bkayyer a share of the oil revenues in Syria in return for supporting IS in its war against the Nusra Front.⁸⁵ This idea was welcomed by the *fukhdhs* of Al-Mechref, Al-Eid and Al-Kassar due to historical tribal conflicts over land ownership in the Badia, on the one hand, and to the economic marginalization experienced by a large part of these *fukhdhs*, on the other. IS' war against the Nusra Front in Deir ez-Zor took on tribal overtones between *fukhdhs* from the Al-Bkayyer tribe and the Al-Bu Chamel tribe, which contributed to the defection of leaders and members of the Nusra Front belonging to the pro-IS Al-Bkayyer tribe. This phase ended when IS took control of Deir ez-Zor after six months of fighting, during which the organization gave tribes privileges ranging from the acquisition of some wells to mediation roles aimed at stopping the prosecution of some wanted persons or detainees by IS.

The second episode comes after IS extended its control over the governorate, including its residents and resources, during which the organization exhibited particular ruthlessness in dealing with tribes. This was reinforced by the desire of combatants belonging to tribes that had pledged allegiance to IS to retaliate against their families from other tribes to settle old feuds. For example, when IS took over Al-Shuhayl, the stronghold of the Nusra Front, IS *Wali* of Deir ez-Zor was Amer Al-Rafdan, who issued a decision to displace the town's inhabitants belonging to the Al-Bu Chamel tribe for ten days. This happened less than a year after Nusra Front members belonging to Al-Bu Chamel tribe had blown up Al-Rafdan houses in Jadeed Ageidat.⁸⁶ The same applies to Al-Shaayat battles against IS, during which large numbers of the inhabitants of Muhasan who had pledged allegiance to IS participated in the attacks on Al-Shaayat. They tortured the inhabitants and plundered their

properties after IS had issued a decision to indefinitely displace residents from Al-Shaayat.^{87 88} The participation of the inhabitants of Muhasan from Al-Bu Khabur tribe was in retaliation to a previous attack launched by groups from Al-Shaayat during which a number of Muhasan inhabitants were killed. IS did not give tribes any privileges; on the contrary, it intentionally insulted some tribal leaders, even punishing tribal groups that had previously pledged allegiance to IS before it took control of Deir ez-Zor. For example, the position of Abu Dujana El-Zer as military emir encouraged many of Al-Zer's inhabitants belonging to Al-Bu Ezzeddin tribe to pledge allegiance to IS. However, when the latter felt that Abu Dajana Al-Zer was a prominent leading figure for his tribe's members, it removed him from his position and dispatched the Al-Zer's inhabitants who supported IS to various fronts in Iraq and Al-Hasaka.⁸⁹ IS executed many tribal members like Ubeida Abu Al-Hareth in late 2014, member of the pro-IS Al-Gu'ran tribe who was previously an emir in the Nusra Front. IS also willfully insulted tribal symbols through its continuous arrests of prominent figures and *sheikhs* of some tribes on multiple charges while rejecting any mediation in their favor. As for IS' local agents and leaders that had previously gained many privileges, IS pursued a policy of moving those persons from one wilaya to another to isolate and prevent them from establishing alliances within their environments.

The third phase covers the period of IS seeking the support of tribes. Prior to losing control over Mosul, IS intensified its meetings with tribal *sheikhs* and dignitaries through the Public Relations *Diwan* and the Security Bureau. IS asked the *sheikhs* to recruit tribal members to fight alongside the organization in exchange for privileges such as shares from the oil revenues and power over the members of their tribes (within the organization). IS' efforts were in vain, because the instabilities experienced by tribes in the years preceding IS' control had weakened the role of *sheikhs* – a weakness which IS had also maintained by marginalizing tribes.

One can distinguish three patterns in the way IS dealt with Deir ez-Zor's tribes:

1. Alliances between tribes and IS organization: This

87 France 24, "The 'Islamic State' executes hundreds of the Sunni Shaayat tribe members in eastern Syria," France 24, August 17, 2014, accessed March 2018, <https://goo.gl/daxPBV>

88 Ali Khatib, "AbuDajana El-Zer: the story of the rise and fall of a local man who had pledged allegiance to IS," Ayn Almadina, May 5, 2016, accessed February 2018, <https://goo.gl/TzYa2Q>.

89 Haritha Al Jawash. "The organization of the Islamic State executes an emir of the Nusra Front and loses one of its most important leaders in Deir ez-Zor" Al-Quds Al-Arabi, March 2, 2015, accessed March 2018. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=303730>.

85 Interview conducted by the researcher with one of the dignitaries that attended the June 2013 meeting.

86 Mohammad Fattouh, "Daesh punishes Deir ez-Zor countryside inhabitants by displacing them", Arabi 21, July 7, 2014, accessed March, 2018, <https://goo.gl/3C3xCY>

pattern is characterized by high numbers of pledges of loyalty to IS involving one member or more from each family, with IS and the tribe becoming integral, as in the case of the Al-Muchref *fukhdh* from the Al-Bkayyer tribe. In this case, the tribe expresses IS’ vision and the latter respects the former and avoids clashes with it, while IS organs demonstrate good intentions in dealing with the tribe’s members in case they commit any violations. Hence the Public Relations Bureau’s authority prevails over the security apparatus and the Islamic police’s authority. In disputes and squabbles between tribesmen over lands, the Islamic police would usually intervene and insolently resolve the dispute, flouting the tribes’ mediation attempts, as has happened on many occasions. However, in the case of Al-Muchref, conflict resolution was handled by local dignitaries, and IS allowed the tribe’s prominent figures to assume the traditional role, refraining from interfering through the *Diwan* and disregarding the possession of light weapons by some members of the tribe, which is an old tribal tradition.

2. Hostilities between tribes and IS organization: In this case, the security apparatus controls tribes and IS’ organs generally treat them with contempt, allowing IS members to commit excesses against the tribe. Many examples, such as the Al-Shaayat tribe in Abu Hamam, Gharanij and Al-Kishkiyah that were opposed to IS, illustrate this pattern. As mentioned earlier, some of Abu Hamam’s inhabitants killed a number of foreign fighters and burned their headquarters in the Al-Shaayat region in August 2014. Consequently, hundreds of Al-Shaayat members rebelled in their villages to repel the organization’s attack, while IS brought troops to suppress the tribe’s members. IS committed a massacre that claimed the lives of many while arresting thousands of others, before displacing and deporting the remaining tribe members for more than a year.⁹⁰ Even after IS allowed the inhabitants to return to their villages, it continued to tighten its grip on them. It established settlements for foreign fighters in Al-Shaayat, increased its checkpoints and seized lands and properties, which the tribe members failed to reclaim despite their complaints to the judiciary and the Public Relations Bureau.
3. Tribes remaining neutral towards IS organization: This pattern rarely occurred in Deir ez-Zor given the magnitude of tribal conflicts, but one can mention here the examples of the Al-Bahra, Al-Bu Hassan and Al-Ramadi villages, where members of Iraqi tribes had settled in rural Deir ez-Zor since the beginning of

the Ottoman Tanzimat era. Members of these tribes had remained neutral since the outbreak of protests against the Assad regime in 2011 and, in fact, even after IS’ control and did not witness any considerable pledges of allegiance to the organization. The relationship was, therefore, stable and IS was easily able to assert its control over these tribes that, in turn, never challenged IS’ power.

Concerning the previous examples, it should be noted that local tribal conflicts played an important role in determining the relationship between IS and the Deir ez-Zor tribes. In fact, in the three relationship models between tribes and IS, one cannot disregard the influence and role of tribal conflicts. Vengeance and the desire to transform Al-Mechref into a sub-tribal identity within Al-Bkayyer were major motives that made it pledge allegiance to IS. As for the case of Al-Shaayat, members of some tribal groups that had pledged allegiance to IS used their influence in the organization to retaliate against Al-Shaayat for various reasons, including their control of oil resources and their attack on Al-Bkayyer and Al-Muhasan. In the third case, there was no old or new conflict between the tribe members and these tribes did not have any economic or social ambition, which spared them IS’ brutality.

Tribes and their Members Who Pledged Allegiance to IS

The relationship between tribal members and their leading figures was poor, not because of the tribal leaders’ changing positions on different events that hit the region after the waves of protests, but because tribal *sheikhs* and dignitaries have, for many years, neglected their role in supporting tribal members and protecting their interests. IS only exposed this shaky and mostly hostile relationship between both parties further.

IS took advantage of tribal members who had suffered social and economic marginalization for decades, and it was, therefore, no coincidence that they ended up pledging their allegiance to IS to seek social and economic gains. Those tribal members seized this opportunity to retaliate against tribal figures, for instance, when local members from the Al-Bkayyer tribe in Khasham shaved a dignitary’s moustache for not following religious teachings, or when members of the *Hisbah* from Dhiban flogged one of the dignitaries for roaming the streets during prayer time. Similarly, the great *Sheikh* of the Al-Ageidat tribe Khalil Al-Hafl was banned from leaving the regions controlled by IS to get treatment prior to his death in 2016.⁹¹ On the other hand, some groups that had pledged allegiance to IS still showed respect for tribal figures and dignitaries, even those that were opposed to IS. When members from the organization’s *Hisbah* tried to

90 Akhbar Alaan, “Al-Shaayat members’ rebels against IS,” YouTube, July 31, 2014, accessed January 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20BKdmnA_No.

91 Interview conducted by the researcher with one of Khasham’s inhabitants.

seize the properties of some of Al-Bu Chamel's dignitaries, IS members belonging to the tribe stood against the *Hisbah* and used their authority to restore these properties.

IS was not the main reason behind the changing relationship between young generations and the leading traditional figures in the tribe. In fact, the inherent conflicts between the tribal houses played a major role in these changes, which explains the differences in the way tribal members who had pledged allegiance to IS treated their tribes in the previously mentioned examples.

Oil and tribes under IS

Prior to IS' control of Deir ez-Zor, most of the oil wells were controlled by tribesmen. After imposing its authority, IS established *Diwan* Al-Rikaz, which worked on organizing the extraction and management of oil resources.⁹² To this end, the organization divided the frame of work in this *Diwan* into production, collection, maintenance, machinery, and guarding departments.⁹³ IS recruited civil experts working in the oil sector to help in the management of production and maintenance, and charged its members with the collection of funds and the protection of wells. Oil revenues went directly to IS, which usually did not share these revenues with the tribe members.

IS changed its oil-selling model based on the security situation. During the first year of its rule, IS organization oversaw oil sales itself, but with the intensification of the international coalition's raids on oil wells and IS' need of manpower to guard and manage oil wells, the organization established bureaus to manage oil investment processes.⁹⁴ These bureaus would offer oil wells to investors from the tribes in return for a fee determined by the organization; the investor would benefit from the oil production in the respective well for a week in return for paying the price of the well's production in advance. These bureaus used to give priority to tribal members who had pledged allegiance to IS. Despite IS' keen adherence to denying tribal members any privileges in the oil sector, the members of the Al-Bu Chamel tribe in Dhiban next to the Al-Omar field and the members of the Al-Gu'ran tribe in Al-Tayanah, monopolized the investment of oil wells in the Al-Omar field. They effectively took advantage of their members' pledges of allegiance to IS.⁹⁵ Oil investment was even the main reason behind the rise in the pledges of allegiance to the organization between these two tribes. Not only did members of these two tribes monopolize investment, they even took advantage of their relationship with the

organization to obtain oil-refining contracts, since the organization's bodies needed fuel on an ongoing basis, contracting local oil refiners in return for money.

The Public Relations' Bureau (Diwan)

IS established diwans and bureaus to manage the areas it controlled while trying to dismantle tribal social structures and reproduce them according to its vision. IS organs, such as the *Hisbah*, the judiciary and security apparatuses, which were deployed in its areas of control were responsible for dealing with tribe members on an individual basis. IS implemented several policies like giving a free hand to the security apparatus over tribes in some areas and giving preferential treatment to those who had pledged their allegiance, giving them an advantage over the public.⁹⁶ In fact, people who had pledged allegiance to IS would get financial privileges and escape the control of the organization's organs. In light of the organization's economic and social tightening grip on tribesmen living in its areas of control and due to the lack of job opportunities, many tribe members, including entire families in many cases, pledged allegiance to IS. However, after the liquidation of its opponents in Deir ez-Zor, some tribes were reluctant to deal with the organization, prompting it to try to open up to those tribes. Thus, it created the *Diwan* in Deir ez-Zor, whose responsibilities involved the resolution of tribal disputes over lands, issues related to vengeance practices, and solving the problems of tribal members with IS organs, in addition to its supposed role in inciting tribal *sheikhs* to urge their tribesmen to join and fight in their organization. Under the organization's rule, the *Diwan* attempted to intervene in the restructuring of tribal leaderships and held several meetings in Dhiban, Jadeed Ageidat and Suwaydan, inviting well-known *sheikhs* and dignitaries such as *Sheikh* Khalil Al-Hafl,⁹⁷ Jamil Al-Rashid Al-Hafl⁹⁸ and Hamed Al-Ali.⁹⁹ During these meetings, the *Diwan* proposed the appointment of new *sheikhs* for Deir ez-Zor's tribes, an idea that was widely rejected by the participants in these meetings.

Prior to IS' control of the governorate, an armed conflict had erupted between the Al-Bu Hasan tribe from the city of Al-Asharah and the Al-Gu'ran tribe from the city of Al-Quriyah and ended without the two tribes reconciling. After IS took control of the region, members of the Al-Gu'ran tribe used their wide influence in the organization to obtain a decision from the Islamic Court, sentencing the Al-Bu Hasan tribe to pay a fine in compensation for damage to the properties of the Al-Gu'ran members. This happened despite the fact that the latter were the ones

92 Diwan Al-Rikaz is an Islamic term that IS reintroduced after declaring its Caliphate and is the body responsible for underground wealth.

93 Ayn Almadina, "Deir ez-Zor's oil from the revolution to the Islamic State," *op. cit.*

94 Ayn Almadina, "The oil investment office of Al-Tayana," Ayn Almadina, May 1, 2015, accessed February 2018, <https://goo.gl/bSYwXU>

95 One of the most important and productive oilfields in Syria.

96 The public or the ordinary Muslims, which are terms used by IS to refer to civilian Muslims in its areas of control.

97 Leading figure of Suwaydan from Al-Bu Hasan tribe.

98 A sheikh from the Al-Bu Chamel tribe.

99 Interview conducted by the researcher with some tribesmen who confirmed the holding of these meetings.

who had initiated the conflict and Al-Bu Hasan properties were the most affected. The *Diwan* succeeded in solving Al-Bu Hasan’s feud with the Islamic Court. In fact, IS sent a committee and some members from the Al-Gu’ran tribe from Iraq to consider their complaint.¹⁰⁰ Despite the fact that the Gu’ran tribe has members who had pledged allegiance to the organization, they were ordered to pay 70 million Syrian Liras as compensation for the damage caused by their attack on Al-Asharah.

The *Diwan* developed a network of relations with some tribal *sheikhs* and dignitaries, which helped it solve a number of tribal conflicts while trying to convince them, to no avail, to serve as officials in the *Diwan*. The *Diwan* continued to receive complaints from the residents about the arrest by IS security bureau of some of the towns’ inhabitants, but was not authorized to intervene in such cases. Its functions did not go beyond the cases of killings and revenge, and holding reconciliation meetings between the conflicting tribes following the call of tribal *sheikhs* and leaders in the region. For example, one of the Al-Suwaydan’s inhabitants was killed after a quarrel with one of his cousins, leading the *Diwan* to intervene, resolve the dispute and hand the murderer over to the Islamic police.¹⁰¹ The *Diwan* then coordinated a reconciliation between the conflicting parties through the mediation of the region’s *sheikhs* and dignitaries such as Jamil Al-Rashid Al-Hafl from the Al-Bu Chamel tribe and Kamal Najj Al-Jarrah, *Sheikh* of the Al-Dmeem tribe.

In an attempt to gain the tribes’ support in the ongoing IS battles, the tribes’ *Diwan* intensified its meetings with tribal *sheikhs* and dignitaries in early 2017 and asked them to form committees that would receive the complaints of tribesmen and issue verdicts in cases related to robbery and murder.

Tribes after the collapse of IS

The battles against IS were led by the international coalition on the one hand, and by Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime, on the other. This brought about the division of the tribes’ regions into two areas of influence: one to the north of the Euphrates River, controlled by the coalition-backed Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), and one to the south of the River, controlled mainly by the regime and its Iranian allies. This resulted in the conflict taking on political and economic dimensions in which the tribes were used as tools.

The YPG looked for allies among the contradicting tribal structures and established the Deir Ez-Zor military council, which included fighters belonging to various tribal groups, the most prominent of which were Al-

Shaayat and Al-Bkayyer.¹⁰²

After having controlled parts of Deir ez-Zor, the YPG held meetings with some of the tribes’ dignitaries and *sheikhs*.¹⁰³ The new map of alliances showed the rapprochement among dignitaries and *sheikhs* from the Al-Baggara tribe in the western countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the Al-Shaayat and Al-Bkayyer in the northern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, and the Kurdish administration. On the other hand, the regime intensified its contacts with the mayors and dignitaries of the Deir ez-Zor tribes in areas south of the Euphrates River. The idea was to mobilize them to recruit tribal members into the ranks of the regime forces to extend its control over the governorate and to attack the areas of influence of the Kurdish forces north of the river.

Following the collapse of IS, given these dominant parties’ race for winning the support of tribes in Deir ez-Zor in order to consolidate their influence and given the tribal structures and the multiple political agendas within the same tribe, it is impossible for those conflicting parties to obtain the support of tribes as socio-political functional blocs. This would prompt these aforementioned parties to support different tribes with competing interests, which would promote social divisions within the same tribe.

Some tribe members, specifically expatriates in the Gulf, are trying to revive the tribe and its leading figures. In their attempt to do so, various tribal parties were keen on attending the inauguration ceremony of Musaab Al-Hafl, who succeeded his father Sheikh Khalil Al-Hafl, as great Sheikh of the Al-Ageidat tribe, despite the great differences between them.¹⁰⁴ However, the tribal reality after the collapse of IS changed. In fact, with the multiplicity of allegiances inside the same tribe, the role of tribal houses as a more stable and possibly more effective socio-political entity than the tribe itself became all the more important.¹⁰⁵

IS was militarily defeated, but many of its tribal members are still in their areas, enjoying the protection of their tribes against any possible retaliation from members in the Kurdish People’ Protection Units or others who are loyal to the regime. Although the tribe ceased to be a socio-political unit exercising its sovereignty on a specific land, some parts of it preserved a security and tactical function, as illustrated before the emergence of IS organization and the jihadist movements. In other words, tribes were able to adjust both, under IS’ control and after its defeat.

100 Interview conducted by the researcher with one of the beneficiaries of the committee’s decision.

101 Interview conducted by one of Al-Suwaydan’s dignitaries.

102 Commander of the military council in Deir ez-Zor Ahmed al-Khubail from the Al-Bkayyer tribe who played a role in recruiting hundreds of members of his tribe to fight in the ranks of the council.

103 RT, “Deir ez-Zor: purposeful coordination and alliances with tribe sheikhs,” RT, December 11, 2017, accessed January, 2018, <https://goo.gl/se6WvJ>.

104 Son of Sheikh Khalil Abboud Al-Hafl, sheikh of Al-Ageidat tribe.

105 Dawod, op. cit.

Conclusion

Despite the disintegration of tribes in Syria and Iraq, most significantly in Deir ez-Zor, tribes in eastern Syria, whether large or secondary (with a limited number of members) remained an unavoidable actor for every external power that alter allegiances. Other methods included engaging them through political influence, such as the tribes' quotas in the Syrian People's Council and local authorities, or by military repression, as IS did. All these attempts aimed at creating a new form of tribalism that obeys the new (or old) dominant powers. However, all the forces that tried to disband tribes or subdue them ended up appealing for their support to consolidate their rule and influence nately ruled the region.

External powers in this case were first represented by the Ottoman Empire, followed by the French Mandate, then the Nation State, and lastly, the Baath regime by way of Hafez Al-Assad and his son Bashar's rule.

The protests that have erupted in Syria since 2011 have led to the creation of new social dynamics, both among the tribes of Deir ez-Zor and the existing 'external forces' such as the Syrian regime. Other powers that emerged include the Free Syrian Army factions, Al-Qaeda represented by the Nusra Front (now known as the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant or "Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham") and then the "IS Organization," which had declared "the Caliphate".

Different external powers successively controlled Deir ez-Zor, but their ways of dealing with the tribes were quite similar in the sense that they all adopted a policy of incentives and sanctions with tribal leaders.

Many external authorities tried to rule by dismantling the tribes' *Asabiyyah*, whether by changing the sources of economic rents and income such as the agrarian Reform Law in Syria (under the Baath Party), which weakened tribal *sheikhs*' authority, or redistributing lands and oil wealth as a way of creating new in the region.

One of the most valuable insights is that tribal *Asabiyyah* was no longer the main large-scale source of mobilization and solidarity in Syria. Tribes have, in fact, lost their leading role and are now deriving their security, political and economic influence from an 'external force' that has exploited power struggles between dignitaries in the same tribe and among different tribes.

Asabiyyah remained a source of mobilization in local conflicts and, at times, provided the appropriate framework for jihadist movements to assimilate the feelings of rejection and direct them in a way that transcended tribes, their hierarchy and leadership structure. The relationship between Deir ez-Zor tribes

and the jihadist groups ranged, depending on the time, from alliances to hostile relations. In Syria, IS did not learn its lessons from the defeat of Al-Qaeda by the Arab tribes that formed the Sahawat movements in Iraq. It adopted the policy of subjugating tribes and other actors with greater force and brutality, although Al-Qaeda learned from the Iraqi experience that it should be less intrusive in the tribes' affairs while ensuring their loyalty. On the other hand, IS considered that the collapse of Al-Qaeda in Iraq was a result of its failure to suppress the opposition, and that the tribes are a potential threat that might undermine its authority. Moreover, the international military bombings of IS remained the crucial factor in the organization's military defeat. Nevertheless, the approach that IS adopted towards the existing social structures (including the tribes) contributed further to its decline.

The relationship between the Syrian tribes, on the one hand, and the Nusra Front and IS, on the other, has explicitly shown that tribal frameworks in the region cannot be bypassed or used by jihadi organizations to consolidate their rule and influence. It was also established that the tribes' relationships with these jihadi groups have remained largely utilitarian, aimed at securing the greater interest and the largest influence of the tribe no matter which party would secure these needs. In fact, Al-Qaeda concluded that it had to be more patient in dealing with the local population while interfering less in their affairs and that imposing Sharia must be compatible with the society's nature. Otherwise, the society will reject religion and the Mujahideen.

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