the future of pastoral peoples
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the future of pastoral peoples

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planning policy and bedouin society in oman

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Oman wraps the eastern corner of the Arabian peninsula, with a long coastal line stretching from the Arabian Gulf in the north to the Arabian sea in the south. There are mountainous areas throughout, and the plains of the Batina coast are suitable for agriculture, as are the different valleys stretching toward the eastern and western slopes in the country and in the southern province of Dhofar. But, the desert forms the major part of the country.

The population is estimated at 1.5 million, approximately 15% of whom are Bedouin. The Bedouin population is characterized by mobility, as elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. This behaviour is imposed by the way of life they choose: they are in pursuit of any cloud that may provide rain for their tribal territory or their Halif (friendly tribe) territory. Yet there are a considerable number of Bedouin involved in fishing and agricultural activities and working for oil companies.

Like Bedouin in other parts of the country, Shihuh move north and south in the Musandam territory. They go up to the Rous Al-Jebal mountains in winter where they cultivate onions, wheat, and other crops. They collect and store their water in barhas (holes dug in the ground). In summer, they move south to work as casual farmers or as date collectors on their own farms. A part of the population fishes during spring, winter, and autumn.

The Bedouin along the eastern coast of the country, and at Masirah island are similar to Shihuh but do not engage in fishing. They migrate toward the farms for date collecting in the summer.

Bedouin in the interior desert chiefly depend on pastoral life. For nearly 9–10 months of the year, they move in vast areas and come together for date collecting (tahdhir) at the nearest centre of the Wilayit to their territory. The Bedouin in the southern desert have the same lifestyle but do not participate in tahdhir because the monsoon rains fall in this part of the country and provide rich grazing for their animals.

As an oil-producing country, Oman is undergoing vast economic changes that affect life in every corner of the nation. Bedouin share the changing pattern of life, either by employment in the oil-producing and civil construction companies or by benefiting from the considerable social and

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1 This paper was submitted but not presented at the meeting.
financial help provided by the government for service programs. The changes have brought many questions to the forefront:

- How do Bedouins live and what role have they in national defence as humans occupying the desert where little security or defence facility is available and where a long line of borders needs to be kept safe?
- What role does their lifestyle play in the safeguarding of the environment (wildlife, animals, trees, etc.)?
- Do the Bedouins contribute substantially toward the national income? If no, then could that fact be treated positively? If yes, are there ways to improve the participation?
- What can be done more effectively to increase the fishing and agricultural participation of the Bedouins?
- In the absence of any real study of the pastoral and nomadic socioeconomic organization, what can be done to improve the life of the Bedouins?
- What is meant by improvement? Does it mean government services? If so, what are the services the government should provide and how? If the services, for instance, are similar in quality to those provided to cultivators in nearby villages, must they differ due to the nomadic pattern of life?

One may expect that Bedouin life encourages high infant mortality and high mortality, in general, because of malnutrition and poor hygienic conditions, a very high percentage of illiteracy, and a poor awareness of religion. In regard to the economic situation, one has to consider cattle and animal feeding problems, especially during poor rainy seasons. There are also problems in trade: for Bedouins to live, they have to sell some of their cattle to buy dates and other necessities. Some people believe consideration should be given to housing for Bedouins; however, this emphasis is not necessary, for every tree in the Bedouin’s surroundings is itself a home. To solve the housing problem for the Bedouin who are pastoral and nomadic, government needs not a superficial study of their members and how many houses they need but a thorough social and psychological study of nomadic and pastoral society.

Prediction of the future form of Bedouin life is difficult for national planners, who are speculating about the present life of the Bedouin. The questions they are attempting to answer include:

- What socioeconomic changes will take place once the different services are provided to Bedouin society?
- What will the behaviour of the society be, and what will be the salient characteristics of their new life?
- What will be the percentage of their migration to urban areas, what political and social problems will result, and how can they be positively solved?
- What can the government expect from the Bedouins in the desert in regards to their participation in GNP, natural defence of the country, and protection of the wildlife?
- Does government intend to establish Bedouin settlements?

All these questions underline a philosophical and moral dilemma. Does the planner or decision-maker have the right to plan the kind of life the Bedouins will have? And is there an obligation for the planner or the decision-maker to intervene and ensure that the rapid changes now
occurring throughout Oman do not adversely affect the Bedouin? There are already many bad examples of effects of changes on their lives from their employment in the oil companies in their areas and of the damage done to pastoral societies.

The government, represented by its various ministries, has ambitious programs for Bedouin areas, especially in the 5-year plan 1981–85. Chiefly involved are schemes for health, education, social services, housing, fishing, industry, veterinary care, roads, and water supply. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour concentrates primarily on social security for needy families, help in case of natural disasters, employment opportunities, social awareness, vocational training, etc. This ministry, therefore, has a large role in changing the behaviour of Bedouin individuals. The big question remains without an answer: Is what is being planned enough and is it the right thing to do?