



From the Arabian Peninsula to the Levant: Arab Tribes and the Syrian War



Paul Antonopoulos* and Drew Cottle

Western Sydney University, Russia

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*Corresponding author: Paul Antonopoulos, Western Sydney University, Russia, Email: paul.antonopoulos@hotmail.com

Abstract

With the Arab tribal system in Syria playing a critical role in the social, cultural and economic fabric of the state, little scholarly attention has been given to their crucial role in the Syrian War. The article gives a detailed explanation of the complex tribal system in Syria and the wider region, as well as their historic origins, while also exploring tribal reactions to the Syrian War that began in 2011. With dozens of different armed groups operating in Syria and adding to the complexity of the war, the tribal elements has been ignored in favour of analysing the role of states such as the United States, Russia and Turkey to name a few, as well as non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda and ISIS. This paper analyses where certain Arab tribes have given their allegiance and reasons why some tribes have opposed the status quo in Syria.

Keywords: Syria; Arab Tribes; Bedouin; Syrian War; ISIS; Badiya; British Army; World War; Tribal communities; Desert; Island; Euphrates; Peninsula; Social contract; Battalion; Levant

Introduction

In 1916, a young liaison officer, Lieutenant T.E. Lawrence of the British Army travelled to Jeddah located in today's Saudi Arabia, in the midst of the First World War to meet with Faysal, the third son of the Sharif of the holy Islamic city of Mecca, Husayn Ibn Ali. In that meeting, the wick of an Arab revolt was lit that would transform the entire region. That young officer would later be known internationally as 'Lawrence of Arabia'. The Arabs of the region launched an armed insurrection against the Ottoman Empire, driven by the British promises of an independent pan-Arab state in what has come to be known as the McMahon Commitment[1]. These promises were never intended to be kept as Great Britain and France secretly negotiated the Sykes-Picot Agreement that would define the territorial ambitions of both powers in the Middle East after the Ottomans were defeated[2], turning the agreement signed with the Arabs into a dead letter. This episode of history left us with two notes that would shape and characterize the future of the entire region from the Great War until the present: the constant interference of foreign powers and the strategic importance of tribal communities. This article will explore one of the least studied aspects of the Syrian War, the Arab tribes and their positions in the war, taking into account that the tribal formations that account for approximately 60 and 70% of the total population of Syria[3].

Historical Perspective

The Bedouins historically refer to tribal groups and Arab farming communities that descend from tribes of the Arabian

Peninsula[4], just to the south of the Levant where Syria is located in the Middle East. The name Bedouin is the Arabic meaning for "dweller of the desert". It can be transliterated as bedaui, badawi, bedu, or badiya, which literally means desert[5]. These deserts, and the wider arid regions of Syria, account for around 80% of the country's territory[6]. Specifically, the tribes in Syria live in three large geographical areas: al-Badia (desert/steppe), al-Jazira (the island, east of the Euphrates) and Hauran (southwest)[7].

At the beginning of the 18th century, there was an important migration of tribal groups from today's Saudi Arabia towards today's Syria and Iraq. Reasons for this migration were either the fear of some kind of plague or the rise of the warring Wahhabi movement[8]. This migratory stream was composed of two great tribal confederations: Shammar and Aneza. Most of the Shammar tribe crossed the Euphrates to the northwest of Syria and Iraq, but a minority remains in the Arabian Peninsula[9]. The Aneza community was established in the "Badiya" of Syria. This confederation includes tribes such as the Hassana, Ruwalla, Ageidat, Fedaan and Sbaa [10]. Many of these tribes retain important ties with the Arabian Peninsula, including the Saudi royal family who are descended from the Hassana tribe and has blood ties with other tribes such as the Ruwalla [11]. In any case, the migratory movement of these two great tribal confederations that were dedicated mainly to the camel herding, provoked the first schism between the tribes. Little by little they forced other

tribes towards Syria's trading centres. Under Ottoman rule, they became powerful and independent tribes. They were proclaimed as noble tribes (asil)[12]. Other tribes whose main activity was sheep farming moved to the periphery of the major cities and paid taxes to the Ottoman authorities who defined them as non-asil or common tribes[13]. Examples of the latter are the Haddiyin and Mawali tribes in Syria.

The organization and functioning of the tribal communities of Syria began to be strongly influenced by a central authority in Aleppo and Damascus from the time of the Ottoman Empire, as it began to be administratively established in eastern Syria within the reformist framework of the Tanzimat [14]. The Ottoman strategy was to subdue or attract tribes through political and economic reforms. Some tribes began to pay taxes to the Ottoman governors established in large cities such as Aleppo or Damascus, in exchange for benefits such as their sons being exempt from military service[15]. At that time, the Ottomans began to buy the loyalty of some tribal leaders thus encouraging a competition to obtain the 'favours' of the central authority, something that has continued in Syrian history. Under the French Mandate (1920-1946), the colonial power expanded its authority and control. Initially, they took measures to prevent incursions by the nomadic tribes in the colonised areas of western Syria[16]. Despite these initiatives, some tribes took part in the Syrian nationalist revolts of 1925-27[17]. Beginning in 1930, the French attempted both to completely reorganize the structure of tribal societies and to win the support of the tribes to defuse the nationalist upsurge[18]. The French authorities began to pay subsidies to tribal leaders, assign grazing and land ownership rights to some tribes, prohibit tribesmen from carrying arms in colonised areas and demanded the payment of taxes by the tribes[19].

At the same time, nine seats in parliament were assigned to the members of certain powerful tribes[20]. These measures undermined the tribal leader's authority and increased the power and security of the state. Tribal leaders were consulted on self-defence which was dependent on continuing state subsidies to the tribes. These changes made tribal leaders less dependent on the obedience of their communities to maintain their power, through their new capacity to dispense patronage within the tribes. An example of these changes is the case of migrations in the 1930s of the Hassana tribe, located near Homs. This tribe was a member of the important Aneza confederation, which was linked through its blood ties to the Royal House of Al-Saud in Saudi Arabia[21]. The transformations within these tribal societies, caused the extended family units of the migrating Hassana tribe (beits) to become independent of the traditional tribal authorities and finding greater security within the apparatus of the colonial state. During the French Mandate, some tribal leaders grew immensely rich through the colonial state's increasing intervention. The French authorities registered the landowners throughout Greater Syria. In this registration of landowners, many tribesmen and peasants were able to avoid

the taxes by their relationship to the major landowners. One example of this arrangement was the registration of more than 20 villages by the Sheikh of Al Hassan Trad al-Milhem[22].

With the departure of the French from Syria after its negotiated independence in 1946, these arrangements were abolished, leaving tribal leaders as functional intermediaries between the new independent state and their communities. The new nationalist government attempted to reduce tribal influence of the Bedouins which did not adopt loyalty to both the nation-state and individual families. In 1956, the government repealed the Tribal Law that had granted legal status to nomadic tribes, including the right to bear arms[23]. During the period of the union between Syria and Egypt in 1958 under Nasser's leadership and the subsequent government of the Ba'ath party between 1963 and 1970, there was a strong state drive to eradicate tribal societies and their leaders. Nasser carried out this policy by favouring the oppressed members of the tribal communities through the redistribution of lands and the promotion of these tribal members to political posts through their membership in the Ba'ath party, to the detriment of traditional tribal authority. In addition, the traditional herding system (hima) and tribal customary law (urf) were abolished. Similarly, the nine tribal seats of the parliament were reduced to six, of which four were reserved for specific tribes. Two seats corresponding to the province of Aleppo were allotted to the sheikhs of the Mawali and Haddiyin tribes, one to the leader of the Shammar confederation in the Jazira region and another for the Hassana tribe in the Damascus region[24].

The Tribes in Ba'athist Era

The rigor by which the Ba'athist authorities treated the tribes was tempered by Hafez Assad when he became president in 1970. Assad tried to integrate the tribes into the new political system. Under Assad's presidency the Ba'ath Party restored a measure of autonomy to tribal leaders by granting them some informal authority over their communities and provided them with seats in parliament. Positions within the state's administration and security forces allocated to important tribal leaders. The purpose of these manoeuvres was to nullify the numerical advantage in favour of the Sunni community regarding the religious affinities existing within the tribes. However, as the tribal leaders began to abandon their communities in exchange for a discreet and quiet life in Damascus or Aleppo, their traditional authority eroded and their ability to mobilize tribal networks weakened.

Unofficially, the powers granted to these tribal leaders were even greater since, while the police were in charge of the surveillance of minor crimes, in the case of serious crimes such as murder or rape, it was left to the authority of tribal and clan leaders as a matter of their communities. This was exemplified in the popular saying from Raqqa in Syria's north: "Offer loyalty and do what you want" (Itiwalaawa-ifal ma tashaa) [25]. The government did not hesitate to use some tribes in an instrumental way to meet their interests, for example, the

mobilisation of tribal forces to stop the armed uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982[26]. Another example was in 1973 when the state authorities displaced thousands of members of the Busha'ban tribe, who were evicted from their homes in al-Raqqa governorate because of the construction of a dam on the Euphrates River. The ulterior motive for this forced tribal removal was to establish an 'Arab Belt' in the Kurdish-majority regions of Syria after the latter had mass migrated to the country decades earlier from other Ottoman provinces that are located in today's Turkey[27].

After his ascendancy to the presidency, Bashar al-Assad, the son of Hafez, the relations between the state and the tribes followed a similar pattern. The new president issued an executive order to privatise all state farms, allowing tribal leaders who had lost large estates under the redistribution laws of the 1960s to recover them and even increase their holdings[28]. A series of clientelist networks were established which enriched the tribal leaders but did not benefit the other members of the networks. The privileges and economic benefits granted by the state to the tribal leaders demanded in return the obedience of the communities under their control, this was Syria's form of what could be called the 'tribal contract', as opposed to the 'social contract' formulated by Rousseau in the eighteenth century[29]. Despite this arrangement the Bedouin population of Al-Badia because of its reliance on agriculture and livestock, was hit hard by unemployment. This tribe suffered from the consequences of a great drought which produced the total collapse of the rural economy in eastern and southern Syria.

Tribal Organization

The Arab tribes of Syria are divided into qabilas (national and transnational tribal confederations) and `ashiras (individual tribes). The `ashiras are further subdivided into fukhud (clans), khums or ibn `amm (lineages), and at their lowest echelon, at al-bayt or aa'ila (extended families). The `ashiras are normally present in a specific region of the country, such as the `ashiras al-Haddadine in northwest Aleppo and Idlib; al-Muwali in Idlib and al-Damaakhla in Idlib, Hama, Aleppo and Raqqa; Bani Khalid in west-central Homs and Hama; and, al-Zoubi in Dara'a and along the border with Jordan[30]. The tribal organization is built on the basis of the concept of patriarchal traditional family, historically forming semi-autonomous groups of people united by blood ties that herded animals within their respective territories. The distinctive feature of each clan is a shared common male ancestor, which brings together different groups or branches with respect to a common male relative even more distant. Each tribal group, from the smallest to the largest confederation, usually share the name of the common ancestor that supposedly founded the particular group[31]. The tribal community itself is defined in terms of kinship. Its patterns of behaviour, both within and between groups is governed by kinship relationships[32]. The kinship system also served to modulate the relationships between different clans and clan groups. The individual stands at

the centre of an ever-widening circles of kinship relations that, at least in theory, is linked to all the other members of a tribe in a particular region of the country. The status of the individual within a clan is determined from birth according to their kinship relationship with the rest of the members of the group.

Another feature of tribal communities because of the cohesion of religious and ethnic groups is inbreeding, or the marriage of members within their group. Lineages, or groups of families that trace offspring to a common ancestor, are also conditioned by inbreeding, although this is in fact less common, despite its theoretical desirability. Seen as a practical link between families, marriage often has political and economic connotations even among the poorest members of tribal communities. The tribal family group and the individual home are based on blood ties between men. The typical tribal home is formed by three generations living together under the same roof: the elderly couple, their married children, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law and, finally, grandchildren and single granddaughters as well as other patrilineal relatives. This pattern responds to what we call extended family. Upon the death of the head of the family, adult children establish their own separate homes. It is normal for marriages to occur within the lineage and it is not uncommon for the child of the father's brother, the first cousin, to be the person designated for the marriage. This practice is commonplace among Sunni Arab, Kurds and Turkmen and occurs in within rural social classes but is rarer in large cities.

The system of election for the members of the tribes remains invariable and is governed by traditional norms such as patriarchy in spite of the different transformations and social changes that have occurred throughout history. Within a tribe, only one specific family lineage generates its leader or "sheik" (sheikh). This family lineage 'beit al-mashaykha' or 'beit alashira' has an important status in the community. Any member of this lineage, including the sheikh's brothers, sons, male cousins, and nephews, can theoretically access the tribe's leadership after the death of the sheikh (as determined by consensus among tribal community/tribal council or majlis leaders), although, in practice, the first-born son usually takes over[33]. No power or authority outside of the tribe, not even the state, can appoint a tribal leader. However, growing economic hardship has significantly affected the youngest members of the tribal communities. Increasing pressure exerted by the government authorities, have modified matters related to tribal authority. The traditional vertical authority of the Sheikh within the tribes has weakened over the decades. Tribal authority has been transformed by a system of collective decision-making by larger and more complex tribal networks surpassing the singular authority of a sheikh or their family.

Tribalism and the Conflict in Syria

The members of the tribes, united by bloodlines, have the duty to defend the members of the tribe attacked by members of other - tribes, or by individuals outside the tribal system.

This behaviour responds to the concept of 'intiqaam', which means revenge for real or perceived offenses committed against a relative[34]. At the dawn of the uprisings in Syria in 2011, a whole series of networks were formed by young members of tribes, disaffected with the authorities, who lived in the cities but shared a common tribal identity. There are well-documented events of malaise that existed in the moments before the revolt as the manifestation of the "Day of Wrath" that took place in cities across Syria, including in with on February 5, 2011 where there was an important tribal presence, especially from the Jabbour, Ta'iyOuinaza confederation[35]. One of the first acts of this uprising was the popular reaction to alleged torture suffered by several members of the al-Zoubi tribe in Dara'a by government agents. The incident caused outrage and was the catalyst for uprisings in the cities of Deir Ezzor, Homs and Aleppo, where the impulse of solidarity and self-defence was determined by the tribal customary laws ('urf)[36]. The death of the child, Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, of the al-Zoubi tribe in April 2011 in Dara'a, became one of the main symbols of the ascribed 'Revolution' in Syria[37]. A leading oppositionist in the region was Bashar al-Zoubi (Abu Fadi), commander-in-chief of the Southern Front and leader of the Yarmouk Brigade, who was a notable and wealthy member of the al-Zoubi community[38].

The main tribes of this region are, the al-Zoubi, the al-Hariri, al-Na'ime and al-Rifa'i. Many members of these tribes swelled the ranks of different opposition militant groups and battalions operating in the area. All were supposedly responding to customary law. The tribal sheikhs attempted to exert significant pressure to stop these protests in an attempt to preserve their status. Their action provoked a series of squabbles between and within tribes, clans and family lineages, dividing them into Assad loyalists or opponents. Subsequently, the dynamics of the conflict has subjected the tribes to enormous pressure to choose sides. It must be stressed that the Revolt in Syria, unlike events in Tunisia and Egypt that were driven by the urban protests, began in rural areas and the outskirts of large cities. In Syria the social upsurge was a protest from the periphery against the centre. In this sense, tribalism has played a key role in the spread of protest throughout the country, by its very nature and dispersion. Once the generalised violence was unleashed, some tribal groups armed themselves as a measure of self-defence. Both sides in the war, government and armed opposition, have mobilized their resources to attract these groups to their areas of control and use them politically and militarily in the struggle.

For example, the Bani Khalid and al-Muwali tribes have been active fighters in the armed opposition and exemplify the role of a local ashira within the conflict that has taken place in western Syria[39]. Some battalions of the Bani Khalid tribe, fighting under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) participated in the battle of Homs and its suburbs. Another example of this response is the Shield Brigade of the same tribe in Hama[40]. Similarly, members of the Al-Muwali tribe fought against the Syrian Army near Ma'ratNuman, south of the city of Idlib,

where the presence of this tribe is significant[41]. There are three battalions in the opposition forces of western Syria that proclaim their tribal origin, without referring to a specific tribe. One of these groups is the "Battalion of the Free Tribes", which is also active in Ma'ratNuman[42]. This battalion operates under the umbrella of the armed Sunni opposition group, Ahfaad al-Rasul, (Descendants of the Prophet). Another tribal battalion was created in Dara'a. They were, formed in February 2013 by army deserters with tribal origins from several provinces, calling themselves the "Free Tribes of al-Sham". This battalion was integrated into the "al-Omari" brigades, affiliated with the group "AlwiyaAhfaad al-Rasul" in Dara'a. It must also be mentioned that the "Front of the Syrian Tribes" was formed in Aleppo in April 2013[43].

Some large transnational tribal confederations such as Ougaidat, Baggara and Shammar. played a role in organising armed militia. Members of the Qabila al-Na'im is one of the largest tribal confederations in Syria formed a brigade in the Damascus countryside. The Qabila Ougaidat confederation became one of the most active in the fight against Assad, forming the Ougaidat Tribal Brigades, who became widespread throughout Syria[44]. This confederation was crucial in organising the exiled group, the Council of Arab Tribes of Syria. Some members of the Ougaidat confederation and prominent Assad opponents are Shayk Nawaf al-Faris, former ambassador to Iraq, Colonel Abdul Jabbar al-Okaidi, an important military leader in Aleppo until his resignation, and the former head of the Political Security Division of Latakia, General Nabil al-Fahad al-Dundal[45]. Many of the great tribes of the northeast and east of Syria such as Shammar, Baggara, Jabbour, Dulaim and Ougaidat maintain close and strong ties with their counterparts in Saudi Arabia and Iraq[46]. Their tribal relationship has been a determining factor in the internationalisation of the conflict through the entry of weapons and equipment from Saudi Arabia through the existing transnational tribal networks.

Loyalties Found

There are cases of wills found within the same tribal confederation, whose members are torn between support for Assad or the opposition. This is an outcome of the character and local reach of these tribal groups and their lack of cohesion and dispersal throughout Syrian territory. In addition, tribal loyalties changed or were contested after the years of clientelist politics applied by the central government, which undermined the traditional tribal model and, in a certain way, the authority of its leaders. We can even speak of changing wills according to the course of the war. This occurred to the Baggara confederation, many of whose members have converted to Shi'a Islam[47]. In the area of Aleppo, numerous members of this tribe have fought in the ranks of the Syrian Army. In contrast, one of its most prominent leaders in Deir Ezzor, Shayk Nawaf Raghbi al-Bashir fled to Turkey to join the Council of Arab Tribes and to lead the Jazirah and Euphrates Front to Liberate Syria[48]. After the military defeat of the opposition in Aleppo in December 2016,

al-Bashir returned to Damascus and pledged allegiance to Assad and the Syrian Army, in an endeavour to play a leading role in his hometown of Deir Ezzor in the post-conflict period[49].

Shayk al-Bashir had also organised armed groups to fight against the Kurds in the ethnically diverse city of Ras al-ʿAyn in Hasakah province[50]. These types of actions highlight another of the great problems of the Syrian chessboard, such as the Arab-Kurdish antagonism and their fragile coexistence in the region, caused by the historical frictions between both ethnic groups that occur mainly in the areas of Hasakah and Qamishli. Another example of this confusion of tribal loyalties is how members of the Ta'ie tribe organised in the pro-Assad Popular Committees (later Syrian National Defence Forces) under the orders of the member of parliament, Sheikh Muhammad Fares. They were reported to be involved in fighting in the Qamishli area, against Kurdish fighters of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Despite the official denial in any involvement in this fighting by the latter, the tension between the two communities remains. The Ta'ie or Tayy tribe, which can be found in both Syria and Iraq found its origins in Yemen, although it could also be before Arabised Arameans after their forced conversion to Islam[51]. During the Christian genocide of 1915 perpetrated by the Ottomans, the Yazidi military leader of Sinjar Hammo Sarro along with his friend Mohammad Sheik, leader of the Tayy tribe, gave shelter to numerous Armenians, Arameans and other Christians who fled the massacre.

Another example can be found in the Haddiyin tribe, where tribal militias were formed either supporting or opposing the Assad government depending upon whether their creator was a traditional leader (generally, government supporters) or a younger member. Within this tribe, some members fought alongside opposition groups in the vicinity of Aleppo[52]. Others, however, remained loyal to the Syrian government as part of a militia run by the Defence Minister Fahad Jasem al-Frej, who is of the Hadidiyin tribe, near Idlib. This militia collaborated in supplying food to the besieged government forces in Aleppo. After occupying the areas where this militia fought in Idlib, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra captured Sheikh Nayef al-Saleh of the Hadidiyin tribe and beheaded him in public for assisting the Syrian military[53]. In particular, he was accused of smuggling food to the fences at Abu Duhur military airport to government troops that was besieged. There are members of the Baggara tribe fighting on the side of the Syrian government against the opposition in Aleppo, while other tribal members are aligned with anti-government forces in Deir Ezzor[54].

Finally, the powerful Shammar confederation, dominant in the Hasakah region, through its leader Shaik Hamidi Daham al-Hadi, has been involved in the conflict by sending a few thousand fighters to the Sahadid Forces. They are led by the Shaik's son, Bandar al-Humayi. These combined forces are integrated into the Kurdish-led and US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighting against ISIS in eastern Syria[55]. This conglomerate of opposition groups has a strong Kurdish presence in its ranks and

receives military aid and support from foreign powers, principally, the United States[56]. However, they also bring together fighters of Arab origin to allay simmering Kurdish-Arab antagonisms and appease the villagers while strategically occupying more territories to the south. This militia of the Shammar tribe has important connections with the Gulf monarchies[57]. The Qabila Shammar groups have many sub-tribes such as the Abdah, Aslam and Zoba[58]. It is estimated that its population amounts to 3 and a half million in the eastern region of Syria. It maintains important connections with tribal groups in the provinces of Al-Anbar and the area surrounding Mosul of Iraq, who are trained and armed by Western powers[59].

Crucially, the Syrian government reacted from the first moment of conflict by attempting to ally with the greater number of sheikhs and members of tribes. Assad sponsored a series of conferences under the name of "Syrian and Arab Tribes Forum"[60], emphasising their role as the first line of resistance to foreign intervention in the war. In the surrounds of Hasakah, members of the Ta'i and Jabbour tribes fight in the ranks of the government because of the precarious situation of these communities under mounting pressure from Kurdish groups. In general, the oldest sheikhs and the traditional leaders have been more cautious about supporting the revolt, which has led to an important generational fracture in the tribal networks. The Bedouin tribes remain powerful disunited forces in the current conflict in Syria, especially in geographical areas where the presence of the state has been weak or absent. It is in localities where local and foreign actors of the conflict have tried to influence the tribes or win them to their cause, within the sights set on the framework that is generated after the war.

Tribes and the Rise of ISIS

The rise of ISIS and its struggles with Jabhat al-Nusra in eastern Syria at the end of 2014 had dramatic consequences producing a major inter-tribal fracture in many clans. The clans of the Egidate tribe were driven into allegiances with Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS[61]. The background of the clashes was whose forces would seize and control the important oil fields in Deir Ezzor province after the withdrawal of the Syrian Army. Members of the Al-Bakir clan were aligned with ISIS while members of the al-Bukamel and Sheitha clans fought with Jabhat al-Nusra in their battles against ISIS[62]. This internecine warfare ended in the complete defeat of al-Nusra and its allies who were isolated from their populations. Or, in some cases, massacred which happened with the crucifixion of more than 700 members of the Sheitat tribe in southern Deir Ezzor province and in the cities of Abu Hamam, Al-Kashkiyah and Ghranij[63]. Members of the Sheitat tribe were organized into a tribal militia called Ussud al-Sharqiya (Eastern Lions) formed by a few hundred combatants under the command of Tlass al-Salam (Abu Faisal)[64]. After their rout by the Syrian Army, clan members either fled to Kurdish-held territory, to join the ranks of the pro-government side in Homs province, or a minority even swore allegiance to ISIS.

Fearful of the prospect of the creation of an autonomous Kurdish enclave in Syria, Turkey engaged in tribal politics by promoting the establishment the “Army of the Eastern Tribes”, a grouping of the heads of 45 clans in the Deir Ezzor, Hasakah and Raqqa provinces[65]. This Turkish move intended to take advantage of the old Arab-Kurd rivalry to counteract the growing influence of the PYD in the traditional territories of the Arab tribes and nullify the territorial threat posed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its related organizations like the People’s Protection Units (YPG). ISIS has also activated tribal rivalries by releasing videos of tribal leaders, including Baggara, Egidate, Jabbour and Bu Sha’an swearing allegiance to its Caliphate[66]. The terrorist organisation attempted to generate support by playing on the divisions caused by the sociological changes within the tribal structures, to attract a new generation of ambitious leaders who reject traditional structures, by offering them benefits from oil smuggling. This may explain the behaviour of one of the former senior officials responsible for the security of the Caliphate in Raqqa, Abu Abd Al-Rahman Al-Amni, better known as Ali al-Sahou, who recruited young people from his “Bu Sha’ban” tribe, as well as others for ISIS[67].

Finally, the role Jordan has played on the southern frontier of the war must be considered. Amman promoted the formation of tribal militias to counteract the influence exerted by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in the region. A Jordanian initiative led to the creation of the “Army of the Free Tribes” composed of combatants of different clans[68]. Most of its fighters are members of the Nu’im tribe, who have ancestral ties with countries such as Qatar and Bahrain, although members of the al-Hariri, al-Masalmah, al-Zoubi and Fadl tribes also became armed by Jordan[69]. In the same region, the US-backed militia JayshMaghawir al-Thawra or the New Syrian Army, an important tribal composition, also suffered major military setbacks in the city of Abu Kamal. Another prominent tribal militia group is Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa, formed by members of the al-Mashhura, Albu Assaf, AlbuKhamees, Jais, AlbuShamis, AlbuJarad, Albu Issa tribes in Raqqa province[70].

Conclusion

Tribalism is an important factor which must be taken into account in the dynamics of the current conflict in Syria. To date, it is a question yet to be been given any major scholarly consideration or scrutiny. However, it is important to understand its development and the scenario that may exist when the conflict ends, especially when considering all the actors involved, both internal and external. The US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have all attempted to instrumentalise the tribes in order to use their networks, manpower and influences. What has come to be called the Syrian Revolution within the series of revolts since the Arab Spring began was totally unlike the previous urban uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In Syria it became ‘a revolution of the periphery’, of the rural world, where tribal communities have played a central but never a decisive role. The development of the Syrian conflict has followed a pattern of action already known and developed in other parts of the world. Jihadist

groups like Al-Qaeda attempt to find sanctuaries in border regions, usually inhabited by tribal members, such as Waziristan in Pakistan, Shabwa in Yemen, Al-Anbar in Iraq or, in the case at hand, the steppes of Syria. These are regions where the power and authority of a centralised state authority has little or no presence and can operate with relative ease, against militarised tribal forces deploying insurgency and guerrilla tactics.

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