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Land issues in the Syrian Badia
A Historic Approach

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الاتحاد العربي للمساحة

The Syrian steppe

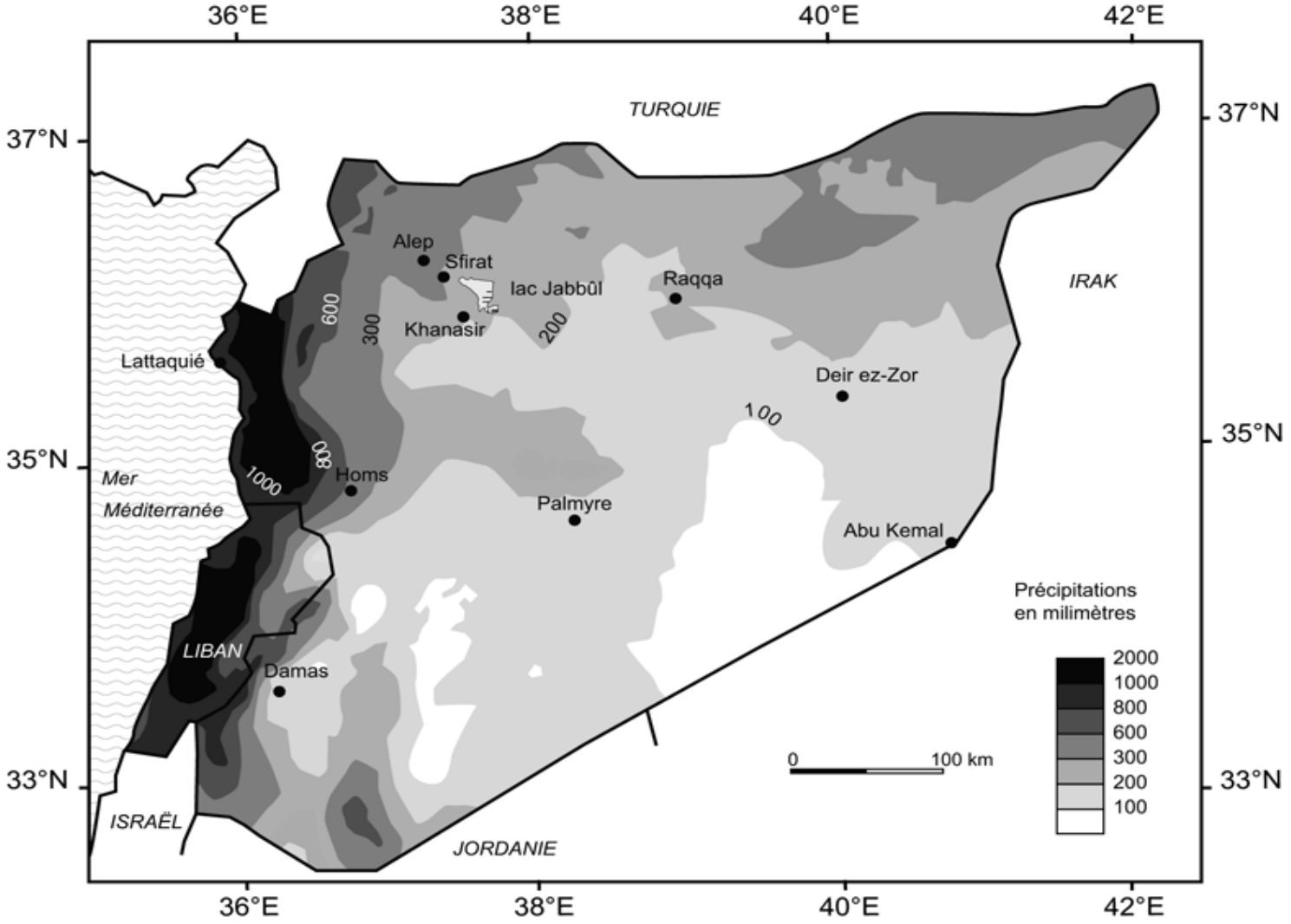
The Syrian steppe, known as **Al Badia**, comprises **55 percent of Syria's land** mass. It totals **10.2 Mha** and receives **less than 200 mm rain p.a.** Pasture comprises 70 percent of Al Badia and this provides a grazing resource for six to seven months of the year**. In 1950, there were 2.6 M sheep, against 10-12 million in 2003** (the maximum number of sheep in Al Badia has been 15 million)

In 2003, there were **between 900 000 and 1.5 million people in Al Badia, of which about 500 000 were settled**. Traditionally a large proportion of the populations would have been nomads (herders without a permanent home who are always on move) and transhumance herders (people with a permanent home, who move with their sheep for some of the year). However, there has been a **decline in the number of nomads over the last 50 years, and in 1990 there were an estimated 10 000 nomads, the rest being transhumance herders**.

Gareth Edwards-Jones, Agricultural Policy and Environment in Syria: The Cases of Rangeland Grazing and Soil Management, in Syrian agriculture at the crossroads, chapter 5, FAO, Rome, 2003; accessed through: https://www.fao.org/4/y4890e/y4890e0d.htm#bm13

Distribution of mean annual rainfall in Syria and Lebanon (1960-1961 to 1989-1990)

Jean-Baptiste Rigot, L'évolution ralentie du milieu naturel dans la steppe aride du nord de la Syrie à l'Holocène, in Géomorphologie, Paris, vol. 12 - n° 4 | 2006



Control of migratory traditions

- **Control of the migratory tribes of the Syrian steppe and desert** (both Arabic and Kurdish) has been an active policy of (city) state powers for a long time and achieved by the **Ottoman authorities** in the latter part of the 19th century. The **French subsequently used the tribes as a balance to nationalists in the cities and settled areas.** Upon independence nationalists sought to wholly subdue and break the tribes through settlement. Though unsuccessful in this quest, the governments that have followed independence have nevertheless excluded tribal structures and institutions from formal government policy. This policy has suffered the same problems as the settlement schemes, and in actual implementation of the state has reluctantly dealt with tribal entities to facilitate interventions.

- Jon Rae, An Overview of Land Tenure in the Near East Region, 2002, FAO, p. 213; accessed through in 11/2024: https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/70eeec16-d540-4858-b82f-7575ca5610c3/content

Ottoman land categories

- Originally, much of the steppe and desert areas was ***mawat*** or 'dead' land not set aside for the use of the public. Both the Ottoman Land Code and *shari'ah* held **mawat** as 'open access' where "no taxes were claimed" and all persons could "cut for fuel and for building, or collect herbage without anyone being able to prevent him.
- Moreover, the French mandate took the following decision in 1926: ***'ihya al-mawat*** [reviving dead land] concerned persons who brought unregistered state land into cultivation; they could acquire registered title by proof of a period of (3yr.) It was enacted with an eye on **encouraging the expansion of cultivation particularly in the northeast of the country**.
- Jon Rae, An Overview of Land Tenure in the Near East Region, FAO, 2003

Ottoman land categories (2)

- Another category of land was **Matrukah** ('given over'); it was of two types: (1) land left for generally use of the public (i.e. roads) and (2) land for the inhabitants of settlement, village, or town. Examples of the latter were communal forests, herding stations, and threshing floors.

- Other two categories of landed property were:
  Miri, applied to State property, with the right to use the land (tasarruf)
  Mulk, or private property
  These categories were registered in the official Turkish land register (Tapu), while often miri land could be de facto the private property of high-ranking Ottomans or influential Syrian businessmen.

- Jon Rae, ibid

Evolution of land administration in Syria

- 1858: The Ottoman Land Code introduced general registration but was only implemented at limited sites. Registration of title and survey was carried out on a large part of the cultivated land in Syria (Iraq) hastening the disintegration of communal forms of land tenure (*mush'a*) and communal rights.

- 1930: The law of Immovable Property No. 3339, laid down the principles and procedure for cadastral survey and registration. Owners who received registered title were still *miri* holders, i.e. nominally tenants of the state, but in practice they owned the land absolutely (except for inheritance following civil rather than shari'ah law).

- 1943: 3,544,883ha had been surveyed and registered hastening the disintegration of communal forms of land tenure (*mush'ah*) and communal rights. However, the register system soon failed with on-going hostilities

- 1979: 40% of the agricultural land registered with clear title given and joint possession ended.

- Badia lands are both protected by law, as State property, and usually unregistered.

Water resources in the Badia

- Locations for establishing communities in the Syrian steppe were chosen according to the availability of water resources and proximity to markets. In the second half of the 19th century, the way to define a home base was for a tribe, or family to appropriate a Roman well or a cistern. The well or cistern was claimed by the ones who discovered and rehabilitated it.
- Community boundaries were drawn by dividing the distance between two captured Roman cisterns into two equal parts. This can explain part of the great heterogeneity in community land size that prevails today. At that time, Bedouin were simply looking for a water source with an attached area of land where they could spend the winter. When barley cultivation began in the early 1950s, there were disputes between communities about the boundaries, which were not yet well defined. It took a long time before boundaries settled to their present shape – and these are still dynamic as a sub-group of Bedouin can separate from the community on a share of the land.

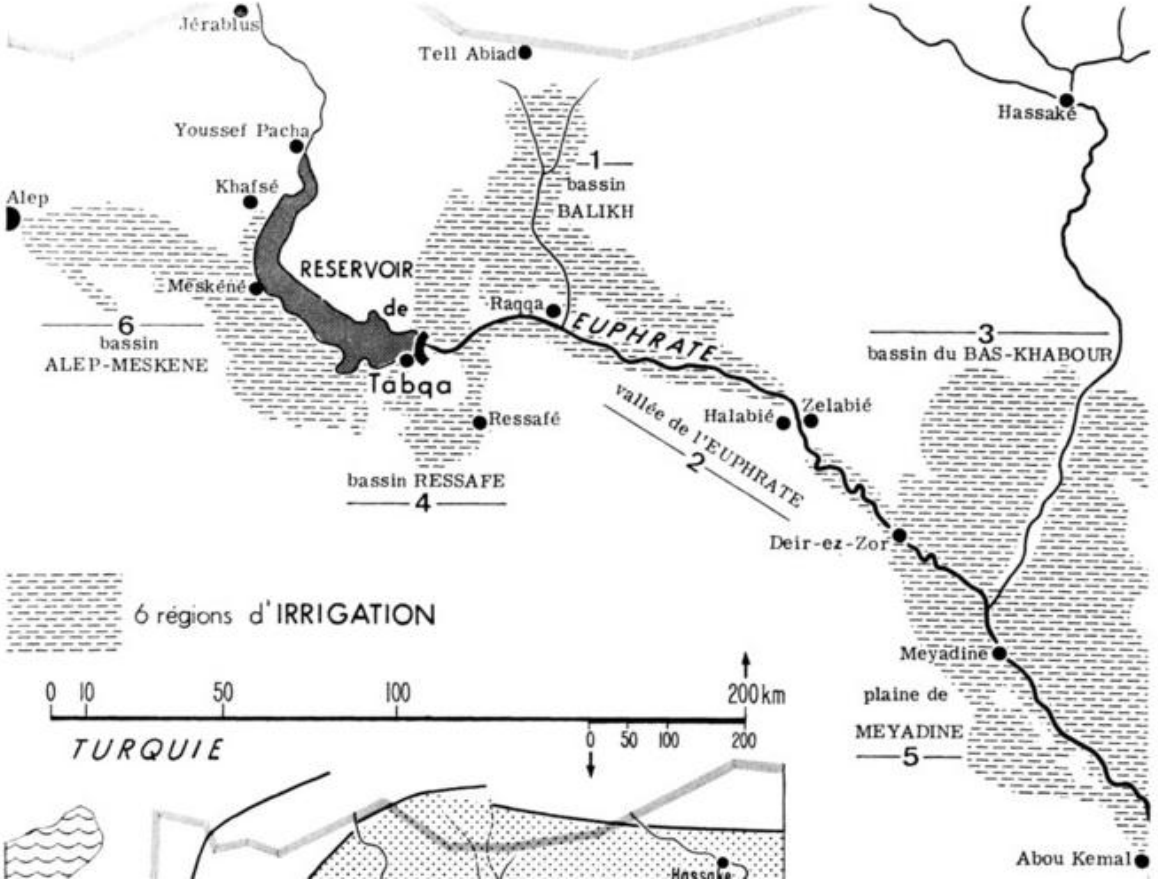
- ICARDA, Al Badia Community Survey in Syria Descriptive Statistics, August 2006, p.24

The Euphrates valley

- The Euphrates valley issue is however an obvious exception for Northeastern Syria. The Euphrates River, including its tributaries, is a major source of water for the country. It was decided to built a strategic dam, the Tabqa dam, with the support of the USSR. A bilateral agreement was signed in 1966, and the construction was terminated in 1973. One of the aims was to extend irrigation to an additional 100,000 ha; some sources indicate that the irrigation could be extended, thanks to the dam, (and other secondary ones) to more than 1 million hectares, including tributaries. A ministry for the Euphrates Dam was set up, to accompany the development of the project, and manage problems related to this process.

- 11. Bourgey André. Le barrage de Tabqa et l'aménagement du bassin de l'Euphrate en Syrie. In: *Revue de géographie de Lyon*, vol. 49, n°4, 1974. pp. 343-354.
- For more information, see Monib El-Khatib, The Syrian Tabqa Dam: Its Development and Impact ; https://gammathetaupsilon.org/the-geographical-bulletin/1980s/volume26/article2.pdf

Map of newly irrigated areas



Tabqa dam

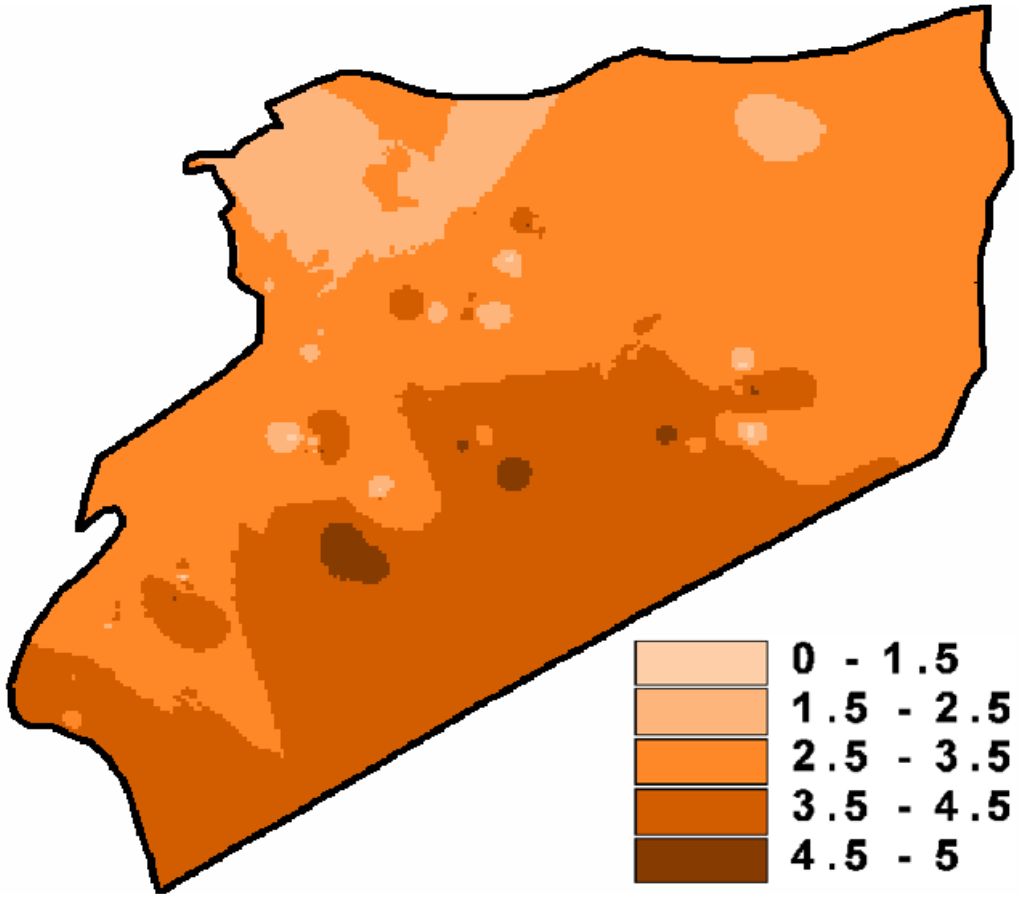
- Last remark, despite the abundance of water in the Euphrates valley, Syria has been hit by a long period of drought between 2005 and 2010. The absence of an efficient water distribution infrastructure and the lack of agricultural practices adapted to arid areas, have contributed, according to many authors, to the explosion of violence of the Syrian civil war.
- During the Syrian civil war, Tabqa military airport was conquered by ISIS, but the dam was fortunately not damaged. The dam, and the airport, are, since May 2017, under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (mainly Kurdish).

- https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-defeated-at-tabqa-dam/3847666.html
- Fabrice Balanche, Les leçons de la crise syrienne, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2024, p.74

Mass migration to urban areas

- The 2005-2010 drought is often considered as a major reason for a mass migration from rural areas to urban centers, which further increased the demographic and housing pressure on said centers. In 1981, for example, Aleppo had a population of less than 1 million, but it became home to more than 3 million in 2010. Similarly, the population of Homs rose from 345,000 in 1981 to more than 1.1 million in 2010. The development of informal housing, and consequently of social tensions, accompanied this phenomenon.
- The Day After, Reality of Housing, Land, and Property Rights in Syria, HLP Working Group, Istanbul, Dec. 2020, p.67

Soil degradation indicator in Syria (ICARDA 2006)



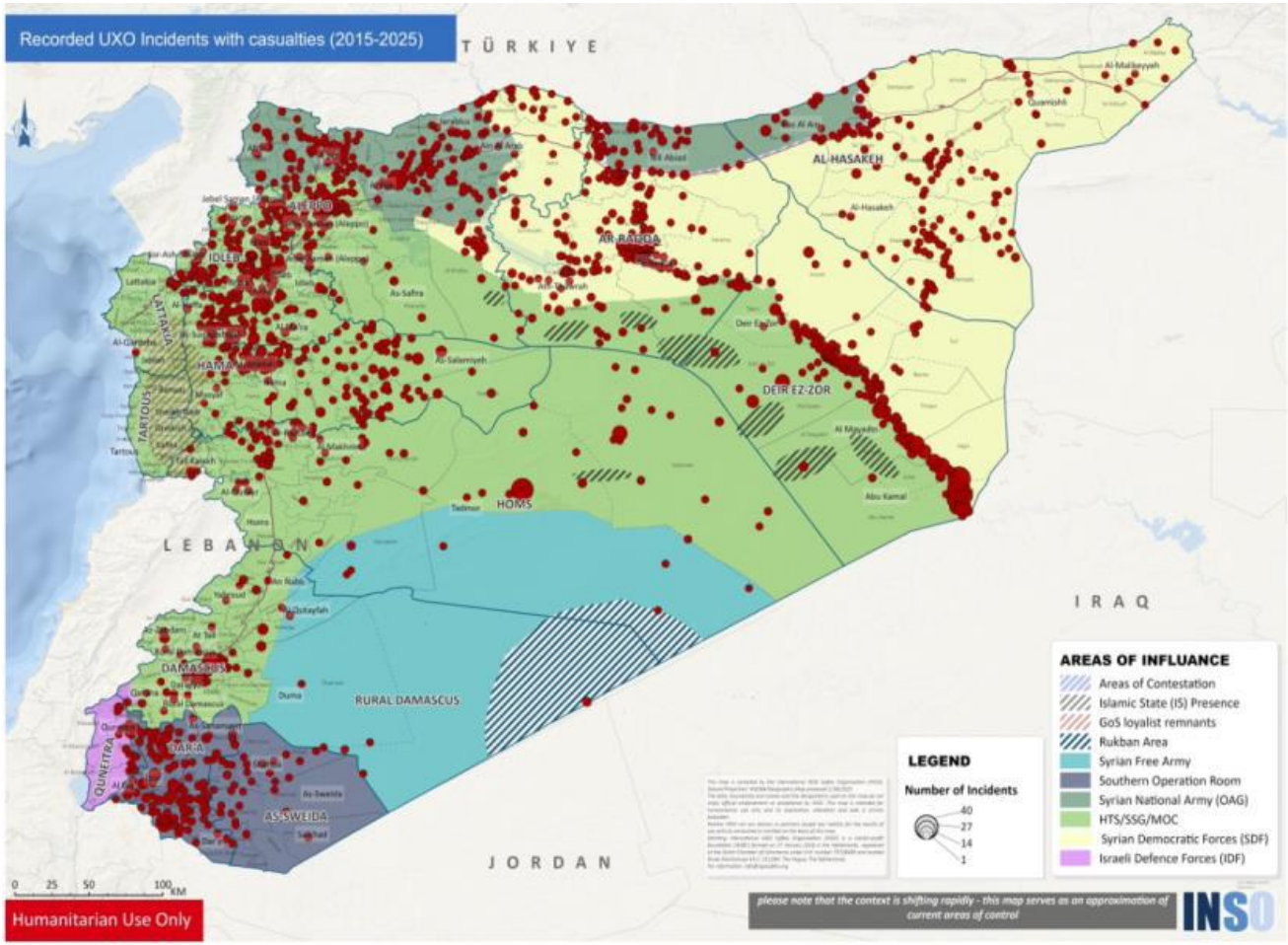
Impact of conflict on agriculture

- FAO wrote in 2017:
- Despite six years of crisis in Syria, agriculture remains a key part of the economy. The sector still accounts for an estimated 26 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and represents a critical safety net for the 6.7 million Syrians – including those internally displaced - who still remain in rural areas.
- However, agriculture and the livelihoods that depend on it have suffered massive loss. Today, food production is at a record low and around half the population remaining in Syria are unable to meet their daily food needs.
- The findings revealed that USD 16 billion has been lost in terms of production, along with damaged and destroyed assets and infrastructure within the agriculture sector. The assessment also estimates that, depending on the scenario, between USD 11 to 17 billion would be required to kick-start the recovery of the agriculture sector.

War and environmental challenges

- The summer of 2021 saw record low levels of rainfall and a sharp decline in water flow into the Euphrates and other rivers in northeast Syria. On top of this, dams were built in the Khabur river in the spring of 2021, and the water flow to Hasakeh from the Alouk water station faced dozens of deliberate interruptions by the “Syrian National Army”, resulting in over 600.000 lacking access to water for longer periods.
- At the same time, the toxic oil industry kept polluting local creeks and river by dumping contaminated wastewater, further impacting the surface and groundwater sources. Despite the political will to change the situation, the local authorities lack the proper equipment and financial resources to fix the ill-maintained oil infrastructure.
- https://paxforpeace.nl/news/climate-and-conflict-are-hammering-the-agrarian-poor-in-syria/?highlight=syria

Recorded unexploded ordnance (UXO) incidents with casualties as recorded by INSO since 2015.



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