# 11

# THE 'CAMEL DISPUTE': CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY AND TRIBAL CONFLICTS IN THE IRAQI–SYRIAN BORDERLAND, 1929–34

*Laura Stocker*[1]

The history of Bedouin tribes and tribal-state relations in the Middle East has long been written from a nation-centred perspective, whereby tribes were reduced to 'a negligible factor in state formation'.[2] Recent scholarship on borderland studies, however, has shown that when historians shift their perspective to the margins of states and empires, actors previously considered insignificant suddenly appear to play a much more relevant role than generally acknowledged.[3] As Sam Dolbee has argued for the case of the Shammar tribe in the late Ottoman Empire, 'it is in part the Shammar's place on the margins that gave them power' – a fact that can be easily overlooked if scholars continue to focus on centralised state institutions.[4] Alan Mikhail has similarly suggested that the 'traditional concentration of

[1] I thank Jordi Tejel, Johann Büssow, Ramazan Hakkı Öztan and Nadav Solomonovich for their insightful comments on this chapter.

[2] Ronen Zeidel, 'Tribes in Iraq. A negligible factor in state formation', in Uzi Rabi (ed.), *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 171–87.

[3] See e.g. Jordi Tejel, 'Making Borders from Below: The Emergence of the Turkish-Iraqi Frontier, 1918–1925', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 5 (2018), pp. 811–26.

[4] Sam Dolbee, 'The Locust and the Starling: People, Insects and Disease in the Late Ottoman Jazira and After, 1860–1940' (PhD thesis, New York University, 2017), p. 107.

historians on political or administrative territorial division can be bypassed, or at least broadened or balanced' by taking ecological spaces and nomadic groups as analytic units instead.[5] Drawing on this discussion, this chapter looks at Bedouin tribes in the *bādiyat al-Shām*, the desert and steppe region stretching between eastern Syria, western Iraq, northeastern Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia.[6] By looking at the desert borderlands, the chapter seeks to rethink how states extended their sovereignty over people and territory situated at the margins of the newly established states in the Middle East during the interwar period.

This study is mainly concerned with the Bedouin communities that belonged to the ʿAnaza tribes (Arabic: ʿAšāʾir ʿAnaza), which formed one of the largest tribal confederations in the *bādiyat al-Shām* region. After the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire the territories of the migratory circuits of the ʿAnaza were divided by new international borders that defined the mandates of Syria, Iraq and Transjordan as well as the independent kingdom of Saudi Arabia.[7] Yet, the emergence of new state borders did not herald a sudden departure from the existing forms of mobility, as the ʿAnaza tribes continued their regular seasonal migrations across various state territories. Such free movement across international borders was granted to them by the governments of the French and British mandatory powers who primarily aimed to control rather than restrict the cross-border mobility of Bedouin tribes. Since most of the ʿAnaza communities became affiliated either to Iraq

[5] Alan Mikhail, 'Introduction – Middle East Environmental History: The Fallow between Two Fields', in Alan Mikhail (ed.), *Water on Sand. Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 11.

[6] The Arabic term *bādiya* is generally translated as 'desert'. Hence, there is no fixed geographical definition of what the *bādiya* is. However, it is often used to refer to the larger Northern Arabian desert and steppe region stretching from the Arab Peninsula over the Sinai and Western Iraq until Syria: see Chatty Dawn, *From Camel to Truck. The Bedouin in the Modern World* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2013). The *bādiyat al-Shām* accordingly refers to the northern part of this region and is often applied equivalently to the term 'Syrian Desert'. In percentage terms, this region accounted for a relatively large area of the newly established nation states of Syria, Iraq and Jordan.

[7] Saudi Arabia as an independent kingdom was only established 1932 with the unification of the kingdoms of the Najd and the Hejaz.

or Syria, this study focuses mainly on the cross-border dynamics between the territories of these two states.

The emphasis of the chapter is on a short, albeit pivotal, period for state formation processes in the Middle East between the late 1920s and mid-1930s. This period marks a transition from what Cyrus Schayegh has called the 'Ottoman twilight' to an era when the Middle East 'became primarily an umbrella region of nation states'.[8] Across the desert borderlands, too, the consolidation of nation states and the demarcation of state borders went alongside with the tighter control of Bedouin tribes and growing state efforts to implement security. Yet, such processes were not the result of an alleged 'natural course' of state formation, whereby state power expands from the centre to the margins, but rather emerged in conjunction with bottom-up responses from local actors to nationalist and imperial policies.[9] The cross-border position of the Bedouin further complicated this interactive dynamic, as the great mobility of the Bedouin made the objectives of taxing the tribes and restricting tribal raiding largely dependent on transnational cooperation. The cross-border policing of tribes in turn triggered constant disputes of sovereignty and administrative responsibilities over people and territory in the borderlands between the French and British mandates.

This chapter examines such cross-border dynamics by taking a closer look at one episode of livestock raiding that emerged against the backdrop of long-standing conflict between two rival coalitions of the ʿAnaza tribes. The affair illustrates how Bedouin cross-border mobility and tribal conflicts increasingly became tools with which imperial and national governments pressured one another and advanced claims for territorial control and state sovereignty along the borderlands. Moreover, it brought to the fore the progressively diverging aims in tribal policing of the French-Syrian and British-Iraqi governments. The conflict took place in the late 1920s during the winter migration of the

[8] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). This development, as Ramazan Hakkı Öztan has argued, was closely interlinked with economic policies that developed out of the Great Depression of 1929. See Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Great Depression and the Making of the Turkish–Syrian Border', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 52 (2020), pp. 311–26.

[9] See also Tejel, 'Making Borders from Below'.

Syrian ʿAnaza tribes to Iraqi territory involving tribes from both sides. Two well-informed contemporaries, the British military officer John Bagott Glubb and the German archaeologist Max von Oppenheim both described the episode as the last flare-up of large tribal raiding in the European mandates, which was successfully suppressed by the state government, and further cited the affair as proof that the state had gained the upper hand in the desert borderlands and full control over the Bedouin tribes.[10] Yet, looking at the conflict from a cross-border perspective reveals a more complicated picture and mitigates such narratives of European colonial prowess. Because of its transborder dimensions, the conflict had soon evolved into a major diplomatic issue between the French-Syrian and the British-Iraqi governments. Instead of reverting to international agreements which stipulated the regulation of such disputes through joint transnational conferences, both sides started to interfere directly, seizing large numbers of livestock from the Bedouin of the other state, which led to the naming of the affair as the 'ʿAmārāt-Ruwalla camel dispute'.[11] However, the imminent settlement of state borders and the efforts of different governments to secure the loyalty of powerful tribes gave the Bedouin considerable leeway to assert their own interests and get the authorities to act on their behalf. Thus, Bedouin tribes were not simply passive recipients of imperial and central state politics but rather pursued their own political and economic interests. By analysing the episode of the 'camel dispute', the chapter argues that the desert borderlands of the new nation states were a central site and their Bedouin population key actors in negotiating the territorial and political order of the post-Ottoman Middle East.

Tracing Bedouin agency is certainly a difficult task, given the absence of sources written by indigenous actors themselves. One way to capture them, as Pekka Hämäläinen has suggested, is the cross-checking of sources from different imperial powers.[12] This chapter adopts this approach by simultaneously consulting archival material from the French and British mandate administrations, complemented with ethnographies, travelogues and private collections from Arab and European contemporaries as well as tribal encyclopaedias. The first

[10] John Glubb, *Arabian Adventures. Ten Years of Joyful Service* (London: Cassell, 1978), p. 211 and Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, *Die Beduinen. Band 1. Die Beduinenstämme in Mesopotamien und Syrien* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1939), p. 76.

[11] The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FO 371/14556, E5598/251/89.

[12] Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 13.

part of the chapter provides an overview on the course of tribal-state relations since the expansion of modern statehood into the desert and steppe regions of the Middle East. In the second part, the episode of the 'camel dispute' is described in more detail and analysed in its specific context of the consolidation of the Middle Eastern nation states in the late 1920s to mid-1930s. However, before elaborating on these aspects, it is necessary to briefly discuss the terms or the categories 'tribes' and 'tribal confederation' as well as to provide some explanations on how, in this chapter, they are understood and used in relation to the ʿAnaza communities.

## The ʿAnaza Tribes

European orientalist tradition as well as Arab urban-centred scholarship have long perceived tribes (Arabic: *ʿašāʾir or qabāʾil*) and tribal confederations as homogenous, primordial groups with a peculiar socio-economic or political structure. Yet, this 'essentialist and ahistorical notion' of tribes has been widely discredited by anthropologists and historians over the past few decades.[13] Instead, scholars began to analyse the concept of 'tribe' in its specific social, economic and political contexts, showing the diversity and fluidity of social formations referred to by this generic term. This chapter builds on this more recent scholarship that conceptualises tribes and tribal confederations as 'social groups that claim descent from a common male ancestor and are connected with a specific territory at a particular time but that are not politically united'.[14]

As a socially constructed unit, the ʿAnaza confederation, as Astrid Meier and Johann Büssow have suggested, can thus best be described with Benedict Anderson's concept as 'imagined community'.[15] The ʿAnaza tribes were connected to each other by different – real or fictive – genealogical lineages, tracing back to the founding father of the confederation ʿAnza Ibn Wail Ibn Qasad.[16] The tribe was further divided into two major divisions,

[13] Samira Haj, 'The problems of tribalism. The case of nineteenth-century Iraqi history', *Social History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1991), p. 47.

[14] Astrid Meier and Johann Büssow, 'ʿAnaza', in Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_23785>. First published online 2012 (accessed 31 March 2020).

[15] Ibid.

[16] ʿAbbas al-Azzawi, ʿAshaʾir al-ʿIraq (Baghdad: Matbaʿat Baghdad, 1937), p. 258.

first, the Ḍanā Bishr, which included the tribes of the Fadʿān, the Sbaʿa and the ʿAmārāt, and second, the Ḍanā Muslim, consisting of the Ruwalla (together with the Muḥallaf they built the Jilās), Ḥasana and the Wuld ʿAlī. Intertribal relations during the interwar years in the *bādiyat al-Shām* were largely shaped by the rivalry and conflicts between these two divisions. However, like tribes themselves, tribal alliances were fluid and based on different, often temporary, economic, political and ecological considerations of tribal groups. Genealogical lineages thereby mostly served as 'reference systems' on which such alliances were founded but did not have to be.[17]

Alongside other tribal confederations such as the Shammar and the Ḍafīr, the ʿAnaza tribes belonged to the a*hl al-'ibl* ('people of the camel'), which denominated 'nomadic, camel-herding tribes'.[18] This was primarily a self-attribution, which distinguished them positively from other allegedly 'less noble' tribes whose socio-economic foundations were mostly based on sheep breeding or temporary sedentariness. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the socio-economic distinction between them increasingly blurred. However, during the interwar period the privileged social and political status of the Bedouin was recognised and reinforced by the European mandate administrations, which relied on the military power and territorial knowledge of these tribes to govern the desert borderlands of the new nation states. In the following section, the course of tribal-state relations from the late Ottoman to the interwar period is examined in more detail.

## Tribal-State Relations in the Middle East from the late Ottoman to the interwar period

### *The late Ottoman period*

According to oral traditions recorded by Arab historians and European anthropologists, the ʿAnaza tribes had moved from the southern regions of the Arabian Desert to Syria and Mesopotamia in the early eighteenth century, together with the Shammar, and subjugated the long-time predominant

[17] Johann Büssow, 'Negotiating the Future of a Bedouin Polity in Mandatory Syria: Political Dynamics of the Sba'a-'Abada during the 1930s', *Nomadic Peoples*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2011), p. 70.

[18] 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Rawi, *Al-Badiya* (Baghdad: Matbaʿat al-'Anī, 1949), pp. 109–16.

Mawāli confederation.[19] Henceforward, it was mainly the ʿAnaza and the Shammar that controlled the desert and steppe areas of Syria, Mesopotamia, the Najd and Hejaz. With new reform policies from the mid nineteenth century onwards, however, the Ottoman central government began to expand its administrative and infrastructural reach into the eastern Arab provinces. The hitherto largely independent Bedouin communities began to be subject to tighter state control.[20] Ottoman reform policies implied profound transformations of the social, economic and physical landscape of the Arab Middle East. The introduction of a new land code in 1858 and the development of agricultural land underpinned efforts to sedentarise the highly mobile population in order to make it accessible for taxation and conscription. New settlements protected by police posts against Bedouin infringements emerged at the desert's margins and cultivation advanced further into the steppe land.[21]

The Ottoman authorities aimed to restrain the frequently erupting tribal wars between the ʿAnaza and the Shammar and to restrict tribal raiding which posed a security threat to the settled communities as well as to the transdesert caravan routes. At the same time, they sought to enforce taxation and conscription among the tribes. Such efforts were mostly of limited success and tribes frequently evaded entirely the access of state authorities. In general, however, tribal-state relations resembled more a partnership than one of unilateral domination.[22] The political, military and economic power position of the ʿAnaza in Syria and Mesopotamia, and the fact that important trade,

[19] Oppenheim, *Die Beduinen*, p. 68. To be sure, the migration of the ʿAnaza and the Shammar Bedouin to Syria and Mesopotamia did not occur all at once but was the result of several waves of migration of these communities. Since there is only incomplete historical evidence, both, the reasons for and the course of these migrations are disputed among scholars. For a detailed study of this context which focuses on the Mawāli tribes, see Stefan Winter, 'Aufstieg und Niedergang des osmanischen Wüstenemirats (1536–1741): Die Mawali-Beduinen zwischen Tribalisierung und Nomadenaristokratie', *Saeculum*, Vol. 63 (2013), pp. 249–63.

[20] Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1850–1921* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[21] Norman Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syrian and Jordan, 1800–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[22] M. Talha Çiçek, *Negotiating Empire in the Middle East. Ottomans and Arab Nomads in the Modern Era, 1840–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

pilgrim and communication routes passed through their territories, made them essential allies for the central government and other regional power holders.[23] Unable to control the Bedouin with military force, the Ottoman authorities formed alliances with powerful tribes and tribal sheikhs in particular. For the levying of taxes and protection of routes the latter were rewarded by subsidies payment, land concessions and political titles. Such Ottoman policies boosted the authority of a small number of sheikhs and heralded a period retrospectively referred to as 'the age of the sheikhs' (*zaman al-shuyūkh).*[24] The German archaeologist Max von Oppenheim in 1899 noted that many of the ʿAnaza sheikhs competed for being recognised by the government as the paramount sheikh of their tribe.[25] The important power positions of some ʿAnaza sheikhs, such as Fahd Ibn Hadhdhāl from the ʿAmārāt, Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān from the Ruwalla and Mujḥim Ibn Muhayd from the Fadʿān in the European mandates of the interwar period thus already dated back to the late Ottoman period.

It was also in this late Ottoman context when significant changes took place in the socio-economic landscape of the desert and steppe land, characterised by a gradual shift from camel to sheep breeding and agricultural cultivation. The greater part of the ʿAnaza, however, continued to depend on camel breeding and the caravan trade. While tensions remained between the settled population and Bedouin due to tribal raiding, the expansion of settlements and cultivated land went alongside increasing socio-economic entanglement between these communities.[26] Many of the growing urban

[23] India Office Record/L/PS/20/C131, 'Personalities, Arabia', April 1917, in *Qatar Digital Library*, Qatar National Library (ed.), <https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000884.0x000164> (2020), p. 104. (Accessed 20 January 2020).

[24] See e.g. Thorsten Schoel, 'The Hasana's Revenge: Syrian Tribes and Politics in their Shaykhs Story', *Nomadic Peoples*, Vol. 15, No. 1, (2011), p. 102 and Katharina Lange, 'Heroic Faces, Disruptive Deeds: Remembering the Tribal Shaykh on the Syrian Euphrates', in Dawn Chatty (ed.), *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st century* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 99–122.

[25] Stiftung Rheinisch-Westfälisches Wirtschaftsarchiv zu Köln, Abt. 601, Nachlass Max von Oppenheim, (hereafter, RWWA 601), 188, 'Aneze-Beduinen' (1899 [1935]), pp. 14–15.

[26] See e.g. Lewis, 'Nomads and Settlers'.

centres and villages developed into new regional trade hubs during the late nineteenth century and became important markets for pastoralist products.[27] In the summer, when the Bedouin tribes moved to the margins of the desert, they sold their livestock products in the cities and villages, rented camels to merchants and pilgrims for the crossing of the transdesert routes and, in turn, purchased manufactured goods. Sheikhs often had their new landholdings cultivated by sedentary farmers or smaller allied tribes with whom they entered into a relationship of tenancy. In sum, the expansion of modern territoriality, as Reşat Kasaba noted, did not always contradict Bedouin interests, but rather they 'came to be embedded in the institutions and practices of modern states in the late and post-Ottoman world'.[28]

*The interwar period*

In the political reordering of the Middle East during and right after the First World War the ʿAnaza, as Oppenheim noted, 'represented their interests with considerable skill'.[29] Many of these tribes constituted a large military and human force and therefore precious allies for various warring parties. This allowed the sheikhs of powerful tribes, such as Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān of the Ruwalla, to change sides if necessary and ensure they would eventually be on the winning side of the war.[30] After the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, however, the Middle East was divided into different spheres of interest by European powers and the newly established states were placed under the mandatory rule of France and Britain – officially commissioned by the League of Nations to administratively and militarily support them until

[27] See e.g. Barout Jamal, 'La renaissance de la Jéziré : Deir ez-Zor ottomane, de la désertion à la reconstruction', in Jean-Claude David and Thierry Bossière (eds), *Alep et ses territoires, Fabrique et politique d'une ville (1868–2011)* (Beirut, Damascus : Presses de l'Ifpo, Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2014), pp. 105–19.

[28] Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire, Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), p. 124.

[29] Oppenheim, 'Die Beduinen', p. 75. (All translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.)

[30] Philip S. Khoury, 'The Tribal Shaykh, French Tribal Policy, and the Nationalist Movement in Syria between the Two World Wars', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (April 1982), pp. 180–93.

they would be able to function as independent nation states.[31] In Iraq and Transjordan, the British mandatory power established Arab governments under the Hashemite King Faisal in Iraq and King Abdullah in Transjordan, which were placed under the control of British advisers.[32] The French governed Syria, according to the principle of 'divide and rule', as a loose confederation of multiple states that were united to the Syrian Republic in 1930.[33] In defining the borders of the new states, the location of tribal territories was rarely taken into account. The ʿAnaza migratory circuits spanned across the state territories of British Iraq and Transjordan, French Syria and the Najd. Although the Bedouin continued to migrate across different national borders each tribe was assigned a national affiliation. The reorganisation of the political landscape and of regional power distribution simultaneously caused major shifts in tribal alliances, leading to tribal disintegration. Some ʿAnaza sections moved entirely to the Najd, not only because of Ibn Saud's favourable taxation policies for nomadic tribes but also in the hopes that they could pursue their Bedouin way of life better there than under the European mandates.[34] Most of the ʿAnaza, however, chose to side with the French government in Syria, home to their main market towns and summer grazing lands. Only the ʿAmārāt became British-Iraqi subjects, as they were orientated towards Baghdad and the Middle Euphrates.

In broad terms, European mandatory powers perpetuated the Ottoman tribal policies which not only suited their political, economic and strategic interests, but also proved to be a cost-efficient way to govern and safeguard the vast desert frontiers. Both the French and the British continued to excel on the instrumentalisation of tribal leaders by distributing subsidies and land

[31] For a comprehensive introduction into the mandate system, see Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, *The Routledge History of the Middle East Mandates* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[32] For a study of the British Mandate in Iraq see Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq. Contriving King and Country* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

[33] For a detailed study of the French Mandate in Syria see Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate. The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[34] Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (hereafter, CADN), Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 1363, 'Notice Tribu Roualla', 20 août 1934.

concessions for the provision of security of imperial infrastructure in the desert, further consolidating the sheikh's power position. In Syria in particular, the ʿAnaza sheikhs acquired important power positions in the administration of the borderlands. In the early mandate period, the administration of the entire desert borderlands in Syria were assigned to Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān, the paramount sheikh of the Ruwalla, and to Mujḥim Ibn Muhayd from the Fadʿān. Although this system only lasted a very short time, both sheikhs remained at the top of the list of French subsidy payments throughout the interwar years. In Iraq, too, the ʿAnaza under Fahd Ibn Hadhdhāl had already, during the First World War, become one of the most important British tribal allies in Iraq's southern and western desert. This partnership between the ʿAmārāt and the British continued during the interwar years and their relations only cooled off with the expansion of direct state control in the late 1920s.[35]

In addition, the European desert administrators also relied on their own military intelligence officers who were usually assigned as 'advisers' of the sheikhs or local administrators and delivered intelligence on tribal migration, raiding and desert resource distribution.[36] Recent scholarship has argued that rather than working for a single state, the sphere of influence of these officers spanned the entire 'desert corridor'.[37] In Syria, French desert officers operated under the military intelligence service, the 'Service de Renseignement' – which was later transformed into the 'Service Spéciale du Levant' – as well as under the tribal control board of the 'Contrôle Bédouin', established in 1920.[38] The British counterpart in Iraq were the Special Service Officers (SSO) who operated under the command of the Royal Air

[35] Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'The ʿAmārāt, their Shaykh and the Colonial State. Patronage and Politics in a Partitioned Middle East', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 58, Nos. 1–2 (2015), pp. 163–99.

[36] Martin Thomas, 'Bedouin Tribes and the Imperial Intelligence Services in Syria, Iraq and Transjordan in the 1920s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2003), pp. 539–61.

[37] Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'Running the Corridor: Nomadic Societies and Imperial Rule in Interwar Syrian Desert', *Past & Present*, Vol. 220 (August 2013), pp. 185–215.

[38] Christian Velud, 'French Mandate Policy in the Syrian steppe', in Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam (eds), *The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 70.

Force (RAF). The air force was the central element of British tribal policing in Iraq but was also frequently deployed by the French in Syria. The use of air power was seen as a 'cheap and effective' means to control the vast desert areas and its Bedouin population. The practice of collective punishment of 'unruly' tribes by bombing of tribal camps and villages was almost a daily aspect of life in the desert. Such practices were being justified by the deeply rooted colonial notions that the Bedouin could only be disciplined by the use of force.[39] The idea that they were to be ruled along different governmental rationales than the rest of the population was also reflected in the legal and administrative separation of the Bedouin and the desert borderlands. This kind of 'alternative modes of sovereignty and rule' was in fact a shared feature of many colonial borderlands of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was built on the notion that 'tribal populations' needed to be governed by their 'own laws and customs'.[40] At the same time, this separation was based on a paternalistic, romanticising discourse according to which, as Toby Dodge has noted, the Bedouin tribal organisation reflected a 'democratic system of equality' where 'leaders were naturally selected on the basis of strength of character'.[41] It was this notion of the Bedouin as the 'noble savage' that largely determined the tribal policies of European mandate administrations in the Middle East.

In Syria, the separation of the Bedouin population was implemented in the form of a semi-autonomous state in the desert (*bādiya*) that was divided by a physical boundary from the cultivated areas (*mamūra*). This internal boundary not only separated two different legal spheres but also served as a way of controlling and disarming the Bedouin tribes when they entered the cultivated areas. In many regards this internal boundary was equally, if not more important than international borders for the channelling and control of Bedouin mobility. As for Iraq, the extraordinary legal status of the Bedouin

39 Priya Satiya, *Spies in Arabia. The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 239–62.

40 Benjamin D. Hopkins, 'The Frontier Crimes Regulation and Frontier Governmentality', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (May 2015), p. 370.

41 Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq. The Failure of Nation-building and a History Denied* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2003), p. 77.

was inscribed in the Tribal Civil and Criminal Dispute Regulation (TCCDR) and incorporated into the constitution in 1925. The TCCDR was applied to all members of 'tribal communities', and thus concerned basically the entire Iraqi rural population. As such, it established a general division between the rural and urban population, which reflected one of the most important features of British rule in Iraq.[42] In both states, Bedouin tribes were also granted certain privileges that did not apply to the rest of the steppe population. These included the free movement across state borders and the taxation of livestock in lump sums rather than on a per capita basis.

Until the late 1920s state interference into Bedouin affairs was mostly limited to matters concerning the settled population or the safety of imperial infrastructure. The French and British paid less attention to intertribal raiding, seeing it not as an act of tribal resistance, but rather 'as part of the natural cadences of Bedouin life' which was thus rather 'a force to be managed [. . .] than an object to be eradicated'.[43] The British 'rules for raiders', a legislation that existed for a short period of time in 1925 and established rules for the conduction of intertribal raids, is exemplary for this approach.[44] However, for different reasons, the late 1920s marked a turning point in the administration of the borderlands and in state policing of Bedouin tribes across the region. This was when the state authorities on either side of the Syrian-Iraqi border began to increasingly interfere into 'tribal affairs' and advanced efforts to extend greater security in the desert borderlands, while also trying to extract resources in the form of taxes on livestock. In explaining this shift towards tighter state control in the borderlands, scholars have pointed to a number of episodes. In Syria, for instance, after the Great Revolt that lasted from 1925 to 1927, the French became increasingly afraid of a union of tribal sheikhs with the nationalist urban elite as well as the emergence of powerful tribal alliances. Henceforth tribal misconduct was punished more severely by air bombardment and the politics of 'divide and rule' among the Bedouin was conducted more decisively.[45] Thus, they gradually cut the subsidies of great

[42] Ibid., pp. 63–83.

[43] Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate. Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 166.

[44] Fletcher, 'The ʿAmārāt', pp. 178–86.

[45] Thomas, 'Bedouin tribes', p. 559.

tribal sheikhs like Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān and Mujḥim Ibn Muhayd and began to distribute them among different leaders of smaller tribes. In British Iraq and Transjordan, it was the Ikhwān revolt from 1927 to 1930, and its devastating effect on the tribes whose grazing lands were placed on the border with Saudi Arabia, that pushed the state expansion into the desert districts.[46]

The reconstruction of the ʿAnaza 'camel dispute' below shows yet another reason for this shift in tribal policing of the desert – namely the growing disillusionment with the Bedouin sheikhs who were unable to represent and control the steppe population as hoped. This was not least due to the paradox on which the tribal policy of the European mandate power was based: while it boosted the power of the sheikhs, it also caused them to become increasingly distant from other members of the tribal community. Due to their growing wealth, many sheikhs withdrew into urban life and only occasionally accompanied their communities on their seasonal migrations into the desert. In this context, the differences between the British and French mandate systems, which hitherto had played only a marginal role in tribal policing, came to the fore, with 'the former pursu[ing] an unequal partnership with a dependent élite, [while] the latter required more direct control of the subject population'.[47] Since most studies have examined the evolution of tribal policing within a specific national context, transnational and cross-border perspectives have so far been neglected. Yet, as the 'camel dispute' highlights, interstate and cross-border dynamics were central to tribal-state relations. The episode further illustrates that although these developments restricted Bedouin autonomy, it was specifically in this context of imperial rivalry that tribes could also expand their agency by bringing state authorities to act on their behalf.

[46] From 1927 to 1930 the Ikhwān tribes in the Northern Najd and Hejaz revolted against ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Ibn Saud who had formerly used them to extend the territorial reach of his kingdom. After a peace agreement with the British, Ibn Saud, however, restricted the grazing rights of the Ikhwān, which led to an open rebellion of the latter who started large scale raids into Iraq, Transjordan and Kuwait. For a comprehensive overview on the costs of the Ikhwān attacks on Iraqi tribes see Antony Toth, 'Conflict and Pastoral Economy: The Costs of Akhwan Attacks on Tribes in Iraq, 1922–1929', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2002), pp. 201–27.

[47] Martin Thomas, 'French Intelligence-Gathering in the Syrian Mandate, 1920–1940, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2002), p. 1745.

## The ‘Camel Dispute’ and Cross-border Policing of Bedouin Tribes

The course of Bedouin migration occurred usually in seasonal circuits. During the hot summer months, when the tribes stayed at the fringes of the desert, the Syrian ʿAnaza were distributed along the cultivated areas between the upper Euphrates in the north and the Hauran in the south. The summer residences of the Iraqi ʿAnaza, on the other hand, were located in the vicinity of Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf in the Middle Euphrates. In winter, the tribes usually moved towards the Hamad, the desert region located in the borderlands of Iraq, Syria, Transjordan and Saudi Arabia. As such, Bedouin tribes enjoyed free movement over the international state borders of the French and British mandates. Indeed, as Benedetta Rossi has argued, ‘in desert-like environments’, control over people and movement was more important than control over territory.[48] In the British ‘desert corridor’, as Robert Fletcher has shown, state officials often saw political boundaries as a factor complicating Bedouin policing, since pastoral patterns of mobility often ‘invited and required them to reach out across state borders’.[49] As state borders began to be delimited by the late 1920s, however, the transgression of borders by Bedouin between the French and British mandates was increasingly interpreted as territorial claims, leading to severe interstate disputes. In order to avoid constant diplomatic incidents, cross-border policing of tribes was thus regulated in different agreements and conventions between the French and British mandate administrations. Such interstate regulation determined common procedures for the taxation and for the settlement of tribal conflicts. In 1927 Syria and Iraq signed the ‘provisional agreement on the regulation of the frontier tribes’ and in 1929 a similar agreement was concluded between Transjordan and Syria.[50] Nevertheless,

[48] Benedetta Rossi, ‘Kinetocracy: The Government of Mobility at the Desert’s Edge’, in Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (eds), *Mobility Makes States. Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 149.

[49] Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and the Tribal Question. Desert Administration and Nomadic Societies in the Middle East, 1919–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 181.

[50] United Nations Archive, League of Nations, ‘Provisional agreement concluded between Iraq and Syria for the negotiation of the affair of frontier tribes’, 6 April 1927, Mandates General, 1928–1932, 6A/1294/655, R2314.

unclear responsibilities over people and territory and lacking state capacities in the borderlands often obstructed interstate cooperation. Differing domestic political interests further led to increasingly divergent strategies in tribal policing by the end of the 1920s, which – as the 'camel dispute' illustrates – led to a sharp decline of interstate cooperation with regard to cross-border tribes for several years.

### *The beginning of the ʿAnaza 'camel dispute'*

The main elements of policing Bedouin mobility in the French and British mandates were the detection of general migration patterns as well as intelligence gathering on the state of tribal alliances and the distribution of grazing land that allowed insight into any deviation from these patterns. Yet, European colonial powers often misinterpreted the nature of tribal migrations, understanding them as based primarily on social customs, when in fact, they were mainly defined by the distribution of desert resources and tribal alliances.[51] Martin Thomas has shown that government officials and military officers of the French and British desert administration were often poorly equipped and lacked knowledge of the population and the territory. Additionally, they composed their reports under great time pressure with little space for details, which led to the fact that 'connections within and between tribal groups were frequently missed or misunderstood'.[52] Existing methods of policing Bedouin mobility, as illustrated by the escalation of the dispute between the ʿAnaza tribes in 1929, quickly broke down when several unexpected factors or misunderstandings converged.

In January 1929 'practically the whole Ruwalla tribe' came to the Wadiyan area in Iraq where they stayed next to the Iraqi ʿAmārāt as well as the Syrian Sbaʿa and the Fadʿān.[53] The relatively water-rich Garaʿa depression in the Wadiyān area, which lay in the western desert of Iraq, was a popular winter residence for many Syrian ʿAnaza, in particular for the Sbaʿa and the Fadʿān, who usually grazed their herds together with Iraqi ʿAmārāt to which they were allied through the Ḍanā Bishr descent group. Yet, in the

[51] Haj, 'The problems of tribalism', p. 49 and Thomas, 'Bedouin tribes', p. 551.

[52] Thomas, 'Bedouin tribes', p. 550.

[53] TNA, FO 371/13760/E555/30/93, 'Intelligence Report No. 2 for the fortnight ended the 16th of January, 1929', 18 January 1929, p. 4.

winter of 1928 to 1929, different ecological, political and economic factors gave the impulse for the Syrian ʿAnaza including the Ruwalla, to move to Iraq in unusually larger numbers. First, the constant stream of attacks from the Ikhwān tribes on the borders of Saudi Arabia made the grazing lands of the ʿAnaza further south unattractive.[54] Secondly, the introduction of a new taxation system in Syria in 1927, which subjected Bedouin to tax payments for their livestock on a per capita basis instead of the traditional lump-sum payments, made it more attractive for the tribes to stay on the Iraqi side of the desert as well.[55] Finally, due to deteriorating weather conditions since the mid-1920s, which had gradually reduced the availability of water and grazing land in the desert areas of the *bādiyat al-Shām*, the tribes mingled on relatively small territory.[56] According to the British intelligence officer appointed to the area, however, there was little reason to be concerned, 'since the Ruwalla and the ʿAmārāt which both belong to the ʿAnaza were on good terms with each other'.[57] Indeed, the threat of the Wahhabi tribes that affected both the Ruwalla and the ʿAmārāt had led to a peace agreement between Fahd Ibn Hadhdhāl and Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān in 1923. The decision of the two sheikhs to shelve off their old enmity had eased the long-standing tensions between the Ḍanā Muslim and Ḍanā Bishr. However, Fahd had died in 1927 and Nūrī mostly resided in Damascus, while his grandson Fawwāz accompanied the tribesmen on their winter migration into the desert. As a result of these developments, the agreement between the ʿAmārāt and the Ruwalla lost its significance.[58] The British intelligence officers were dumbfounded when a conflict between the ʿAnaza broke out and the long-standing

[54] Antony Toth, 'The Transformation of a Pastoral Economy. Bedouin and States in Northern Arabia, 1850–1950', (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2000), pp. 214–67.

[55] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V, 987, 'Contrôle Bédouin de la Mouvance de Syrie, Année 1927, Rapport annuel', p. 1. TNA, Air 23/91, 'Special Service Office, Ramadi', 16 April 1927.

[56] Middle East Centre Archive, St Antony's College, Oxford (hereafter: MECA), Cecil John Edmonds collection, GB165-0095, Box 3, File 1 'Administration of Iraq 1930–1944. Ministry of Interior', p. 3.

[57] TNA, FO 371/13760/E555/30/93, 18 January 1929, p. 5.

[58] TNA, FO 481/18/E6564/3655/91, 'Annual Report of the Administration of the Southern Desert and the Defence of the Iraq Frontiers from 1st May 1929 to 30th April 1930', p. 3.

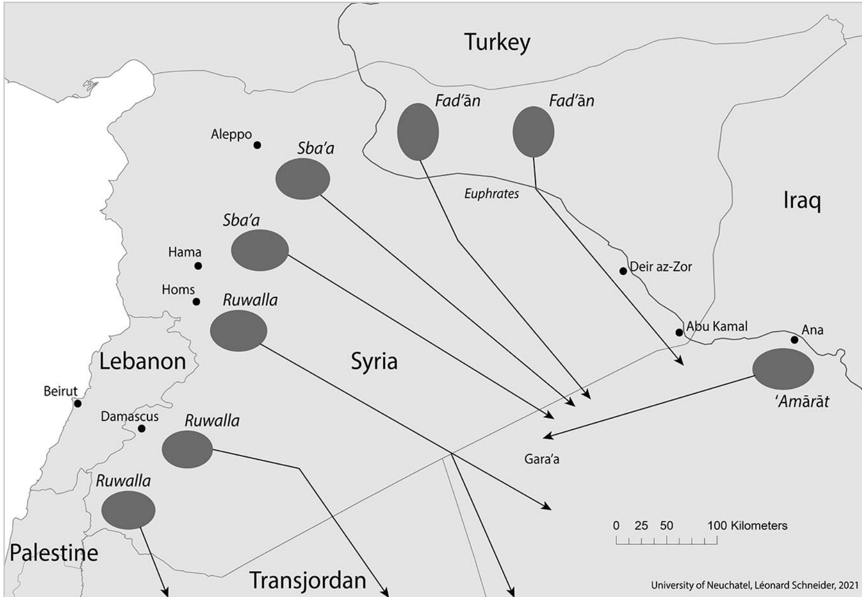


Figure 11.1 Direction of the winter migration of the ʿAnaza tribes in the 1930s
Credit: Data compiled from CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 552 and Oppenheim, 'Die Beduinen', map in annex titled 'Streifgebiete der Beduinen in Syrien und Mesopotamien'.

dispute between the Ḍanā Bishr and the Ḍanā Muslim coalitions escalated into a larger battle during the winter migration in early 1929.

Raiding incidents from the previous years had already strained the relations between the Syrian ʿAnaza with the Ruwalla on the one side, and the Sbaʿa and Fadʿān on the other. In January 1929 the Ruwalla sought to take revenge from the Sbaʿa for raids in Transjordan that had occurred some months before.[59] As the Ruwalla attacked the Sbaʿa, both the Fadʿān and the ʿAmārāt quickly got involved into the conflict. The Ḍanā Bishr, together with other Iraqi tribes, built an alliance against the Ruwalla, which in turn began to mobilise other tribes in Transjordan and Syria. The dispute, which had begun with a few raids between the Syrian tribes, therefore escalated into a conflict of two large coalitions in which, according to an article in the Syrian newspaper *al-Nahḍa*, some 40,000 tribesmen

[59] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 1363, 'Notice tribus Roualla' 20 août 1934, p. 5.

were involved.[60] Even though this figure cannot be verified, it reflects, if not the scale of Bedouin tribes' mobilisation capability, at least their success in building a threat potential. As the Iraqi police was considerably overwhelmed with the situation, the Royal Air Force eventually had to intervene, pushing the Ruwalla back over the border.[61] As systems of Bedouin policing broke down, tribal turmoil was often dealt with by the use of the air force and by bombing tribal raiders. European colonial powers justified such acts of state violence less by a lack of state capacity than, as Priya Satia has shown, through the idea that the Bedouin 'could tolerate random acts of violence in a way that others could not'.[62]

Back in Syria, the French gathered the ʿAnaza sheikhs and urged them to settle their claims.[63] Like many times before, this agreement did not last long and tensions between the Ruwalla and the Sbaʿa continued to flare up during the summer grazing season. The British were alarmed by alleged efforts of the Ruwalla to buy large numbers of weapons and demanded from the French to confiscate their machine guns before the tribes' winter migration to Iraq.[64] Yet, due to lack of will and/or capacities of state authorities, such demands often proved in vain or were carried out insufficiently. In late 1929, when the Syrian ʿAnaza moved, heavily armed, to the desert, the dispute between the tribes escalated once again and led to the death of two members of the Shaʿlān family.[65] This, according to the British reports, prompted the Ruwalla to launch intensive raiding against the Sbaʿa who resided on the Iraqi territory and also against numerous Iraqi tribes. In early 1930, the British officer Cecil

[60] The article is a French translation from Arabic from 'Faik', an informant of Max von Oppenheim. RWWA 601, 158/1, 'Razzu, Rualla, 'Traduction d'un article de journal du journal el Nahda, No 9/5 du 7 avril 1929'.

[61] TNA, FO 481/18/E6564/3655/91, 1 May 1929 to 30 April 1930, p. 3.

[62] Priya Satia, 'A Rebellion of Technology. Development, Policing and the British Arabian Imaginary', in Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke III (eds), *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), p. 9.

[63] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 1363, 'Notice tribus Roualla', 20 août 1934, p. 5.

[64] TNA, FO 371/14554/E1226/251/89, 'British consul in Beirut to the French High commissioner', 10 December 1929, p. 130.

[65] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 552, 'Expose de la situation des tribus nomades en 1930', p. 5.

Edmonds reported that 'the Ruwalla were completely out of hand, raiding not only the Sbaʿa but also again the Iraqi ʿAmārāt'.[66]

*The Ruwalla seizure and British-Iraqi tribal policing*

The British tended to attribute the main responsibility for the escalation of the conflict to Fawwāz whom they saw as 'spoilt, vain and anxious to make himself a name'.[67] In their view, it was only the power of the two 'great shaykhs', Fahd Ibn Hadhdhāl and Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān that so far had prevented larger conflicts between the different ʿAnaza branches. The escalation of the dispute also revealed that Maḥrūt Ibn Hadhdhāl, who had replaced Fahd as the sheikh of the ʿAmārāt, did not enjoy the prestige and authority of his father and that his influence over the Iraqi tribes was less considerable.[68] Maḥrūt, who found himself in a quandary between the government's demand not to counter-raid and the interests of his tribesmen in reclaiming the livestock, tried to settle the matter in direct negotiations with Fawwāz. Yet the latter refused to stop the raids as long as Maḥrūt sided with the Sbaʿa and other Iraqi tribes with whom the Ruwalla were at war.[69] It was the British officer John Bagott Glubb who eventually decided to take matters into his own hands.

In 1928 Glubb had been appointed administrator of the newly created district of the 'Southern Desert Province'. In the wake of the deteriorating security situation caused by the Ikhwān attacks, the Iraqi government had agreed to the creation of this new administrative unit in the southwestern borderlands of Iraq and had equipped it with a 200-men strong police unit, the so called 'southern desert force'.[70] In early 1930, when the ʿAnaza conflict escalated in Iraq's western desert, Glubb and the southern desert force had for

[66] MECA, Cecil John Edmonds collection GB165-0095, Box 3, File 1, 'Administration of Iraq 1930–1944. Ministry of Interior'.

[67] TNA, FO 481/18/E6564/3655/91, 1 May 1929 to 30 April 1930, p. 3.

[68] Fletcher, 'The ʿAmārāt', pp. 186–93.

[69] TNA, FO 371/14554/E1226/251/89, High Commissioner Baghdad to H.B.M's Consul General, Beyrout', 7 February 1930, p. 161.

[70] 'Report by his Majesty's government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the council of the League of Nations on the administration of 'Iraq for the year 1928', in ed. Robert L. Jarman (ed.), *Iraq Administration Reports 1914–1932, Vol. 9, 1928–1930,* (Melksham and Oxford: Redwood Press Ltd. & Green Street Bindery, 1992), p. 43.

the first time successfully restricted the Ikhwān raids. Glubb was convinced that in view of the decline of the powerful sheikhs, the establishment of a civil administration and state control was 'the only way of producing a really satisfactory situation in the desert area'.[71] The expansion of state administration into the desert went alongside with the strict prohibition of raiding for Iraqi tribes which was implemented by the 'raiding and plunder law' in 1927.[72] Glubb insisted that the enforcement of the anti-raiding law required that the government takes responsibility for the 'immediate recovery of loots', being 'the only efficacious way of settling intertribal raids'.[73] The raids of the Ruwalla also jeopardised the safety of the overland desert route which 'had become a public highway frequently crossed by convoys of cars and buses'.[74] As multiple attempts of the Iraqi police to intervene into the ʿAnaza conflict were of no avail, Glubb, together with heavily armed police cars and the assistance of two airplanes, seized more than 2,000 camels from the Ruwalla, killing 50 tribesmen during the operation. He brought the confiscated animals straight to the British-Iraqi desert post in Ruṭba where he distributed the largest part of them to the Iraqi tribes.[75]

Although the confiscation of livestock was not an uncommon means of punishing tribes or forcing them to cooperate, Glubb's operation – which Antony Toth has aptly described as an 'official raid' – was of a different kind.[76] Instead of making a provisional seizure and resolving the disputes through negotiations in which both sides would file their claims with a joint commission – a process that sometimes took several months – Glubb returned the animals single-handedly and directly to the tribes within a matter of few days. As such, the Ruwalla demands were only considered after the Iraqi tribes had

[71] TNA, CO 730/140/8/68058, 'Note on the causes which make it essential to establish and maintain a permanent administration in the desert', 12 June 1929, p. 1.

[72] The 'raiding and plunder law' placed all internal and cross-border raiding under severe punishment, see TNA, FO 371/15360/E3684/8/89, 'Extract from the Iraqi Government Gazette No. 20 dated the 14th of May 1927', p. 14.

[73] TNA, FO 371/14556/E 4555/251/89, 'The Residency, Baghdad to M.D. Tetreau, High Commissioner of the French Republic in Syria', 15 July 1930, p. 3.

[74] Glubb, 'Arabian Adventures', p. 201.

[75] TNA, FO 481/18/E6564/3655/91, 1 May 1929 to 30 April 1930, pp. 13–23.

[76] Toth, 'The Transformation of Pastoral Economy', p. 174.

been fully satisfied in theirs. Meanwhile, the British officer Peake had launched a similar operation on the Ruwalla sections camping in Transjordan whom he accused of raids against the Ḥuwaitāt, a Jordanian tribe.[77] Such operations undoubtedly aimed at gaining tribal loyalties, which had been put at severe risk by the Ikhwān raids and the prohibition of raiding.[78] At the same time, they were clear a demonstration of state power against powerful tribes such as the Ruwalla that still constituted a serious military and political power in the desert borderlands. Most important, they reflected the new course of British tribal policing in which the state was positioning itself as the primary arbitrator in tribal conflicts. From the British point of view, this development was inevitable, given the dwindling influence of the younger generation of Bedouin sheikhs on their tribesmen and their increasing unwillingness to cooperate with the government, as the example of Fawwāz showed. In this sense, they saw in the 'overbearing turbulence of the Ruwalla' an opportunity to 'set an example' and 'to punish some offender'.[79] At the same time, as the subsequent course of the affair shows, the British-Iraqi government sought quick and non-bureaucratic ways to resolve cross-border disputes, resorting to those who were, in their eyes, reliable tribal leaders with sufficient authority. Such strategies increasingly came into conflict with French-Syrian tribal policies. The British narrative portrays the Ruwalla raids in Iraq's western desert as the last raiding incident 'in the vast spaces of the Syrian desert' and the ultimate establishment of state power.[80] A look at this episode from the borderlands, however, challenges such linear narratives of imperial expansion and of alleged 'heroic victories' of British desert officers.

*The ʿAmārāt seizure and French-Syrian tribal policing*

In the operation against the Ruwalla, a Syrian tribe, the British had deliberately passed over the French-Syrian authorities, which, in the view of the

[77] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 552, 'Expose de la situation des tribus nomades en 1930', 1930, pp. 8–10.

[78] Toth, 'The Transformation of Pastoral Economy', p. 175.

[79] TNA, FO 481/18 E6564/3655/91, 1 May 1929 to 30 April 1930, p. 29.

[80] Glubb, 'Arabian Adventures', p. 211. A similar assertion is made by Oppenheim, who pointed out that the dispute was 'the last resurgence of the old conflict between the Bishr and the Ḍanā Muslim', which was 'effortlessly stifled by the French', concluding that the 'power over the desert has eluded the ʿAnaza'. (Oppenheim, 'Die Beduinen', p. 76.)

latter, had constituted a breach of the frontier agreement of 1927. The convention stipulated that the settlement of disputes involving tribes from different national allegiances were to be dealt with in conferences from joint arbitrary commissions – a practice that existed since the early mandate period. While such conferences involved a great deal of bureaucracy, including the collection and processing of records and reports dating back several years, they usually had a poor record. Although disputes were in theory often successfully settled, the tribes did not necessarily agree with the results and the government often lacked the will or the means to enforce the decisions. Christian Velud has further pointed out that French tribal policy, driven by growing fears of 'pan-Arab' tribal unions within and across Syria's borders, contributed to the fact that no long-term rapprochement between tribes was achieved.[81] As a result, the same conflicts were resumed over several conferences and their resolution was sometimes postponed for years. The ʿAnaza conflict brought to the fore the increasingly divergent opinions between the French and the British on the usefulness of direct interstate cooperation in tribal affairs, especially with regard to such joint conferences for the settlement of cross-border conflicts.

The lengthy bureaucratic efforts involved in these conferences were at odds with the British view that state authority in the desert was to be established 'by acts, not words'.[82] The lack of assertiveness of the French authorities in disarming the Ruwalla after the first conflicts in early 1929 further confirmed the British viewpoint. Instead of turning to the French authorities, Glubb thus approached Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān in order to settle the outstanding claims of the Ruwalla. Nuri immediately travelled from Damascus to Ruṭba where he negotiated a deal with the British and reconciled with the ʿAmārāt leader, Maḥrūt Ibn Hadhdhāl. The British regarded this gesture as a reprimand against the recalcitrant Fawwāz from Nuri and felt confirmed in their notion that the authority of the 'old' tribal sheikhs was still the safest and fastest way to deal with intertribal raiding.[83] Yet, Nūrī, with his decades of experience in dealing with various state and imperial powers, knew how

[81] Velud, 'French Mandate policy', p. 70.

[82] TNA, FO 481/18/E6564/3655/91 1 May 1929 to 30 April 1930, p. 29.

[83] Ibid.

to play the different sides off against each other in order to assert his own interest and that of his tribe. Back in Damascus he showed no intention of dropping the matter, but instead complained to the French High Commissioner about the British behaviour. The Ruwalla raids, he claimed, had only served to compensate for earlier losses to the Iraqi tribes and made the seizure unjustified.[84] With regard to Peake's operation in Transjordan, too, Nūrī felt unfairly treated, since the raids on the Jordanian Ḥuwaitāt, as he claimed, had not been carried out by his tribesmen but by a dissident section of the Ruwalla who had left him in 1926 to join the Wahhabis in the Najd. The French met Nūrī's complaint with an open ear. The French High commissioner, Henri Ponsot, instantly sent a letter to his British counterpart and the Iraqi minister of interior protesting against Glubb's operation.[85] At the same time, he used the opportunity to urge that the Syrian-Iraqi conference, which should have taken place in February in Abu Kamal, be resumed in order to achieve a final settlement of all existing claims of the tribes on both sides. Since the British and French had been unable to reach an agreement on the preconditions, the conference had been postponed indefinitely.[86]

Other than the British, the French regularly insisted on closer state cooperation in tribal matters not only with regard to tribal raiding but also to tax collection.[87] This was mainly to circumvent the involvement of tribal intermediaries and to maintain control over the British-Iraqi intentions towards the Syrian tribes. Besides the ever-present fear of a union of tribal leaders in Syria, the French also suspected the Iraqi government of seeking to form an anti-Syrian tribal alliance on Iraqi territory. Attempts of the Iraqi government to win tribal loyalties by tax exemptions and gifts to tribal leaders, as well as the British rapprochement with Ibn Saud in 1927, fuelled the paranoiac

[84] TNA, FO 371/14555/E3610/251/89, 'Haute Commissariat de la Republique Française à son Excellence Sir Humphrys Haute-Commissaire de sa Majesté Britannique en Irak, Bagdad', 19 May 1930, p. 2.

[85] Ibid.

[86] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 563, 'Note A.S. de la conférence Syro-Irakienne projetée à Abou-Kemal et de la sasie de gages sur les troupeaux ʿAmārāt', 18 avril 1931.

[87] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 561, 'Frontière Syro-Irakienne, Perception de l'oueidi des Chammars', 1930 and TNA, Air 23/158, 'Humphrey, British High Commissionner of Iraq to Ponsot, French High Commissionner of Syria', 17 April 1931.

vision of the French that Syria would soon be surrounded by a pan-Arab tribal union under British tutelage.[88] To satisfy the Syrian tribes in their demands towards the Iraqi tribes was thus also important to ensure tribal loyalties and to prevent further emigration to other state territories. Moreover, there was a danger that the ongoing feuds between the ʿAnaza, but also between various other tribes, would get out of control and cause a major split within the Syrian tribes. This, in turn, would have posed a serious threat to the security situation in the desert. The French thus simultaneously made domestic political efforts to defuse the situation and set up a peace conference in Palmyra in May 1930 to which they invited the forty most important tribal sheikhs, forcing them to sign a curfew that would end the state of warfare between them. At the same time, several measures that extended state control over the tribes such as the stricter punishment of raiding and the raising of livestock taxes were implemented and Nūrī's and other tribal leaders' tax share was cut.[89] The restriction of Bedouin autonomy, and of Nūrī's privileges in particular, made it all the more important to represent the interest of the Ruwalla and other Syrian tribes towards the British.

Yet the British-Iraqi authorities rejected Ponsot's suggestion for the reconsideration of the Ruwalla seizure in a joint conference, arguing that the usual procedure would not apply in this case since the raids of the Ruwalla had rather 'the nature of a hostile invasion into Iraq [than of] a conflict between tribes'.[90] Also with regard to the confiscation of the Ruwalla camels by Peake in Transjordan, the British refused to negotiate the matter. In view of the 'obvious ill will' of the British-Iraqi authorities, the French had to look for other ways to satisfy the Syrian tribes and to force the cooperation of the British on the ʿAnaza conflict.[91] Such an opportunity was presented to them when the ʿAmārāt together with other Iraqi tribes in spring 1930, soon after

[88] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 563, 'Compte-rendu de mission', 13 mars 1933.

[89] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V, 552, 'Expose de la situation des tribus nomades en 1930', 1930.

[90] TNA, FO 371/14556/E4555/251/89, 'Copy of memorandum NO. C/1955 dated the 18th June 1930, from the Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad', p. 6.

[91] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 552, 'Expose de la situation des tribus nomades en 1930', 1930, p. 13.

Glubb's operation, moved to Sukhna on Syrian territory where grazing conditions were particularly favourable. After having tried in vain to find an agreement with the British-Iraqi authorities on the preconditions for a joint conference, the French commander of the Contrôle Bedouin Colonel Callais proposed to seize camels from the Iraqi tribes in order to restitute them to the Syrian tribes. When the ʿAmārāt raided some smaller Syrian tribes and it became clear that a conference that could have settled the dispute diplomatically was unlikely to happen in the near future, Callais' proposal for the seizure was eventually approved.[92] In August 1930 the French-Syrian authorities thus confiscated more than 800 camels from the ʿAmārāt as well as several hundred from other Iraqi tribes that were camping with the latter and distributed them among the Syrian tribes.

*From a tribal to an interstate conflict in the early 1930s*

At first it seemed that the seizure of the ʿAmārāt camels did not fail in its intended effect as the British-Iraqi authorities eventually agreed to a joint commission meeting that should settle the outstanding claims of the Iraqi and Syrian tribes. However, they refused to enter any negotiations before the camels seized by the French authorities were fully restored to the Iraqi tribes.[93] The fulfilment of this condition encountered several difficulties, such as the refusal of the ʿAmārāt to accept the camels that were returned by the French as they were not the same as those that had been confiscated.[94] Additionally, the Syrian tribes themselves began to make individual arrangements with the ʿAmārāt and the Iraqi authorities for the restitution of the camels, which added to the confusion of the situation.[95] The French suggestion for settling the affair with a lump sum payment helped little to find a way out of the impasse.[96] The longer the affair of the 'camel dispute' dragged on, the more complicated it became to consider the demands of the tribes involved and the less likely it was to find a quick diplomatic solution. As a

[92] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 563, 18 avril 1931.

[93] TNA, FO 371/14556/E5598/251/89, 'From High Commissioner Baghdad to Consul General, Beyrout', 22 September 1930.

[94] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 563, 'Note au sujet des chameaux Amarats', 19 mai 1934.

[95] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 552, 'Sasie effectuée sur Amarat', 22 novembre 1930.

[96] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 563, 'Note au sujet des chameaux Amarats', 19 mai 1934.

result, the planned Syrian-Iraqi conference was postponed repeatedly. Even though, growing presence of police units in areas of potential tribal disturbances impeded larger incidents, raiding between the Syrian and Iraqi tribes, albeit on a smaller scale, went on and added new demands for the restitution of livestock.[97]

What had begun as a dispute between two sections of the ʿAnaza tribes evolved in the early 1930s into an interstate conflict over the question of tribal policies and territorial sovereignty in the Iraqi–Syrian borderland and beyond. In view of the imminent demarcation of state borders, both the French-Syrian and the British-Iraqi government increasingly encouraged Bedouin tribes to relocate to their territory in order to claim tribal lands in the border area. In Iraq, which officially became independent in 1932, King Faisal further saw the predominantly Sunni Bedouin tribes as potential allies to strengthen his position against the national Shiʿi majority and intensified efforts to win the loyalties of the powerful ʿAnaza tribes. Until the mid-1930s, for example, he persuaded a large part of the ʿAbada section of the Sbaʿa to move to Iraq.[98] As for the 'camel dispute', Faisal and the Iraqi government were similarly interested in restoring the good relations with Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān, which had suffered from the repressive operations against the Ruwalla. In 1932 and 1933 the Iraqi, with Glubb's support, had again confiscated large numbers of camels from the Ruwalla as a compensation for the ʿAmārāt seizure as well as for raids by the Ruwalla on Iraqi tribes that camped in the Najd.[99] However shortly after, Faisal offered Nūrī a compensation payment of 600 lira for the seized camels and restored a third of the animals to the Ruwalla.[100] These deals were usually made on the quiet, without officially informing the French authorities and underlined the claim of the British-Iraqi authorities that tribal affairs on Iraqi territory are their sole responsibility. On another occasion, when the Sbaʿa got raided by the Jordanian Ḥuwaitāt in Ruṭba, the Iraqi authorities applied to Glubb in Transjordan who then forced the Ḥuwaitāt to restitute the livestock to the

[97] TNA, Air 23/68, 'Report Western Desert', 13 January 1931.

[98] Büssow, 'Negotiating the future of a Bedouin polity', pp. 81–83.

[99] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 563, Sasie Amarat, 'Note sur les saisies effectuées par le gouvernement irakien sur des tribus syriennes', not dated.

[100] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 563, 'Feuille de Renseignement', 19 mai 1934.

Sbaʿa. Such actions by the British-Iraqi authorities on behalf of a Syrian tribe without the involvement of the French led to loud protest from the latter.[101]

Other state actors, such as the Saudi government, were simultaneously eager to control tribal affairs on their territory and to safeguard tribal loyalties. When the Ruwalla complained to Ibn Saud that they had been victims of numerous Sbaʿa raids on Saudi territory, the latter protested to the French-Syrian authorities on behalf of the Ruwalla arguing that 'the existing law in the Najd' would not allow him to 'ignore raids that took place on his territory'.[102] In a similar manner, Ibn Saud negotiated a deal with the British-Iraqi authorities for the restitution of camels to the Dughmān, the Najdi sections of the Ruwalla, whose animals had been confiscated by Glubb. By the early 1930s thus various national and imperial governments had become involved in the 'camel dispute'. Increasing rivalry between different state powers claiming sovereignty over parts of *bādiyat al-Shām* and their efforts to win tribal loyalties offered new spaces of agency for the Bedouin, who got the governments to act on their behalf and represent their interests to the neighbouring states.

In 1932 an international commission deployed by the League of Nations began to demarcate the Iraqi–Syrian border. Yet, it was not until 1934 that the British-Iraqi and the French-Syrian governments resumed direct negotiations with regard to the 'camel dispute'. While the former finally accepted the sum of the French compensation payments for the confiscations of the ʿAmārāt camels, the latter consented to refrain from re-negotiating the official seizures of the Iraqi and Transjordan governments on the Ruwalla. In the long term, governments on both sides could not avoid cooperation with regard to cross-border mobility of Bedouin tribes. Among other factors, it was the desert grazing conditions in 1934 forcing many Iraqi tribes to move into Syria that gave the impetus for the British-Iraqi side to acquiesce to a joint conference and led to a rapprochement between the two sides. After a preliminary meeting in Baghdad in May, the actual conference took place in October in Palmyra with the presence of tribal and state authorities from Iraq and Syria as well as Jordanian and Saudi representatives. Eventually, all

[101] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 564, 'Rezzou Houeitat sur Sbaa', 9 octobre 1933.

[102] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 564, 'Note sure les renseignements demandés par le Délégue du Nedjd au sujet des biens réclamés aux tribus syriennes par les tribus roualla campant au Djauf', 1934.

claims between the Bedouin tribes were officially settled and the results were stipulated in agreements signed by the paramount sheikhs of the ʿAnaza and other tribes.[103] The Palmyra conference did not lift the fundamental mistrust between the governments, nor did it put an end to tribal conflicts and cross-border raiding. Nevertheless, it can be seen as a watershed at the end of a period in which power structures and tribal-state relations in the Middle Eastern borderlands had undergone profound transformations.

By the mid-1930s the desert and steppe region of the *bādiyat al-Shām* was largely pacified. More consistent state intervention reduced the number of raids considerably. Yet, as one of Oppenheim's informants in Iraq claimed, state repression did not completely eliminate the tribal raids but rather led to them occurring more 'in silence'.[104] This was in part due to the fact that the sheikhs who were responsible for their tribe paid high fines for violating the ban on raids.[105] Several external factors contributed to the weakening of the Bedouin tribes, which facilitated the restriction and control of tribal raiding. Thus, many Bedouin tribes had suffered enormous herd losses due to a serious drought that peaked in the early 1930s.[106] At the same time, the world economic crisis of 1929 had begun to take its toll on the pastoralist tribes: the collapse of the wool market in the USA, which was an important place for the export of Middle Eastern wool, meant a severe setback for the pastoralist economy.[107] The stricter enforcement of the raiding ban eventually deprived the Bedouin of what had long been an important means of compensating for losses.[108] The combination of these factors dealt a severe blow to their power and autonomy. As a result, many Bedouin suffered from

[103] CADN, Cabinet politique, ISL/1/V 564, Haut Commissaire de la République en Syrie et au Liban à M. le Ministre des affaires étrangères, 8 juin 1934.

[104] RWWA 601, 158, 'Abdul Aziz Reise, Razzu, Schammar', 1937, p. 9.

[105] Ibid.

[106] TNA, Air 23/69, 'Intelligence Report Western Desert from January 1932 February 1932'.

[107] Françoise Métral, 'Transformations de l'élévage nomade et économie bédouine dans la première moitié du vingtième siècle', in Ronald Jaubert (ed.), *Les marges arides du croissant fertile : peuplements, exploitation et contrôle des ressources en Syrie du Nord* (Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, 2006), p. 91.

[108] For the economic function of raiding see: Louise Sweet, 'Camel Raiding of North Arabian Bedouin: A Mechanism of Ecological Adaption', *American Anthropologist, New Series*, Vol. 67, No. 5/1 (October 1965), pp. 1132–1150.

hunger and poverty and migrated to the cities in search of work or became shepherds of the sheikhs and urban notables' herds or tenant farmers on the land of the large landowners. However, from the mid-1930s onwards, favourable weather conditions and a once again flourishing market for livestock products, as well as the relative political stability in the desert and steppe regions, led to a resurgence of nomadic pastoralism.[109] Bedouin tribes continued their seasonal migrations criss-crossing international borders that ran through the *bādiyat al-Shām* throughout the interwar period and beyond. Increasing numbers of police and customs posts, as well as the expansion of the road network, intensified state control and changed mobility regimes in the desert.[110] In many states the Bedouin became important partners of such desert mobility regimes due to their knowledge of the territory and of the tribal landscape.[111] At the same time, they continued to use this knowledge to undermine state structures, for example by evading state authorities and establishing smuggling networks.

During the turbulent period of the Second World War, when Syria and Iraq were (re)occupied by British forces and state control over the desert and steppe lands weakened again, many Bedouin tribes took advantage of the situation to resume their raiding activities.[112] The extended autonomy, however, did not last long. In the post-war period of decolonisation, Arab national governments in Syria began to set up 'new programmes of sedentarisation and detribalisation to bind desert populations to the fate of the nation'.[113] In Syria, all remaining privileges of the Bedouin tribes were officially abolished under the United Arab Republic in 1958, which ultimately led to the migration of many ʿAnaza communities to Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, as research on a more contemporary period has shown, Bedouin identity and nomadic

[109] Métral, 'Transformation de l'élévage', p. 93.

[110] See Chapter Eight for further discussion.

[111] The most striking example is the establishment of Glubb's Desert force in Transjordan in 1931, also known as the Arab Legion. The paramilitary force protected Transjordan's desert borderlands and largely consisted of members from Bedouin tribes.

[112] For an overview see TNA, FO 226/271.

[113] Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'Decolonization and the Arid World', in Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 381.

pastoralism continue to exist and exert decisive influence over many states and societies of the Middle East.[114]

## Conclusion

As it has been argued recently, studying the 'Bedouin component' across the desert and steppe regions 'can open new perspectives on important debates in Middle Eastern historiography'.[115] Driven by a similar conviction, this chapter has aimed to explore the roles played by the Bedouin in state formation processes during the interwar years. Focusing on the *bādiyat al-Shām*, and the Iraqi–Syrian borderlands in particular, it has examined two interrelated questions. First, how did states extend their sovereignty over the desert and steppe lands situated at the margins of the post-Ottoman nation states in the Middle East? Second, how did tribal-states relations develop within these processes? In seeking answers to such inquiries, this chapter has zoomed in on an affair known as the 'camel dispute', which took place at a time of regional upheavals during the late 1920s and early 1930s when nation states and state borders were in a process of being consolidated. What started as a dispute between different sections of the 'Anaza Bedouin tribes, as we have seen, soon evolved into an interstate conflict between British Iraq and French Syria.

As this episode has illustrated, the consolidation of state control in the borderlands was not a linear process emanating from the centre to the periphery, but rather one that emerged against the backdrop of negotiations between different state and non-state actors in the borderlands. In particular, as I have argued, it was the cross-border mobility of Bedouin tribes that made them so central to such negotiation processes. Various interstate agreements regulated administrative responsibilities over people and territory in the borderlands. However, as the affair of the 'camel dispute' illustrated, interstate cooperation was often obstructed by differing interpretations and objectives of governments regarding such agreements. The imminent demarcation of state borders moreover intensified the competition for resources and sovereignty in

[114] Dawn Chatty, 'The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria. The persistence of Tribal Authority and Control', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (Winter 2010).

[115] Johann Büssow, Kurt Franz and Stefan Leder, 'The Arab East and the Bedouin Component in Modern History: Emerging Perspectives on the Arid Lands as a Social Space', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 58, No. 1/2 (2015), p. 1.

the borderlands. Thus, cross-border policing of Bedouin tribes, particularly the regulation of tribal conflicts, became a bone of contention between the British-Iraqi and French-Syrian governments and, at the same time, a means to pressure one another and assert claims of territorial sovereignty.

However, the 'camel-dispute' also highlights that the Bedouin were not merely objects of negotiations between state governments but rather pursued their own objectives. Increasing state rivalries and their free movement across state borders allowed them to advance their political and economic interests within different states. At the same time, they not always relied on state intermediaries but also negotiated directly among themselves when diplomatic channels failed. The comparison of source material from competing imperial powers helps reveal such spaces of agency within which Bedouin tribes operated. Yet, the agencies of ordinary members of tribes appear only fragmentarily, and the sources tend to give more insight into the roles played by Bedouin elite actors such as Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān. The latter, as we have seen, exploited state rivalries and diverging strategies of tribal policies and in so doing skillfully played off different national and imperial state authorities against each other. Recent studies have shown how the expansion of state control into the desert borderlands of Iraq and Syria have gradually limited the authority and influence of Bedouin sheikhs.[116]

Yet, as the example of Nūrī Ibn Shaʿlān illustrates, the cross-border relationships with various state powers, which sought to secure the loyalty of powerful local actors, also enabled such figures to continue to be influential political actors in the post-Ottoman nation states.

[116] See e.g. Büssow 'Negotiating the Future of Bedouin Polity' and Fletcher, 'The ʿAmārāt'.