

Marwan AL-ABSI – Sameer HASSAN

**Syrian Bedouin Lifestyle and Identity Concept in the Conditions of the Social and Cultural Changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## **Syrian Bedouin Lifestyle and Identity Concept in the Conditions of the Social and Cultural Changes of the 21st Century**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the beginning of the last century, there has been an increase in the number of Bedouins who prefer a settled way of life. As a result, their daily life is gradually changing, and clan and tribal ties are slowly being broken. Settled Bedouins born into a nomadic family strive to continue to apply the principles of Bedouin ethics and viable old traditions in the new environment, as they are deeply rooted in them from an early age. However, some traditions of their ancestors are gradually changing and being modified due to new socio-cultural and economic conditions. On the other hand, there are traditions that continue to survive, although Bedouins now must cope with rapid technological progress. Bedouin families tend to settle and adapt their lifestyles to the conditions of the 21st century. Bedouins are proud of their origins and even in the conditions of a settled way of life they try to keep their traditions. This study analyzes the way of life and the identity of Arab nomads in the process of social and cultural changes. It focuses on Bedouin communities living in the Syrian Desert. In the last decade, however, it has been the wars in the Middle East that have pushed the

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Bedouins out of their natural environment, restricting the application of their cultural traditions in everyday life. This study builds on previous findings of repeated field research stays in the Syrian Desert where the first author lived among Bedouin families with whom he currently maintains virtual contact as the war situation interrupted further planned research stays.

**KEYWORDS:** Arab nomads, Bedouin identity, Bedouin way of life, the Syrian Desert

### Introduction

The Bedouins/Arab nomads are geographically linked to the Arabian Peninsula and have a history dating back to pre-Islamic Arabia. Most of them are professed Muslims, but there are also Christian Bedouin communities. They speak Arabic Bedouin dialects, which vary depending on the area in which they live. Natural and climatic conditions have forced most of its population to live a nomadic way of life. All nomads living in tents were not only shepherds, but according to historical sources, they were also involved in tillage, trade, services, or the army (Mundy-Musallam 2000, 1-5). The Bedouin cultural traditions have deep roots in the rich past of the ancient Arab tribes. Despite natural changes and social and economic upheavals, these traditions continue to survive, with Bedouins now having to cope with the new economic conditions and rapid technological progress. Although Western civilization has affected these parts of the world, their way of life in the past and today is very similar, especially in terms of the hierarchy of values, interpersonal relationships or customary law and ethical principles. There are some laws and traditions in nomadic tribes, the origin of which date back to the period before the rise of Islam. Since about the middle of the 20th century, the number of Bedouin families has been increasing, leaving the traditional way of life due to the penetration of civilization into the desert, as well as due to intense government attempts of enforcing sedentarization among the Bedouin tribes. In the last decade, however, it has been the wars in the Middle East that have pushed the Bedouins out of their natural environment and restricting the application of their cultural traditions in everyday life.

Natural conditions divided the ancient Arabs into Bedouins (Arabic *badu*), nomadic shepherds inhabiting the deserts, semi-deserts, or steppes; and a settled population (Arab. *hadar*), settling in cities, villages, and oases where the inhabitants began to engage in trade, crafts, or agriculture. The Arab society before Islam was characterized by a tribal organizational structure based on blood and kinship. Semi-nomadic and settled Bedouin tribes also preserved their tribal structure and tribal

customs. The settled inhabitants were mostly of ancient tribal origin. The traditional division of the Arab society into the Bedouin civilization and the urban/settled civilization was presented by a medieval Arab Muslim philosopher and sociologist Ibn Khaldoun in the 14th century in his important work *Al-Muqaddima*, where he formulated methodological starting points for the study of man and the human civilization. In the second chapter of this extensive work, Ibn Khaldoun distinguishes between two main forms of organization of social groups creating the human civilization. The first form is the Bedouin way of life, in which Ibn Khaldoun includes nomads in the desert and rural people living far from the cities; the second form is a settled way of life associated with urban culture. The topicality of his work is also appreciated by contemporary authors dealing with the issue of nomadism and tribalism (Gombár 2005; Mitchell, Al-Hammadi 2020; Al-Haroun, Al-Ajmi 2018; Dayarante 2020).

The Bedouin society and its culture can be identified and understood through its specific cultural phenomena (Zakariya 2005; Musharqa 1988). This study does not address all aspects that characterize the cultural environment of Bedouin communities living in the Syrian Desert. It analyzes their current living conditions, tribalism, identity, customary law, and Bedouin ethics.

### Methodology

Repeated field research<sup>1</sup> focused on the study of the specific culture of Syrian Bedouins living deep in the desert, who have not yet been exposed to vibrant tourism. For example, the Bedouins in Petra – a major Jordanian tourist destination – have gradually adapted their way of life to the needs of tourists, who have become the predominant source of livelihood. They are settled in the most visited Jordanian locality and daily show tourists the “authentic Bedouin culture” in a stylized form to meet their expectations and enrich them with unforgettable experiences of traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Marwan Al-Absi carried out field research stays in 2006, 2008 and 2010 within Syria in the following provinces: Damascus; Damascus countryside (Douma district: Bedouin villages on the border of *Badiya*: Housh al-Farah, Housh Nasri, Al-Nishabiya, Al-Zamaniya, Al-Dawahira, Al-Shoufani; Al-Hamad Desert); Homs province (Palmyra district: Bedouin settlements deep in *Badiya*); Raqqa province (Bedouin villages in *Badiya*: Jubb Shuair, Tal Abiad, Ain Aisa); Daraa and Al-Swaida provinces (rocky desert area of lava origin Al-Lajat).

culture. Here we talk about the so-called *neo-bedouinism* and its consequences (Weber 2011).

The first author had the opportunity to live with the Bedouins in their daily lives, while actively participating in the routine activities of Bedouin families from different tribes during the spring and autumn months.<sup>2</sup> If we aim to research the reality of the Bedouin life, and not a way of life stylized to attract tourists and meet their expectations, then an important condition for serious field research in this area is a sufficient distance of the researched tribes from vibrant tourist sites. Since 2011, war has been affecting the lives of Syrian Bedouins, and these have been the cause of the discontinuance of planned field research. The extent of how the Syrian crisis is affecting the Bedouin way of life in the Syrian Desert is now being learned from the stories of tribal sheikhs, which are being published in the Arab Internet media (e.g. Al-Araby; Al-Hal net.). We assume that in peaceful conditions it will be possible to continue to study the Bedouin issue.

A prerequisite for obtaining reliable information from the Bedouin environment is communication with them directly without a language barrier (without the use of a mediating foreign language) because Bedouins usually do not speak foreign languages. If we speak Arabic with them, we will gain their trust and they are more open to us. The language proficiency of the researcher significantly influences the course and results of the research because we usually obtain the most important information through interviews and narratives.

### **Living conditions of Bedouins**

The Bedouin society was formed in the Arabian Peninsula. Natural and climatic conditions determined the way of life of its inhabitants. The free life of nomads was subjected to unwritten laws, which were necessary for survival and maintaining social balance in these harsh conditions. The civilization of nomads is thousands of years old and, despite natural changes and groundbreaking social and economic upheavals, it continues to survive. The question remains how the Bedouins will cope with rapid technological progress and the process of globalization, for which even an inhospitable natural environment is unlikely to be an insurmountable obstacle.

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<sup>2</sup> These were the Bedouin tribes: Al-Sayyad, Al-Ramle, Al-Akidat, Al-Salout, Al-Maadid, Al-Mawali.

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Bedouin society is made up of nomads and semi-nomads. Their homeland is made of deserts, semi-deserts, and steppes. Specific natural conditions set the rules for their social, cultural, and economic life. Religion, first pagan and then Islamic, has significantly influenced traditional Bedouin culture.<sup>3</sup> Islam mastered their everyday reality and offered new patterns of behaviour. Nomads gradually adopted it thanks to the fact that this religion has preserved some cultural patterns and norms of pre-Islamic tribal society. On the other hand, there are some Islamic rules that Bedouins still do not respect, for example Islam has granted women inheritance rights, but to this day Bedouin women in most tribes do not have the right to inherit.

The life rhythm of the inhabitants of the desert and steppe depends on the alternation of seasons. After the winter rains, when the ground is green with low vegetation, the nomadic tribes set out on long marches. During the short spring, the Bedouins disperse in smaller groups to ensure sufficient grazing for their herds. During the hot summer, they move again through the arid desert or steppe to larger camps next to the underground springs, where they spend the harshest times of the year (hot summer and cold winter). They currently transport their herds on large motor vehicles. In the past, they used only camels for migration, without which life in the desert was not possible. These animals were highly valued, and still are valued, for their immense endurance and resistance to the harsh desert conditions. People were transported on horseback, but horses were bred only by the wealthier living in a more favourable natural environment, because horse breeding was dependent on the quality of water and food. In the past, the livelihoods of nomads also included robbery (Arab. *Ghazwa*) of other tribes, trade caravans and peasant settlements. The Bedouins lived in a harsh and inhospitable environment and the looted prey or ransom obtained for the so-called caravan protection was considered a necessary means of livelihood (Tauer 1984).

The way of the Bedouins' life has been mostly the same in the past and today, even though the expansion of Western civilization, in both positive and negative senses, has affected these parts of the world. Laws and traditions from the pre-Islamic period also apply in individual tribes. Today, some Bedouin families tend to settle down and adapt their lifestyles to the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the Bedouin are

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<sup>3</sup> There are also small communities of Christian Bedouins living in the Syrian Desert.

proud of their origins, which are a distinctive feature of their personality. Even in the conditions of a settled way of life, he tries to keep Bedouin traditions.

### **The social organization of the Bedouin society (tribality and tribalism)**

Specific living conditions affected the social organization of the Bedouins. Nomadic life in the desert and the constant threat of enemy invasions required larger groupings in the demarcated territory. The position of the Bedouin did not lie in his personal, individual strength, but in the strength of the collective, i.e., the whole tribe. Therefore, tribal organization became the most appropriate form of social organization. The tribe was usually formed by a group of people who derived their origin from a common ancestor. The tribe leader was responsible for the entire tribe. He resolved disputes, made peace or truce, represented his own tribe on the outside, and decided on the time and place of migration. The chief did not have unlimited power and consulted with members of the tribal council (the so-called council of elders) on serious issues in the life of the tribe, and only then made decisions. This procedure is still applied today.

The Bedouin society is governed by unwritten law, and it still respects most of its customary rights, the serious violations of which are punishable. The Bedouins have created their own judicial system that spans all aspects of their lives. Customary law has not been recorded in writing, but tribal judges have mastered it perfectly and applied it to all members of the tribe. Its original purpose was to protect the basic values of the tribal society – blood relatives, honour, and property. Judges dealt with issues of honour and violence, economic disputes – the breeding of camels or other animals, the occupation of pastures and water springs. Bedouin traditions and legal norms are passed down from generation to generation. To this day, the position of a judge is usually performed by the chiefs themselves, which increases their status even within their own tribe and beyond. A capable and respected judge increases the position of his own tribe.

The Bedouin judiciary is a system that allows to solve the problems of almost all activities of the tribe. Bedouins trust the judgments of their judges because they respect the traditions on which their own judicial system is based. Today's Bedouin society is already more open to the rural and urban population. The young generation of Bedouins is gradually expanding their knowledge of the majority society and its culture. Nevertheless, observance of unwritten laws and customary traditions among Bedouins continues to exist either in a modified form or in an identical way with the

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practice of past centuries. In the present, some civil law disputes can be entrusted by the Bedouins to a state court, but they deal with issues of dishonour and vengeance exclusively according to their customary law. It is worth noting that even when dealing with the issue of inheritance claims, Bedouins ignore civil and even Islamic law. These issues are governed in principle by their own customary law. Under this right, wives, daughters, mothers, or sisters never inherit, only male descendants or relatives in the paternal line are entitled to inheritance. These strict rules are based not only on harsh living conditions, the system of tribal hierarchy and the principles of Bedouin ethics, but mainly on the exclusive obligation of a man to provide for his family financially and materially.

Bedouin ethics are directly linked to the harsher and inhospitable natural and social conditions of life in the desert. They are based on the principle of protecting blood relatives, honour, and property. The Bedouins try to resolve inter-tribal disputes through negotiation and agreements. In the past, many tribes preferred to resort to violence and their actions were dominated by an unbridled passion for fighting, and therefore Bedouin communities were exposed to frequent raids and conflicts with neighbouring tribes. Militancy in this context was a recognized virtue. At present, there are no disputes over water resources or pastures, because the areas where nomads live temporarily always belong to a certain state. Militancy as a traditional virtue has lost its justification. The core of Bedouin ethics is formed by traditional ancient Arab virtues: hospitality, generosity, honour, courage, and pride, as well as respect for the elderly and the revered. To this day, these qualities form the traditional Arab notion of masculinity. Courage is one of the most important principles and represents a characteristic feature of a Bedouin nature. The Bedouin see their power in courage. Every member of the tribe desires to be able to show his courage and take the courageous act that decides the fate of the whole tribe. The Bedouin ideal is to keep a promise. The Bedouins consider the fulfilment of the word to be a kind of debt which must be repaid unconditionally. They ignore and disrespect anyone who does not keep what he promised. The performance of a good deed (Arab. *Hasana*), which Western societies call charity, has been part of traditional Bedouin ethics since pre-Islamic times. For Bedouins, the performance of a good deed is not limited to members of their society. It must not be differentiated whether it is a Bedouin or an urban or rural inhabitant.

Each Bedouin tribe inhabits a certain area for a transitional period, which it considers to be its temporary homeland. The Bedouins still live in tents, each representing one family line. A community consisting of several family lines is identified as a clan.

Multiple clans form a tribe, the highest unit of Bedouin society. Tribes are sometimes hierarchized into major and minor tribes according to the number of members or the status of individual tribes in the Bedouin community. Tribe as a social unit and a verbal term are regarded as historicism in Western societies. In the Arab world, tribality and tribalism still persevere. Tribal solidarity and cohesion are the hallmarks of the tribal system. Cohesion and loyalty between family lines and clans comes first. It commits to a mutual assistance and support and guarantees security for everyone. Tribal cohesion has been a condition of survival in the past, as robberies have often taken place and the protection of the territory and herd had to be ensured. An individual could not have survived in such harsh conditions. At present, living conditions have changed and, although there are no plunders or fighting conflicts, tribal cohesion continues to be one of the main Bedouin principles.

In recent decades, wealthy nomadic Bedouins have been building stone houses in villages. Nevertheless, they often set up tents next to these houses, which they use mainly in the summer. The Bedouins consider the tent to be a symbol of nomadic origin, of which they are very proud. Bedouins who have settled permanently set up tents next to their homes only for a certain transitional period, for example when important holidays, weddings, deaths, as a large tent provides more space for usually many guests.

### **The Bedouin identity**

It follows from the above that the main determinants of the Bedouin identity are the way of life (nomadism), the form of organization of Bedouin society (tribality and tribalism) and religion (mostly Islam, to a lesser extent Christianity). In constructing the identity of indigenous peoples (of any country), the nature of their indigenous society must be respected, regardless of where its members currently live. These are three dynamic and inseparable elements that ensure the Bedouin unity and solidarity. A Bedouin identifies himself primarily with his way of life and with the desert, which, for him, represents freedom. Most Bedouin narratives began with the words: *I am a true Bedouin; I have a flock of sheep...* The loss of mobility can weaken this layer of their identity, but the nostalgia for a free life in the desert is evident. The evidence for this is the tents set up in the gardens next to the houses of settled Bedouins. From an interview with Muhammad Al-Jasim (Khudr 2021), the mayor of the Bedouin village of Housh Nasri, I learned that he had kept a smaller number of sheep and goats and two camels that he keeps reminding him of his Bedouin origins,



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of which he is proud. Nomadic Bedouins emphasize nomadism and herd ownership as a major determinant of their identity. Settled Bedouins point to their inherited Bedouin origins, whether they still own sheep, goats, or camels or not. Thus, we can generally classify present Bedouins into two groups: the Bedouin and the population of Bedouin origin.

The Bedouin society is dominated by a collective consciousness and collective activities that take precedence over individual interests. A Bedouin is identified by the tribe from which he comes. Members of the tribe are united by a common awareness of their common origin, biological or fictional. However, what unites them the most is the phenomenon of tribalism. Ghazi bin Muhammad defines tribal identity as follows:

*What traditionally makes a person belong to a tribe is not merely successive degrees of genetic relationship – which, after all, every family in the world has – but rather that a person and his/her tribe think the same way; believe in the same principles; assimilate the same values and ethos; act according to the same unique rules and laws; respect the same hereditary Shaykh (Tribal Lord); live together; migrate together; defend each other; fight together, and die together* (Muhammad 1999, 13; comp. Lenovský et al. 2019, 62).

Tribalism is an integral part of the Bedouin identity and still resists the influence of social and cultural change. Bedouins are not attached to a house or a country but fixed on the local community – the people with whom they live and migrate. Strong dependence on the collective, respect for the authorities, a strong connection with traditions and the need to fulfil common responsibilities are phenomena that give members of the Bedouin community a sense of security and safety. These certainties have been and constantly are being undermined by exogenous influences, such as the discovery of oil, railway construction, agricultural development, phosphate mining, urbanization, and war conflicts. These profound changes are gradually destroying the traditional way of life of the nomads living in the Syrian Desert. They weaken the first determinant of the Bedouin identity – nomadism.

Belief in God is one of the factors that construct the identity of the Bedouins. The Bedouin begs God and is thankful to Him. He turns to Him for better or for worse. But in the end, in difficult times, he relies primarily on the help of his community. In the Arab world, Islam is a significant part of everyday life, but for the Bedouins, it is tribalism that plays the most important role in shaping the Bedouin identity. Within one tribe, Sunnis and Shiites can live side by side, but their dominant identifying

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factor will always be their tribal fellowship and loyalty. "The tribal bond was and still is the strongest link between the tribes. For example, members of the prominent Shammar tribe living in Syria are Sunnis, while those in Iraq are predominantly Shiites." (Abda 2005, 26).

Bedouins are characterized by their ability to adapt to new natural, economic, and social conditions, yet their Bedouin identity remains very strong. Settled Bedouins have changed their way of life, but they still define themselves as Bedouins, even though they no longer live in a tent and migrate through the desert with their sheep. As a result of current exogenous influences (globalization of the economy, modern technologies and means of communication, better access to education and health care, etc.), young Bedouins are constructing their identity in a new, changed environment. The identity of nomadic Bedouins reflects their everyday reality. Young Bedouins perceive their identity as a cultural heritage - a legacy of their ancestors that needs to be protected.

**Nomadism versus sedentarism (Bedouins and the influence of the modern era)**

The young generation of Bedouins is not isolated from the world of settlers – domestic or foreign. A satellite TV dish and a diesel generator used to generate electricity became parts of the tent's facilities. In this way, Bedouins can acquire knowledge about the majority society and its culture. Nevertheless, customary law and customary traditions continue to be practiced among Bedouins. Only some civil law disputes are entrusted to Bedouins by state courts, but they deal with honour issues exclusively according to their customary law.

Since the beginning of the last century, there has been an increase in the number of Bedouins who prefer a settled way of life. As a result, their daily lives are gradually changing, and gender and tribal ties are slowly being broken. Settled Bedouins born into a nomadic family strive to continue to apply the principles of Bedouin ethics and viable old traditions in the new environment, as they are deeply rooted in them from an early age. Those who have already been born into settled families have no direct relationship with traditional Bedouin culture, and therefore it can be assumed that the traditions of their ancestors will gradually modify because of new socio-cultural and economic conditions.

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Since about the middle of the 20th century, the number of settled Bedouins has been constantly increasing due to the penetration of civilization into the desert. Unusual droughts, which have occurred at irregular intervals since the 1960s, have contributed to this. The Syrian government has been intensely interested in the sedentarization of the Bedouin tribes since 1963 and subsequently launched a major land reform. Most of the land owned by the tribal leaders has been divided into small plots for poorer Bedouin families. In this way, the government wanted to motivate nomads to settle and engage in agriculture. The next two decades were very dramatic for Syrian Bedouins.<sup>4</sup> Many Bedouin families have left Syria or settled involuntarily.

Since the 1990s, trucks transporting Bedouins, their portable dwellings and animals have appeared more and more frequently in Bedouin settlements (Grant 2013; Chatty 2013). The shepherds and the herds did not travel for water, the tanks came to the sheep directly for grazing. In some areas of the desert, the state had wells dug to feed the animals. The Ministry of Agriculture regularly sent veterinarians to vaccinate cattle free of charge. During periods of drought, the government provided financial and in-kind assistance to Bedouins (animal fodder, etc.).

A new situation has arisen in the field of health care and education. For example, traditional healing practices began to disappear in connection with health care that was available to Bedouins in the nearest village or town. Mobile schools and boarding schools have been set up for the Bedouin children, which are attended by both boys and girls throughout the school year. The government also provided a third education opportunity by designating a teacher who lived and travelled with Bedouins and taught their children in the meantime. The introduction of compulsory schooling for Bedouins has created a need to change the usual division of labour in the family. Although children continue to help their parents with animal husbandry or other work, they have to set aside some time each day for school and learning.

The traditional Bedouin way of life in the Arab East has now been preserved mainly in an area called *Bilad Al-Sham*.<sup>5</sup> In the Gulf region, such a way of life is now rare.

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<sup>4</sup> Syria's Bedouin Tribes: Interview with Dawn Chatty (July 2, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> *Bilad Al-Sham* is the Arabic historical name of the area known as Levanta (present-day Eastern Mediterranean), located in present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the former Palestine, used until the end of Turkish rule in the 20th century.

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The modernization and raising of living standards associated with the discovery of oil deposits have caused economic and social changes, which have caused the gradual settlement of the nomadic population. As a result of urbanization and the creation of new job opportunities, the population of villages with which Bedouins traded is also declining. The desert is a source of oil, and it is in this industry that many Bedouins are employed. Their way of life has changed radically, and family members live in markedly different conditions compared to their ancestors. The road construction and refurbishment, development of agriculture and food industry, and especially, the war conflict have also led to a reduction in the number of nomads.

In recent years, fighting in Syria has been concentrated in the Syrian Desert. Bedouins lose the opportunity to migrate and thus lose their main source of livelihood. Many of them have moved to neighbouring countries, notably Jordan, where the conditions are suitable for a nomadic way of life (Hamdu 2019). In this way the Bedouins lose their property, their dwellings/tents and their livestock is exterminated, stolen, or lost. From interviews with Yaser Aloush (Sheikh of the Al-Saab clan) and Nader Jaweed (Sheikh of the Bousheikh clan), which were published in the Al-Araby newspaper (Khudr 2021), we learn that property losses were huge during the bombings. The Bedouins were forced to flee and live in camps. They sent their children to work in Turkey and other surrounding countries, or to Europe, i.e. that they now work in a different environment than the one they were used to. However, Sheikh Aloush adds that despite such a situation, they try to preserve their traditions, such as the respect for guests, help in an emergency, sharing joyful and sad events with relatives and neighbours. Sheikh Jaweed described the situation in a similar way. Bedouins, like other Syrians, seek refuge in resettlement camps. They lost all their property (tents, livestock). Suddenly they had to abandon their daily habits, receiving guests in a tent, the traditional preparation of Arabic hot coffee on the fireplace, etc. Several Bedouins today have become sheep traders in northern Syria. One of the rich Bedouins owned hundreds or even thousands of sheep, did not sell them, was proud of such a large flock. Today, however, the Bedouins own barely a hundred sheep.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional Bedouin way of life is on the decline due to political, economic, and technical developments. Bedouins settle near or directly in villages. They live in houses (especially in winter), but in the yard they have tents set up with traditional

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Bedouin furnishings to drink Arabic coffee, receive guests or watch TV. They are engaged in agriculture, irrigating arable land, and raising cows. Some have, out of nostalgia, kept a few sheep, even camels, as a symbol of their Bedouin origin. One of the reasons for the transition to a settled way of life (especially in the city) is the vision of a better and more comfortable lifestyle. The young generation is moving to cities for education and better job opportunities. Bedouins who have settled in cities perform various professions, the more ambitious one's work in higher political and governmental positions. They are proud of their nomadic origins. Semi-settled Bedouins live in the countryside in houses and go to the desert with their herds to graze. In this context, one can agree with Dawn Chatty, who states:

*However, regardless of their multiple occupations and residence patterns, they remain culturally Bedouin if they maintain close social ties with pastoral kin and retain the local linguistic and cultural markers that identify them as Bedouin.* (Chatty 2010: 47).

Interviews conducted with Bedouins of various ages during previous field research stays have shown that for many of them the desert represents the notion of freedom and limitless freedom of movement. They cannot imagine a life other than that under a tent. Others consider life in the desert to be harsh and uncertain and they would not want to go back to it. They identify themselves as Bedouins and are not ashamed of their origins. Surprisingly, not all young Bedouins want to settle in one place. On the contrary, they remain in the desert, although they realize that life there is more difficult. But the sense of belonging is strong, amplified by infinite freedom.

Bedouins make up about 12 to 15% of the Syrian population.<sup>6</sup> This is a rough estimate made before the war. Despite the predominant trend of sedentarization, deserts and semi-deserts are inhabited by real nomadic tribes. They continue to maintain their traditional way of life, but with the help of modern technology, which makes their work easier (cars, tractors, generators) or makes their free time more pleasant (satellite television, radio, etc.). The rate in which they apply customary traditions is the highest among them in comparison to the settled and semi-settled Bedouins. Lifestyles and livelihoods are changing faster than maintaining old traditions. Here we mean the situation up until 2011, when the crisis began in Syria. So far, there is a state of war in the country, which also affects the daily life of the

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<sup>6</sup> Syria's Bedouin Tribes: Interview with Dawn Chatty (July 2, 2015).

Bedouins. Their economic organization has changed, many Bedouins have settled involuntarily, and the tent has lost its original meaning as a symbol of freedom. Nevertheless, their culture is still firmly rooted in their daily lives, especially in terms of kinship, tribal ties, ceremonial customs, and their traditional customary law. It is not possible to estimate what the consequences of the war for the life and position of the Syrian Bedouin communities are and will be. Only subsequent field research carried out in peaceful conditions will show this.

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