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Bedouin Bureaucrats: Mobility and Property in the Ottoman Empire,

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Examining modern state formation in the Middle East, historians have traditionally focused on central state institutions and nationalist movements which were predominantly centered in urban settings. Recent scholarship, however, has increasingly turned its gaze to the interior of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman territories, showing that actors and places that were historically deemed marginal to, or even threatened by, the processes of modern state-building were in fact actively involved in, if not central to, the development of state institutions. Barakat's *Bedouin Bureaucrats* is a welcome contribution to this increasingly vibrant historiographical field. By rethinking the concept of the "tribe" and through stressing Bedouins' deeply rooted historical connections to land, agriculture, and modern state institutions, her book sets new standards in studying Bedouin actors in the Middle East.

Drawing on a wide range of primary sources, including sharia court records and property registers, *Bedouin Bureaucrats* traces the trajectories of several Bedouin headmen in the Syrian interior during the late Ottoman period. In the context of the growing incorporation of the Syrian interior into imperial state structures in the second half of the nineteenth century, these headmen figured as "representatives of administratively defined 'tribes'" (p. 4). In their capacity as such, Barakat argues, they came to constitute the government's main "access

point” to “tent-dwelling communities” with regard to matters such as property management, taxation, and dispute resolution (p. 22-23). By using the term “bureaucrats” to conceptualize these actors, Barakat points to their active participation in constituting political and social order by enacting, resisting, and transforming administrative practices and categories within growingly standardized practices of imperial bureaucracy (p. 23).

Bedouin Bureaucrats consists of five chapters organized chronologically to cover specific historical periods, as well as a comprehensive introduction and conclusion. Focusing on the period between the 1870s and the outbreak of World War I, the book provides nuanced insights into the complex dynamics of modern state building, knowledge production, and capitalist expansion in the Syrian interior. A select number of maps serves to provide a clearer visual representation of the evolving geographical landscape that she refers to as the “Syrian interior.” The book gains further analytical depth by comparing the Syrian interior with similar spaces on the margins of land-based empires, most notably the North American plains and the Kazakh steppe. In terms of actors, it concentrates on five Bedouin communities that inhabited the landscape of present-day Jordan, southern Syria, and Palestine: the Al-Fayiz Bani Sakhr, the Kayid ‘Adwan, the Wiraykat ‘Adwan, the Manasir ‘Abbad and the Fuqaha ‘Abbad.

Chapter 1 examines the evolving historical dynamics in the Syrian interior from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, prior to the emergence of “Bedouin Bureaucrats.” Challenging the frequently invoked notion of the eighteenth-century Syrian interior as a “tribal frontier,” the chapter engages with historiographical debates about the nature of Ottoman sovereignty in early modern Syria. Barakat argues that Ottoman sovereignty in the Syrian interior was “layered” at the time, with northern areas under direct imperial administration, while the southern region constituted a “sphere of submission” (pp. 38-49). Within this southern sphere, Ottoman rule centered on the administration of the pilgrimage route, which was accomplished primarily through the establishment of subsidy relationships with Bedouin communities, mostly from the camel-breeding elites of the ‘Anaza and Bani Sakhr. From the eighteenth century onward, these subsidy relationships increasingly evolved into “long-term hereditary contractual agreements” which lasted until the end of Ottoman rule (p. 27).

By emphasizing continuities in the relationship between Bedouin communities and Ottoman state institutions between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the chapter challenges the prevailing perspective, embraced by Ottoman reformers

and historians alike, that Ottoman rule in the nineteenth-century Syrian interior inherently constituted a “modern rupture” (p.74). Based on these examinations, Barakat further contends that because of the enduring ties to the populations of the imperial periphery, Ottoman state-building efforts in these regions during the nineteenth century – much like those in other land-based empires such as Russia or the Americas – should be distinguished from the colonial patterns of governance prevalent in European overseas empires.

Through the story of Dhiyab al-‘Adwan, a headman of the ‘Adwan Bedouin inhabiting the Salt region on the east bank of the Jordan, Chapter 2 draws attention to an actor whose involvement with Ottoman state institutions was more recent than that of the camel-breeding elites. The chapter shows how Bedouin headmen involved in local trade in pastoral and agricultural products took advantage of the expansion of capitalism and the growing integration of the Syrian interior into a global wheat market, which helped to increase their economic wealth through partnerships with urban merchants. In this way, the chapter demonstrates that such capitalist enterprises closely interacted with newly emerging imperial visions of agricultural expansion and played a crucial role in pulling the state into the interior regions. The chapter goes on to explore the new efforts of Ottoman officials and lawmakers to create a defined “state space” in the Syrian interior, that is, a “landscape within a territorially conceived and hierarchical administrative and judicial apparatus and a theoretically uniform and bounded grid of property relations” (p. 4). The emergence of “state space” in turn led to the arrival of the “tribe” as a “standardized administrative category” (p. 79).

As chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, these efforts gained new momentum after the global crisis of the 1870s. In this context, Bedouin headmen became increasingly involved in the day-to-day administrative practices of the Ottoman state. These chapters examine the heyday of “Bedouin bureaucrats,” pointing to the dependency of Ottoman administration on local knowledge and authority to handle property relations in the absence of “centralized provincial and district level registers” (p. 131). At the same time, these chapters shed light on the contested nature and “deeply uneven outcomes of the state-space project in the interior” (p. 163).

Chapter 3 illustrates how a “semiautonomous’ land market” (p. 244) continued to be regulated within local sharia courts, which co-existed with the introduction of official imperial land administration. It shows that in the 1880s the sharia courts were the main institutions for handling credit contracts and land transactions between Bedouin and urban merchant capitalists in the Syrian

interior. The practices of these courts relied on and legitimized pre-existing forms and legal understandings of the regulation of property transactions, thereby granting Bedouins continued access to their lands even though the official land administration “did not construct [them] as the historic holders of usufruct rights to the lands they registered” (p. 141).

The historical dynamics in the Syrian interior from the 1880s on were also marked by a “convergence of [external] pressures,” such as the influx of Chechen refugee populations, the growing interest of “distant capitalists, including Zionist financiers” in acquiring lands in the interior and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 (pp. 160-161). Chapter 4 argues that these dynamics coalesced with the growing perception of Bedouin land in the Syrian interior as “empty land” and “legally unused land” that belonged to the state (p. 161), notions that were increasingly articulated by Ottoman officials in Istanbul. The ensuing policy of establishing new refugee settlements and dispossessing Bedouins led to violent conflicts over what was clearly *not* empty lands. The chapter uses the example of Nahar al-Bakhit, a headman of the Manasir Bedouin, to show how some “Bedouin bureaucrats” utilized their central positions in local administration and their close ties to local officials and merchant elites to organize resistance against this policy. By “creating a threat of rural unrest,” as the chapter concludes, the “Bedouin successfully stopped the expansion of refugee settlements in the interior” (p. 199).

The ability to hold onto their lands distinguished Bedouin communities in the Syrian interior from indigenous populations in the North American plains and the Kazakh steppe. The book argues persuasively that this “unique outcome” (p. 4) of the Ottoman modern state project in Syria was strongly shaped by the empire’s growing “sovereignty issues,” (p. 236) particularly due to the rise of British influence in the second half of the nineteenth century. Bedouins, framed as “potentially loyal Muslims,” benefited from imperial policies that ultimately “prioritized sovereignty concerns over capitalist expansion” (p. 208).

These developments did not unfold evenly both within and between Bedouin communities. Chapter 5 points to this asymmetrical impact of modern state formation on Bedouin society in the Syrian interior. It argues that during the final decades of Ottoman rule, as the governance shifted towards a more “nation-state mode,” (p. 4) the possession of “immovable,” that is landed property, became the main criterion for accessing Ottoman citizenship. While “Bedouin bureaucrats” met this criterion, other community members who only owned “immovable property,” primarily livestock, remained imperial subjects who did not enjoy full

political rights. These disparities were particularly evident not only in taxation matters but also in the seizure of “immovable property” as collateral for community taxes. Consequently, the headmen, who played a central role in enforcing taxation, “became symbols of the increasing visibility of inequality within administratively defended communities [...]” (p. 215).

In parallel, Barakat argues that the category of the “tribe” itself came to constitute a “power field within which Bedouin struggled to maintain control over resources and political influence” (p. 203). In this respect, the chapter underscores a central premise of the book, which posits the “tribe” as a *contested* administrative category within the framework of modern imperial state. By doing so, it challenges prevailing scholarly tendencies that uncritically reproduce the category of the “tribe” as presented in official documents of imperial and colonial governments. The author’s framing of tribe as a bureaucratic category is one of the book’s most important contribution to the broader historiography of the modern Middle East.

Finally, using the example of Shaykh Harb of the Bani ‘Atiya and Talal Paşa of the Bani Sakhr, chapter 5 also shows how leaders of the camel-breeding elite were able to exploit their connections with high-ranking Ottoman officials and their mobility as camel breeders, which gave them the ability to create a permanent threat of leaving the Ottoman jurisdiction and thus deprive the government of tax revenues, in order to secure fiscal and political privileges. In doing so, it further differentiates analytically the “tribal aristocracy” (p. 150) – a term Barakat uses to describe the predominantly camel-breeding Bedouin elites – from Bedouin communities who were more closely aligned with agriculture, sheep-breeding, and local trade.

Nevertheless, the book’s strategy of placing these diverse actors within the same analytical framework is not consistently compelling and occasionally obscures some of the nuanced distinctions that the book otherwise effectively establishes between Bedouin communities characterized by different socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, the primary sources that Barakat uses – particularly district-level court records and land records from archives in Jordan and Turkey – mainly shed light on Bedouin communities involved in agriculture and sheep breeding. Because of this focus, the concept of “Bedouin bureaucrats” is primarily tailored to, and effectively resonates with, headmen from these communities. However, it is less convincing with regard to Bedouin leaders from the camel-breeding elite, whose political influence, as Barakat herself points out, “transcended, both spatially and temporally, the still relatively new apparatus of

Ottoman state space [...]” (p. 328). Overall, the book leaves a certain ambiguity whether it categorizes these elites equally as “Bedouin bureaucrats” or not.

To this end, the book also misses out to point to another of its strength, namely its contrasting impact on the broader field of Bedouin studies in the context of the modern Middle East, which has predominantly centered on the “tribal aristocracy”. In the context of this scholarly discourse, “Bedouin Bureaucrats” not only pays attention to previously overlooked actors, but also offers a novel perspective through the application of a materialistic approach that goes beyond the more conventional analytical framework of “tribal-state relations.” However, Barakat’s engagement with literature from this field remains relatively scarce.

For the reader more familiar with this strand of literature, the book also seems to underplay two important aspects of the broader historical context. First, it pays relatively little attention to the military capabilities of certain Bedouin communities, particularly the camel-breeding elites, which played a central role in explaining why the Ottomans and other regional powers, including the British, granted their leaders significant political and economic privileges in order to secure their loyalty. And second, it omits the context of the revival of the caravan trade and the concurrent boom of the camel-breeding economy in the Ottoman interior in the late nineteenth century, as emphasized in the works of Antony Toth and Philip Pétriat. How did these dynamics interact with the expansion of agriculture and landed property in the interior, and how did they affect communities with less military power, whose influence lay outside the camel-breeding economy? By addressing these questions, *Bedouin Bureaucrats* could have further contributed to the field of Bedouin studies.

However, the book’s selective engagement with the literature that focuses on the nineteenth-century American and Russian empires contributes to a clearer structure and an exceptionally well-narrated style. On the whole, *Bedouin Bureaucrats* provides a most gratifying reading experience. It offers astute insights into the complex dynamics and interconnections involved in the process of modern state formation, thereby tackling important historiographical questions that extend far beyond its specific geographical and temporal scope.

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