

**MIGRANT NETWORK - AN ANSWER
TO CONTAIN DESERTIFICATION
A Case Study of Southern Syria (Gabal al-Arab)**

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**RED DE MIGRACIÓN. UNA RESPUESTA PARA CONTENER
LA DESERTIFICACIÓN
El caso del Sur de Siria (Gabal al-Arab)**

RESUMEN.- El área de Gabal al-Arab se convirtió en zona de emigración después de la I Guerra Mundial, lo que dio lugar a una superpoblación que condujo a la desertificación de las tierras cultivadas. La tendencia de migrar a EE.UU. que comenzó en el Líbano para huir de la opresión de Osmán se generalizó en los habitantes de Gabal al-Arab. A lo largo de los años, fueron cambiando los países de destino de la migración, las primeras fueron a Argentina y Venezuela y más tarde a Nigeria y Senegal. En los años 80 se inició un proceso de remigración hacia Siria. También en las últimas décadas se ha producido un flujo de miembros de las clases medias educadas a Damasco.

Actualmente, se están produciendo cambios en el paisaje cultural de Gabal al-Arab, como la renovación de los núcleos de asentamiento, la expansión de plantaciones de frutales con residencias de verano y la renovación de viñedos.

Las comunidades en Gabal al-Arab se asientan en la unidad casa-familia, socialmente homogénea y económicamente heterogénea, caracterizada porque todos sus miembros reúnen los ingresos, que son administrados por el cabeza de familia, quien toma las decisiones de inversiones y gastos.

La red de migración se desarrolla en base a la unidad socio-económica de la casa-familia de la que forman parte los trabajadores migrantes, quienes con los ingresos obtenidos en el exterior ayudan a garantizar la economía de ésta.

La supervivencia y la inversión en áreas amenazadas por desertificación sería imposible sin estas redes de migración que pueden estar constituidas de distintas formas, con diversos sistemas de comunicación, diferentes flujos de capital e información, una política de reforzamiento de las relaciones de parentesco (especialmente a través de matrimonios) y la interconexión de sus actividades.

ABSTRACT

The region of Gabal al-Arab changed into an emigration area after World War I, which gave way to over-population and subsequent desertification of the arable land. The trend to migrate to the U.S.A., which began in Libanon as a flight from the oppression of Osman, has faded among the inhabitants of Gabal al-Arab. As time passed, the destinations of the immigrants have changed, first to Argentina and

Venezuela and later to Nigeria and Senegal. In the 1980's the process of re-migration to Siria started. Meanwhile, the last decades also produced a flow of middle-class people to Damascus.

Now, there are changes going on in the cultural landscape of Gabal al-Arab, such as the renewal of settlements, the expansion of fruit tree plantations with summer residences and the renewal of vineyards.

The communities in Gabal al-Arab are based on the house-family unit, which are socially homogenous and economically heterogeneous, and characterized by the fact that the joint income of its members is managed by the head of the family, who decides about investments and payments.

The migration network develops on the basis of the socio-economic unit of the house and family, to which the migrating workers belong and contribute by the income they obtain abroad.

The survival and the investment in desertification threatened areas would be impossible without these migration networks, which can be made up in different ways, with different communication systems, different flows of capital and information, or without a policy of re-enforcing relationships (especially marriages) and interconnection of its activities.

1. Physical environment

Even from far —coming from Damascus on the southern arterial road via Sayyida Zaynab— you can already see the clear-cut elevations of Gabal al-Arab. At an approximate altitude of 1000 m the wide, shield-shaped mountain ridge stands out up to 1800 m against the surrounding landscape.

Numerous little volcanic hilltops, craters with embankments and cinder peaks, mainly of pleistocene origin, accentuate the mountain ridge. The former eruption spots lay mostly on certain lines in the basaltic plateau which have been determined by tectonic events.

The Gabal al-Arab is characterized by a continental mountain climate. The west slope gets 300 mm a year of rainfall, which is already sufficient, but, in addition, there are dew, fog and snow in this area as well as on the plateau. Further south, though, precipitation decreases to 100 mm.

Although there seems to be enough precipitation, the Gabal al-Arab always has to fight general aridity: only temporarily does water drain on the surface. The few sources spring from local limited and shallow ground water levels above the clay layer in the cracked basalt, therefore they produce only very little water, in summer they disappear completely. Ground water basins bellow that level are completely missing.

Especially in the humid areas of the northern mountains grass and herb communities grow on a large scale. Except from an area with small remnants of former holm-oak forests, south of Qanawat and east of as-Suwayda, there is no close vegetation.

The young lava fields are the least suitable for agricultural exploitation. Mechanical cultivation is only possible on the older (tertiary) lava fields or on areas cleared from stones. Another limiting factor, especially in the southern region of the mountain is the decreasing rainfall. According to the great variability droughts of several years occur in regular intervals and thus make any kind of agricultural exploitation impossible. The fringes of the Gabal al-Arab turn into desert.

2. Historical and social aspects

Nowhere in Syria did the recultivation of the area of late settlement tie on Roman tradition in such a strong way as it did in the South (Wirth 1971: 411). Most of the settlements developed on Roman ruins, until the seventeenth century the Gabal al-Arab was mainly pasture used by nomads. The few miserable settlements of Sunnits and Christians were in danger to become deserted under the pressure of the Beduins. In 1685, by order of the ruling Osmans, a squad of about 150 Druze came from the Lebanon into the Gabal al-Arab to fight the nomadic beduins. The Druze managed to maintain and settled. In 1711, 1803 and 1811/12 more Druze from the Lebanon followed. The number of Druze settlers in the Gabal had by then increased up to several thousand.

Political disturbances and social tension, which expressed themselves in the persecution and subjugation of the Druze in the Lebanon, caused increasing emigration from 1840 on. In 1844, 1860 and 1889 emigration came to a peak. In 1917/18 the population shift turns round. Those Druze having immigrated shortly before the First World War leave the mountains after the war and return to the Lebanon. "The tide of migration has turned: immigration, at its peak in the second half of the nineteenth century, slackenes and ceases after the First World War" (Lewis 1987: 95). Nevertheless population is increasing during the twentieth century undiminishedly.

According to long military conflicts with the state and the Beduins (Salih 1977: 225) and because of hard living conditions in the Gabal al-Arab, the Druze developed a strong feeling of solidarity and a high regional identity (see Blanc 1952). "Druze communal solidarity is a long-established phenomenon which continues in strength today for most Druze. "Along with this solidarity,

a strong regionalism is prevalent in the Jabal ad- Druze in Syria" (Gubser 1979: 125). Even the new developed educated middle class of the Druze population holds on to these convictions (see Abu-Izzeddin 1984).

In the Gabal al-Arab there is an open marriage group ("Heiratskreis"), apart from a few villages, which population tends to marriage within the village. The marriages and relative relations stretch to the Lebanon and to all foreign countries where emigrated Druze communities are existing. Druze act towards Muslims and Christians—inclusive European—as "woman-takers", but not as "woman-givers".

3. The agriculture exploitation of Gabal al-Arab during the first half of the twentieth century

The settlers developed and cultivated the land with a great lot of work, they broke stones from the parent lava rock and built houses, they cleared the fields from stones to use them for agricultural purposes. Wirth (1965: 267) still reports in the late sixties: "The labourious built hills consisting of collected stones often take more space on the stony karst and basalt fields than the cornfield in-between. Only enormous industriousness allows meagre cultivation of cereals, there seems to be a large discrepancy between expenditure and yield".

Viniculture plays a major part and can be found in the near vicinity of every village in the Gabal al-Arab, as far as the climatic conditions allow. An important supplement were lentils and, in addition, cereals as basic nutrition for man and beast. The agricultural area of the Gabal al-Arab was used in three—or two-field system depending on the local natural environment. Accordingly the rotation of crops changes: cereals— forage plants —fallow or cereals— chick-peas —fallow and cereals— fallow. Arable subsistence farming was completed by keeping goats, sheep, camels and cows (Desideri 1932: 134).

4. Migration

On the basis of a fast growing population, marginal agricultural resources and returning droughts the Druze were early, after the First World War, forced

to find new sources of income which were outside their settlements. The retreating area of the Gabal al-Arab became an emigration area after the First World War already. During the twentieth century emigration increases. "In the 1970ies the Muhafazah of Suwayada (the former Gabal ad-Duruz) had the highest emigration rate of any Syrian Muhafazah" (Lewis 1987: 95). This process was the result of overpopulation which had led to desertification of the cultivated land. The destinations of the emigrants changed during the years, different regions had varied preferences in different times.

A precise temporal as well as spacial structure of the emigration and immigration areas is neither possible nor useful as migration processes overlap and interlock. Most of the destinations and migration waves apply to all villages in the Gabal al-Arab with varied intensity, moreover there are destinations and occupations that are restricted to the inhabitants of few certain villages. The remigration of the Druze back to the Lebanon after the First World War is not regarded as labour migration but might be taken as the returning of fugitives.

4.1. *Emigration to the Americas and Africa*

The general trend to emigrate to the United States which started in the Lebanon in order to escape oppressions under Osman rule also infected the inhabitants of the Gabal al-Arab. The first absorbing countries were Argentina and Venezuela, later Nigeria and Senegal followed. After the turn of the century until the thirties mainly inhabitants of as-Suwayada and Arman emigrated to the countries mentioned.

A second period of general emigration caught the Druze in Gabal al-Arab in 1954, this time again mainly the inhabitants of as Suwayada and from the villages of Salhad, Arman, al-Munaydara, at Tayba, Sa'af, Rami, Bakka, al-Masquq, Imtan, as-Sana and Sahwat Blata leave for Venezuela in the period between 1954 and 1958. 80% of the village last mentioned still live in Venezuela. The idea to emigrate spreads through family connections.

Although this migration was first regarded as a final step, during the eighties remigration to Syria started. Along with the remigrants came a considerable sum of investment capital into the Gabal al-Arab which goes far beyond the sporadic money transfers.

4.2. *Migration to Damascus*

"An increasing number of people, however, live as well as work outside the Jabal. They include many members of the educated middle classes which have so greatly increased in number in recent decades: government officials of all grades, army officers, teachers, doctors, lawyers and so on. Such people maintain their family connections with the Jabal, but are no longer resident there and may be classified as emigrants from it". This group described by Lewis (1987, 95) moves preferably to Damascus to work and live there. You can find them in the quarters of Muhayyam Garmanna and Muhayyam Filastiyyin; in the mid-thirties emigration from all villages in the Gabal al-Arab to Damascus started. Inhabitants from the villages of T'la, al-Hit, al-Hayyat in the north and from the settlements of Anz in the south of the Gabal al-Arab showed a special tendency to move to Damascus. At least one third of the inhabitants of the mentioned settlements work as civil servants in Damascus. Emigrants from 'Anz prefer to settle in the quarter al-Tabala near Bab Sarqiyy. Besides, you will not find a restaurant in Damascus which does not employ waiters and employees from the region of Milh/Imtan.

4.3. *Local migration in Gabal al-Arab*

If local migration during the first half of the twentieth century pointed towards unoccupied regions and deserted villages in the inner mountain area, the direction changes in the mid of the century. The reason for this was the arid period between 1958 and 1961. During these years contrasting local migration is noted. The centres of Sahba and Salhad show a positive balance which are less important as very many move further on or emigrate. More than 60 families from ar-Rudayma move to Sahba and settle there for trading. It is different in the capital of Muhafaza as-Suwayda. The results of local migration and remigration created a conglomeration of more than 100000 inhabitants today. Settlements grow along the arterial roads leading to neighboring villages. Day-labourer come from peripheral regions of Gabal al-Arab to the labour market of as-Suwayda, they earn between 100 and 200 SL per day depending whether food and accomodation is included.

4.4. *Temporary labour migration to the neighbouring Arab States of Lebanon, Libya, Saudi-Arabia and to the Gulf States*

The first temporary labour migration from Gabal al-Arab led to Lebanon. Soon after the First World War, since the mid-twenties the Druze went to their relatives in Lebanon in order to work there. The former native country became a favourite host country for floating labourers. Their relatives helped them to find work and to solve other daily problems of their Syrian brothers.

During the dry period between 1958 and 1961 migration reached a climax, from every village people started for Lebanon. In the course of time seasonal work during summer time was established in Lebanon, comparable with the temporary labour migration of Christians and Alawits from the southern part of Gabal al Ladiqiyya to Lebanon which stopped with the outbreak of the civil war.

When labour conditions became worse in Lebanon the bulk of the jobs in the Gulf region were already occupied by foreign workers from other countries. Consequently there is only a small number of persons from settlements in Gabal al-Arab who work in the Gulf region, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi. Only the village of Rami is an exception. In 1950/51 four men got together and went to Kuwait to work as bricklayers (naggar beton). Nowadays several men of each family work temporarily in Kuwait. During summer time cars with Kuwaiti number plates park all over the place. The inhabitants of Rami were early forced by their economical situation to look for work outside the village, because their fields had only an average size of 30 feddan. According to the cereal field system, half of the arable land always lies fallow.

The inhabitants of Rami use the money earned abroad to buy fruit plantations on the plateau of Gabal al-Arab. More than 800 Dunum a multiple of the size of their village fields —are already in their possession.

The alternative to Lebanon was Libya. Workers from all villages of Gabal al-Arab are working in Libya at the moment. In Barik, for example, 70% of all men have worked in Libya once in their life. They used to stay there only for short periods of four to six months every year. In Libya very few work longer without a break or they take their families with them.

In addition to the countries mentioned above where the Druze go in search for work, three other Arab states are of importance: Jordan, Yemen and Algeria. Many men from Milh and Huwayya and the neighboring villages

work in Jordan as waiters and assistants in cafes and restaurants. Labor migration to Yemen and Algeria is different. Syria committed herself to send teachers to these states. Especially people from the settlements of Masad and al-Qurayya take part in this temporary labour migration.

5. Investments in Gabal al-Arab

Nowadays there are mainly three processes in Gabal al-Arab which change the outer appearance of the cultural landscape of the mountain region considerably: renovation of the settlement centres, expansion of fruit-plantations with summer residences or of settlements as well as renovation and construction of vineyards, partially with summer residences and workers' housing. The dynamics of these processes are strongly influenced by money and informations which has been earned outside the country. Labour migration and remigration determined the investments in Gabal al-Arab even early in the twentieth century. "Les vieux gradins éroulés dans la Djebel ne seraient sans doute pas relevés et si la population venait à augmenter dans la paix, la conséquence probable en serait plutôt le développement de l'émigration, qui existe déjà, qu'un surpeuplement local. Du moins verrait-on s'élever autour de Kennaouat et de Soueida, bon nombre de ces maisons avenantes et cossues dont les Libanais retour d'Amerique se plaisant à enrichir leur pays natal" (Herbette 1926, 57).

In Gabal al-Arab you can still find old houses, skillfully built with broken basalt-stone. These houses were described by Dufourg (1951) in detail. But more and more people renovate and expand traditional houses with modern materials such as concrete and cement. Nowadays houses are completely made out of concret, including the roof, later walls are decorated or panelled with limestone or marble and the roofs are covered with red bricks. Along the road from as-Suwayda to Qanawat, huge palaces have been built, owned by remigrants from Venezuela. The same applies to many villages such as Salhad, Arman, al-Gariyya etc., where the houses of foreign workers and remigrants arose along the roads leading outside the villages.

Today many of the old vineyards are revived and new cultivation methodes came into use, moreover vineyards are planted on recently cultivated land. Concrete poles are preferably taken for carrying the vines.

Fruit-trees can be found in the northern parts of the Gabal al-Arab, there are clear concentrations east of as-Suwayda and in the gardens around the settlements in northern Gabal al-Arab. According to these usually extensive fruit plantations Gabal al-Arab is nowadays experiencing an agricultural expansion it has never had before.

6. Migrant network based on the social organisation of the house-family

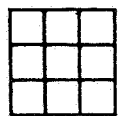
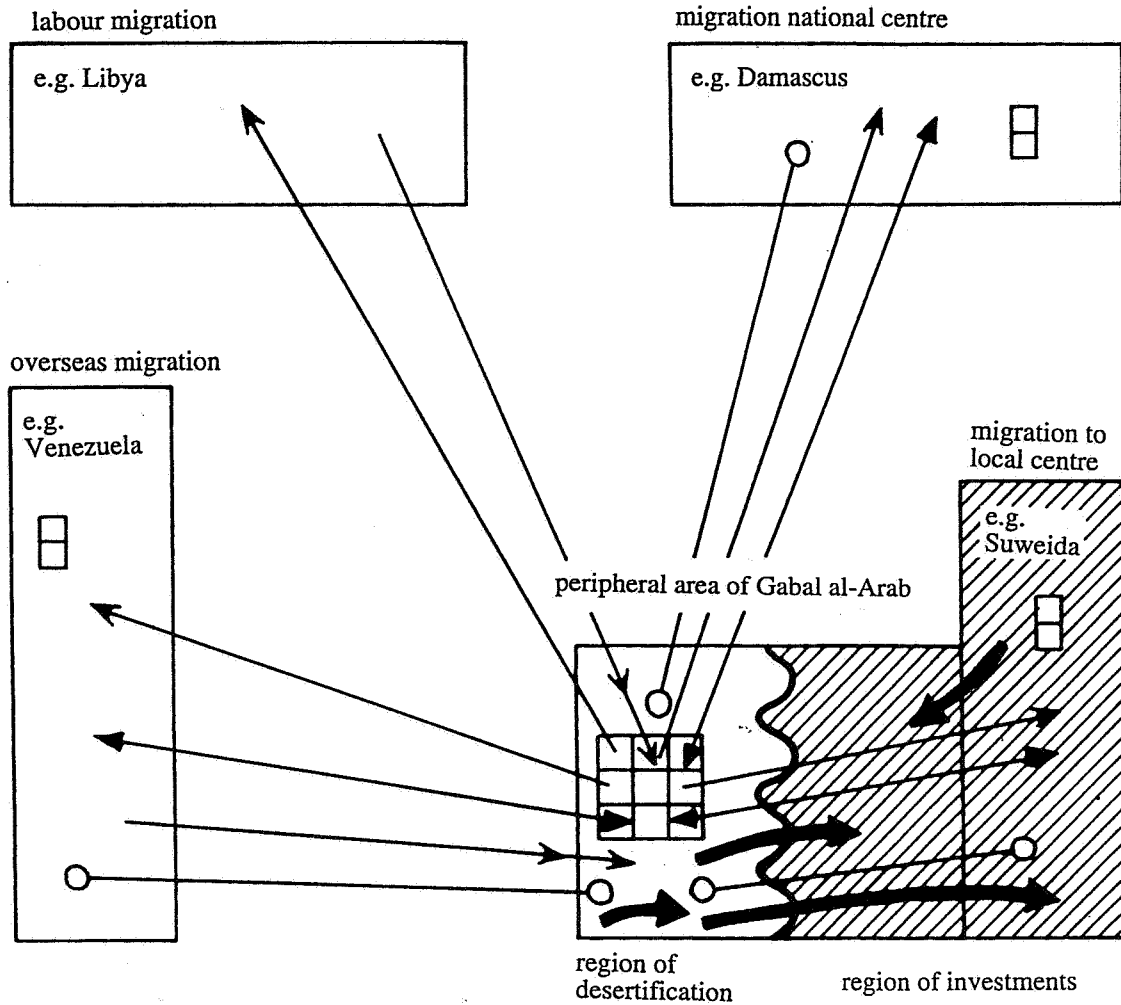
The basic social and economic unit of communities in Gabal al-Arab is the house-family. This is not the same as the European small or large family nor the lowest level of the Middle Eastern tribal organisation, the extended family. But rather the house-family may be roughly characterized by the following criteria—whereby in this form, it can only be described empirically to a certain extent. All family members pool their joint income to cover their living costs. This pooled income is administered by the head of the family, who also makes the decisions about larger investments and purchases. All different economic activities of the members are also decided by the head of the family.

The house-family's sources of income are usually very varied. Although the family is a socially homogeneous unit, it is economically heterogeneous: i.e. every family member has a different occupation. If an occupation shows profit, which lie above average, other family members will be stimulated to take up this profession. Family members will tend to take up the profitable occupation, because—as is only possible within a family—they will have open access to and insight into the profit potential.

The house-family is spatially relatively unrestricted. Thus, labour migrants and migrants are still part and parcel of the family. The house-family can live spatially separated, but at the same time, maintain a joint economy (through joint economic projects or money-transfers etc.). Individual family members often have different occupations in different areas, mostly of national and international centres and in doing so provide are able to lend security to the family's income.

In order to reach a close relation within the kinship group all kinds of communication methods such as letter, fax, video, telephone and personal visits are practised. Despite the spatial separation a considerable amount of marriages take place.

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house-family

→ migration (remigration)

↔ communication (depends on distance and facilities)

→ flux of capital and information

○—○ kinship-relations

→ investment (housing, agriculture....)



new family (part of house-family)

Model of migrant network.

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The empirical study of the situation described above, shows that a migration-network develops on the basis of the social unit, the house-family. The socio-economic unit of the house-family connects various migration patterns like emigration, labour migration, regional migration etc., and leads to the above mentioned investments in peripheral regions.

Surviving and investment in areas threatened by desertification would be impossible without *migration* and *remigration* in various types, *communication* in several forms, *flux* of capital and information, enforcing the relation of *kinship* (esp. marriage) and *the interconnection of these activities on the basis of the house-family-unit*, as shown in the model.

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