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CONFEDERATIONS, TRIBAL

CONFEDERATIONS, TRIBAL. A discussion of tribal confederations in the Iranian world must begin with recognition that there is a problem in defining the terms "tribe" and "confederation." The concept of tribe is notoriously inexact, not least in the context of Iranian history, where groups defined by a wide range of different criteria have been referred to as "tribes." Tribal groups, moreover, commonly comprise several levels of organization, from a nomad camp to (sometimes) a nation-state, with different criteria defining membership of groups at each level. There is little agreement among scholars on the levels at which to apply the term "tribe" or "confederation." Definition is not aided by indigenous terminology, which includes a variety of terms (e.g., *īl* [Tk. *el*], *ʿašīra, qabīla, ṭāʾefa, tīra, ūymāq* [Tk. *oymāq*], *ūlūs* [Tk. *ulus*]) that have multiple meanings, many of them used interchangeably and without precision as to level (Lambton, pp. 1095-96).

Major cultural-linguistic groupings (conventionally termed "ethnic groups," "peoples," or "nationalities") in the area, including Turks, Persians, Kurds, Pashtuns, and Baluches, cannot be termed "tribes," if only on grounds of scale, complexity, and lack of unity; but the term is sometimes used for their major subdivisions, though criteria for identifying such groups as tribes also vary. For many scholars a tribe must have an ideology of common descent; according to this criterion, some very large groups like the Baḵtīārī Lors (ca. 500,000 people) and Dorrānī Pashtuns (ca. 2 million people) have been called tribes. Others apply the term to almost equally large groups like the Qašqāʾī, the Ḵamsa, the Boir Aḥmadī, and the Šāhsevan, according to the criterion of

political-territorial unity and chieftainship, though they lack comprehensive ideologies of common descent and are heterogeneous in origins and composition. Some groups (e.g., the Šāmlū, Afšār, and Qājār components of Qızıilbaš/Qezelbāš) have been termed "tribes," even though the only criterion is the existence of central leadership. Yet other scholars, not wishing to take such extreme positions, have located tribes at a lower level of political structure, referring to larger groups (whatever their apparent basis) as "confederations." Thus, when discussing such confederations in Persia, Fredrik Barth (on the Ḵamsa), Gene Garthwaite (on the Baḵtīārī), Lois Beck (on the Qašqāʾī), Reinhold Loeffler (on the Boir Aḥmadī), and Richard Tapper (on the Šāhsevan) all use the term "tribe" for first- or second-order components, numbering at most a few thousand individuals. Such groups usually (but still not always) combine territorial and political unity under a chief with an ideology of common descent.

Many writers on tribal societies in the Iranian world posit a single, ideal type of tribe or a tribal (pastoral-nomadic) mode of production and attribute variations and the emergence of confederations and central leadership to a series of differentiating factors, commonly grouped into internal (e.g., culture, demography, ecology, economy) and external (e.g., the role of the state and neighboring tribes and the proximity of frontiers, cities, and trade routes). There is little agreement, however, on which features are essential to the tribe or the tribal mode of production. Some argue that certain (if not all) tribes are intrinsically centralized, but most point to the importance of external factors, particularly the history and nature of relations with states and other tribes. For some, tribes are naturally egalitarian, and all central authority, indeed the very existence of tribal groups as defined cultural or political units, is an imposition by or a reaction to outside forces. For others, the potential for centralization exists as a tendency, which may be activated or suppressed by an external power (see, e.g., Beck; Digard; Garthwaite; Helfgott; Irons; Loeffler; Tapper, 1983).

Historically, tribal groups in the Iranian world have shown evidence of processes of both evolutionary and cyclical or alternating change. Political evolution in scale and complexity—from tribe to chiefdom and confederation, involving the unification of disparate groups, centralization of authority, and stratification— has occurred again and again, in instances ranging from the major confederations like the Baḵtīārī, Ḵamsa, Qašqāʾī, and Dorrānī to local chiefdoms like the Yāraḥmadzay Baluch. The reverse process is seen in

Kurdistan, however, with the dissolution of the emirates in the 19th century and their consequent “devolution” or “retribalization” into more diffuse organizations and simpler groups, and among the Šāhsevan, whose unified confederation, formed by the state in the 18th century, broke up in the 19th into independent tribes and rival coalitions. Both evolution and devolution occur in response to state politics.

Xavier de Planhol (pp. 229-33) sees the period from the 18th century to the present as the heyday of such large composite nomad confederations as the Qašqāʾī, Baḵtīārī, and Ḵamsa and argues that they emerged in conditions of maximum grazing density of the pastures, extended migrations, and close contacts with nontribal villagers and that they represented the final evolutionary stage before settlement. This view does not, however, account for the facts that numerous tribal groups that lived in such conditions did not form confederations; that others did not live in such conditions and yet became settled; and that geographic location and national and international politics were major factors in the rise of the three confederations mentioned. Besides, several Qızılbaš groups under the earlier Safavids had been composite confederations of the same order as these three (Petrushevskiĭ, p. 95), though by about 1111/1700, when the new groups were emerging, the Qızılbaš had mostly been broken up, settled, or widely scattered.

Most tribal groups in the Iranian world were nomadic or seminomadic pastoralists, though other economic activities (cultivation, hunting, collecting, raiding, trade) were often practiced. It seems likely, though relevant historical sources are only suggestive on this point, that internal demographic factors and the conditions of nomadic pastoralism have always shaped basic communities and that larger political groupings like confederations—and indeed tribes—are the products of external relations, notably with centralized states. The most important internal factor is the nature of rights to land for farming or grazing or accumulation of wealth, whether these rights are individualized or communal at some level; this factor is in turn the basis for the formation and nature of communities at determinate levels of tribal society, as well as for rivalries and factionalism among them, all of which counter any shared ideology and inhibit unity in the face of an outside threat.

Basic nomadic communities are of two kinds (Tapper, 1979a; idem, 1979b): the egalitarian pastoral community of some twenty to fifty families, in daily contact, usually based on patrilineal descent, and led by an elder, and the permanent union of several such groups in a larger community of a few

hundred families. The larger community is highly endogamous, maintains notions of common origins, jealously guards its pastures, and in many instances is led by a hereditary chief. Indigenous terms for these larger communities are numerous; perhaps the most common are *ṭāʾefa* and *tīra*, both terms implying a group that is itself part or a section of a yet larger grouping. Wider unions of tribal communities are formed at various levels and in various conditions; although the common indigenous terms for such unions (e.g., *īl* or *ʿašīra*) are not precise, it is helpful to differentiate among them by using the terms "tribal cluster," "alliance," "chiefdom," and "confederation."

Thus, in conditions of insecurity and disorder or when threatened by a predatory government, several tribal communities—a thousand or more families—form a cluster around a chief who has demonstrated his ability to offer protection and security. While the larger communities are remarkably stable and long-lasting groups, regardless of leadership, the composition, unity, and continuity of clusters depend on the success of the cluster chief in ensuring both security and access to resources for dependent groups in the cluster (for Šāhsevan clusters around 1900, see Tapper, 1318/1986). A successful chief may institutionalize his dominance over the cluster, turning the cluster into a chiefdom, a territorially bounded collectivity with coordinated and dynastic leadership but with little elaboration of government or stratification of society; examples include the major component groups of the Qašqāʾī and the Baḵtīārī.

The term "confederation," that is, loosely, a union of tribal groups for political purposes, might be used for such a chiefdom but perhaps is better reserved for unions at a higher level still, with more elaborate government and stratification. Chiefs (*ḵān, īl-ḵānī, īl-begī/elbeǧi*) of confederations (and, on a smaller scale, chiefs at lower levels: *kalāntar, kadḵodā, beg*) maintain retinues (*ʿamala*) of armed henchmen (including both levies from subordinate groups and refugees and outlaws from elsewhere), servants, and other employees; the relatives of the chiefs and sometimes the subchiefly families form a distinct stratum (*ḵavānīn, begzāda/beǧzadä*).

Although the term "confederation" has also been used to designate an alliance without central leadership (e.g., the Yamut [Yomut] Turkmen), such an uncentralized alliance is better termed a "coalition." The unions conventionally termed "confederations" sometimes share an ideology of common descent (as with the Baḵtīārī or the Dorrānī), but most are

heterogeneous in composition, unified under a leader either by state action (e.g., the Šāhsevan or the Ḵamsa) or electively as an indigenous response to state or other external pressure (e.g., the Qašqāʾī or the Boir Aḥmadī).

In the absence of effective superior authority, relations among autonomous political units within a region often take on a familiar chessboard pattern: Neighboring chiefs (often closely related) compete for control of pastures, village land, and trade routes and maintain relations of hostility on their borders while allying themselves (often by marriage) with their neighbors' neighbors in order to prosecute the consequent feuds against intervening mutual enemies; a larger pattern of two coalitions or blocs throughout or even beyond the region is often formed. Such patterns have been recorded at various levels, sometimes several at once (for examples, see Tapper, 1983, p. 79).

Chiefs also compete for the favors of government officials, but local rivalries are encouraged by a weak government fearful of the emergence of a strong, unified tribal confederation. Such tactics have been employed by conquerors, established rulers, and imperial agents (for examples, see Beck; Garthwaite; Tapper, forthcoming). Factional rivalries within a region involve mainly the leaders of the political units, and subordinate leaders may upset a balanced relationship by defecting with their own followers to the other side. Sometimes regional alignments of tribal groups extend into cities, where they are related to institutionalized urban rivalries (Tapper, 1986).

In some areas, especially among Sunni groups like the Turkmen, Baluch, Kurds, and Pashtuns, factional rivalries are mediated by locally based religious leaders; either *sayyed*s (those claiming descent from the Prophet Moḥammad), sometimes from lineages merged into the tribal system, or charismatic imams or mullas or Sufi shaikhs or *pīr*s. On occasion religious leaders can move beyond their mediating role and unite large groups into at least ephemeral confederations for specific politico-religious purposes, as happened frequently among Kurds and Pashtuns in the 19th and 20th centuries. The ability to unite usually rests on the hope for material gain and the absence of material cause for conflict as much as, if not more than, any tribal notions of common descent or religious or other ideology of unity.

See also afÂžār; ʿaÂžāyer; baḵtǰārǰ tribe; boir aḥmadǰ; individual tribes.

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