

Changes in Pastoral Society in Syria and Resource Management

Part 2: Baqqara Tribesmen and the Abd al Aziz Mountains

It has been less than 50 years since the Baqqaras became sedentary, considering that the time they first started to settle down was when the pastoralists started to build sun-dried brick houses as they started incorporating in their livelihood modern agricultural methods to grow barley in the Abd al Aziz (AA) mountains. The history of their sedentary life is short and it is not accurate to say that they have completely become sedentary. Many still move seasonally with their livestock. This means that the Baqqaras are not completely sedentary. During the last half century there were a number of significant changes affecting various aspects of their lives. Firstly, the road network was developed and the use of cars and buses increased. As this tendency developed, the relative status of camels that had been the important means of transport was downgraded and many people abandoned camels completely. Secondly, schools were built in villages which improved education for children. Thirdly, access to markets became easy, which increased shipment of milk and milk products to urban markets. Lastly, their eating habits changed as they had more chance to eat vegetables that were bought with cash and each household started baking tannour bread on a daily basis in an oven next to the house. There seems to be increasing self-recognition that they are “hadar”, urban dwellers, rather than nomadic “Bedou”. However, the major difference between other city dwellers and the Baqqaras are the still-existing strong ties and sense of belonging to their own tribe whose members share the memories of common ancestors. Although the power of the tribal headmen as social leaders has significantly weakened as has their political influence, they still have remarkable abilities to mediate disputes between tribal members.

In the 19th century, the Baqqaras were based along the Euphrates and farmed easy crops such as maize in summer using the water from the river before moving to rangeland in winter. In the 20th century, they expanded their territories northwards into a tributary called the Khabur River. Their population was distributed from Deir Ez Zor in the south and to Ras Al Ain, at the border with Turkey in the north, as well as from Raqqa in the west to the eastern bank of the Khabur River in the east. The Baqqaras presently are divided into 27 sub-tribes with a headman for each of the sub-tribes. However, more generally, they are divided into two groups called the Baqqara al zor and the Baqqara al jabal. The population of the Baqqara al zor largely spreads from along the Euphrates in Deir Ez Zor Prefecture to the southern foothill of the AA mountains. The Baqqara al jabal, in contrast, is a group that expanded from the AA mountains to the northern part of Hasakah Prefecture, by going up and down the upper tributary of the Khabur river. Their expansion sometimes led to disputes over rangelands and with other tribes, but the Baqqara al jabal steadily established their expanded territory. In the late 1950s when modern barley cropping spread in the region, the members of the Baqqaras and their sub-tribes settled down in areas which were allocated to each household. Where there are mountains in the area of allocated land, people maintained their usual pastoral-system oriented livelihood, and if there were rivers, some changed their livelihood to cultivation of wheat and cotton actively introducing irrigation.

Land demarcation of tribes practicing pastoralism-oriented livelihoods is not as clear as those with cultivated land. However, even though many demarcated rangelands overlap one another, there is a clear demarcation based on social divisions with sub-tribes as a unit. In the AA mountains, 5-6 sub-tribes of the 27 Baqqara al jabal live on individual plots. In the next issue, I would like to go into details regarding land use in the AA mountains, focusing on the Baqqara al jabal in transition in the settling process as observed by the author between 1993 and 1996.



Day pastoralism



Water point at a village



Renovation of sun-dried brick house