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From Camel to Truck? Automobiles and the Pastoralist Nomadism of Syrian Tribes During the French Mandate (1920-1946)

Mehdi Sakatni (Aix-Marseille Université – IREMAM)

Abstract: A conventional view of nomadic tribes is that motorization – the passage from animal to automobile transportation – brought about the transformation and eventually the obliteration of the nomadic pastoralist lifestyle in the long twentieth century.

But through the example of nomadic tribes in French mandate Syria, this paper shows that creative appropriation of the automobile actually helped nomadic groups to strengthen their position and to defend their economic and political interests. Automobiles allowed tribal chiefs to experience enhanced mobility, facilitating a faster connection between the bulk of the tribe and the towns. Nomads could thereby be sure to sell their livestock and products more easily. Motor cars also presented nomads with a new weapon with which they challenged the technical hegemony commonly associated with colonial power. Consequently, it forced mandate authorities to adapt and transform their own ways of policing and controlling the steppe to counter the pioneering use of cars by armed Bedouins. Lastly, it enabled tribal chiefs to gain social prestige and, therefore, to assert themselves as ruling elites in the soon-to-be-born independent state. Overall, the Syrian nomads should be seen as pioneers of automobile culture at the start of the global Fordist period, rather than as its victims.

“Once, we could find along the tracks the skeletons of wild animals – whitened bones as the travelers told, under the vultures flying in the blue skies – but now the caravan has no camels anymore, and we’re more likely to pick up gasoline cans, and empty tin cans, and inner tubes, and old tires, in the form of dead snakes. Sometimes, we can even find a whole automobile, an old piece of junk that’s been burnt to the ground. And the grey-winged scavengers have fled: for they don’t like rubber.”¹

Roland Dorgelès, made famous by his account of soldiers’ lives in the trenches of the Great War, travelled extensively to the Middle East, from Egypt to Mesopotamia across the states of Syria and Lebanon under French mandate in the mid-1920’s. During this period, he crossed the Syrian steppe and met with various French officers and Bedouin shaykhs. In his romanticized account, *La caravane sans chameaux* (“The Caravan with No Camels”), Dorgelès noticed that the wilderness was already – as early as the mid-1920’s – occupied by the signs of the mechanization of transport. What is particularly striking is that mechanization had reached the tracks of the Syrian steppe, in the eastern part of the country, which was considered the remotest place of the mandate territory. Devoted by tradition to the pastoralism of Bedouin tribes, the steppe appeared in Dorgelès’ dualistic description as conquered by the new symbol of modern industry, the automobile.

¹ Dorgelès, *La caravane sans chameaux*, 200. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

Indeed, it is a common saying about nomadic tribes in primary sources and secondary literature alike that motorization – the passage from animal to mechanized transportation – brought about the transformation and, ultimately, the almost complete obliteration of the nomadic pastoralist lifestyle. It is believed that motorization is one of the key factors – among others such as the transformation of landed property, the expansion of cultivation and the pressure on grazing land – that can explain the sedentarization pattern observed in numerous nomadic societies over the past century². In the case of the Bedouin nomads of the Middle East, motorization is often interpreted as a threat to their main economic asset: livestock. Many contemporary observers of the mandate era and later academic works on Bedouin societies, often influenced by modernization theory, maintained that the development of road networks played a major role in the final settlement of nomadic groups.³

If we take a closer look at the consequences of motorization on the two major types of pastoralism in the Middle East (camel- and sheep-herding), nomadic camel-herders seem to suffer the most: automobiles, and later on, trucks, replaced the camel (dromedary) as the common mean of transportation of goods. The general value of camel and its breeding thus decreased, forcing herders to seek other means of livelihood⁴. Regarding the nomadic sheep-herders, mechanized transport transformed the way they migrated; namely, the increasing presence of trucks reversed the migration movement: instead of moving the herds towards watering points and grazing lands, herders chose to bring water in tanks and produced/purchased fodder to their now motionless animals.⁵ This transformation makes them less mobile.⁶ In both cases, however, the motorization increased nomads' dependence to the towns and the monetization of their economy.

Anthropological work including that of Dawn Chatty – from which the title of this paper derives – tends by contrast to shed a new, more balanced light to this assertion. Chatty studied the transformation of Bedouin life through the case of the al-Hassana tribe. As she lived amongst the nomads' encampments during her field work, she was struck by the importance motor vehicles had acquired in their lives. But her assumption was that the Bedouin were not necessarily the victims of a dynamic of modernity over which they had no control. On the contrary, they maintained their agency through times of continuous change and managed to defend their economic interests. Motorized transport did not bring pastoralism to an end but rather transformed it.⁷

The history of the automobile industry and its social and cultural politics in the Middle East is only beginning to be written. Most academic works on the topic of Middle Eastern auto-mobility deal with the diverse uses of motor cars in contemporary societies, but rarely add a

² Squires, *Range and Animal Sciences*, 110.

³ Some examples can be found in Chatty, *Nomadic Societies*, such as Lancaster and Lancaster, *Integration Into Modernity*, 335-69; Chatelard, *Desert Tourism*, 710-36.

⁴ Pâpoli-Yazdi, *La motorisation et ses conséquences*, 104; Muhsam, *Sedentarization*, 548; Beck, *Use of Land*, 66.

⁵ Bourbouze, *Systèmes d'élevage*, 35-6.

⁶ Squires, *Range and Animal Sciences*, 108-10. In the case of Syria, see Louhaichi and Tastad, *The Syrian Steppe*, 4.

⁷ Chatty, *From Camel to Truck*.

historical analysis of how this auto-mobility came to be.⁸ In other words, we still know relatively little about the ways motor vehicles were appropriated in the region and how the culture of auto-mobility developed. This is particularly true in the case of *Bilad al-Sham*. Nevertheless, it appears that Syria witnessed a massive growth in the number of vehicles precisely during the mandate era. Just before the First World War, there were 500 cars in the whole Ottoman Empire, most of them in the capital Istanbul; motor vehicles owned by private individuals (officially registered) totaled just three in Syria. But by the end of the war, there were about a hundred of them. In 1932, the number of vehicles (including trucks) reached 17,600.⁹ Finally, between January 1932 and October 1936, the states under French mandate officially imported a total of 2,883 automobiles and 1,794 trucks.¹⁰ Plainly, this was a flourishing market, denoting increased social demand for vehicles.

This paper will discuss the early consequences of the motorization of the Syrian steppe for the nomadic tribes. Though it seems intuitively likely that this new tool changed the lives of populations who built their livelihood on mobility, I argue it did in an unexpected way. This study will focus first on the “conquest” of eastern Syria by motorized transportation. I show that the nomads were quick to seize the new opportunities and that the automobile proved itself a precious advantage to them in defending their interests. More broadly, I dwell upon the colonial encounter between the Bedouin and the French authorities in the interwar period and show how the motorization of Bedouin movements consequently reinforced the motorization of French military forces, catalyzing the dynamics of mechanization. In the wake of David Edgerton’s work on technology in global history¹¹, I focus here on “things in use”, rather than simply on histories of invention and innovation, which privilege Eurocentric technical genealogies. In scrutinizing the uses of motor vehicles by the Bedouin, as they appear in mandate archives and travelers’ accounts, I argue that the Bedouin defined their own kind of auto-mobility, which matched their specific activities. Motorization strengthened the already existing economic bonds between the pastoralists and urban centers and contributed to the integration of the Bedouin population into the Syrian territorial state during the process of its formation.

Bringing civilization to the wilderness: the development of mechanized transport in the Syrian steppe

In the early days of the mandate, French authorities constructed a peculiarly binary vision of Syria. They divided the country into two parts, superimposed over the administrative division of the Mandate territories into various sub-units. The eastern part of Syria was considered a “nomadic zone”: the domain of Bedouin pastoralists (*badiya*) and, as such, a territory that required a specific form of administration. In contrast, the western part of the country was named under the Arabic term of *ma’mura* — the grey area in Figure 1 — which was translated

⁸ Two counter-examples that bring historical depth to the study of auto-mobility in the Middle East are Tignor, *In the Grip of Politics* and Ménoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh*.

⁹ Blecher, *Desert Medicine*, 256.

¹⁰ Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes/Mandat Syrie-Liban (thereafter CADN/MSL) /701/Note concernant le commerce de l’automobile en Syrie et au Liban (1936).

¹¹ Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*.

as the “cultivated zone” or the “sedentary zone” or even sometimes, quite equivocally, as the “civilized zone”.

This conception lasted until the very end of the mandatory era and had a major impact on French Bedouin policy.¹² The partition rested on both security and economic rationales. The French High Commission viewed the area east of the four main cities as uncharted territory: they indeed knew very little about the geography or the population of the steppe south of the Euphrates and even less of the upper Jazira. As a result, they considered the whole area as dominated by Bedouin tribes and pastoral nomadism. The first French High-Commissioner, Henri Gouraud, devolved the administration of the *badiya* to a military corps, the Contrôle Bédouin (CB) — derived from the Intelligence Services that played a major role in installing the French mandatory authority — assisted by a few *méharistes* companies (the *méharistes* companies were camel-mounted fighters in charge of desert police operations).¹³ Following the same pattern, the whole economic life of the country was divided along this partition: the eastern steppe was considered a vast pasturing area for the herds of the Bedouin nomads, whereas the *ma'mura* was the domain of settled agriculture that required protection from Bedouins' depredations. The main goal of French “Bedouin policy” was ultimately to bring the nomads into the realm of civilization — in other words, to settle them as sedentary farmers and to turn the arid and marginal steppe into a productive, tightly controlled area of agriculture.¹⁴ This conception evolved at the turn of the 1930's into a more balanced vision that acknowledged the political and economic unity of the country. Nevertheless, the idea of the steppe as the uncivilized socio-economic margin of Syrian territory prevailed in the early years of the mandate.

<Figure 1 here>

Figure 1. Location of the main nomadic tribes in French mandatory Syria (1943) with their seasonal migrations and encampments, in Ababsa, *Raqqa*, from a sketched map of the Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT).

Given this structuring dualism through which the French colonial authorities constituted the space of the Mandate, it is not therefore surprising that the French administration sought first to develop the transport infrastructure in the western part of Syria. The High Commission wanted to ensure that the cities in the economic heart of the country — the “civilized” zone — were properly connected with one another. Modernization of the roads in Syria — as shown in fig.2 — followed the principle of the “pioneering frontier of civilization”, a progressive “conquest” of territory that pushed the perceived backwardness of nomadism always further east. In the wake of some travelers' experiments, crossing the Syrian desert by car became a

¹² On the general French partition between the coastal “Levantine westernized” Middle East and the Arab traditional hinterland, see Henry Laurens, “Jausse et les Services de Renseignement français (1915-1919)”.

¹³ About the role of the *Service des Renseignements* in establishing the mandate administration, see Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'État Mandataire*.

¹⁴ Settlement of Bedouin on agricultural land was part of the Ottoman policies in the region and of the British plan in mandate Transjordan: Rogan & Tell, *Village, Steppe and State*. Similar policies of sedentarization in arid zones were also conceived in other French colonial territories, especially in North Africa: Frémeaux, *La France et le Sahara*.

quite common activity by the mid-1930's.¹⁵ The Beirut-Damascus-Baghdad road, after a relative period of neglect, came back into use and competed with the Suez Canal as a way of linking Asia with the Mediterranean.

<Figure 2 here>

Figure 2. The road network (including roads and registered tracks) in French mandatory Syria (1938) (from Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie*, 182).

As stated above, the automobile was quick to reach the so-called margins of Syrian territory. Town centers of the steppe, such as Sukhna or Dayr-az-Zawr, were, in the words of contemporary French officers or academics, filled with the humming of engines by the mid-1930's. Sukhna for example, a small oasis north of Palmyra, kept its role as a stopping place for caravans during the interwar but the town transformed with motorization: the *khan* disappeared to make way for garages where merchants and pilgrims could park their vehicles.¹⁶ Jacques Weulersse, a French geographer, noted the same adaptation to this new form of travelling in the whole countryside: by 1939, almost every village in Syria was connected to the road network (often by a rudimentary track) and the job of driver had become one of the most prized occupations, especially in rural areas.¹⁷ Colonial Mandate officials and academics were amazed at the speed of adaptation to the automobile and they often praised Syrian chauffeurs for their driving skills. The Fordist consumption model rendered the automobile a relatively accessible asset in the interwar Middle East. As a result, it was seized on by the rural population as a means of earning wages. The business of transport quickly became a blooming one in the Syrian towns and all over the country.¹⁸

There were official transport companies – the most famous being the Nairn and L'Autoroutière du Levant – but the majority of automobile transport services were provided by private individuals.¹⁹ Dozens of private cars and trucks – unregistered as commercial transport vehicles – ensured the transportation of people and goods in mandate Syria. They bear a striking resemblance with the proliferation of taxi services described in Beirut by Kristin Monroe.²⁰ This activity was actually so popular that it endangered the business of the regular transport companies by constantly bringing prices down. The High Commission was finally forced to react by limiting the importing of vehicles and by enacting severe legislation to end competition and preserve the main companies' profitability.²¹

In this general context, Bedouins played an important role. Intuitively, it seems logical that people who built their livelihood on mobility would seize this new tool to get around more

¹⁵ The most famous of these experiments being “La Croisière Jaune” conducted by André Citroën and linking Beirut to Beijing between April 1931 and February 1932: Deschamps, *La Croisière jaune*.

¹⁶ Albert de Boucheman, *Une petite cité caravanière*, 91-2.

¹⁷ Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient*, 182-3; CADN/MSL/701/Alphonse Algrin, *Transports sur chemin de fer et sur route - Renseignements*, Beyrouth, 2nd September 1932.

¹⁸ Bianquis, *Transports en commun*, 41-2.

¹⁹ The Nairn Transport Company was a pioneer in defining the fastest route between Damascus and Baghdad and was in charge of the postal service between the two countries.

²⁰ Monroe, *The Insecure City*, 102-5.

²¹ CADN/MSL/701/Alphonse Algrin, *Transports*.

easily. Unfortunately, however, information on how the Bedouins got hold of cars is scarce. It is hard to tell, for example, how many cars Bedouin *shaykhs* owned exclusively for themselves. For instance, we know that in the case of Nuri Sha'lan, of the Ruwala tribe – one of the most prominent groups in the Syrian *badiya* during the first decades of the twentieth century – he possessed two cars in 1925 for his personal use, but that he frequently rented and requested other vehicles in the main cities for more specific and selective needs.²²

As for the type of vehicles used by Bedouin drivers, most of our knowledge is inferred from the state of the road network and the sparse comments of travelers. There were several restrictions on the use of automobiles in the interwar Syrian steppe. First, the geography of the steppe was not a steady and continuous plateau: on the contrary, mountainous terrain, such as the Jabal Boueida, the Jabal Sha'ar and the Jabal Bishri disrupted the monotony of the landscape, making it an arduous terrain for motor vehicles. Furthermore, the rudimentary tracks spreading across the territory until the mid-1930's restricted the use of automobiles to models that had medium-to-large horse power (6 cylinders and above) and a high clearance from the ground. American cars and especially those from Dodge, Oldsmobile and G.M.C. were therefore the most commonly used for riding the tracks of the steppe in the first years of the mandate.²³ American manufacturers rapidly dominated the automobile market in the Middle East in general, and particularly in the states under French mandate. French vehicles, by contrast, were popular only in the social circles of French citizens residing in the Levant. Military officers and administrative agents benefited from a unique fiscal regime that made trade with the French metropole attractive. But for the rest of the Syrian population of that time, American brands were the favorite. Between 1932 and 1936, 53 per cent of the imported cars in the French Middle Eastern mandates came from the United States of America. American domination was still more significant in the motor truck trade: 86 per cent of the trucks imported during that period of time were constructed by American firms.²⁴ It is instructive to see that the French mandatory authorities had very little control over the acquisition of cars by Bedouin chiefs. Whereas they managed to tightly monitor nomads' migrations and often seized the properties of dissident individuals, officers and administrators allowed a great liberty in terms of purchasing and riding motor vehicles. This lack of control can be explained by the minimal legislation governing motorized transport in the early mandate years. Auto-mobility was not a major concern for mandate authorities and they hardly anticipated the development of the automobile market among the nomadic population. When eventually they realized its significance and impact on Bedouin mobility, they reacted by forcing *shaykhs* to ask for official authorization before acquiring vehicles.²⁵ But it was already too late.

It seems that the majority of tribal *shaykhs* were equipped with automobiles by the end of the 1920's, as motor vehicles had become a common sight in Bedouin encampments, according

²² Müller, *En Syrie*, 68; CADN/MSL/1915/Contrôle Bédouin (thereafter CB) Damas-Palmyre, *Bulletin d'information hebdomadaire* (thereafter BIH) n°11, 25th March 1936.

²³ CADN/MSL/702/*Report on Reconnaissance by Motor Car from Beyrouth via Damascus to Baghdad*, April 1923; Blanchard, *La route du désert Damas-Bagdad*, 238.

²⁴ CADN/701/*Note concernant le commerce de l'automobile en Syrie et au Liban*.

²⁵ CADN/1536/*Conflit Sbaa-Rouallah*.

to many travelers.²⁶ And American brands – such as the 12-cylinder Packard of Shaykh Mujhim Ibn Mahid²⁷ – remained the most popular cars in the tribal milieu.

We have much more general data on the way the Bedouin were using motor vehicles, mainly from the weekly reports of French officers from the *Contrôle Bédouin*, who surveilled their targets by following nomad encampments during their seasonal migrations. Officers described the daily activities of the shaykhs and zealously noted down any information that could relate to the general security of the steppe – especially those dealing with movement.

Unsurprisingly, the first use of automobiles by nomads had to do with security matters: Bedouins frequently employed cars as a military asset during raids against rival tribes.

The automobile as tribal weapon: the motorization of raiding

Some of the Syrian tribes took part in the First World War and had probably already seen or experienced the use of motor vehicles in modern warfare.²⁸ Their use of cars in combat were therefore partly an appropriation of what they had seen; however, they did not merely reproduce military tactics but adapted the automobile to the specificities of Bedouin raids and conflicts and to fighting conditions in the steppe. As a consequence, French mandate authorities had to respond to the threat by increasing their own motorized equipment to uphold their technical advantage over the population they wished to control.

The first reported occurrence of motorized raiding happened in 1925. At that time, the greater speed of the automobile represented its main advantage over the horse or camel. But the situation soon escalated by the end of the year 1926 when Nuri Sha'lan promoted a new weapon in Bedouin raids: he installed machine guns at the back of his cars and was therefore able to attack his opponents with three self-made “armored cars”. Shaykhs of rival tribes protested this state of affairs as it threatened the balance of power between the different groups and alliances²⁹.

Tribal raiding was not merely a sport for Bedouin groups nor an outdated, folkloric practice, contrary to what most French colonial commentators were eager to explain.³⁰ It definitely had to do with honor, bravery and the ability to fight – and was an extremely codified activity— but it also had more material aspects.³¹ Raiding was probably an efficient way of maintaining the economic balance in an environment where resources were scarce. By raiding an opponent, a social group – whether a tribe or a fraction of it – could ensure its survival as well as contesting the domination of a rival group. It is no accident that the *ghazw*-s often targeted the largest, richest and most prominent tribes. The introduction of motor vehicles in

²⁶ Montagne, *La civilisation du désert*, 215.

²⁷ Mujhim Ibn Mahid was the shaykh of the Fid'an tribe: De Groot-Adant, *Terre d'Astarté*, 73.

²⁸ For example, the Ruwala, among other Arab tribes, took part in the Arab Revolt and Nuri Sha'lan was one of the first to enter the conquered Damascus in October 1918: Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*.

²⁹ Müller, *En Syrie*, 68.

³⁰ British officers in the neighboring mandates of Iraq or Transjordan often shared the same interpretation of raids; see Fletcher, *Running the Corridor*.

³¹ As one in-depth (unpublished) study of a French officer shows : CADN/986/Étude sur le rezzou.

this activity transformed raids, therefore, but also definitely shook the political equilibrium in Bedouin society.

Tribal shaykh-s all over Syrian territory logically hurried to buy automobiles to keep up with the leading nomadic groups. By the end of the 1920's, most of the major raids and every military encounter between Bedouin tribes was partly motorized. The conflict opposing the Siba'a and the Ruwala, which lasted from 1928 to 1932 and which absorbed the attention of both French-Syrian and British-Iraqi administrations, offers a significant illustration of this phenomenon. On 15th February 1929, a major assault by the Ruwala and al-Hassana tribes on Siba'a encampments united four hundred horsemen and eight armed vehicles.³² Opponents also realized that automobiles had become an indispensable asset in war, as Siba'a and Fida'an shaykhs were touring the cities of Aleppo and Homs in search of automobiles to support their troops before launching attacks.³³ By 1930, it already seemed impossible for the Bedouin to consider a non-motorized assault potentially successful.

Nevertheless, Bedouin raiders still used camels and, even more often, horses alongside automobiles. Motor cars were not, in any case, substitutes for the animals. The automobile had a strong impact on the speed of attacks and due to the possibility to transport up to eight armed men was a powerful weapon. In that sense, Bedouin could hardly ignore it. However, in raids – which generally involved the capture of numerous animals as prizes – motor cars could not replace camel riders or horsemen in managing the newly acquired herd. This illustrates the importance of time in the use of technology. As it is often the case and as David Edgerton has noted, a new technology does not necessarily erase an older one; they rather cohabit for quite a long period in the same milieu.

Tribal opponents were not the only ones to worry about the motorization of raiding. French authorities were also quite concerned: they feared that the continuing mechanization of nomads' mobility would eventually deprive the colonial power of its technical superiority. Controlling and policing the Syrian steppe was indeed mainly a matter of speed. The military forces and concrete administration in the *badiya* were extraordinarily light: four officers associated with the *Contrôle Bédouin*, assisted by three *méharistes* companies and occasionally two groups of *Gardes Mobiles*, oversaw the entire steppe and the total Bedouin population – that is around 180,000 people scattered over an area of 300,000 square kilometres. When the general security was disrupted, for example by raiding, the priority of the French administration was to prevent any escalation by intercepting the suspects.³⁴ Reliable intelligence as well as efficient technical means of intervention were thus paramount. A CB officer admitted that any reaction to a raid, a theft or a homicide had to occur at most six hours after the event: past this window, the situation could get out of hand. To ensure a swift response, the authorities relied mainly on telegraph communications and, of course, on the automobile.

³² CADN/MSL/1536/Conflit Sbaa-Rouallah/*Bulletin de renseignements Syrie*, 26th February, 1929.

³³ CADN/MSL/1536/Conflit Sbaa-Rouallah/*Rapport du Lt-Colonel Tracol*, Damas, 4th April 1929.

³⁴ French officers particularly feared the classic retribution of *diya* (retaliation that could degenerate in blood feud) that was seen to be associated with Bedouin tribal customs.

The motorization of the tribes posed therefore a major challenge to French authorities. It contested the technical hegemony traditionally associated with colonial power and it made the policing of the steppe a much more complicated task. This challenge was solved by the colonial authorities by an increasing motorization of the most efficient military force in the steppe: the *méharistes* companies.

In the early stages of the conquest of eastern Syria (July 1920 – November 1921), a military corps mounted on camels was considered by the Haut-Commissariat the most efficient type of military force. The camel adapted to the arid environment and, contrary to automobiles that had to be imported at a great cost, camels were affordable and available at the main markets in the vicinity of the steppe.³⁵ Furthermore, camels were less dependent on water sources — that had yet to be discovered — and on the quality of tracks that had yet to be surveyed.

By the end of 1923, however, the situation had already changed. Colonial knowledge of the geography and of the nature of the communications networks was constantly increasing thanks to the work of the Intelligence Service and the experiments of travelers. The number of automobiles incorporated in the *méharistes* steadily increased starting 1923. The first vehicles to join the *méharistes* force were four Ford trucks, used first for the fast transportation of troops of the 1st *Méharistes* Company. They were also equipped with Lewis machine-guns. In October 1925, the High Commission adopted a new strategy: the Ford trucks were replaced by cars of the French brand Chenard & Walcker (see figure 3). Equipped with new machine-guns of the Hotchkiss type, the cars numbered 12, divided in four units. The motorized force's main activity then turned from transportation to surveying: automobiles were then used for scouting wells and pastures to anticipate the seasonal migrations of Bedouin encampments. By 1927, the number of cars rose from 12 to 28 and each one of the four groups of cars constituted a distinct administrative unit under the name of *Peloton d'Auto-Mitrailleuses Légères du Désert – A.M.L.D* (Light-Armoured Desert Cars). The *auto-mitrailleuses* were already a major asset in policing the tribes and when the French *état-major* considered recalling them, CB officers reacted. From experience, they knew their authority would be undermined by loss of the motor vehicles: “two hundred camel riders could not replace the power of the Auto-Mitrailleuse Section in the desert.”³⁶ These sections were finally administratively dissolved in 1935 to re-incorporate the *méharistes* companies which were labelled *Compagnies Légères du Désert – C.L.D.* Under the authority of a French officer, *méharistes* and light-armored cars were united in the same mission – policing the nomadic population of the steppe.³⁷ Camel riders were kept as a practical tool for reaching remote places in the steppe, whereas light-armored cars were used for surveying, for rapidly linking tribal encampments and towns and, of course, as a display of French military strength. It embodied to the point of perfection Moroccan Resident-General (and ideologist of French

³⁵ Christian Velud described accurately how the 1st *méhariste* company was formed: French officers scanned the Bedouin tribes for volunteers and the camel markets for animals. Velud, *Une expérience d'administration régionale*, 249-53.

³⁶ CADN/MSL/1536/N° 2938 A.P./3, Le Capitaine RIO au Chef de Bataillon, *Demande tendant au maintien de la Section Mitrailleuse Automobile*, Alep, 27th March 1928.

³⁷ “Les autos-mitrailleuses légères au Levant”, *Revue des Troupes du Levant*, n°4, 1936, 75.

protectorate rule) Hubert Lyautey's motto – often cited as a role model by French mandatory officers: “better to display force than to use it”.³⁸

Most of the cars used in the steppe were not equipped with heavy armored protection for the soldiers riding them but were still deemed sufficient by French authorities. By 1935, the Armée du Levant did possess, however, heavy armored cars of the Panhard-Schneider type but which were used for urban policing. There were three main reasons for this: first, the light *automitrailleuses* were adapted to the conditions of desert warfare with their long distances to cover, and where speed was paramount. The heavily-armored Panhard cars were indeed much too heavy (they weighed almost three metric tons more than the Chenard) and were consequently less mobile.³⁹ Second, the tasks of the CLD consisted mainly in surveillance, and much less in combat. Moreover, when they did encounter opponents, the *méharistes* rarely confronted a heavily armed force in the Bedouin raids, as these were mostly executed by small mobile Bedouin groups.

There was finally a third reason: the firm belief among mandate officials that the French possessed an automatic technological superiority over Bedouin tribes made them overlook the question of automobile technology. The French were more concerned by the quantity of motor cars they were able to put in the battlefield than by upgrading their *automitrailleuses* to the latest standards. A striking example of this attitude is that the French chose to continuously use, during their military operations in the desert, touring cars on which they mounted a machine gun. But this type of motor car was, at this time, already an outdated item of military technology: such vehicles had already been used twenty years previously in Protectorate Morocco. Military automobile technology had made undeniable progress since the Great War but this progress does not seem to have reached the outskirts of the Syrian steppe. In this sense, the pictures circulating in⁴⁰ were hardly a demonstration of up-to-date technological superiority but rather a display of military tactics: an executed movement bringing together camel riders and automobiles in a coordinated exercise to show the adaptation of French military tactics to the conditions of desert policing and fighting. The production of such pictures (such as the ones shot by the executive chief of the Contrôle Bédouin, Jean Deleuze) and their limited circulation in the inner circles of French mandate authorities (military officers and high administrative officials) support this argument. The French authorities did not bother to advertise these pictures as they could hardly symbolize the technological superiority that the mandate claimed. Tellingly, this display – a small camel-

³⁸ The politics of Lyautey in Morocco were often used as guidelines in the mandate administration as some of his disciples, such as Henri Gouraud, who had taken part in the Protectorate, were also major officials in the Levant during the mandate era. See Burke III, *A Comparative View*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-80.

⁴⁰ Such as the pictures in Jean Deleuze's private papers, head of the Contrôle Bédouin showing the Compagnies Légères du Désert, uniting camel riders with armored cars.

mounted force assisted by an armed motor car – embodies quite accurately what a motorized Bedouin raid could have looked like.⁴¹

In sum, the military use of cars by Bedouin nomads, while significant especially in the eyes of the colonial authorities anxious about their relative domination of this new military technology, must not be exaggerated. The obsession of the Contrôle Bédouin's officers with security must not be allowed to hide the other and, probably most common use of cars by the shaykhs.

Enhanced mobility: Connecting Tribe and City

A key axis of French mandatory government consisted in “divide and rule”: Arab nationalists struggling for independence from mandatory rule were identified as the greatest potential threat. They were constantly under surveillance and the Haut-Commissariat countered their actions by regularly promoting regional or local autonomy.

The French “Bedouin policy” was also influenced by this general conception. French authorities feared that frequent contact between the tribes and the nationalist milieu — identified as the landed aristocracy of the four main Syrian towns Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus — would pull the nomads in to join the fight for independence. Therefore, they tried to prevent them from mingling in anti-colonial politics by controlling their mobility and keeping them out of the cities. At the same time, the *politique bédouine* of the mandate consisted in the promotion of influent shaykhs through financial subsidies; in exchange, the High Commission required from this appointed Bedouin elite the unequivocal recognition of French rule and support in maintaining order. Clearly, the mandate government could not assume control of Syrian desert areas without Bedouin shaykhs' assistance.⁴²

But, contrary to the assertions of the French colonial discourse, Bedouin Arabs did not represent a separate, backward world in a country divided by a clear frontier between civilized/uncivilized or cultivated and fertile land as against arid desert land. All the nomadic tribes in Syria, at the beginning of the mandate, already had strong ties with the economic and political elite of the four main cities. Sheep-herding tribes, for example, were associates of urban merchants: city merchants owned the herds and employed members of local nomadic tribes to put them out to pasture. Furthermore, some Bedouin elites were an integral part of this world.⁴³

In fact, Bedouin were deeply dependent on their relationships with urban merchants. Life in the steppe could not have been possible without the items provided by the city trade: food such as grain, clothing, cloth for tents, and many more were only available in the town markets. They were likewise dependent in that herders had to sell their livestock and their

⁴¹ Daniel Neep shows that the French indeed imitated in many cases the insurgents' use of speed and space: Neep, *Occupying Syria*, 103-18.

⁴² See Thomas, *Bedouin Tribes*, 552-4.

⁴³ Some Bedouin shaykhs were already in fact part of the political elite and/or of the landed aristocracy. Nawaf al-Salih, shaykh of the Haddidin, for example, was part of the Ottoman administration and a major political character before the mandate period. See Rogan, *Asiret Meketebi*.

products, in order to purchase the goods needed for their long journey away from the towns. Regular contact with the towns was therefore crucial. To facilitate the trade between the tribes and the towns, Bedouin traditionally relied on middlemen. Those middlemen — either hired by city merchants or working on their own — often travelled with the tribe over short distances and camped with them to conduct business. As Dawn Chatty argued, the automobile sometimes allowed Bedouin groups to cut these individuals out of the deal or, in most cases to redefine the trading relationship between nomads and cities. As such, the automobile proved an essential device. It allowed the chiefs to deal with the market's fluctuations and to maximize profits on the sale of their property. Chiefs who had no car were increasingly at a disadvantage economically.

Automobiles also supported pastoralist activities. Herding of sheep flocks using motor vehicles — described as one of the main transformations of nomadic pastoralism by Dawn Chatty — was occurring in the mandate era in Syria. Some Bedouin groups were seen converting automobiles to transport sheep from the *badiya* to the western coast of the country. Such activity was sufficiently developed by 1930 to bring the mandate authorities to support this initiative by planning a regular transportation service for animals.⁴⁴

It is safe to say that nomads are often on the move. But, for the Syrian Bedouin chiefs, mobility was indeed a vital element of their functions. The CB's surveillance of Bedouin shaykhs reveals their most frequent movements. In the case of Nuri Sha'lan, one of the most important and consequently one of the most scrutinized shaykhs, his circulation in space had three underlying reasons. The first was to manage the positions of the different encampments belonging to the tribe. Scarce resources demanded a tight control from the shaykhly authority to make sure that all the nomadic units had their share of water and pastures throughout the seasonal migration.⁴⁵ This activity was potentially time-consuming as the large Ruwala tribe encampments could be scattered over four hundred kilometers.

Nuri Sha'lan also had to meet frequently with other Bedouin shaykhs from his own tribe, from allied tribes and from rival ones.⁴⁶ Managing the dispersion of the nomadic population in space required concertation with all the concerned groups in order to keep the peace. But when the peace was disrupted, meeting with other shaykhs was also a way to deal with the problem. Raids, thefts and violent incidents were resolved during assemblies by recourse to customary law. And finally, as a leading political character, Nuri Sha'lan had frequent official and unofficial gatherings with French mandate's representatives, including CB officers. During these meetings, administrative matters such as counting of herds, border crossing and taxation were dealt with.

It is crucial to understand that all these activities allowed tribal shaykhs to assert their power. Being able to answer a call, whether to act as referee in a tribal dispute or to be a source of intelligence for the colonial power on events in the steppe, gave a shaykh an aura of reliability and increased his prestige, from which he retained much of his authority.⁴⁷

Automobiles rendered mobility for these purposes much easier for Bedouin shaykhs. They exploited these new means of mobility to their advantage. But in doing so, it also had one

⁴⁴ CADN/MSL/1536/Note au sujet de la question bédouine dans les États Sous Mandat Français, 35.

⁴⁵ CADN/MSL/1915/CB Damas-Palmyre – BIH 11, 25th March, 1936; BIH 18, 16th May 1936.

⁴⁶ CADN/MSL/1915/BIH 5, 5th February 1936.

⁴⁷ See Lancaster, *The Ruwala Bedouin Today*.

major long-term consequence, the growing settlement of nomadic chiefs in towns. The ownership of permanent urban houses became a common fact: Nuri Sha'lan in practice lived in his numerous properties in the Salhiya neighborhood of Damascus.⁴⁸ As the automobile shortened distances between cities and encampments, Bedouin chiefs increasingly avoided the discomfort of days and nights under the tent. French officers had little doubt about this transformation: motorized shaykhs spent less time within the encampments. Just as the “absentee landlord” – in the historiography, the archetype of the urban notable and political leader⁴⁹ – the “absentee shaykh” can be considered a common figure of the Arab Middle East around the mid-20th century.⁵⁰ The absentee shaykh does not dwell anymore among its wandering tribe but, like his urban counterpart, he relies on patronage and access to the urban circles of political power to fulfil his pivotal role as a local elite.⁵¹ Such a position of power – at the same time deeply rooted in the nomadic tribal society and tightly linked to the town – could only exist in a world where mechanized transport facilitated connection between urban and rural areas.

Conclusion

In the early days of motorization, the Bedouin did not go straight “from camel to truck”, nor did the automobile act as a substitute to camel. Instead the automobile was, in the first years of the mandate, a useful complement to the camel. During confrontations, it certainly brought accelerated tribal raiding, which was essential to the success of this type of action. It consequently transformed, in the most radical way, this vital asset of Bedouin life. The automobile also served the purposes of counteracting the French control over desert territory: it represented a force that had to be dealt with. In reaction, French military authorities reinforced the mechanized equipment of their desert units, contributing indirectly to the ever-increasing motorization of the Syrian steppe.

But more than an additive to a camel-riding fighting force, the motor vehicle was above all a precious asset in defending and managing the economic interests of nomadic herders. Tribal raiding was a way of restoring the herds of Bedouin groups after unfavorable events such as drought or epizootics. By increasing their efficiency, the automobile accordingly strengthened the importance of raiding and its usefulness in times of economic distress. Furthermore, cars allowed tribal shaykhs to move faster between the rural areas where animals were herded and the towns where they were sold. By tightening their economic and political bonds with the leading families in the town, motorized transport helped turn the nomadic Bedouin shaykh into a settled member of the urban elite, thus accentuating a century-long tendency. Finally, the introduction of the automobile in Bedouin life reveals the striking capacity of nomads to adapt and pioneer the new techniques to serve their interests: they were pioneers of auto-

⁴⁸ CADN/MSL/1363/*Notice de renseignements – Tribu Roualla*, 20th August 1934.

⁴⁹ The paradigm of the “absentee landlord” – a political local leader living in town and whose power derives from his control of rural agricultural land and tax – is best described in Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, and in *Syria and the French Mandate*.

⁵⁰ The French anthropologist Jacques Berque admitted the existence of the absentee shaykh as early as the late 1950's: Berque, *Introduction*, 492.

⁵¹ Philip S. Khoury himself argues that Bedouin shaykhs were progressively included in the urban landowning elite: Khoury, *The Tribal Shaykh*.

mobility in this sense, and not the passive recipients of technologies and practices created elsewhere.

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