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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Apr., 1982), pp. 180-193

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4282880>

Accessed: 16/01/2013 10:07

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The Tribal Shaykh, French Tribal Policy, and the Nationalist Movement in Syria Between Two World Wars*

Philip S. Khoury

INTRODUCTION

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the tribes of Syria encountered the forces of sedentarization. The re-assertion of Ottoman central authority coupled with the growth of a market-oriented economy, connected to the spread of cash-cropping, pushed the frontiers of settlement in Syria eastward. A modernized Ottoman army supported by the extension of railroads and other means of rapid communications increased the State's control over the margins of cultivation. The nomadic invasions of the eighteenth century, which had approached the Mediterranean coast, were halted and driven backwards, as vast new areas were conquered and put under the plow. The Government manipulated the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 to encourage and assist settlers in their agricultural pursuits by granting special privileges on State domains, such as tax exemptions and remissions. As large shifts of pastoral and sedentarized populations occurred, the ancient barriers between the desert and the sown were gradually lowered. Conditions of settled life became less precarious. Eventually more and more tribes switched from pastoralism to cultivation, creating greater security in the countryside. Beduins and peasants began to co-exist, sometimes harmoniously.¹

One important outcome of the movement towards tribal sedentarization in Syria (and elsewhere in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire) was the transformation of the tribal shaykh from 'patriarch' into profit-seeking landlord, and his tribesmen into cultivators on the shaykh's lands. Old tribal loyalties faced erosion as conditions of life for the tribe changed dramatically.

The most common and peaceful method employed by the Ottoman State to sedentarize large tribes was to award their paramount shaykhs either the income from nearby villages or the title deeds to lands. Normally it did not take long before the shaykh managed to register the villages, from which he now derived an income, in his own name. The usual pattern was for the shaykh to transform part of his tribe into tillers on his lands.² Several prominent tribal shaykhs secured title deeds to vast tracts of land in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which they passed on to their sons and grandsons. For example, Jad'an ibn Muhayid of the Wuld Fad'an, which had entered Dayr al-Zur in the seventeenth century, was awarded the income from twenty villages southeast of Aleppo in 1870. Ostensibly, the Ottoman government was rewarding Jad'an for fighting the Rwalah Beduin on its behalf. In fact, the

* This article is a revised version of Appendix One of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, 'The Politics of Nationalism: Syria and the French Mandate, 1920-1936' (Harvard University, 1980), vol. 3, pp. 1115-39.

State's main interest was to encourage this powerful shaykh to settle his tribe. Jad'an soon registered these villages in his own name, but because his tribesmen refused to settle at the time, he was forced to hire villagers to farm the land as sharecroppers. Later, during the French Mandate, his grandson, Mihjim, would have greater success in settling the Fad'an.³ Mahmud al-Fa'ur, the paramount shaykh of the Fadl Tribe of al-Qunaytrah, which originated in the Hijaz and claimed direct descent from the Prophet, inherited his lands in the Jawlan at the beginning of the twentieth century. These lands had been registered and partially settled in 1875 after Mahmud's father had defeated Druze and Kurdish rivals in the area. Mahmud's son, Fa'ur al-Fa'ur, who inherited the leadership of the tribe on his father's death in 1927, increased the pace of settlement.⁴ The Amir Nuri Sha'lan of the Rwalah — a southern branch of the 'Anazah Confederation which entered Syria in the seventeenth century and was stationed in the Jawlan and Hawran — received his property from the Ottoman government sometime towards the end of the nineteenth century in return for his willingness to settle some of his warring tribesmen.⁵

Before World War I, the Syrian tribal shaykh remained a powerful personage. He usually maintained large retinues, including armed warriors, often a sedentary clientele composed of tribesmen and dependent peasants, shepherds and domestics. The shaykh was still able to collect protection money (*khawah*) from peasants in his area, and a rights of passage tax from caravans and strangers.⁶ He also derived a revenue from lands registered in his name as well as a percentage of the taxes his tribe paid to the Ottoman government.⁷ But the traditional independent role of the shaykh had begun to undergo a metamorphosis as a result of state centralization and increasing contacts with urban life. The shaykh's political role became more ambiguous as he came to find himself in the position of an intermediary between the government and his tribe.

Town notables, both absentee landowners and merchants, played an important part in the tribal sedentarization process, serving their personal interests and those of the Ottoman state. As tribal shaykhs began to acquire and register land after 1860, they were made to pay annual property taxes by the state. Either because the shaykh was hesitant to place his lands under the plow or because he and his tribe had no experience in farming, the shaykh had difficulty making agriculture profitable. After paying taxes, the shaykh often found himself short of capital and he had to seek loans. In the absence of full-scale banking facilities, urban notables served as moneylenders. In time, the shaykh's finances, his capital, seed, implements, and eventually his lands fell into the hands of the notable. It was not uncommon for tribesmen and peasants settled on the shaykh's former lands to become the urban notable's tenants, thereby guaranteeing their permanence on the soil.

The typical pattern was for the shrewd and sophisticated notable who had already become an absentee landowner by using his government office and usury to swindle peasants out of their holdings, to wait for the shaykh's mortgage to reach one-fifth of his land's market value before he informed the shaykh that he was in urgent need of money and required his debt to be paid off immediately. If the shaykh failed to come up with the cash, he would be forced to default and inevitably to transfer the title deed for all or part of his

lands to the city notable.⁸ Sometimes squeezing a shaykh at his most penniless moment might force him to cede vast tracts of land. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Mawali Tribe of Ma'rrat al-Nu'man near Hama lost several thousand acres of agricultural and pastoral land originally awarded it by the Ottoman government for services rendered, to Nawras Pasha al-Hiraki, a notable of this beduin trading center. The Hiraki family became one of the biggest landowners in Syria.⁹

OVERVIEW OF FRENCH MANDATE TRIBAL POLICY

Despite certain important developments along the road to tribal sedentarization in Syria in the late Ottoman period, the real push was only to come after the French occupation in 1920. Although tribal resistance continued in the interwar years, the coming of the French Mandate guaranteed the irreversibility of the sedentarization process. Under the French, administrative improvements, the extension of roads, and the popularization of the automobile, bus and truck all hastened the extension of the margins of cultivation and the settlement of Syria's beduins who were nearly 300,000 strong midway through the Mandate.¹⁰

The French discovered early on in Syria that the 'beduin question' could not be solved according to their North African method. Unlike Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia with their deep southern hinterlands into which the French drove tribes, thereby largely excluding them from western contact, the Syrian desert — once a unified tract where beduin roamed rather freely — was now divided into separate territories, governed by different European powers.¹¹

One outcome of World War I was a severe dislocation of populations in Anatolia and Cilicia leading to the immigration, into Syria, of ethnic minorities in large numbers, in particular, the Armenians and the Kurds.¹² As immigration contributed to the settlement of vast sparsely populated areas like the Jazirah in northeastern Syria, Arab tribes began to encounter greater restrictions on their freedom. Some decided to abandon a now truncated Syria for neighboring territories or the Arabian peninsula where they could maintain their pastoral existence. Observers noticed a significant reduction in the Arab beduin population of Syria during the early Mandate. This was due, in part, to an increasing number of restrictions imposed on the tribes by the French, but also to the division of several tribes along the new frontiers between Syria and Iraq and Syria and Transjordan, with some branches falling under French and others under British jurisdiction.

As part of the French tribal pacification policy in Syria, the first French High Commissioner, General Gouraud, announced in 1920, the establishment of a *Contrôle bédouin* to be placed under the authority of his Delegate in Damascus. The backbone of the *Contrôle bédouin* was a series of camel companies (*méharistes*) commanded by French officers. The first camel company outpost was established in June 1921 at Dayr al-Zur on the Euphrates River. Soon afterwards, however, it was attacked by an armed force from the 'Uqaydat Tribe and it took until October for the French to secure the tribe's surrender.¹³ Although French security forces were plagued by frequent uprisings and attacks until 1924 in the peripheral northern regions

of Syria — often the work of Kurdish tribes and Turkish bandits on the frontiers — in the spring of 1922 the Jazirah region was incorporated under French authority, with the village of Hasaja serving as its administrative capital. Furthermore, the much disputed northeastern frontier with Turkey was, by 1923, subject to regular patrol.¹⁴

During the early years of French occupation, tribal warfare in Syria was commonplace in many regions. This was due, in part, to the resumption of old tribal rivalries over territorial domain, the result of mounting French pressures on the tribes to settle in what was now a much more restricted and better policed area. In the spring of 1921, a long-standing quarrel between two large sheep herding tribes, the Mawali and the Hadidiyin, erupted into bloody warfare in the district of Ma'rrat al-Nu'man. The French Army intervened with a heavy hand and secured both tribes' surrender. Nevertheless, this rivalry continued with intermittent clashes for several more years, despite French efforts to arbitrate the dispute.¹⁵ Other disputes were tempered by armed intervention, but also by arbitration; or by the splitting up of large tribes with rival branches, along Syria's new frontiers. In this way the Shammar were divided between Syria and Iraq and the Fadl between Syria and Palestine-Transjordan.¹⁶

External meddling in Syrian tribal affairs, mainly by the Amir 'Abdullah in Transjordan and the Sa'ud Family of Arabia, caused the French many headaches during the early Mandate. Despite new frontiers, Syrian tribal politics were still affected by outside influences. A Syrian tribal shaykh might be used to negotiate a dispute between two non-Syrian shaykhs, or by an Arab monarch as his agent, in an attempt to build a support base inside Syria. In any case, tribal politics were full of intrigue, and nothing disturbed the French more.

Probably no tribe and certainly no beduin shaykh used external support to resist the authority of the *Contrôle bédouin* more successfully than the Rwalah and its notorious *Amir*, Nuri Sha'lan. Born in 1847, Nuri, on his father's death, killed his brother to take over the Rwalah. Known to have boasted towards the end of his life that he had sold himself, in turn, to the Turks, the Arabs, the British and the French, Nuri was very close to the truth.¹⁷ Soon after he became the uncontested *Amir* of the Rwalah, Nuri offered his services to the Turks in return for a large percentage of the taxes his tribe paid to the state. But during World War I, the Allies were able to bribe him into switching his allegiance to the Hashemites. Nuri participated in the occupation of the Hawran and, never missing a chance for glory and booty, he entered Damascus with the Allies in October 1918. With Nuri in command of 15,000 armed men, the Amir Faysal was soon obliged to recognize him as a powerful influence on the Damascus scene, and particularly on the Sharifian Army which was tribal in composition. In return for his support, Faysal reportedly paid Nuri the handsome monthly subsidy of 2,700 gold pounds. But eventually Nuri, who became deeply involved in local intrigues, proved to be a burden on Faysal. His true colors came out at the Battle of Maysalun in July 1920 when he quickly shifted to the side of the occupying French forces, claiming that all along he had been the protector of Syria's Christians.¹⁸

Nuri Sha'lan was immediately put on the French payroll, collecting during

the first year of occupation, a monthly subsidy of 2,000 Turkish gold pounds, and the occasional bonus from the High Commissioner's *fonds secrets*.¹⁹ For a time, Nuri upheld his end of the bargain, guaranteeing that the Rwalah behaved itself in the Hawran and Jawlan. But the French should have realized that Nuri's allegiance would soon wear thin. With the Rwalah roaming near Syria's frontiers with Transjordan, the tribe could be of considerable use to the ambitious Amir 'Abdullah, who had recently settled in Amman and was interested in disrupting French rule in Syria, in order to secure a Syrian throne for himself. It was not long before Nuri began to receive a subsidy from 'Abdullah.²⁰

An abortive attempt on General Gouraud's life in late June 1921, near al-Qunaytrah, and his subsequent accusation that the attack was the work of members of 'Abdullah's entourage, placed Nuri Sha'lan in a precarious situation vis-à-vis his French patrons, who at this time saw 'Abdullah's hand and, by association, a British hand everywhere in Syria.²¹ Because of his contacts with the government in Amman, Nuri's French subsidy was terminated in early July 1921.²² Then, in August, when he refused to hand over to the French authorities correspondence he had received from 'Abdullah, they accused Nuri of conspiring against the Mandate.²³ An outraged Nuri left Damascus, where he maintained a home, to return to his tribe, which immediately began raiding settlements in the Hawran. The French response was to seize Rwalah livestock, sell it, and then divide the proceeds in the plundered districts.²⁴ By October Nuri was fed up; he requested that his tribe and its tributaries receive British protection. Meanwhile, hardpressed for cash, he began to withhold taxes that he had collected from the Rwalah for the Damascus State government.²⁵

Nuri Sha'lan remained on the French blacklist for several years, accused of being 'Abdullah's agent and pro-British.²⁶ The High Commission once had hopes that he would play an important role in French negotiations with Ibn Sa'ud and even with Sharif Husayn.²⁷ But now he could neither be trusted to comply with French policy nor to avoid conspiracy. Nuri was for sale; and though he did little to further 'Abdullah's ambitions in Syria, he continued to receive his allowance from Amman. However, his relations with the Hashemite prince were bound to sour as Nuri was never comfortable as a single agent. When Ibn Sa'ud defeated the Sharifs and occupied the Hijaz in 1924, the Rwalah were still identified with the Hashemites. So he seized the Sha'lan holdings in Wadi Sirhan and the Jawf Oasis. After trying to reach an agreement with Ibn Sa'ud, Nuri finally visited Mecca in early 1926. There he worked out a compromise with the new guardian of the Holy Places, and, on returning to Syria, he began to spread anti-Hashemite propaganda among the tribes. His subsidy from Amman was immediately cut off. Nuri's 'conversion' to Wahabism and his break with 'Abdullah, though looked upon by the French caustically, was enough to warrant a *rapprochement*. Nuri's French subsidy was resumed and his relations with the High Commission steadily improved.²⁸ The penetration of Wahabi ideology and propaganda among the tribes proved to be an ideal check against what the French still feared was an Anglo-Hashemite conspiracy to drive them out of Syria.

The establishment of the *Contrôle bédouin* enforced new regulations such

that tribes could not carry arms in settled areas and had to pay livestock taxes in lump sums. Several tribes refused to submit to this new régime and took refuge with other tribes across Syria's frontiers. Most tribes, however, buckled under to the French authorities. By early 1925, the 'beduin question' appeared to be nearly resolved. The French had reached an informal political understanding with many of Syria's powerful tribal shaykhs, notably Mahmud al-Fa'ur of the Fadl, Trad al-Milhim of the Hasanah in the Homs-Hama region, and Mihjim ibn Muhayid of the Fad'an. Even Nuri Sha'lan was silent! But then later in the same year, the longest uprising of the Mandate era erupted in the Jabal Druze, spreading throughout southern and central Syria and into Lebanon. Fearing tribal participation, the High Commission asked for a special grant from the French government to be paid to a number of tribal shaykhs to ensure the quiescence of their tribes.²⁹

Indeed, as the 'Great Revolt' spread, tribes sympathetic to the rebels increased their raiding activities. In the Hawran, Shaykh Isma'il al-Turk al-Hariri, the wealthy chief of a 3,000-member sedentarized tribe bearing his name, joined the Revolt when French troops were temporarily forced to abandon his district. In the areas where the Hariri failed to penetrate, their rivals, the Zu'abi Tribe, gave full support to the French. The Hariri uprising did not last long, however, as the French Army returned to the troubled district and Shaykh Isma'il was forced to seek refuge in Transjordan.³⁰ In early October, armed troops of the Mawali under the command of a rebellious Syrian Legion captain, Fawzi al-Qawuqi,³¹ attacked Hama pillaging much of the town center, cutting communications and destroying government property. It was this attack which led to a clear shift in the direction of French tribal policy, towards a more aggressive approach.³² Disobedient tribes were to be beaten back into submission by punishing air attacks. The Mawali were the first to surrender under heavy French air bombardment. What this tribe was forced to suffer for its insubordination served as a painful lesson to all Syrian tribes: the *Contrôle bédouin* meant business and the price to be exacted for failing to heed this lesson was to be exorbitant.

The major lesson of the 'Great Revolt' of 1925–1927, learned by Syrian tribal shaykhs as well as the nationalist leadership in the towns, was that open warfare against the French was hopeless. The human and material costs were simply too high. On the other hand, the French authorities, though willing to display their military strength, were under great pressure both from Paris and the League of Nations to seek some sort of reconciliation with opposition forces in Syria. In the case of the tribes, the French High Commission worked swiftly. It convened an Assembly of Shaykhs at Hama in 1927. But at the meeting it soon became clear that the shaykhs, while no longer posing a serious military threat, would continue their raiding and looting until some form of equitable compensation for the loss of protection money and rights of passage taxes, which were now proscribed by the Mandatory régime, could be found.³³ The French solution was to regularize the payment of subsidies to the chiefs, in amounts to be calculated on the basis of the size and importance of the tribe, the potential influence of its shaykh, and his willingness to cooperate with the *Contrôle bédouin*. Not surprisingly, Nuri Sha'lan and his grandson and heir, Fawwaz, of the Rwalah, were to receive the largest subsidies, followed by

Mihjim ibn Muhayid of the Wuld Fad'an, Daham al-Hadi of the Shammar, Hagi Agha of the Kurdish Hufraiyah in the extreme northeast of Syria, and Nawwaf al-Salih of the Hadidiyin.³⁴

The Hama Assembly of Shaykhs, though not an unqualified success, did result in peace agreements between several warring tribes: most significant were the cessation of hostilities between the Hadidiyin and the Mawali, the Rwalah and the Siba', and the Fad'an and the Shammar tribes.³⁵ Yet another conference was held in 1930, this time in Palmyra, to heal a dangerous rift within the large 'Anazah Confederation and to develop a more efficient system of crime control in the tribal zones.³⁶

The social and economic impact of the French *Contrôle bédouin* on both tribes and shaykhs was immense. This new order, supported by the introduction of the automobile and truck, and the growing network of roads which reduced the value of the camel and the horse as means of transportation and exchange, jolted the traditional way of life of much of Syria's beduin population. No longer could a strong tribe levy tribute from caravans and pilgrims, collect protection money from weaker tribes and rural settlements, or resort to raiding, which the beduin did from 'sheer economic necessity'.³⁷

TRANSFORMATION OF THE TRIBAL SHAYKH

French tribal policy probably had its greatest effect on the changing role of the beduin shaykh. Like the urban notable before him, the shaykh found himself positioned between the central government and society, in his case caught in the middle between the *Contrôle bédouin* and his own tribe, trying to satisfy both. If he did not assume his responsibilities, as defined by the French, he could be threatened with the loss of his subsidy, lands and, in extreme cases, his position. Often too powerless to resist, the shaykh began to appear to his tribesmen more like a French agent than their leader and defender. Gradually the shaykh began to lose his prestige and popularity.³⁸

During the Mandate, observers noticed the growing estrangement of the beduin shaykh from his tribe. With the ongoing settlement of the tribe on his lands, the shaykh began to spend less time in the countryside encampment. Just as the attraction of the profit motive had proved overpowering, so had the attraction of the town, where the shaykh could spend his land rents and cash subsidies. As the shaykh developed a taste for city life, he began to spend a greater part of the year there. Nuri Sha'lan, Fa'ur al-Fa'ur and Mihjim ibn Muhayid built homes in Damascus and Aleppo and began to participate in the life and politics of the cities. Nuri even built a mosque in his Damascus quarter, Hayy al-Akrad, where he became highly regarded as a pious figure.³⁹

Although older shaykhs found difficulty adjusting to their new urban surroundings, making every effort to preserve their desert customs and habits, their sons and grandsons grew up as familiar with the city as they were with the desert. Educated in elite schools where their classmates and friends were the sons of urban notables, they adapted more easily to the faster pace of the town.⁴⁰ Their interest was now as much in the European roadster or the big American automobile as in the pure-bred Arabian stallion.⁴¹ Their night life revolved around coffee houses, hotel lobbies and, for those more promiscuous

younger shaykhs, the cabaret.⁴² A Fawwaz Sha'lan or a Fa'ur al-Fa'ur was, in a sense, a schizophrenic, as much a city notable as he was a tribal chieftain.

Throughout the Mandate, the relations of shaykhs and urban notables grew stronger as the shaykhs were drawn into the orbit of the city. These relations continued to be based on a complex set of financial dealings, while appearing on the surface to be social. The most common transaction preserving these relations was the loan. Tribal shaykhs maintained their preference for borrowing from urban notables rather than the banking establishments that sprang up during the Mandate, mainly because individual notables did not impose rigid debt repayment schedules. Many shaykhs were found to be heavily in debt in this period.⁴³

The association of shaykhs and notables was also fostered in the 1930s and 1940s by large-scale agricultural enterprises. As vast, sparsely settled and uncultivated regions in Syria were brought under control by the French and the Syrian government, absentee landowners, city merchants and entrepreneurs began to invest large amounts of money in their development. Partnerships were formed between entrepreneurs and tribal shaykhs, who often owned the lands in question, but used them only for grazing. The entrepreneur would supply the capital, seed, equipment, including tractors, and occasionally some of the labor. In return for the rights of exploitation, the shaykh was guaranteed a certain percentage of the harvest or cash profits.⁴⁴ In the Qunaytrah region, Husayn Ibish and the Amir Sa'id al-Jaza'iri, both Damascene notables owning big tracts of land in Jawlan, together with Shaykh Fa'ur al-Fa'ur of the Fadl — another big landowner of the region, formed such an enterprise in the 1930s.⁴⁵ In the Jazirah, which was largely State Domain land restricted to the grazing and breeding of livestock, this process did not begin until the early 1940s, when the Syrian government issued decrees permitting its agricultural exploitation. However, once this rich, fertile region, which would shortly become Syria's new breadbasket, was liberated for development, many partnerships between tribal shaykhs and city entrepreneurs, mostly from Aleppo, were formed.⁴⁶ The two most powerful shaykhs of the Dayr al-Zur area, Mihjim ibn Muhayid of the Fad'an and Daham al-Hadi of the Shammar, became deeply involved in the opening up of the Jazirah.⁴⁷

As prominent tribal shaykhs began to receive the financial rewards of more efficient agriculture, they quickly came to realize how important it was to push for sedentarization in their areas. Indeed, they became less hesitant to define and align their interests with big absentee landowners and merchant-moneylenders or, for that matter, with the French authorities.

TRIBAL SHAYKHS AND POLITICAL LIFE DURING THE MANDATE

What followed French efforts to bring about a reconciliation with tribal shaykhs in the late 1920s was a long period of relative tranquility which was seriously disrupted only once, in the late 1930s, by a revolt of Kurdish tribes in the Jazirah — a revolt which may well have been French inspired.⁴⁸ This period was also one of great political activity and intrigue in which beduin chiefs were drawn into the whirlwind of Syrian political life revolving around

the French and the national independence movement.⁴⁹

In return for their compliance with the *Contrôle bédouin*, influential tribal shaykhs were granted automatic parliamentary representation. As of 1928, when the Syrian Chamber of Deputies was opened, French policy was designed to block the political and legislative programs of city-based nationalists by packing the Constituent Assembly with representatives from the countryside who tended to be less politically sophisticated and thus more easily manipulated. Since the countryside was under firmer French control than the towns, which were nationalist strongholds, the High Commissioner's political agents had few problems getting acquiescent tribal shaykhs and rural notables elected.⁵⁰ With a guaranteed yearly salary of LS 1,200 just to sit in the Chamber and to vote as they were instructed, shaykhs had few qualms about participating in the political system.⁵¹ In fact, some savvy shaykhs seized the opportunity to use parliament to bolster their own patronage networks by sponsoring the legislation of financial assistance programs for their tribes.⁵²

In the 1930s the French and the Syrian nationalists were engaged in competition to win to their side or to neutralize certain influential beduin shaykhs. Obviously, these shaykhs were obliged to curry favor both with the High Commission and the nationalists, in the hope of re-strengthening themselves and thereby re-asserting their independence. But, in fact, their efforts to seek good terms from both sides reflected their diminishing strength. Even the Wahabi movement, waging from beyond Syria's frontiers an attack on sedentarization through ideological penetration and material support to key shaykhs, was incapable of pulling tribes back to their traditional way of life.⁵³ The authority of the *Contrôle bédouin*, the shaykhs' growing attraction to the city, their more complex financial relations with urban notables, and the transformation of their relationship to their tribesmen, which was rapidly becoming one of landowner to peasant, were all an acknowledgement of their submission to a new way of life.

During the first fifteen years of the Mandate, the French High Commission was able to beat the challenge of the nationalist movement for influence over prominent beduin shaykhs. In the Syrian Chamber of Deputies this was patently clear, and it was also the case in most other political circles. Although shaykhs in this period began to associate more regularly and freely with Syria's urban political elite, their strongest and most beneficial contacts were normally with notables in collaboration with the French administration who, by virtue of their access to the High Commission, were in the best position to offer these shaykhs services and special favors. Shaykhs also developed rewarding business relations and friendships with a handful of very wealthy landowning notables outside government who, in their idle time, were interested in cultivating the ways of the desert, especially the breeding of horses, the hunt and falconry.⁵⁴ The noticeable absence of similar relations with nationalist leaders was due, in part, to their exclusion from government in this period and thus from the pool of potential benefits which could be distributed to the shaykhs; and, in part, due to a general nationalist antipathy towards the beduin who, by his very nature, lacked real political commitment to any cause, other than his own.

It was only in 1936, when the first nationalist government took office in

Syria and the possibility of independence suddenly seemed much nearer, that influential tribal shaykhs began to cultivate good relations with the nationalist leadership in Damascus and Aleppo. Some shaykhs, most notably Mihjim ibn Muhayid, Daham al-Hadi, Fa'ur al-Fa'ur, and even Fawwaz Sha'lan, demonstrating both weakness and far-sightedness,⁵⁵ declared their allegiance to the nationalist government and were elected to the Chamber of Deputies on the National Bloc ticket.⁵⁶ And though nationalists continued to suspect the motives of the shaykhs, their need to demonstrate to the French that their support was nationwide obliged National Bloc leaders to greet the shaykhs' support with open arms. In public, nationalists and tribal shaykhs made every effort to portray their new relationship as one of mutual cooperation in the struggle for national independence from the French.⁵⁷

NOTES

1. Dawn Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck: A Study of the Pastoral Economy of the al-Fadl and the al-Hassanna in the Beqaa Valley of Lebanon', Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1974, pp. 68–70. The author would like to thank Dr Chatty for permission to consult her thesis which is an important contribution to the study of Syrian tribes and to economic anthropology; also see: Norman N. Lewis, 'The Frontier of Settlement in Syria, 1800–1950', *International Affairs*, 31 (January 1955), p. 58; E. Epstein, 'Notes from a Paper on the Present Conditions in the Hauran,' *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 23 (1936, p. 606; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: 1978), p. 22.
2. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 68; A. de Boucheman, 'La sédentarisation des nomades du désert de Syrie', *Asie française*, no. 320 (May 1934), pp. 140–43.
3. Haut-Commissariat de la République française: Direction des renseignements du Levant, *Les Tribus nomades et semi-nomades des états du Levant placés sous Mandat français* (Beirut: 1930), p. 75. During the Mandate, the Fad'an were divided into two branches, the Wuld and the Dana Majid. The latter were stationed across the Iraqi border. Originally, the tribe was devoted to camel raising but then switched to other livestock. In the 1920s, the Wuld had 1,200 tents and 7,500 tribesmen. The Dana Majid had 900 tents and 6,500 tribesmen. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 68; FO 226/241, vol. 27, Mayne to Spears, 3 February 1943. Mihjim was born in 1885 and was married to a niece of Nuri Sha'lan of the Rwalah Bedouin.
4. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, p. 63. The Fadl were mostly settled in the Qunaytrah and Hulah areas and thus during the Mandate fell under both French and British jurisdiction. In the 1920s they numbered approximately 1,190 tents (including satellites). Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', pp. 69–70; FO 371/9588/117, vol. 6456, 'List of Tribes in Syria', Palmer to FO, 25 June 1921. Mahmud al-Fa'ur led his tribesmen at the Battle of Maysalun in July 1920 against the French Army of occupation. He eventually was forced to take refuge in Transjordan. Adham al-Jundi, *Ta'rikh al-Thawarat al-suriyah* (Damascus: 1961); Fa'ur al-Fa'ur, who was born in 1900, though an influential tribal leader, faced a challenge both to his leadership and to his landownership rights from members of his family.
5. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, pp. 19–24; FO 371/9588/177, vol. 6456, 25 June 1921, pp. 157–9. In the 1920s the Rwalah had 3,500 to 4,000 tents (including satellites). Also see: Alois Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (New York: 1928).
6. A. de Boucheman, 'Le bédouins en Syrie', *Centre de Hautes Etudes administratives sur l'Afrique et l'Asie modernes* — Paris (hereafter, *CHEAM*), no. 126 (23 April 1937), pp. 8–9; The *khawah* was a tax which stronger tribes imposed on weaker tribes and upon the rural settlements in return for protection.
7. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, p. 22.
8. Capitaine Casenave, 'Nomadisme et sédentarisation', *CHEAM*, no. 1559, (n.d.), pp. 12–13.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 13; Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, p. 75.
10. Although figures for the beduin (nomadic and semi-sedentary) population of Syria during

the Mandate can only be approximated, in 1928 the French High Commission published the following statistics:

| <i>Beduin Population of Syria, 1928</i> | |
|---|------------|
| <i>Muhafazah/Sanjak</i> | <i>No.</i> |
| Dayr al-Zur | 131,800 |
| Aleppo | 91,496 |
| Damascus | 23,315 |
| Hama | 17,754 |
| Homs | 10,690 |
| Hawran | 3,131 |
| Alexandretta | 1,712 |
| TOTAL | 279,898 |

Source: *Oriente Moderno*, 8 (1928), p. 566.

11. Epstein, 'Notes', p. 606.
12. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 73.
13. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', *CHEAM*, p. 11; Stephen H. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (London: 1958), p. 120. Also see: André LaCroix, 'Le Contrôle bédouin de Syrie', *CHEAM*, no. 1147 (9 April 1947).
14. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon*, p. 120.
15. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, pp. 75–9; A. de Boucheman, 'Notes sur la rivalité de deux tribus moutounnières de Syrie: Les "Mawali" et les "Hadidiyin"', *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 8 (1934), pp. 9–58. The Mawali were originally from the region of Baghdad and came to an area southeast of Aleppo in the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century they were employed by the Ottoman state as road guards in their area. In the 1920s they numbered 1,760 tents. The Hadidiyin also came from the vicinity of Baghdad and were installed in the Aleppo Province in the fourteenth century. In the 1920s they numbered 3,550 tents. At this time their chief was Nawwaf al-Salih. He was born in 1888, attended the Beduin Chiefs School in Istanbul and rose to the rank of Captain in the Ottoman Army. In 1929, he began to sedentarize his tribe more concertedly, after renting vast tracts of land northeast of Hama.
16. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, pp. 115–17; Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 91.
17. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, p. 22; FO 371/2142, vol. 20849, 6 May 1937; Khayr al-Din al-Zirikli, *al-A'lam* (Cairo: 1958), vol. 9. Nuri Sha'lan died in 1942 at the age of ninety-five. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', *CHEAM*, p. 8.
18. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, pp. 22–3; Captain D. Brunton, 'Who's Who in Damascus, 1918–1919', *Brunton File*, Middle East Centre, St Antony's College, University of Oxford.
19. On one of Nuri's regular visits to Beirut in this period, he received LT 5,000 gold from the High Commissioner. FO 371/5149/117, vol. 6454, Damascus Consul to Curzon, 16 April 1921.
20. At the General Syrian Congress in Damascus in March 1920, the Amir 'Abdullah was elected King of Iraq and his younger brother, the Amir Faysal, was elected King of Syria. However, the French occupation of Syria in July 1920 forced Faysal to give up his throne. Later, in 1921, the British invited him to head the local administration in Baghdad and soon thereafter he was elected King of Iraq. Meanwhile, 'Abdullah had already arrived in Transjordan in March 1921. When he learned of Britain's invitation to his brother, he became extremely jealous and angry. Unsatisfied with the opportunity to govern Transjordan alongside the British, he set his sights on extending his authority into Syria by trying to muster support for a Syrian throne for himself. For the details of 'Abdullah's quest for a Syrian throne, see my unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'The Politics of Nationalism: Syria and the French Mandate, 1920–1936' (Harvard University: 1980), vol. 1.
21. FO 371/7260, vol. 6461, Damascus Consul to FO, 14 June 1923. FO 317/7579, vol. 6461, Damascus Consul to FO, 27 June 1923.
22. FO 371/12017, vol. 6457, Damascus Consul to FO, 8 October 1921. Just before the assassination attempt on General Gouraud, Nuri Sha'lan had contributed camels to the Camel Corps of the *Contrôle bédouin* — and it seems that the French were trying to promote

Nuri to a position of supremacy among the tribal shaykhs of Syria. FO 371/8858, Palmer to FO, 17 June 1921.

23. FO 371/9659, vol. 6455, Damascus Consul to FO, 10 August 1921.
24. FO 371/10176, vol. 6456, Damascus Consul to FO, 27 August 1921.
25. FO 371/12017, vol. 6457, Damascus Consul to FO, 8 October 1921.
26. In 1921, the British were interested in using the Rwalah as a labor force for laying railroad track in Palestine and Transjordan. FO 371/12515, vol. 16457, Damascus Consul to FO, November 1921; Nuri Sha'lan was offered part of his former subsidy back in March 1923, in return for his continued contribution to the Syrian Legion. FO 371/4073, vol. 9054, Damascus Consul to FO, 29 March 1923.
27. FO 371/12017, vol. 6457, Damascus Consul to FO, 8 October 1921.
28. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, p. 23. Nuri did cement his relations with Ibn Sa'ud by arranging for his grandson and heir, Fawwaz Sha'lan, to marry two of his sisters into the al-Sa'ud family, one to Ibn Sa'ud himself, and the other to his son, Sa'ud (later King of Saudi Arabia). FO 371/2142, vol. 20549, 6 May 1937.
29. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', *CHEAM*, p. 9; Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 79; Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Levant 1918-1929, *Syrie-Liban*, vol. 197 (10 February-31 March 1926), pp. 4-5.
30. E. Epstein, 'Le Hauran et ses habitants', *l'Asie française*, no. 343 (septembre-octobre 1936), pp. 244-51; Epstein, 'Notes', p. 608. Isma'il al-Hariri was later amnestied and became a deputy for the Hawran in the Syrian Constituent Assembly in 1928. See al-Jundi, *Ta'rikh*, pp. 177-81, for details of the Hariri revolt.
31. Fawzi al-Qawuqji, *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji, 1914-1932* (ed., Dr Khayriyah al-Qasimiyah), (Beirut: 1975), vol. 1, pp. 73-118; Conversation with the late Fawzi al-Qawuqji (Beirut: 16 July 1975). Al-Qawuqji, who was born in 1887, of Turcoman stock in Tripoli (Syria), had a long military career, spanning four decades. He participated in the Arab Revolt of 1916, the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925, the Palestine-Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, and the Palestine War of 1948 in which he commanded the Palestine Arab Army.
32. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', pp. 79-80. In the spring of 1926, as the Hadidiyin (and some of the Mawali) were returning to the Homs-Hama area from winter migrations, they were again bombarded by the French. Also the Mawali, in league with Hama rebels, attacked in October 1925, a French detachment as well as the citadel at Ma'r'rat al-Nu'man, and were bombarded by the French airforce. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, pp. 76-8.
33. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 80; De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', *CHEAM*, p. 9.
34. *Oriente Moderna*, 13 (1933), p. 354; 19 (1939), pp. 157-8; 20 (1940), p. 58.

Select List of Official Syrian Government Subsidies to Beduin Chiefs

| Name of Shaykh | Tribe | Sum in LS (Syrian lira) | | |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| | | 1933 | 1939 | 1940 |
| Nuri Sha'lan | Rwalah | 3,415 | 3,415 | 3,600 |
| Fawwaz Sha'lan | Rwalah | 2,049 | 2,049 | 2,400 |
| Mihjim ibn Muhayid | Wuld Fad'an | 3,305 | 3,305 | 3,400 |
| Daham al-Hadi | Shammar (al-Khursah) | 2,644 | 2,300 | 2,400 |
| Hagiu Uthman Agha | Hufrakiyah | 1,982 | — * | 6,000 |
| Nawwaf al-Salih | Hadidiyin | 1,534 | 1,534 | 2,000 |
| Trad al-Milhim | al-Hasanah | 512 | 800 | 1,400 |

* Hagiu Agha was not granted a subsidy by the nationalist government in 1939 due to his separatist revolt in the Jazirah. But after the government fell in the same year, the French High Commission made certain that the Kurdish chieftain, who was in their pay, received a very healthy increase in his subsidy. Subsidies continued to be paid to beduin shaykhs throughout the Mandate, and for sometime afterwards. In 1945, the Syrian government paid a total of LS 75,600 to 34 tribal shaykhs as subsidies. Once again a Sha'lan topped the list; Fawwaz received LS 66,000, followed by Mihjim ibn Muhayid (5,800), Nawwaf al-Salih

- (3,500), and Daham al-Hadi (3,500). *Markaz al-wathaiq al-ta'rikhiyah* (Damascus), *al-Dawlah. intikhabat* 20/1461 (3 January 1946).
35. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 81; Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, pp. 75, 119.
 36. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 81.
 37. Epstein, 'Notes', p. 606.
 38. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', p. 9.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 40. For example, Fawwaz Sha'lan (b. 1907), who became heir apparent to his grandfather, Nuri, when his own father died prematurely, was educated in Beirut at the American University. Although he spent a considerable amount of time in Damascus and Beirut, frequenting night clubs, he still was able to build a strong following among his Rwalah tribesmen, especially as his grandfather grew older (Nuri Sha'lan died in 1942). In Damascus, Fawwaz was regarded as an urbane gentleman, but his grandfather made certain that he never lost touch with desert practices. Like Nuri, Fawwaz killed his own cousin near Palmyra in 1935 when he tried to challenge his position in the Rwalah. The British who despised his grandfather, wrote of Fawwaz in 1936, that 'his political allegiance depends on his pocket or his vanity — sometimes both', although he 'may become the force in the desert that his grandfather was; he, too is for sale'. FO 371/2142, vol. 20849, 6 May 1937.
 41. Automobiles and trucks became commonplace among tribal shaykhs by the 1930s. They were primarily used for city travel and for visiting their tribes and other tribes. The Rwalah, who never stopped raiding in the Mandate period, maintained a fleet of armored cars just for this activity. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', p. 10.
 42. FO 371/2142, vol. 20849, 6 May 1937.
 43. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', p. 12.
 44. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', pp. 85–8.
 45. FO 371/2142, vol. 20849, 6 May 1937.
 46. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', pp. 87–8.
 47. FO 226/241, vol. 27/2/71, Mayne to Spears, 3 February 1943. Among the leading developers of the Jazirah in the early 1940s were the Mudarris and Ma'mar-bashi families of Aleppo. Haut-Commissariat, *Les Tribus nomades*, pp. 111–12, 119–120.
 48. The 1937 revolt of Hagi Agha and its relation to French activities in the Jazirah is discussed in L. Dillemann, 'Les Français en Haute-Djézireh — Une réussite ignorée en marge de l'échec syrien', *CHEAM*, no. 50 538, n.d.
 49. According to Chatty, in the early 1930s 'French officials began to report a growing phenomenon whereby camel raising, as it became less lucrative, was progressively abandoned for sheep raising both along the frontiers of cultivation and in the pastoral zones'. On this subject see the excellent study of a French official in Syria, Victor Müller, *En Syrie avec les bédouins. Les Tribus du désert* (Paris: 1931). Müller worked with the tribes of northern Syria. Also see A. H. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (London: 1946), p. 82, and Jacques Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche Orient* (Paris: 1946), p. 181.
 50. The way the French controlled the countryside and in particular the elections in rural districts in Syria is discussed in some detail in my dissertation, 'The Politics of Nationalism: Syria and the French Mandate, 1920–1936', vol. 1, Chapter 4.
 51. *Journal Officiel de la République syrienne: Débats* (14 June 1932), 4th session, p. 32; *Oriente Moderno*, 12 (1932), p. 342. These salaries were fixed for the first time in 1932.
 52. Chatty, 'From Camel to Truck', p. 82.
 53. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', p. 13.
 54. For example, Husayn Ibish and Sa'id al-Jaza'iri both had great respect for beduin customs and traditions. Ibish, born in 1885 and educated at the Syrian Protestant College (later AUB), was the son of Ahmad Agha Ibish, a Kurdish livestock merchant. Through his marriage to a daughter of 'Abd al-Rahman Pasha al-Yusuf — at the time the biggest landowner in the Damascus region — and through his own entrepreneurial skills, he became the biggest landowner in the *muhafazah* of Damascus in the 1930s. Meanwhile his younger brother Nuri had studied agrarian sciences in England and joined Husayn in his enterprises. The British wrote of Husayn Ibish in 1936: 'Hunted big game with Yussef Kemal [Yusuf Kamal]. Takes no part in politics, but in close touch with Beduin. Sportsman.' He was also a well-known dealer in race horses. As for al-Jaza'iri, he was the grandson of the Amir 'Abd

- al-Qadir, the Algerian resistance leader who had settled in Damascus in the 1850s. Sa'id inherited most of his lands. FO 371/2142, vol. 20849, 6 May 1937; Conversations with Yusuf Ibish (Beirut: 4 July 1975) and Wajihah al-Yusuf Ibish (Beirut: 15 August 1975).
55. Once the nationalists took office in 1936, they were given the authority to allot subsidies to tribal shaykhs. It was now possible to terminate a shaykh's subsidy if he did not show some spirit of cooperation with the nationalists. For instance, the Kurdish tribal revolt in 1937 in the Jazirah, led by Hagi Agha, resulted in the termination of this chieftain's subsidy in 1939. The French High Commission, however, had it resumed in 1940. See fn. 34 and *Oriente Moderno*, 19 (1939), pp. 157-8; 20 (1940), p. 58.
 56. From the late 1920s, the National Bloc steered the national independence movement in Syria. It was composed of absentee landowners, members of the professional middle class, and a sprinkling of wealthy merchants. For an analysis of the National Bloc's composition, organization and strategy in the 1930s, see my doctoral thesis, 'The Politics of Nationalism: Syria and the French Mandate, 1920-1936', vol. 2, Chapter 8.
 57. Tribal shaykhs became very interested by this time in cultivating relations with nationalist leaders and did so by demonstrating their renowned generosity whenever possible. For example, they would make every effort to fete and honor nationalist leaders when they passed through their territories. When the National Bloc leader, Fakhri al-Barudi was released from prison in the Jazirah in 1936 for his activities in the General Strike at the beginning of that year, Mihjim ibn Muhayid of the Wuld Fad'an, and himself one of the most respected tribal shaykhs in Syria, demonstrated his far-sightedness by honoring al-Barudi with a gift of 20 she-camels and dozens of sheep. De Boucheman, 'Les bédouins', p. 13.