

THE TALE OF TRIBES

by

Mohammad Al-Rousan

Thesis Supervisor:

---

Louie Dean Valencia-García, Ph.D.  
Department of History

Second Reader:

---

Elizabeth Bishop, Ph.D.  
Department of History

Approved:

---

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.  
Dean, Honors College

THE TALE OF TRIBES

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of  
Texas State University  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

Mohammad Al-Rousan

San Marcos, Texas  
December, 2018

## **Abstract**

The Bilad al-Sham, or the Eastern Levant, is a region of land located in the eastern Mediterranean. The Bilad al-Sham culture, referred to as Shammi culture, has an emphasis on self image and resents the tribal culture. The narrative in Jordan is that of a country built on tribal culture and values, but this is only half the story. Northern Jordanians feel more accustomed to the Shammi culture compared to the narrative about Jordan. In this study, I will examine how the northern Jordanians perceive the Shammi culture and how it influences their identity. The argument to be made is northern Jordanians are historically not direct descendants of the Shammi culture, but have adopted the Shammi culture as their sense of identity.

## Introduction

Jordan is a country built on tribal values and norms, where bloodline dictates identity and legacy, and the tribal values are emulated in Jordanian society and government. The identity of Jordan it is a country built on tribal culture and values, was set by the Jordanian Government due to southern Jordanian tribal influence.<sup>1</sup> Amongst countries in the Arab League, Jordan is seen as a blend of Eastern Levantine and Bedouin identity, qualities that set Jordan apart from the other Middle Eastern countries.<sup>2</sup> The north-south divide in Jordan is more than a geographical split, it is a cultural divide. The south of Jordan has a strong tribal history, and the tribal values and culture are still persistent in the south. When Jordan was established in May 11th, of 1946 by the Hashemites, the royal family of Jordan, with the influence from the British, the identity proposed was one of a country built on tribal values and culture.<sup>3</sup> Jordan would be a tribal country, and the country would be built on tribal values of the southern Jordanians.<sup>4</sup> However, while tribal identity deeply affects Jordan's government and south society, it does not entirely dictate how northern Jordanians structure their society.

Northern Jordanians identify with "Shammi," or Mediterranean, culture.<sup>5</sup> Unlike southern Jordanians, Northern Jordanians do not emphasize tribal values and norms. Instead, northern Jordanians focus on their adopted Shammi culture. As a result of this Shammi culture, northern Jordanians feel they are free to do and live as they please, and do not let tribal identity define them personally and politically.. In fact, Shammi culture

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip Robins, *Making of Jordan*, (New York City, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 121.

<sup>2</sup> Robins, *Making of Jordan*, 125.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain, and the making of Jordan*, (New York City, Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Patai, *Kingdom of Jordan*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1958), 156.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Patai, *Kingdom of Jordan*, 157.

resents tribalism, the focus on their understandings of familial honors.<sup>6</sup> In tribal Arabian culture many people who hold a predestined understanding of identity and future.<sup>7</sup>

The Bilad al-Sham, where Shammi culture is found, is a land in contrast to the rest of the Middle East. Whereas much Middle East is defined by tribal cultures residing in the desert, the Bilad al-Sham region has a Mediterranean climate, which affects the ways how the people who live there understand themselves and their culture.<sup>8</sup>

As a northern Jordanian, I feel it is an obligation to help others understand the nuances of Jordanian society. I have lived my life as a Shammi. I understand the dynamics of the culture, and hope to impart my insights into my culture to scholars. Nariman Al-Rousan was a three term veteran in the Jordanian Parliament. While conducting an interview, Nariman gave insight with her conversation with Mamdouh Al-Rousan a Jordanian historian. Abu-Haitham Al-Rousan was a Shammi rights activist, who inspired to promote Shammi culture and identity in the Hashemite Kingdom. These are insights many scholars do not obtain, is a valuable resource that must be used for this project.

---

<sup>6</sup> Meir Zamir, *Greater Syrian Lands*, (New York, Taylor and Francis Ltd., 2006), 335.

<sup>7</sup> Zamir, *Syrian Lands*, 336.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 336.

## Research Methods

In this thesis I will implement ethnographic qualitative research methodology. I will rely upon secondary sources, oral history interviews with family relatives, a family genealogical tree, and my own personal experience. Ethnography is a research method in which researchers use qualitative measures to place themselves into the environment of their research.<sup>9</sup> It is used by anthropologists to give the reader insight into the authors mind and perceptions of their research.<sup>10</sup> In this way, ethnography is beneficial to further understand a research question, and anthropologists would argue it gives a human component of emotion.<sup>11</sup> Additional sources that will be used to interpret Shammi culture will include: Anthony Mark's *Into Arabia, perhaps, if so where?*; Thomas Phillips' *Into Greater Syrian Lands*; Elena Corbett's *Antiquity and Modernity in Southeastern Bilad al-Sham*; and Albert Hourani's *A History of the Arab Peoples*. These sources will provide context to the ethnographic study.

The primary sources used for this research will be two oral history interviews conducted by me, a family history narrative written by Atef Al-Rousan, and a family tree written and recorded by Mamdouh Al-Rousan. The first interview, conducted on August 22nd, 2018, was with Nariman Al-Rousan, a former three-term Jordanian Parliament member. In that interview she discusses her knowledge of northern Jordanian origins. She also discusses her conversation with Mamdouh Al-Rousan, who holds a doctorate in History from the University of Baghdad. While administering the interviews, I took notes on essential points regarding Shammi culture, origins of northern Jordanians, and the

---

<sup>9</sup> Scott Sells, *Teaching Ethnographic Research Methods*, (Journal of Social Work, 2010) 165.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Sells, 167.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 167.

influence of Shammi culture and identity for northern Jordanians. The second interview that was conducted on September 18th, 2018 with Abu-Haitham Al-Rousan, who was a civil activist, and promoter of Shammi culture. The components of the interview that were discussed were: 1) the creation of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; 2) problems north Jordan faced before the creation of the Kingdom; and 3) how Shammi culture has an influence on Jordanian society. Additionally, I will rely upon Atef Al-Rousan's book *Al-Rousan, a Journey Across History*, which discusses the origins and history of the Al-Rousan family, and a genealogical study by Mamdouh Al-Rousan.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Atef Al-Rousan *Rousan, a Journey across History* (Irbid, Yarmouk University Press, 2010), 1.

## **My Shammi Story**

My story starts in the small village of Sama Rousan just north of Irbid. Though I was not born in Jordan, nor did I grow-up there, I spent my summers at my grandparents homes in northern Jordan. I remember going to Syria and Lebanon as a child, and reminiscing the beauty of the countries, reminded me of our village. My parents always reiterated to my siblings and me that we should be proud of being Shammi. As a child, I did not know what being Shammi was, but I was consistently told I should be proud, so I went along with the narrative. I remember my parents telling me how important this land, Bilad al-Sham, is to our family, and this will always be home. As a child, I could not comprehend the importance of identity and land. All I saw were fruit trees, and spent most of my time playing with my cousins on the street. I did not know what it meant to be Shammi, but I knew I was supposed to be proud of being Shammi. There was a specific moment in my childhood in which I learned the world was not as beautiful and as generous it appeared to be. The fateful night of July 14th, 2004 that changed my life.

My family and I were at a family friend's house at a neighboring village. I knew the families and their children, and I always had a great time with them. Village life was simple, everyone knew everyone. There were never any problems, life was peaceful. While we were at the family friends home, my friends and I were playing in the street until we saw a car pull into the driveway. None of us recognized the car, nor the men coming out of the car. As the curious child I was, I decided to follow these men inside the house. I was hiding in the corner in the living room, listening to their discussion with my family and family friends. The men had a different Arabic accent than what I was accustomed to hearing. They were from the south of Jordan. The men's speech became aggressive. My



aunt stood up, and said, “We are not tribal, nor are we bedouin. We will not adhere to these demands.” I did not know what they were arguing about. The amount of conviction and volume in my aunt's voice terrified me. I ran back outside. I remember being a terrified nine-year old child shaking. I had never seen anyone that angry in my life. I didn't know what to do or say, so I just sat outside by myself. My friends kept telling me to come play, but I told them I was tired. In reality I was scared and could not get my aunt's voice out of my head.

My family and I left about an hour later the incident, and I asked my dad the question that would change my life forever, “Baba, what's a bedouin and a tribe?” My father had this puzzled look on his face, and asked where did I hear this. I told him I eavesdropped on the conversation that the men and my aunt were having. He looked at me with his dark piercing eyes. I felt he was staring into my soul. However, I felt assured when he looked at me and said, “Hamoda yaba, Jordan might be one country, but there are two different groups of people. You have people who are tribal and Shammi. We love our tribal brothers, but we are Shammi at the end of the day, but our story is never told, they assumed the identity for us.” I knew from then on, the country I loved with all my heart was not the place I thought it was, it became tainted in my eyes.

Later on in life, I eventually learned the difference between being Shammi and being tribal. I have no animosity towards the tribes, but I eventually learned the truth about my beloved Jordan. Jordan's narrative is often told as a country with a tribal history, and our country inherited those values from southern Jordanians. That in fact, is not true. There is a region of Jordan who has its own story—a Shammi story.



## **Toward defining Shammi Culture**

The Bilad al-Sham is a region located off the eastern Mediterranean coast.<sup>13</sup> Shammi countries include present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. Shammi countries contrast with other Middle Eastern countries in terrain, language, cultural traditions, and gender norms.

The Bilad al-Sham boasts a Mediterranean climate with fair weather that is mostly consistent year-round.<sup>14</sup> The Mediterranean climate possesses a pleasant climate with warm and dry summers, with cold to mild winters.<sup>15</sup> The Mediterranean climate allows for a continuous and consistent agriculture cycle, allowing crops to have a consistent growth cycle.<sup>16</sup> The temperature never seems to drop drastically between seasons. Shammi terrain consists of hills and flat plains with fertile soil near the rim hills, which in turn makes the Bilad al-Sham productive for agriculture.<sup>17</sup> The crops traditionally grown in Bilad al-Sham are plums, figs, pears, squash, and berries.<sup>18</sup> My village, Sama Rousan, is located in northern Jordan and has strong agricultural economy. Sama is located just south of Umm Qais on top of a hill overlooking flat plain lands which are crop yielding areas for wheat and other grains. The hills were used for growing fruit. This is consistent in many parts of the Bilad al-Sham. As a child, I remember taking weekend trips to Syria. My family and I would stop on the side of the road and pick figs from the trees. Shammi climate and terrain is a key factor to their travel economies.

---

<sup>13</sup> Meir Zamir, *Greater Syrian Lands*, (New York, Taylor and Francis Ltd., 2006), 335.

<sup>14</sup> Quinn, Robert. "Mediterranean Climate." *University of California Press 2* (2006): 21.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Quinn, "Mediterranean Climate," 21.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Quinn, "Mediterranean Climate," 23.

<sup>17</sup> Meir Zamir, *Greater Syrian Lands*, (New York, Taylor and Francis Ltd., 2006), 336.

<sup>18</sup> Meir Zamir, *Greater Syrian Lands*, 337.

turn makes the Bilad al-Sham productive for agriculture.<sup>19</sup> The crops traditionally grown in Bilad al-Sham are plums, figs, pears, squash, and berries.<sup>20</sup> My village, Sama Rousan, is located in northern Jordan and has strong agricultural economy. Sama is located just south of Umm Qais on top of a hill overlooking flat plain lands which are crop yielding areas for wheat and other grains. The hills were used for growing fruit. This is consistent in many parts of the Bilad al-Sham. As a child, I remember taking weekend trips to Syria. My family and I would stop on the side of the road and pick figs from the trees. Shammi climate and terrain is a key factor to their travel economies.



Hills of Altinozu, Syria<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Meir Zamir, *Greater Syrian Lands*, (New York, Taylor and Francis Ltd., 2006), 336.

<sup>20</sup> Meir Zamir, *Greater Syrian Lands*, 337.

<sup>21</sup> Roffey, Charles. "The rolling hills of Altinzou, looking across Syria." Flickr. [https://www.flickr.com/photos/charlesfred/42435800531\(2018\)](https://www.flickr.com/photos/charlesfred/42435800531(2018)).



Sama Al-Rousan, Jordan<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Atef Al-Rousan *Rousan, a Journey across History* (Irbid, Yarmouk University Press, 2010), 1.





Biblos, Lebanon<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Jones, Steve. "The hills of Lebanon." The Electronic Intifada.  
<https://electronicintifada.net/content/lebanons-phoenix-rising/6207> (2006).



Hills of Ramallah, Palestine<sup>24</sup>

Shammi Arabic is different than most modern Arabic spoken in different regions in the Middle East. The Shammi Arabic tone tends to be softer, and slower in speech, and extends the pronunciation of the word—making Shammi Arabic one of the easiest Arabic dialects to understand.<sup>25</sup> Shammi Arabic does not put much stress on word pronunciation, which explains its soft natured tone.<sup>26</sup> Shammi Arabic has a tendency to skip over letters, mainly over the letter “ق” (Qaf). If one were to say “منطقة” in traditional Arabic, it would

---

<sup>24</sup> Eva the Dragon. “Hills in Palestine.” Tales of Dragons, Rabbits, and Roosters. <https://dragonsrabbitsandroosters.com/2013/11/17/the-pearls-of-our-lives/hills-in-palestine-by-eva-the-dragon/> (2013).

<sup>25</sup> Lutfi Hussein, *Levantine Arabic for Non-Speakers*, (New York City, Georgetown University Press, 1995), 161.

<sup>26</sup> Hussein, *Levantine Arabic*, 161.

be pronounced as “mintaqa” while in Shammi Arabic it would be pronounced “mintia’a”. Shammi Arabic also has a strong emphasis on the letter “ي” (Ya). When saying the letter “ي” (Ya), there tends to be an over extending of the letter pronunciation. Another example would be the word “كيف” in modern colloquial Arabic it would be pronounced “kaif” while in Shammi Arabic it would be pronounced “keef.” Arabic speakers outside of the Bilad al-Sham perceive Shammi Arabic to be lighter in tone, compared to their dialects. For example, I grew up speaking Shammi Arabic, and only interacted with the Shammi community. During my time at Texas State University I first interacted with Arabs outside the Shammi community, many of whom were Iraqi. While interacting with the Iraqi community, I noticed how fast their speech was compared to mine. An Iraqi man told me it was due to the difference in dialect. I assumed my tone of speech was at an appropriate volume, because I spoke how I generally learned Arabic while growing up. The Iraqi man informed me Shammi Arabic is the easiest dialect to understand. I proceeded to ask why. They explained Shammi Arabic is used in mainstream Arabic cinema and television because it is better understood by Arabic speakers. It was these qualities that set Shammi Arabic apart from other Arabic dialects. This demonstrates how different Shammi Arabic is compared to other Arabic dialects, because from my experience other Arabs don’t speak in other tongues. Whenever I converse with an Arab speaker that is not from Bilad al-Sham, the speakers attempts to converse with me in Shammi Arabic. I have not seen an Iraqi converse with a Saudi, with the Iraqi speaking in a Saudi accent, but whenever I speak to an Iraqi or Saudi, they want to converse with a Shammi accent. While studying abroad in Morocco in summer of 2018, any interactions I had, Moroccans knew I was Shammi from my accent and started to converse with me in a Shammi dialect.



Because of an emphasis on education, for both men and women, Shammi culture is often thought of as demonstrating gender equality. Based on my experience up in a Shammi household, there certainly is an emphasis on education. Education does not only mean school, but any form of education is warranted in a Shammi household. In relation to gender norms, men and women are encouraged to pursue an education, and attempt to receive the highest degree possible. Education within the Shammi culture is seen as a quality that can enhance one's status within the community. The higher degree of education an individual receives, the more favorably the degree holder is generally looked upon within the community. However, in relation to gender roles, the community status is generally focused on men. Education is encouraged within the Shammi community for both men and women, but the influence within the community still emphasizes male dominance. Indeed, this demonstrates a form of sexism within Shammi culture. Despite both men and women being expected to take the initiative to better their lives with an education, only one gender is allowed to really demonstrate clear influence. This is not only a community issue, but within the household as well. Growing up in the Shammi community in Dallas, I always found it odd how the women were often well-educated, and had received high degrees—M.D.s, J.D.s, and Ph.D.s— however, those women were still constrained by patriarchal cultural norms within marriage. The cultural norm for them is still to be housewives. I am an adversary of this norm, believing it stunts the growth of Shammi culture. It is highly hypocritical to encourage women to receive an education, and earn advanced degrees, but force them into marriage with men who discourage their wives from pursuing anything more than being a housewife. This is a problem within the Shammi

community. Why inspire women to earn degrees that would benefit society, but be enclaved in their homes as housewives?

As previously mentioned, Shammi culture resents tribes. In general, Shammi believe in character over credentials, having little to no regard towards the individual's tribal bloodline. Shammi culture believes in qualities of the person, not the quantity of their family. When traveling to the Bilad al-Sham and interacting with locals, the questions that are generally asked are "Who are you?" I would reply with my name, but I would be proceed with a line of questions about my livelihood, my education, and what I do for a living. When compared to south Jordan, Shammi culture has little regard for a person's origins. Instead, the primary quality cared about in Shammi culture is the quality of the person. In relation to tribes, the tribal culture is predicated on the tribal bloodline and lineage.<sup>27</sup> Tribal culture depends on an honor system. For example, if one's relative were to have high honor, it is believed their offspring would inherit the honor and continue their legacy.<sup>28</sup> In the Shammi culture, this is an unfair assessment to the individual, because if the ancestor or relative held high degrees of honor, it does not equate their offspring to hold high degrees of honor. The Shammi culture believes the character of the individual should have little to regard to their familial past. The Shammi communities with which I have interacted have little regard for my name. The community wants to know who I am as a person. Though family does matter, but if bad decisions are made, the blame was placed on the individual, not the family. In the past, I have interacted with southern Jordanians, still holding to their tribal values. For example, while in Jordan, I was once having a conversation with a southern Jordanian man and another southerner whom I invited joined

---

<sup>27</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991), 308.

<sup>28</sup> Hourani, *Arab Peoples*, 307.

us. While proceeding with the conversation, I noticed the two men had little conversation between one another. As one of the men went to the bathroom, I asked my friend why was he not conversing with my guest. His response, “He’s from a different family. His grandfather disrespected mine. We must uphold our family legacy.” For me, that instance was ridiculous. It was outrageous for such a thing to prevent conversation. My friend replied, “What if it was your grandfather?” My reply was simple, I told the man sitting across from me, “It is my grandfather’s business. I cannot judge a man from an argument two generations ago. It’s an unfair value judgement.” That instance presents itself as troublesome within tribal culture. Tribal culture pass on feuds and conflicts through generations, which is troublesome frankly. I would of assumed in this day and age this mentality would of died out when Jordan was created, but it still persists today.

Familial unity is a quality one must possess within the Shammi culture. Shammi culture defines family as nuclear, while the tribe is a greater community of families. There is a Shammi saying, “My family is my strength and my weakness” [“عائلي هي قوتي وضعفي”]. Family in the Shammi culture is a sign of strength and encouragement, and if the Shammi were to hold their family close to their hearts through the glory and defeat, the Shammi culture looks at this individual as a person with great might and humility.<sup>29</sup> Though Shammi culture focuses on individualism, and has little regard for familial history, keeping the family close is a sign of humility and cohesion. For example, my family is not perfect by any means, but we are a tight knit group. If there was an issue within the tribe, you would discuss the issues with the community members of the tribe. However in the Shammi culture, you would discuss issues only with your immediate family.

---

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Marks, *Into Arabia, if so Perhaps Where?* (London, Arab Studies, 2007), 18.



## Importance of Identity

Yale professor Amy Chua emphasizes the importance of tribal politics and the role it plays on society today. Chua argues people join tribes in order to receive a sense of belonging. By definition, human society is built upon us not being hermits; we must feel a part of something important. Chua argues humans supplement identity with a sense of belonging.<sup>30</sup> Tribes are looked on as a group with a strong emphasis in having many aspects in their life as important.<sup>31</sup> Tribes are defined depending on what region of the world they are located.<sup>32</sup> Importantly, tribes are defined differently in the west than it is in the east.<sup>33</sup>

When discussing tribes in the Middle East, tribes are seen as having a familial relations by a common ancestor. Shammi culture falls into a unique set of circumstances when considering how tribes are often considered in the Middle East.s. Northern Jordanians are not original to northern Jordan, they are migrants originating from different parts of the Middle East. These migrants to northern Jordan were exposed to the Shammi culture, that is to say Mediterranean culture, and eventually adopted it. This adoption, in turn, gave northern Jordanians a unique sense of identity.Chua states people yearn to belong, the northern Jordanians who moved toward the Mediterranean Sea wanted nothing more but to belong to their new homeland—severing ties with older tribal alliances.

---

<sup>30</sup> Amy Chua, *Political Tribes*, (New York City, Penguin, 2018) 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> Chua, *Political Tribes*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 7.

## **Interview 1: Nariman Al-Rousan on the Origins of Northern Jordanians**

Nariman Al-Rousan was a three term veteran of the Jordanian Parliament representing the Irbid locality in her first term (House), and the Irbid Governante for her last two terms (Senate).<sup>34</sup> While campaigning in northern Jordan, Nariman stated she, “needed to understand a basic history of the families” she would be representing. So, when campaigning in local town meeting halls, Nariman wanted to “know their history and where they came from” in order to find common ground with her future constitutes.<sup>35</sup> Nariman explained, “We are not original to Jordan. I knew the family history, but we barely knew the history of those around us.” While conversing with locals and asking for their stories she “came to the realization they are no different than we are.”<sup>36</sup> When asked about similarities between the families, Nariman responded, “These people, like us, came from different parts of the Middle East, mainly from Mesopotamia, Eastern Syria, Anatolia, and the northern region of the Arabian Peninsula, and though some are not of Arab descent, their path and stories are similar.”<sup>37</sup> When asked to elaborate, “The reason we tend to get along so well in our communities is not because of the Shammi culture and identity, but because of how similar our stories are.”<sup>38</sup> When asked if she conducted her own research, she confirmed she spoke with Mamdouh Al-Rousan, a family member who received his Ph.D. in history, about the origins of northern Jordanians. Mamdouh explained to Nariman families’ story is different, but the reasoning to why they came to north Jordan are generally similar. Mamdouh Al-Rousan was a historian focusing on Jordanian and Iraqi history wrote

---

<sup>34</sup> Al-Rousan, Nariman (Former Jordanian Parliament Representative) Mohammad Al-Rousan. August 22nd, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

his dissertation in 1954 predicting the rise of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq.<sup>39</sup> During her campaigns in the early 2000s, Nariman would often visit Mamdouh and he would explain to Nariman how different regions in the Middle East were generally tribal, and have been part of these tribes even before the reigns of the Abbasid and Umayyad Empires, and tribes hailed before the time of the Messenger Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>40</sup> During both Islamic Empires, the Umayyad and Abbasid there was little mobility for tribes. In turn, these tribes resided on the same land together for hundreds of years. Nariman elaborated her conversation with Mamdouh stating tribal members had been with each other for hundreds of years, and tensions eventually built.<sup>41</sup> Intertribal politics took a toll on the tribes, and some members believed they were not earning the respect they deserved. Many of the tribes started to become oligarchies and eventually transitioned into a caste system.<sup>42</sup> Nariman stated, "The lower-leveled tribe members became exhausted feeling trapped within an identity they were born into, and felt these groups needed a new place to start over and create their own sense of identity."<sup>43</sup> Eventually the two Empires collapsed and the Ottomans came into power. When asked about the impact the Ottomans had on these tribes, Mamdouh stated to Nariman, "The Ottomans had the millet system, and the millet system gave citizens the authority to live autonomously and migrate to different region without feeling the need to conform to tribal norms."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

The Ottoman millet system is a law system that grants their citizens within the Empire their right to live in their own autonomous area.<sup>45</sup> The Millet was created to appease Christian populations in the Balkans and Armenia, but it allowed citizens of different ethnicities to create their own identity.<sup>46</sup> This was seen as an opportunity for Arabs and other ethnicities to escape their tribal values and norms to create their own identity.<sup>47</sup> Though there are not Ottoman records to where and why these Arabs in different ethnicities came from, but the families' histories are interpreted orally.<sup>48</sup>

Nariman continued the conversation, asking Mamdouh if there was a measure to determine where these families hailed from? Mamdouh assured her he could—it depends on the last name.<sup>49</sup> If a family were to have an ا (alif) followed by another letter to their name, these families either came from Mesopotamia or eastern Syria.<sup>50</sup> If a family were to have a ي (ya) in their name, it is indicated these families came from north eastern Syria near the Hasakah area, or Northern Mesopotamia near the Kurdish and Mosul area.<sup>51</sup> If a family were to have a ت (ta marbuta), it is indicated they came from a wider land mass from either the northern Arabian Peninsula, western Mesopotamia, eastern Syria and small parts of southern Anatolia.<sup>52</sup> The discoveries Mamdouh made were astounding in Nariman's eyes. She proceeded to ask Mamdouh, "Why were these findings never published?"<sup>53</sup> Mamdouh informed Nariman he tried to but "the government want[ed] to lay Jordan as

---

<sup>45</sup> Arksal Salim, *Between Nation and Millet*, (Penguin, New York, 2008) 515.

<sup>46</sup> Arksal Salim *Nation and Millet* 512.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire*, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013) 16

<sup>48</sup> Bruce Master *Arabs of the Ottoman Empire* 18

<sup>49</sup> Al-Rousan, Nariman (Former Jordanian Parliament Representative). Interview by Mohammad Al-Rousan. August 22nd, 2018

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



being built on traditional tribal norms. In reality this is only half of the story. Northern Jordanian ancestors escaped tribal society in order to create an identity of their own, and in order to keep the status quo of Jordanian identity. The Jordanian government mandated that the identity will be supplemented with tribal values and norms.” When Mamdouh attempted “to publish his findings, the government believed he would be pushing for an identity change, which is not true. He wanted the international community to understand the Jordanian government is only telling half of the story. Jordan is not entirely tribal, north Jordan identifies with the Shammi culture.”<sup>54</sup> When Nariman was questioned as to why north Jordan’s story was not told, her response was Jordan is split “north to south, the population is about the same, but the number of families is far greater in the north, and the number of tribal members far exceeds the number of families in northern Jordan.”<sup>55</sup> Southern Jordanian tribes have influence within the country, and were united together when the Hashemites came to power. The government policies and structure were based and determined by the southern’s terms.<sup>56</sup> Though southerners have accepted the Shammi colloquial Arabic, their identity is intune with their tribal roots, and have strong-armed their way to hold high official positions within the government. There is nothing wrong with this notion; its their heritage. However, when it comes to Jordan, government policies tend to suppress role of family units in Shammi culture over tribes.<sup>57</sup>

When asked when did northern Jordanians adopt the Shammi culture and identity Nariman responded, “These families left their homes and tribes to find their own sense of identity. When these families made the migration to northern Jordan, the families needed

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

to commit to a way of life. So these families started to establish farms, tailoring businesses, and other local businesses to make a living.”<sup>58</sup> When asked if any of this was written down, Nariman stated, “What these migrants were doing 500 years ago, they’re still doing till this day, it’s a generational upbringing.”<sup>59</sup> Nariman continued, “eventually these groups started to interact with the West Bank and Syria, and their identity started to change.”<sup>60</sup> Nariman reiterated that society needs to “understand these people came from traditional tribal areas in the Middle East, and it was their way of life, but when the interaction with Shammi people began, people slowly accepted their identity.”<sup>61</sup> Asking what happened, Nariman stated, “The new migrants started to notice how differently they were organized when compared to their original homelands. The Shammi people were welcoming and hospitable, and were looking for [personal] character more than [familial] credential.”<sup>62</sup> This resonated with the new migrants, and for once they felt welcomed into a society which disregarded tribal history, but focused on the character of the individual. Nariman explained, “This was a process at first, but the first hundred years it took awhile for these new migrants to accept the Shammi culture, and it was eventually passed on through generation to generation and people felt Shammi. It was part of their identity, and we held on to that identity since then.”<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## **Atef Al-Rousan on Our Family History**

Atef Al-Rousan is an historian for the Rousan family, and has traced our lineage before the reign of the Abbasid Empire. Atef's book, *Al-Rousan, a Journey Across History* discusses the Rousan families migration patterns, their settlement and livelihood, and their interaction with the Shammi community in Syria and Palestine.

The Rousan lineage began in southern Mesopotamia near the Basra area today.<sup>64</sup> The Rousan family was a clan part of the Abu-Raas tribe, and the tribe has been assumed to have started in southern Persia, possibly in the Ahwaz region today. Though the name of the descendants were never written, this is purely an estimation due to similar tribes in the area with a common name.<sup>65</sup> The first recorded Rousan ancestor was named Dawees's, and his lineage existed for seven generations living in the Busra area.<sup>66</sup> After seven generations of the Abu-Raas tribe hailing in Busra, Khalil son of Ibrahim, started to develop conflicting feelings about the tribe.<sup>67</sup> At that time in the tribes history, the tribal caste was set with little room of mobility within the tribe, and it was decided by Khalil that it was time to change. This came in part of the Ottoman millet system.<sup>68</sup>

Khalil informed himself about the Ottoman Millet system, and instigated those changes in his adolescent years.<sup>69</sup> Khalil, his wife, and three sons Zamel, Mustafa, and Ibrahim, took upon a journey in search of a new home.<sup>70</sup> Khalil did not complete the

---

<sup>64</sup> Atef Al-Rousan *Rousan, a Journey across History* (Irbid, Yarmouk University Press, 2010) 4.

<sup>65</sup> Atef Al-Rousan, *Rousan* 6

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 8

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 15

journey, only making it eastern Syria.<sup>71</sup> His sons did not follow similar paths, but instead pursued their on journey for their families.<sup>72</sup>

Mustafa and his family came across and developed a relationship with a Druze family in the mid 18th century in southern Syria.<sup>73</sup> Mustafa and his family eventually converted to the Druze faith, which is a monotheistic religion based on Islamic and Greek philosophy teachings and permanently moved to southern Syria.<sup>74</sup> Little record was kept of Mustafa and his family, but it is to be believed his descendants reside in al-Sweida Syria. Zamal and Ibrahim migrated to the northern East Bank. However, soon after entering the East Bank, Zamal and Ibrahim each took a different path.<sup>75</sup> Zamal resided in Sama Rousan, and Ibrahim resided outside of Umm Qais, establishing their homes by the late 18th century.<sup>76</sup>

Ibrahim's descendants are technically part of the Rousan family, but I will instead focus on Zamal and his descendants and their impact. Zamal made a living in the northern East Bank by agriculture, growing such crops as plums, figs, and squash.<sup>77</sup> Zamal occupied as much land compared to about 40 acres. How Zamal purchased the land is an ongoing question within Zamal's descendants today. Zamal had a thriving agriculture business and after his death in the early nineteenth century, his business was passed down to his five sons, Maflah, Shekhah, Suliman, Tala'a, and Mutlaq.<sup>78</sup> Suliman is the only son who kept

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 18

<sup>74</sup> Kais Firro, *The Druze Faith: Origins, Development, and Interpretation*, (Leiden, Brill, 2011), 76.

<sup>75</sup> Atef Al-Rousan, *Al-Rousan, a Journey across History* (Irbid, Yarmouk University Press, 2010) 25.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 26

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 33

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 71

a journal to record his weekly events.<sup>79</sup> Suliman eventually established relations with Syria and Palestine through trade.<sup>80</sup> Suliman recounted his interactions with the Syrians and Palestinians as “people with no tribal value or meaning, when asked who’s tribe did they hail from, I was given a look of confusion.”<sup>81</sup> The confusion Suliman faced was something he was unable to comprehend, and after continuous interaction with Syrians and Palestinians, Suliman noticed a change in northern Jordan.<sup>82</sup> Suliman recounted his interactions with Syrians and Palestinians as he, “would meet outside of Umm Qais, in between Palestine and Syria, and the Shammi’s would ask about me and who am I. Not a care for tribes, but who I was as a man.”<sup>83</sup>

These interactions set Suliman on a course, and felt he needed a better understanding of the residents of Bilad al-Sham, and decided to meet one of his business partners in Damascus.<sup>84</sup> Suliman recounted, “Damascus was a city my eyes had never laid upon on. I was welcomed by the Syrians with much hospitality; I walked into Abu-Rami’s (business partner) home and was treated like royalty.” Suliman enjoyed the interaction with the Syrians, and felt fortunate to be within their presence. He felt the Syrians treated him with honor. Though, it was only a week long trip, this experience changed his train of thought and that of his family as well. With the increased interaction with the Shammi people, Suliman started noticing Northern Jordanians developed better relationships with other families, and tribal or familial conflicts started to decrease. In turn, he noticed a change in identity as well.

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 38

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 49.

As time progressed, Suliman recounts in his journals “my children started to speak with a Shammi tongue, used Shammi cooking techniques, and participated in their cultural norms in playing their music, and learning their dance.”<sup>85</sup> The Rousan family started to develop relationships with other villages, and even started to marry outside the family.<sup>86</sup> This was a drastic change within the Rousan family, and the acceptance of Shammi culture played a role in their development of adopting the Shammi identity.<sup>87</sup>

Generations after the death of Suleiman in the late nineteenth century, there was a survey within *Al-Rousan, Journey across History* discussing the Rousan families attitudes towards the Shammi culture.<sup>88</sup> 72% of the Rousan family members identify as Shammi, and partake in Shammi customs and norms.<sup>89</sup> When asked about the Shammi identity, and Jordan’s narrative on a state building based on tribal norms and values, 85% believed Jordan is not presenting the full narrative on Jordanian identity and culture.<sup>90</sup> The Rousan family feel Shammi culture is at an utmost importance to their identity, and resent the notion of tribalism and the narrative given to the people of Jordan it is a country built on tribal norms.

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 110.

## **Interview #2: Abu-Haitham Al-Rousan on the Importance of Shammi Culture in Northern Jordan**

The second interview I conducted was with Abu-Haitham Al-Rousan, a Shammi cultural rights activist. Born in 1917, Abu-Haitham witnessed the rise of the Hashemites, and one of the darkest moments of northern Jordanian history. Abu-Haitham is a well seasoned veteran, leading the Rousan family to be the political force in Jordan, and has had relationships with both the Hashemite Kings Hussein and Abdullah. Though never a politician by occupation, Abu-Haitham was a Shammi cultural activist in northern Jordan. Abu-Haitham established relationships with Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese officials in order to promote Shammi culture within the Hashemite Kingdom. This interview was conducted on the importance of Shammi culture in northern Jordan, and the events that inspired change in north Jordan.

Abu-Haitham was born and lived his adolescence in a chaotic time in Jordan.<sup>91</sup> The Hashemites were attempting to establish in the Kingdom, and the Jordanians opposed a tribe from the Arabian Hejaz obtaining control of a country with no prior history with the country. Abu-Haitham stated the Rousan family “started to develop a crime syndicate in order to establish control in northern Jordan.”<sup>92</sup> The Rousan family mandated an order to establish power. To do this, they had to extort the townspeople and instituted fear in northern Jordan.<sup>93</sup> Eventually, families started to rival one another and created high levels of tension between families.<sup>94</sup> Abu-Haitham stated, “It was not long before the introduction

---

<sup>91</sup> Abu-Haitham Al-Rousan (North Jordanian Activist). Interview by Mohammad Al-Rousan, September 15th, 2018

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

of the Hashemites the communities and families showed no signs of animosity towards one another.”<sup>95</sup> After a series of unfortunate events, the crimes started to get out of control, and the murdering of rival families became frequent.<sup>96</sup> When asked about how Jordan’s crime problem started he stated, “It was not just an embarrassment to the family, and the community as a whole.” Abu-Haitham’s life changed when visiting Damascus.<sup>97</sup>

He explained “news spread fast, and Syrian’s started have a negative view of Jordanians.”<sup>98</sup> When visiting Damascus for a vacation, a group of Syrians recognized their Jordanian accent and approached Abu-Haitham and his friends and aggressively told them: “Go home you bedouin trash.”<sup>99</sup> Abu-Haitham explained to the group of Syrian men they are not bedouin, but Shammi. The group of Syrians did not consider Abu-Haitham’s words as validation, and continued to speak to them in a dehumanizing way. The Syrian men continued their delittlization of Abu-Haitham and his friends and proceeded to call them “psychopathic killers” who “would do anything to gain power.” Additionally, they said “Shammis would never harm others in their community.”<sup>100</sup> This set Abu-Haitham on a course of action after the incident, and felt there needed to be a resolution to the ongoing problem in Jordan. These tensions were not only affecting those in northern Jordan, but their identity started to feel the affects. When asked how did incident felt Abu-Haitham explained, “This is a solution that needed to be fixed. If we wanted to develop diplomatic

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



relationship with Shammis we [had to] present ourselves as Shammi brothers and sisters.”<sup>101</sup>

Abu-Haitham returned to Irbid after his weekend in Damascus and was inspired to change. Abu-Haitham then met with the Rousan family and other northern Jordanian families to discuss the Hashemites. He asked them to relinquish the violence between the families and unite the community, and come together under traditional Shammi norms.<sup>102</sup> Abu-Haitham discussed with families whether northern Jordanians should allow the Hashemites to come into control, in order to create peace and unity within Jordan. Abu-Haitham believed if the Hashemites were put in power, there would be acceptance from Syria and Palestine as a Shammi nation due to having a legitimate government having the ability to establish diplomatic relations .<sup>103</sup>

Abu-Haitham was not only essential to ending the violence among families, but worked with Syrian Palestinian, and Lebanese representatives to advance relations with the Hashemite Kingdom as not another Arab state, but a Shammi state. The notion of Shammi identity and culture is not only important for the northern Jordanians, but Shammi culture was an element for establishing relations with Syria.<sup>104</sup> Though Abu-Haitham does not believe Jordan, as a whole, is a country dependent on its tribal norms and values, but it is only half the story. A more holistic understanding of Jordan necessitates a reconciliation of narratives. Jordan is a country united from north and south, with the blend of Shammi and tribal cultures becoming one. The Shammi narrative has been ignored by the

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Hashemites and southern tribe elites who insist Jordan is built only on tribal norms and values.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Shammi culture predicates itself on the rejection of tribalism, a emphasis on the quality of the individual. There are aspects of Shammi culture that distinguish itself from other parts of the Middle East, in particular the Fertile Crescent area and the Arabian Peninsula Geography, language, and traditions set the Bilad al-Sham apart. Shammi culture crosses the borders of Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. The Shammi culture benefits from a similar sense of identity in the form of diplomacy and societal relations, which comes with proximity to the Mediterranean, a hub of human interaction.

When discussing the Jordanian identity set by the Jordanian government, many northern Jordanians believe that their identity is being left out of the official narrative.. Northern Jordanians identify as Shammi not tribal. Amy Chua claims humans are tribal; they need to belong in groups, and crave bonds and attachments.<sup>106</sup> In relation to Arabs, tribes are a group perceived by a common male ancestor, and tribes abide by an honor code.<sup>107</sup> The Shammi culture affirms itself on the quality of the person than the quality of their lineage. Chua is right when discussing the tribal component of society still persists today, but I would argue it is partial. The notion of political tribes and tribalism still play a role in modern Middle Eastern society, but not in the same sense in Bilad al-Sham.<sup>108</sup>

The Rousan family made their migration from Basra to northern Jordan in search of a new homeland. When the clan left the tribes, it severed ties with the tribe. Chua is right when when she states political tribes still exist, but there are important nuances to consider that prove Chua's claim to be partial. When the Rousan family severed ties with the Abu-

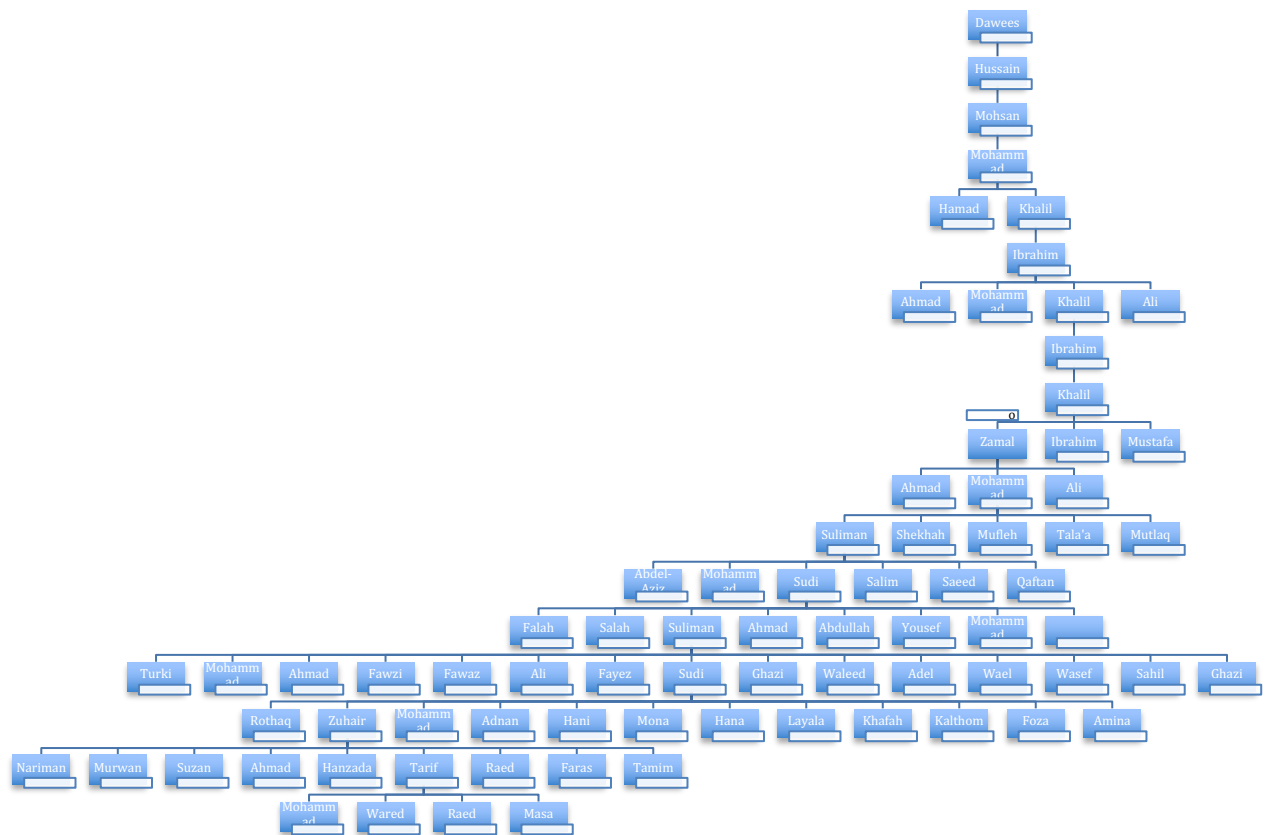
---

<sup>106</sup> Amy Chua, *Political Tribes*, (New York City, Penguin Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>107</sup> Albert Hourani, *History of the Arab Peoples* (New York, Harvard University Press, 1991), 305

<sup>108</sup> Amy Chua, *Political Tribes*, (New York City, Penguin Press, 2018), 78

Raas, there was never a rekindling of that relationship. This could be attributed to the difficulty in keeping in contact during the Ottoman era and in due part the Rousan family finding a new identity in the Bilad al-Sham. Tribes and families are important to the development of identity, but sometimes the connection to the tribe is cut, and homelands are found. “The Sea Peoples may not have come from the sea, and the scale of their migrations may not have been as massive... But none of this should be taken to underestimate the impact of the Sea Peoples and the Land Peoples, who evidently just as active.”-David Abu-Lafia.



<sup>109</sup> Atef Al-Rousan, *Al-Rousan, a Journey across History* (Irbid, Yarmouk University Press, 2010) 71.



---

<sup>110</sup> Atef Al-Rousan, *Al-Rousan, a Journey across History* (Irbid, Yarmouk University Press, 2010) 71.