



NOMADISM

NOMADISM, a way of life and human existence that is connected with permanent and more or less regular movements of people between different locations. The migrational movements of nomads are connected with clearly defined routes and destinations where the nomads spend equally clearly defined periods of time with the ultimate goal of pursuing economic activities and ensuring their livelihood. Three forms of nomadism can be distinguished: nomadic hunters and gatherers, pastoral nomads, and non-sedentary people whose economic activities focus on tinkering and trading. But this entry is only concerned with the pastoral nomads in Iran and Afghanistan.

i. Pastoral Nomadism

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i. Pastoral nomadism

This form of nomadism is a very old way of life that differentiated in time and space, and developed a variety of *genres de vie*. Pastoral nomadism is difficult to define with an overarching and all-embracing definition. But the following characteristics are more or less ubiquitous attributes of pastoral nomads: (1) dependence on domesticated animal husbandry; (2) migration along established routes between focal grazing areas; (3) mobility of herds, people,



and their habitats; and (4) predominant economic dependence on the herds and their products. In other words, the nomadic way of life always tried to (and had to) maintain an equilibrium between the resources of the natural environment and the needs of the people. Animals and herds thus became an essential link between man and his natural environment. It goes without saying that such characteristics put pastoral nomads in competition and conflict with sedentarized populations, especially with agriculturalists. “Pastoral nomadism is a livelihood form that is ecologically adjusted at a particular level to the utilization of marginal resources. These resources occur in areas too dry, too elevated, or too steep for agriculture to be a viable mode of livelihood, and the nomadic pastoralist thus makes use of resources that otherwise would be neglected. Historically, pastoral nomadism is best described as a specialized offshoot of agriculture that developed along the dry margins of rainfall cultivation” (Johnson, p. 2). This statement, taken from the beginning of a comparative analysis of pastoral nomadism in Southwestern Asia and Northern Africa, is well suited to serve as a general introduction, though it needs to be adjusted because pastoral nomadism occurs in regionally specific expressions, forms, and shapes. Its wide distribution between North and West Africa and Central Asia, as the margins of the core areas of pastoral nomadism, has resulted in tremendous differences with regard to habitat, forms of political and social organization, durations of displacement, animals herded, seasonal locations, the role of agriculture, trading mechanisms, horizontal vs. vertical nomadism, and other related factors. (cf. Johnson, pp. 158-76). Differing combinations of these components of pastoral nomadism are causes of the aforementioned variety in the nature of nomadism. In contrast to these differences there is widespread agreement, however, regarding the public and political perception of pastoral nomads. In 1967, the German anthropologist R. Herzog summarized the main aspects of a critical distance on the part of national and centralized governments toward nomads and nomadism. Critics make (1) demographic arguments about the pressure of a rapidly growing sedentary population on the land; (2) economic arguments about the presumably higher productivity of the land through agriculture; (3) historical arguments according to which nomads are considered to be barbarians and sources of political unrest; (4) administrative arguments that point to the almost impossible political control of nomads; and (5) military arguments that stress regional insecurities due to difficult control mechanisms of central governments. While these factors were surely important in the past, at present they are of minor importance since the heyday of nomadism is over.



ii. *Iran*

Iran, like neighbouring Turkey to the West and [Afghanistan](#) to the East, belongs geologically to the vast Tertiary mountain belt stretching from Europe via the Middle East to Central and Eastern Asia. Mountain features, in combination with Iran's distinctly arid [climate](#), therefore, are determining factors in the country's geography and for the development of a pastoral nomadism for which terms like "mountain nomadism" or "vertical nomadism" are appropriate characterizations, since the montane milieu is a major characteristic of Iran's pastoral nomadism.

Ecology. Animal husbandry and pastoralism in the mountain belt of Iran and its highlands find their ecological basis in very specific environmental conditions. The high sub-alpine meadows and grasslands of the Zagros and the [Alborz](#), of Kopet-Dag, or the many isolated mountain massifs of central Iran are snow covered in winter and spring. Long winters in combination with steep and rough terrain as well as the spatial remoteness of many of these areas cannot support economically permanent population and do not allow agriculture. Due to their harsh climatic environment, grazing is restricted to a few months during late spring, summer, and early fall. The same holds true for a great number of intramontane basins and for steppe-like grasslands in the foothills of the mountains where, due to sometimes limited areas and scanty rainfall, agriculture is equally difficult and hazardous. These regions, therefore, are ideal winter pastures and grazing grounds for sheep and goats. In the case of mobile nomads, the summer mountain pastures and winter grazing grounds of basins and foothills were thus combined into one economically fully- viable form of animal husbandry. Nomadism, therefore, used to be a highly competitive and full-fledged economy, side by side with agriculture and different forms of urban economies. The image of "the desert and the sown" (cf. the title of Nelson) illustrates the conflict between nomads and sedentary populations, while the "encapsulation" of nomads (cf. title of Fazel) by peasants and urbanites belongs to the ongoing history of nomadic triumphs and disasters.

The ecological preconditions for the development of mountain nomadism are more or less ideal in Iran. The arid core of the country, the deserts of the Dašt-e Kavir and the Dašt-e-Lut, are surrounded by high mountains: the Zagros to the West, culminating in the Zardeh Kuh (over 4,500 m high), the Alborz and the Khorasan ranges to the North with [Damāvand](#) (5,670 m) as the highest elevation of the country, and the less pronounced Makrān ranges along the



Gulf coast. To the East, the volcanoes of the Kuh-e Bazmān (3490 m) and Kuh-e Taftān (over 4,000 m) provide formidable summer pastures. Intramontane basins, foothills, and piedmonts of these and other mountain ranges of Iran are mostly semi-arid natural steppes with little agricultural but sometimes considerable pastoral potential, and ideal environments for originally lush winter pastures, nowadays often transformed into wheat fields of a sedentary peasantry.

Altogether, only about 15 percent of Iran's territory of circa 1.6 million square kilometers is considered to be potentially useful for agriculture. The areas of land that are suitable for forestry and pasture are likewise limited. They are, moreover, so vulnerable that even a slight interference in the unstable ecosystem may cause devastating consequences, such as the destruction of vegetation, water and wind erosion, and gullying that often result in desertification as well. In contrast to Iran's limited and hardly expandable resources for agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry there is a rapidly growing population. In other words, the ecology of the natural environment is increasingly in conflict with the needs and demands of human ecology. About 1900, the country was populated by only about 10 million people; 50 years later, this number had increased to about 17.5 million. Since the end of World War II the population has grown by leaps and bounds to about 70 million in 2004. At the same time, both the absolute numbers of nomads and their percentage with regard to the total population of Iran has greatly decreased. While it is difficult to give exact estimates because of the traditionally unverifiable number of nomads, in the late 1960s the nomads were estimated to comprise 10-15 percent of the country's total population, that is about 2-4 million people (Fazel, p. 141). According to more recent data, Iran has 93 migratory tribes (sing. *il*, see 'AŠĀYER) who comprise about 200,000 families and 1.3 million people (for the largest tribes and their stock, see There is no doubt that the ecological balance of nomadism has been disturbed profoundly, not only by a growing degradation and spatial limitation of the nomadic environments, but also by Iran's changing political, social, and economic conditions, the impact of which have been equally profound. While even today all parts of the country are characterized by more or less pronounced forms of nomadism, it is especially the Zagros range and its foothills that have been the center of Iranian mountain nomadism for millennia, as is documented by the present-day distribution of nomadic groups in Iran (Figure 2).

History. While it is difficult to reconstruct the development of Iranian

mountain nomadism in detail, forms of migrational animal husbandry in combination with other forms of human subsistence economies have been practiced for millennia. The aforementioned ecological preconditions, with their basic climatic juxtaposition of mostly snow-free lowlands, which permit hunting and gathering, agriculture, and winter pastoralism, with high-altitude, temperate grazing grounds during the summer, have obviously contributed to the development of early human adjustments to these environments. Archeological and anthropological evidence documents that forms of mobile and nomad-like pastoralism had been practiced in Iran's mountain belt since prehistoric times. The analysis and reconstruction of early cultures in the Zagros (Zagarell, 1975, 1982) indicate forms of migratory human activities with a mixed economy of agriculture and animal husbandry. The basic principles of the economic strategies and their spatial organization in Iran's western mountain regions in the 3rd and 2nd millennium BCE (There is very scarce written evidence that documents nomadism in Iran before 1500. Cuneiform inscriptions from Assyria mention mountain tribes that, again and again, descended from the Zagros ranges to plunder and devastate urban centres and rural villages in Mesopotamia. There are references to tribes whose kings were living in tents (Kraus), and evidence is especially rich for Mesopotamia (Klengel). The sources indicate that until 1500 military invasions, as well as other instances of hardship, forced significant parts of the Iranian population to seek shelter and security by abandoning permanent settlements and retreating as semi-nomads into the mountains. Since the Safavid period, the massive translocation and resettlement of tribes, either in their entirety or of their majority, has been well documented (e.g., Perry, 1975; Tapper, 1979).

One remarkable exception to the generally bleak documentary evidence is a work (Kunke) that describes pastoral nomadic tribes, their population, and their migrational patterns during the reign of Shah Ḥosayn (r. 1694-1722). The work's manuscript can be dated about 1800, but the text refers to the period of differentiation between nomads of Iranian origin and those nomadic tribes that had been settled in Iran before the 16th century. Among the nomadic confederations of Iranian origin are listed the Kord and the Lor, whose four major tribes of the Fili, Lak and Zand, [Bakhtiāri](#), and Mamasani comprise over 6 million families. These Iranian nomads altogether formed a population of more than 8.8 million families, while the nomads of non-Iranian origin were estimated at more than 2.2 million families (Kunke, pp. 77-87). Turks, such as the [Afšār](#) and the [Shahsevan](#) (Šāhsevān), and Arabs are considered non-



Iranian nomads. The text's overall estimate of more than 11 million nomadic families shows that this source must be interpreted with great care and caution.

Reliable and, from a Western perspective, comparatively detailed information becomes available from the mid-19th century onwards. Travelers, scientists, and especially political agents of European countries increasingly deliver data and descriptions of Iran's political, military, and economic situation in which pastoral nomads play an important role. The overall situation of Iran's nomadic population in the second half of the 19th century is characterized by the widespread existence of nomadic tribes with major military power and tribal territories which were by no means under the control of the Qajar rulers. Only since the mid-19th century did social changes occur in Iran that also resulted in the disintegration of nomadic groups and cultures. The development of the Bakhtiāri, the biggest confederation (*il*) in the 19th and 20th centuries, is typical not only of the general situation of mountain nomadism in Iran at large, but also of the more general problem of the potentials and constraints of pastoral nomadism and its ecological impact on the environment.

In the 19th century the tribal area of the Bakhtiāri formed a closed and almost exclusively nomadic territory, while other large nomadic tribes such as the Afšār and the Qašqā'i were more or less scattered in different parts of the country. In 1909 two thirds of the Bakhtiāri population lived as nomads in the western foothills of the Zagros. In the central Zagros less than 10 percent of the population was estimated to be sedentary (*Military Report on South-West Persia*). Due to famines (in particular in 1816 and 1865) and epidemics (especially between 1830 and 1870), as well as the general absence of basic medical services, the total population in the Zagros remained relatively stable throughout the century. Hygienic conditions and the nutritional situation were for the villagers generally worse than for the nomads (Durand, p. 140; Sackville-West, p. 89). With the improvement of medical services at the end of the 19th century, a rapid increase in population can be observed in the Zagros, as well as in other mountain regions. But because of their mobility the nomads profited less from the improved conditions than the settled population, and the villagers who were living on the peripheries of the Bakhtiāri and other nomad territories experienced a remarkable population growth (Barth, 1961, pp. 119-20). With the exception of a temporal population growth in the 1920s and 1940s the number of nomads continuously decreased in both absolute and

relative terms. According to the mid-1980s census (Markaz-e Āmār-e Irān), the number of Baḳtiāri nomads declined to 181,505 people with 27,172 families. They represented only 10 percent of the total population within the original tribal area of the Baḳtiāri (Table 1).

The major reason for the decline of Baḳtiāri nomadism was their conflict with the Iranian government. The Baḳtiāri represented an important military force until the 1930s, and controlled the most important trade routes between the Persian Gulf and [Isfahan](#). The Baḳtiāri, like most of the major nomadic tribes, had their own tribal identity that conflicted with a national Iranian identity that the Iranian government had tried to establish since the beginning of the 20th century. Finally, rich oilfields were located in the *garmsir* of the Baḳtiāri territory. These had been acquired by the British in 1905, and the Baḳtiāri khans received a small percentage of the profit (Garthwaite, 1983, pp. 108-10). Since the Iranian government was interested in gaining full control and power over oil exploration and extraction, both Shah Reżā (r. 1926-41) and Shah Moḥammad Reżā (r. 1941-79) made several attempts to destroy the nomads' livelihood, and the existence of nomads was officially negated during the Pahlavi era.

In the 1930s the Iranian government definitely smashed the upper levels of nomadic leadership structures by removing the khans or stripping them of their power. Although this severely shook the foundations of nomadism, the tribal functions on the micro-levels (*tira*, *awlād*) remained intact. Also the enforced sedentarization of nomads was successful for only a short period and did not lead to the planned disintegration of nomadism. A second attempt to destroy the social and economic functions of nomadism was connected with the land reform of the shah's so-called "White Revolution" in the 1960s. The nationalization of forests and pastures in 1963 resulted in the expansion of farmland into nomadic territories and an increase in rural and urban animal husbandry (Ehlers, 1975, 1976, 1980). Traditional collective pastoral rights were replaced by private deeds distributed by the government, usually for 15 years. Nomads who had received fertile pastures enlarged their flocks and made more profit, while those who had obtained ecologically fragile or economically poor grazing areas had to exploit their pastures beyond sustainability. Most importantly, the privatization of collective pastoral property rights and their fragmentation into temporally limited individual users' rights destroyed the collective organization on the micro-level and led to the isolation of the individual nomad (Figure 6). Moreover, all uncultivated



pastures and forests were nationalized and became government property. Additional sources of income for the nomads, such as hunting, charcoal burning, and gathering of products from the forest, were now totally forbidden, which further increased the negative impact of government legislation. Tribes who used to survive through multi-resource nomadism were particularly affected (Digard and Karimi, pp. 85-86). Finally, government interference and military enforcement replaced historically developed migration patterns and further fragmented tribal unity, since every subgroup used to organize their migration at their own discretion (Planhol, 1969). The consequences are chaotic conditions on the migration routes and the destruction of many pastures due to over-exploitation (Figure 6).

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 nomadism has experienced a certain, though only temporary revival. Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-89) considered the nomads the most oppressed part of a feudal society and called them *dakā'er-e enqelāb* (lit. treasures of the revolution; cf. Beck, 1980, p. 18; Digard and Karimi, p. 86). Yet the Islamic government has continued to treat all pastures as government property, and pastoral rights are still leased to individual nomads. Despite expressions of support by the religious leaders, the government considers nomadism an anachronism, since modernization and the compliance with Islam are of prime importance (Nosrat, p. 32). Although nomads are no longer perceived as an anti-governmental power (Tapper, 1979, pp. 196-203), the government still sees nomadism as a potential risk factor because nomads are difficult to control. Nomadism has an unfavourable reputation in the eyes of the Islamic government, since nomads are not considered to be strictly observant.

Seen against this background, it is not surprising that the government holds the pastoral nomads solely responsible for the ecological crisis in many regions (Abdollahi and Chelebi, p. 349). The declared aim is now the gradual and complete sedentarization of all nomads. But unlike the forced measure of the Pahlavi government, the permanent settlement of the nomads is envisioned as a voluntary decision, and planned to be completed in the next 10-20 years (*Sāzmān-e barnāma o budja*, 1986, vol. XIV). To this end the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction established the division for the organization of nomadic affairs (*Sāzmān-e 'omur-e 'ašā'er-e Irān*). Cooperatives were founded to respond to the economic needs of the nomads, and local councils (sing. *šurā*) have replaced tribal organisation in order to gain government influence at the micro-level of nomadic society.



Political influence. Until the 20th century nomads were important members of Iranian society because tribes constituted powerful military factors, and khans of the larger tribes could obtain considerable political influence (Table 1). Tribal leaders engaged in politics and established ruling dynasties. During the Safavid period such an accumulation of tribal power caused the already-mentioned instances of forced migration (Perry, 1975). Khans and their families were also confined at the court whenever the government needed hostages to ensure peace and security in the nomadic territories that were deemed uncontrollable. Military and diplomatic reports of European observers in the 19th and early 20th centuries discussed this tension between the nomadic tribes and the Qajar government quite openly:

“The tribes of Luristan, and even the sub-divisions of them are, from a very practical point of view, autonomous States; with the peculiarity that several of them have no strong territorial connection and move about the country, if not absolutely at will, at any rate by sufficiently devious courses and without restrictions as to seasons. There are, however, always offensive and defensive federacies existing among them. The Persian Governor elects to favour or to attach himself to one of these, securing thereby the services of certain chiefs and their aid in collecting a portion, at least, of the revenue: the chiefs, on their part, finding some advantage in being reckoned among the friends of the Government, and attaching some small value to the occasional gifts and the complimentary titles which the Governor is able to bestow on them. The chiefs of different tribes are constantly meeting in conference or communicating with each other by letters, to settle the mutual relations obtaining between their respective tribes; and each acts in the character of a sovereign. There are no bonds of union or common action between them, except such as are created by the temporary pacts and agreements of their chiefs made under pressure of the dangers and requirements of the hour. The chief places his superior mental equipment at the service of the tribe.” (*Gazetteer of Persia*, II, 1910, p. 627; for the abundance of similar remarks in the European sources, see the sources and studies listed in Garthwaite, 1983, and Tapper, 1983).

Social organization. Each tribe has a remarkable social coherence, which is derived from a strict hierarchical order with clear obligations and responsibilities for all members of the nomadic community. This intra-tribal hierarchy establishes clear social and economic roles for each member (Table 2), and there are remarkable correspondences between different tribes, such as the Shahsevan and the Bakhtiāri (Table 3), concerning their social structures



and hierarchies.

While it can be assumed that other tribes have similar forms of social organization it is probably justified to say that the affiliation to a tribe is the main glue of social coherence and cohesion of nomadic identity. Even today, when many nomads have abandoned their traditional way of life and settled in rural or urban areas (see below), the sense of belonging to an *awlād*, *tira* or *ṭā'efa* is still a powerful element of personal and social identity.

Nomadismus in the second half of the 20th century. Iran's mountain nomads have developed a variety of organizational and spatial patterns to cope with the impacts of modernization and globalization. The major challenge is to combine their summer and winter pastures into one economically viable unit. The survival strategies have shaped their existence, giving it a unique lifestyle with an almost infinite variety of adaptations between nomadism, agriculture, and urban life. The traditional temporal structure of their lifestyle can be reduced very simple and almost ubiquitous schemes of spatial behavior (March until beginning of May: migration from the winter pastures to the summer pastures

May until August/September: summer pastures (*yaylāq/garmsir*)

end of August until November: migration from the summer pastures to the winter pastures

November until mid-March: winter pastures (*qešlāq/sardsir*)

But degradation of the natural environment, population pressure, modernization of transport and traffic, and a series of legislative actions have changed these traditional patterns of migrational behavior. On the one hand, deforestation, changes in land use, and overgrazing, have led to a critical reduction of the natural vegetation cover in many parts of the country so that soils are exposed to rain and the effects of snow-melt, which in turns results in wind and water erosion and gulying of slopes. On the other hand, an increase in rural population has led to an encroachment of agricultural land on traditional pastures and reduces the nomads' traditional economic basis. The development of roads has increased the use of trucks and pickups, and these transport innovations had also negatively impacted the nomads' traditional lifestyles. Yet the modern forms of transportation have helped the nomads to adjust to changing political and economic conditions, since they reduce the

migration periods and thus help them to avoid conflicts with both villagers and urbanites.

A detailed analysis of the causes and mechanisms of the social and economic changes in Iran reveals that there not only factors that force nomads to change their traditional lifestyles (push factors) but also a great number of rural and urban developments

that attract nomads and lead them voluntarily give up their mobile way of life in favor of a rural or urban existence (pull factors). Their great number offers the possibility of a “virtually infinite recombination” (Dyson-Hudson, p. 26). Most important among the push-factors was the transfer of land property to the villagers that has led to a considerable expansion of agriculture and to an augmentation of rural herding. It caused a great number of conflicts with the nomads whose traditional land rights and land uses were severely threatened. Many of the important pull-factors seem to be especially attractive for the younger nomads. Cities offer not only access to the schools, hospitals, mosques, and other public services, but they also provide more opportunity for professional careers outside nomadism. Though traditional family ties and clan structures are adversely affected by the “urban life,” its distractions must not be underestimated as a major pull-factor for the willingness to abandon pastoral migrations (The specific forms and aspects of the decline of Iranian mountain nomadism can be summarized in a three-phase model that considers variables such as migrational behavior, settlement forms and patterns, and economic activities are incorporated (Phase II is characterized by the at least partial dissolution of the ethnic, economic, and social identity and solidarity among a tribe’s members. Modern causes of such a breakup include, most importantly, the encroachment of agricultural land-use into traditional pastures, the development of animal husbandry by the peasants themselves, and the attractions of urban life for many members of the tribe. These factors contribute to the differentiation of migrational behavior, settlement patterns, and economic activities, which is accompanied by a greater variety of how different tribes combine these variables.

The transformation of pastures into cropland causes the most significant changes in migrational behavior. The expansion of fields into the traditional summer and winter pastures forced the nomads to search for alternative grazing areas or to develop different forms of economic cooperation with villagers and urbanites. In either case, the members of the tribe, or its clans (sing. *ṭā’efa*), were usually forced to find new pastures. This was especially true



in the low-lying areas of the *qešlāq/sardsir* where pressure on land became particularly pronounced. Thus the originally extended tribal areas of the *qešlāq/sardsir* developed into a number of scattered and isolated tent groups separated by sedentarized tribal families or peasants who had occupied the nomadic winter pastures for their own herds. Other members of the tribe settled down during winter months in one of the villages along the migration route or near one of the urban centres along it (Figure 6).

During this intermediate phase settlement and economic activities continue to show similar forms of dissolution. Instead of tents, which remain the predominant, almost exclusive form of housing on the summer pastures, more or less solid houses are built for the winter. These houses are erected as new settlements on the traditional camping grounds of the *qešlāq/sardsir*, along the tribal migration routes, or at the fringe of rural villages. Even urban centers may serve as the site of such a new winter camp.

Changing migrational patterns and new forms of winter settlement cause, almost by necessity, new and varied economic bases of survival. In particular, the reduction of pastures for the flocks, often combined with the reduction of the herds' size, demand new and additional sources of income. These are mainly found in new symbioses with agriculture by transforming their own pastures into fields or by combining traditional mountain nomadism with different agricultural activities. The latter can comprise a broad spectrum of combinations of agriculture and animal-husbandry, as well as seasonal wage labor for landlords or informal activities in the cities. These economic adaptations promote in turn the willingness to abandon the migratory lifestyle and to settle permanently (Figure 6).

Phase III marks the more or less complete collapse of traditional mountain nomadism, which has occurred when the second support of its traditional economy, the *yaylāq/garmsir*, is transformed into other uses or when the competition with rural animal husbandry reduces the nomads' availability of obtaining sufficient pastures. Not only are the last tribal bonds of unity seriously affected, but also traditional migrations will end so that the socio-economic basis of tribal organization falls apart. The tribe's collective experience of communal living is replaced by the development of individual households so that the formerly nomadic families are increasingly integrated into predominantly rural peasant society. In this final stage (Table 4), permanent rural settlements increase in number and density while nomadic migration decreases and is deformed, very often even reduced to short-

distance migrations with small flocks and of an almost transhumant character.

Future prospects. Since peasants and urbanites, especially since the 1960s, increasingly encroached upon traditionally nomad-dominated territories, nomads had to fight not only against different forms of internal socio-economic changes and adaptations, but also against forms of rural and urban transformation. The results and consequences of these developments were almost analogous tendencies among nomads and peasants: while the nomads broadened their traditional economy by agricultural activities, the peasants added animal husbandry to their traditional agriculture. Both developments led to an even stronger impact on the limited and fragile land resource of the pastures, increasing competition and sometimes even hostile coexistence within one area. In general both traditional peasant farming and mountain nomadism in Iran tend to develop towards an almost identical form of land use pattern: agriculture in combination with transhumant animal husbandry (FIGURE 5), so that it may be appropriate to speak of an integrative development of these two originally very distinct and different lifestyles. Today, for the more casual observer it is almost impossible to decide what the historical foundations of many rural households are (Table 4).

It is a widespread supposition that “nomadism is dead” (cf. the title of Scholz), and yet in Iran both residual forms of nomadism and adaptations of rural and urban lifestyles in combination with animal husbandry are still practiced. But characteristic elements of traditional mountain nomadism and its disintegration (Table 4), in particular the economic basis and the habitat, the migrational patterns and the aims and goals of a pastoral economy, are changing or have already vanished. Sooner or later, the black tent of the nomads will therefore disappear entirely in favor of an animal husbandry where the owners of the herds are sedentarized, be they farmers, former nomads, or even city-dwellers.

iii. *Afghanistan*

Afghan nomadism has entirely different preconditions than Iranian nomadism, even though Iran and Afghanistan are adjacent states. Its distinct forms and consequences and forms reflect Afghan geography and history. The country has traditionally had a much higher percentage of nomads, but the recent conflict-stricken political and military history have created conditions that do not favor nomadism. Unfortunately, research on Afghanistan's



nomadic people is hampered by the absence of any detailed studies, comparable to those which are available for Iranian nomads. Reliable statistical and other relevant socio-economic data on the Afghan population are scarce and for most of the country's history simply nonexistent.

Geography. Afghanistan is a land-locked country that is more arid than Iran. Its basically montane nature and the juxtaposition of harsh and rugged mountain systems, especially the Hindu Kush, with extended steppe and desert regions provide ample grazing grounds for nomadic animal husbandry. But fertile agricultural lands, rain-fed or irrigated, are rather sparse, concentrated in valley bottoms and a few climatically favourable regions (Grötzbach). Pastoral nomadism has therefore played a major role in the country's history and economy.

History. Afghanistan is a comparatively young country. Although most historians consider Aḥmad Khan Dorrāni (r. 1747-73) as the founder and first king of modern Afghanistan, his successors of were so weak that the control of the country was divided between a great number of ever-changing local dynasties who were in permanent conflict with each other. For example, [Kandahār](#) was until 1863 politically as independent as [Herat](#). Afghanistan in its present size and configuration was created in the late 19th century as one result of strategic rivalry for supremacy in Central Asia between Czarist Russia, China, and the British Empire. Afghanistan became a fully independent state in 1919, but the delineation of some borders continues to be questioned (Grötzbach; Schetter). Even today, local and regional leaders are more powerful than the central government, and tribal regionalism plays a major role.

Social organization. Nomadism and pastoralism are dominant features of Afghan society and economy, and in no other Middle Eastern society are they as influential as in Afghanistan. According to a specific survey of Afghan nomads in 1978, Afghanistan's total population of 14 million included approximately 1 million nomads (Balland, 1988), though this estimate was based on a very strict definition of "nomad." The regular Afghan government census and other sources gave estimates of more than 2 million nomads and semi-nomads (Jentsch, 1973; Majruh) so that about 15 percent of Afghanistan's population before 1980 could be considered nomads. Irrespective of these discrepancies (for a critical review of the figures, see Janata, 1975) Afghanistan was until the Soviet invasion of 1978 one of the most explicitly "nomadic societies."



The political developments since 1978 are dominated by internal unrest, tribal clashes and regional civil wars, since the Soviet invasion was accompanied by permanent changes in the political leadership and government which in turn lead to the rule of the Taliban. The dramatic decline and dissolution of traditional nomadic patterns in Afghanistan are additionally aggravated by the intricate relationships between tribes, ethnicity, and state (Balland, 1982, 1988; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont; Ferdinand; Grevemeyer; Roy; Schetter) which further complicate a fair and reliable evaluation of Afghan nomadism.

Tribes and ethnicities. The complex relations between the Afghan tribes do not facilitate a description of their differentiation according to size (for a critical review of estimates, see for example Aslanov et al.; Balland and Benoist) and life style, that is their classification as nomads, peasants etc. (for the situation before 1980, see [AFGHANISTAN iv. Ethnography](#)). In connection with his discussion of the Afghan connotations of terms such as ethnicity, R. Tapper (1983) argues that “like most countries of the world, the populations of Iran and Afghanistan are heterogeneous according to various relatively objective criteria; language, religion and sect, local or tribal affiliation, productive activity, wealth and so on” (p. 424). Yet he also observes that an official category of any population classification in Iran and Afghanistan remains *ilāt o ‘ašāyer* “which often appears to subsume non-tribal linguistic and regional minorities. In its long history as an official category with the connotation that tribes are organized under chiefs, have a kinship ideology and a pastoral way of life, *ilat* has influenced not only the perceptions of such groups by non-tribal line missing themselves” (ibid., p. 425). The German anthropologist E. Orywal (1988, pp. 35-40) describes the hierarchy of ego – family – regional group – religious group – language group – nation as the foundation of a tribe’s identity. While in Afghanistan the term “*afgān*” implies an identification as Pashtun concerning the identity of ethnicity and territory, other ethnic groups are more fluid in their self-understanding of their ethnic identities (Balland, 1988; Orywal, 1986). The number and size of ethnic groups were, and are, fluctuating, and their affiliation with nomads, semi-nomads, or other groups is equally difficult to quantify. The wide range in estimates for the situation before 1980 ([Table 5](#), [Table 6](#)), which furthermore do not even agree with the data gleaned from ethnographic descriptions (see [AFGHANISTAN iv. Ethnography](#)), demonstrate how problematic such generalizations are. Moreover, these figures have dramatically changed since 1978, and recent estimates of Afghanistan’s population range between an 8 million minimum



and a 15-16 million maximum (Schetter, p. 121-62; esp. p. 123).

Future prospects. Three decades of foreign invasions, war, and factional fighting between different ethnic groups and alliances have created a highly fragmented society and deeply deteriorated the Afghan countryside. Because of the lack of reliable statistical sources and recent scholarly field studies it is difficult to judge the present state of mountain nomadism in Afghanistan today. Still, it seems safe to assume that its traditional patterns are no longer valid because the military and political developments of the last three decades have dramatically impacted the lifestyle of the Afghan nomads.

The original structure of Afghan tribal migrations was characterized by spatial and temporal patterns similar to those of the Iranian nomads (

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