Syrian Civil War from the Viewpoint of "Tribes"

Introduction: With the knowledge of the tribes, you can understand Syria??

Five years have passed since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The civil war has gone through various phases, starting from the government violent crackdown on the public protest movement to request political reforms, arming of anti-government movement, internationalization of the incident involving foreign countries, and the emergence of the Islamic extremist armed groups, typically the Islamic state, as the main force against the government military. Especially under the internationalization of the civil war and the "emergence of the Islamic extremists as the main force", we cannot consider the Syrian civil war as a simple story of good fighting against evil like, "the righteous democratic movement against vicious dictator's regime." Because of such complex situation, it is necessary to study the various international and domestic factors in Syria based on a variety of perspectives. This study is to investigate the Syrian Civil War in term of tribe's roles therein and to make a prediction on the development of the incident.

It should be kept in mind that studying the civil war based on the perspective of tribes is not a magic key to explain the whole Syrian civil war and society simply and comprehensively. It is true that the tribes are an important constituent in the Syrian society, but not representing the whole Syrian society. We cannot explain the whole picture of the civil war simply by the roles and standpoints of the tribes therein. The same is true for various factors such as the religion and sects, ethnic groups, classes, political parties, economic disparities, and intelligence agencies in that they are all important factors in the Syrian society and civil war but cannot explain them as a whole. Moreover, the term "tribes" may be different as to which kind of group it means, and which kind of unit of analysis, as the case may be. The definition of the tribes is different between when it explains something relating to tribes and when it explains how the tribes relate to the cause or result of political incidents. In addition, groups considered as tribes are largely different individually in terms of their scales, lifestyles, and political and social influences.

Tribes are called Qabīla (or Qabā'il in plural form) or Ashīra ('Ashā'ir in plural form) in Arabic. According to Akahori, today's anthropologists tend to refrain the use of this word "tribes" due to the overly diversified variety of tribes but this word functions as the concept usable for academic term regarding the Middle East, defining that the tribes are "regional patrilineal descent group" based on the kinship theory in the anthropology [Akahori 2008 353-354]. Meanwhile, Kubo at al. introduced the definition of the tribes as "ethnic collective organized (or used to be historically organized) under a traditional authority" as a subordinate type of ethnic groups, in view of the comparative governmental analysis (Kubo et al., 2016: 189). Moreover, Takaoka at al. defined tribes as "a group based on kinship, historical coalition or subordination to be a certain social group in relationship to the government" in order to clarify the roles of the tribes in the Syrian political structure rather than in terms of the inside details or structure of the individual tribes [Takaoka 2011: 52]. In this study, we adopt the definition in [Takaoka 2011], noting that there are various definitions depending on the viewpoints of observation.

On the other hand, it is important in studying the political roles of the tribes to understand that when a single or plural tribes influence the state or society, the tribe(s) is also strongly affected in terms of their life style and growth of each group by the policy of the government or the social and economic circumstances [Tapper 1990: 52]. Moreover, as pointed out by Zakariyā, the nomadic life, which has been traditional in the Arabic tribes, are such that the majority of sheep kept by the tribes in Cham (historic name of the region mainly including the current Syrian Arab Republic) are those kept or utilized by contract with investors living in the cities [Zakariyā 1997: 237]. That is, the tribes are not independent from the cities, and the political and economic activities in the cities, but the tribes are strongly connected with the activities. The recent changes such as proceeding of settling, and developments in transport, traffic, and military technologies have influenced the lives and political/social roles of the tribes. However, the nature of the tribes as being inseparable from the political, economic, and social circumstances around them has been intensified.

1. Politics and Society in Syria and Tribes
Before analyzing the roles of the tribes in the current civil war and the influence of the civil war to tribes, we discuss the statues and roles of the tribes in the politics and society in Syria before the civil war. The most of the survey and research on Syrian tribes are field investigation including travel-report like surveys and economic development plan-related survey reports, or reports specifically analyzing individual tribes based on hearing investigations. Typical ones are a literature on Shammar and Tayi distributed in the current Hasakah [al-'Askar 1993, 1996b], and a literature on Baggara, a dominant tribe

in Dayr az Zawr [al-'Askar 1996a]. Beside there are some rare and valuable literatures such as [Zakariyā 1997] comprehensively dealing with the tribes in the Cham area including the non-Arabic tribes, and [al-Ḥamad 2003] collecting information on tribes living in Raqa. They are valuable because they include the information on a plurality of tribes, especially, information regarding how much the tribes involved in the politics after the institutions such as the council and cabinet were formed in Syria. Regarding Affardilah?? Living in Raqa, [Khalaf 1991] discussed this tribe, focusing agricultural businesses with pumped irrigation, the internal change in the tribe through the agricultural land reform after 1950's, and the change in the inter-tribe relation with the other tribes. [Batatu 1999] is also rare and valuable, which discussed the development of the communism movement in Dayr az Zawr, and the reality of the diffusion of the Ba'ath party in the Dayr az Zawr and Hasakah, and the relationship of the party and the local tribes. While [al-Ḥamad 2006] mentioned the political movements of the Kurdish tribes to some extent, there are not much information on the current political and social roles of the Kurdish tribes.

The period since the end of the WWI, the French mandatory rule and the independence therefrom, the annexation with Egypt and the slip therefrom, and the Middle East wars until now is the period in which the environment surrounding the Syrian tribes have changed dramatically. The important ones in the changes are: the significant deterioration in the military and transport advantages of the tribes due to the prevalence of automobiles and airplanes, the economic improvement of the tribes having made a success in agricultural business, and out-migration of many leaders of traditionally dominant tribes such as Shammar, Fadahrn??, and Rualla in disfavor of the socialist political measures after 1950's. When the Ba'ath party came into power in 1963, the agricultural land reforms and denial of the political and social roles of the tribe leaders lowered the status of the tribes. It was deduced that the reasons behind these measures were the program of the Ba'ath party to reform the latifundism of the tribe leaders and the tribe's nomadic life (al-Badāwa) [Takaoka 2011: 152]. When Ḥāfiz al-Asad (H. Asad) came in power in 1970, he alleviated the policy of excluding the influence of tribes, resulting an increase in the number of tribe leaders elected as senators in the people's council serving as a parliament. On the other hand, the inclusion of the tribe leaders in the council was sometimes considered as being politically non-substantial and they were judged as not being influential on the base of the Asad regime, while the political power and economic interest are concentrated on H. Asad and his kin under the rule of the Ba'ath party based on secular and socialist thought [Tomizuka 1996: 185].

In this point, Chatty, who have done great works on the survey of the Syrian tribes based on field investigation, considers that the implementation of such a system to the grouping and unionization of the livestock industry that the tribe leaders tend to be the supervisors of the group/union is the start of "re-recognition" of the political and social status of the tribe leaders, arguing that the tribes had some political and social roles under the Asad regime. More important is the episode that the Asad regime blocked the logistic route from Iraq to Hama in the "Hama incident" (1982) via the "coalition" with the Hadidiyn, a tribe in Homs [Chatty 2010: 44-45]. The episode explains that the relationship establishment with a tribe or a possible role of a tribe had deeply involved in the Syrian politics and civil order as well as the existence of Asad regime. Moreover, Perthes named some tribe leaders as the beneficiaries of the circumvention of the law in land owning and utilization in addition of high-ranking military and government officers, pointing out that there were some tribe leaders got economic benefits by establishing a close tie with the Asad regime [Perthes 1995: 88-89]. In view of these points, we can say that the political and social status or roles of Syrian tribes had not been diminished for disorganized under the Asad regime, rather they had continuously existed firmly. On the other hand, the Asad regime did not established the relationship with the tribes according to the powers or the ranking order of the tribes at the time. The Asad regime distinguished which tribes to politically incorporate and which tribes to exclude, according to the intensions and purposes of the regime, reorganizing the ranking order and powers of the tribes and incorporating the tribes into the regime as supporting bases and human resources [Takaoka 2012: 102-103].

2. Syrian Civil War and Tribes

The succession of the regime from H. Asad to Bashshār al-Asad (B. Asad), and the political, economic, and social changes in Syria under the B. Asad regime are some factors behind the eruption of the Syrian civil war. Moreover, some of the tribes held a meeting of "Syrian Tribal Committee" outside Syria in April, 2011 to rally as an anti-government movement. Regarding the relationship between the B. Asad regime and the tribes, and the behavior and roles of the tribes in the Syria Civil War, Dukhan made some discussion based on hearing investigation to some people from the tribes. According to his discussion, the B. Asad regime considered it important to give the interests to Alawi, while the other tribes could not get the interests of oil (especially in the north east part of Syria). Furthermore, because the B. Asad

regime did not support the tribal people suffered from the drought around 2010, the tribal people in Hasakah, Raqa, and Homs moved to the environs of the large cities, and collectively stayed in specific city blocks, keeping their tribal lifestyle habits and communities. Further, Dukhan pointed out that the revolt in Daraa in March, 2011 triggering the civil war was started and aggravated by the insult to the tribes by senior officials in the security institution, and he argues that such an incident occurred under the B. Asad regime because it lacked the knowhow to deal with the tribes, and it would not occur under H. Asad [Dukhan 2015].

In addition to the analysis, Dukhan also reported which side the tribes belonged as of 2014. According to his report, Hariri (Southern part), Naim (Southern part, Midland), Fawaa'irah (Midland), Shammar (Eastern part and Northern part) are on the anti-government side, and Hadidiyn (Midland), Fad'an (Eastern part and Northern part), Jabbur (Eastern part and Northern part), Tayi (Eastern part and Northern part) are not the pro-government side. Some tribes such as Hasanah (Midland), Aqaydat (Midland, Eastern Part, and Northern part) were split within the tribes, while some such as Mawali (Midland) and Busha'ban (Eastern part and Northern part) had been undecided [Dukhan 2014: 15].

Similarly, Chatty reported on the attitudes of the tribes, stating that Hasanah, Mawali, and part of Hadidiyn had joined the anti-government armed struggle, and Aqaydat had formed a large armed force with the aid of Saudi Arabia, while the tribes in a close tie with the security institution and part of Baggara were on the pro-government side. Moreover, regarding the attitude of the tribes in the Syria Civil War he indicated that there is such tendency that the "distinguished" tribes such as Shammar whose leaders have moved out of the country due to the exclusion under the Asad regime were on the anti-government side, and the "ordinary" tribes remained in Syria are on the pro-government side [Chatty 2013]. Moreover, Takaoka analyzed the tribal candidates elected in the People's Council Election in 2012 and found that the measures for selectively incorporating and excluding the tribes according to the interests of Asad regime were succeeded to the B. Asad regime, incorporating Safusana, Urda, Aqaydat, Tayi etc. giving them some seats in the People's Council. According to Takaoka, the president B. Asad has visited Hasakah (2002, 2011), Dayr az Zawr (2007), and Raqa (2011), and has repeatedly had official meeting with the leaders of the tribes after the erupt of the Civil War, making the relationship between the government and the tribes more visible under the rule of the president B. Asad [Takaoka 2012: 103-109].

Fig.   Distribution of Tribes in Syria
[Source] Created by the author based on [Dukhan 2014], [Chatty 2013], [Takaoka 2012]

In the Syria Civil War, the expanding the sphere of influences of the Islamic extremists such as the "Islamic State" and "Nusra Front", which is al-Qaeda in Syria, and "Ahrar al-Sham" has been an international issue. It is necessary to discuss the relationship between these groups and the tribes. Regarding the relationship between the Islamic extremists and the tribes, there is a precedence in Iraq next to Syria, which we should take into consideration. In Iraq, the "Islamic State in Iraq" (the predecessor of the current "Islamic State") expanded their sphere of influences since 2011 after they significantly reduced it between 2008 and 2010. They occupied Mosul in June, 2014, and established the "Islamic state," announcing the establishment of "Caliphate." The rise of the Islamic state is sometimes reasoned in that the Iraqi government failed to win over the tribes while the "Islamic state" rehabilitated the relationship with the tribes. Cigar presented a study that discussed the fall and rise of the "Islamic state in Iraq" in Iraq in association with not only the wise and unwise attitudes of the Iraqi government but also of the "Islamic state in Iraq" to the tribes. The study pays attention to the avoidance of conflicts with local tribes and reconciliation with tribes by the "Islamic state in Iraq." There are many factors for the aggravated relationship between the "Islamic state in Iraq" and the Iraqi tribes. The main causes of the conflicts were because the "Islamic state in Iraq" forced the marriage between the foreign fighters and women in the local tribes in order to let the foreign fighters settle in Iraq, to which they have no territorial bond nor blood tie, and attempted to monopoly the interests in the vehicles and cargos travelling the trade route.

The "Islamic state in Iraq" tried to solve the causes of the conflicts and to avoid problems with the local tribes, thereby regaining the sphere of influences in Iraq [Cigar 2011: 100-121]. While the "Islamic state in Iraq" was changing into the current "Islamic state," they might adopt their experience in Iraq to the relationship with the Syrian tribes. The "marriage Jihad" to bring women from the outside of Iraq and Syria into the "Islamic state" and the trading non-Muslim women in the "slave market" started at the early state of the "Islamic state" for satisfying the sexual needs of the fighters can be regarded as the attempt to avoid the conflicts with the local communities such as tribes. Moreover, the "Islamic state"

have repeatedly made PR to show the declaration of royalty by the local tribes in Iraq and Syria, or the good relationship with the tribes. Regarding the motive of the tribes for the cooperation with the Islamic extremists such as the "Islamic state," Dukhan has pointed out that the tribes and the "Islamic state" share the same interest in stopping the expansion of the sphere of influence of Kurds, allying conveniently [Dukhan 2014]. It is doubtful that this explanation could well explain the situations in Homs, Hama, and Idlib, where the influences of Kurds would not reach much.

Photo: the Islamic state letting the tribe leaders declare their royalty.

[Source]

However, it seems that the relationship between the Syrian tribes and the "Islamic state" is not cooperative or reciprocal. The relationship between the Syrian tribes and the "Islamic state" is that the latter subdues and suppresses the former, and the "Islamic state" does not tend to admit the statuses and roles of the tribes and the leaders thereof. Regarding the attitudes of the "Islamic state" to the tribes in Syria, the information on the incident in Dayr az Zawr is relatively available. According to the information, Baggara declared the royalty to the "Islamic state" at a relatively early stage among the tribes in Dayr az Zawr, helping the "Islamic state to occupy the most of Dayr az Zawr in the summer of 2014, expelling the "Nusra Front," with which the "Islamic state was competing. On the other hand, Shutaiat Belonging to Aqaydat made arm uprising against the "Islamic state," and purged with nearly 1000 of them executed. Meanwhile, *"Safir"*, a Lebanon newspaper (pro-left wing, pro-Arabism) as of May 28, 2015 said that the relationship between the tribes in Dayr az Zawr and the "Islamic state" or the "Nusra Front" is prohibited to be coexistent or cooperative due to the difference in the purposes between the tribes acting for the sake of the local political and economic power and the Islamic extremists aiming for the global Jihad. According to the news, even Baggara having declared the royalty to the "Islamic state" at the relatively early stage has not received any special privilege in Dayr az Zawr under the control of the "Islamic state", and has been looted for belongings [al-Safīr 2015]. The incident in Dayr az Zawr indicates that the tribes will be resolved or purged no matter whether they want to cooperate and coexist with the "Islamic state" or they resist and confront against the "Islamic state." We can say that the Syria Civil War, and the weakening of the Asad regime and the strengthening of the Islamic extremists in association with the war have jolted the statuses and roles of the Syrian tribes, facilitating the dismantling of the political and social roles of the tribes.

Conclusion: Foresights
Here, we try to foresee how the tribes behaves in the Syrian Civil War and what kinds of statues and roles the tribes will have in the Syrian politics and society. Now the possibility that the Islamic extremists such as the "Islamic state" and "Nusra Front", and the "anti-government sides" militarily depending on and assimilating with the Islamic extremists will win the war, and it has become difficult to imagine the defeat or turnover of the Asad regime. In these circumstances, there are motives for the tribes on the "anti-government side" to seek arbitration or reconciliation with the government, considering the future. In this point, Chatty predicted that the tribes doubtlessly would change their sides to the pro-government side once the occupying areas of the government expand, while he also pointed out that it would be necessary for the government to invite the tribes for the political and social reconciliation [Chatty 2013].

According to his comments, the approach from the Asad regime to the tribes is predicted based on the observation that the tribes tend to support Arabism since the WWI until today. If the Syrian Civil War is considered as a religious conflict between sects, we should consider that the relationship between the Syrian tribes, whose majority is Sunnah Muslims, and Asad regime is intransigent and non-reconciling. But it cannot explain why the attitude of the tribes are so various to include the pro-government and anti-government, as discussed in this study. In this sense, we cannot ignore the possibility that the Asad regime tries to rebuild the relationship with the tribes by persuading them based on the Arabism and patriotism to Syria, in order to win over the tribes. If such an attempt is actually tried and succeeded, it will result in not only the improvement of the political status of the tribes but also expansion of their activities in the field of military and civil order by being tribal militia.

On the other hand, referring to the [Dukhan 2014]'s analysis that the tribes and the "Islamic state" share the interest to stop the expansion of the sphere of influence of Kurds, allying conveniently, we can predict that the support of the "Syrian Democratic Force" with the "Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat" (PYD) and

"Yekîneyên Parastina Gel" (YPG) as its main forces by America and her allies to make the group as the ground force against the "Islamic state" will result in reducing the motive to leave from the "Islamic state." As in the incident in the Dayr az Zawr, the "Islamic state" has a greater tendency to suppress and dissolve the political and social roles of the tribes than the Asad regime. Therefore, there is a room to criticize or review the observation that the tribes and the "Islamic state" cooperate with each other, even if it is for convenience. However, when the Kurd issue in Syria is taken into consideration, the relationship between the Kurds and the Arabic tribes would highly possibly be a factor to prolong this civil war or crease a new factor of post-war turmoil. In the area in Hasakah along the border with Turkey, which area is the core of the Kurdish currently occupying area, the "Arab belt" project of expelling Kurds via land expropriation and purging and settling Arabs had been carried out from the end of the 1950's to 1980's. In this project, some tribes such as Bulsaan acted as the vanguard of the settling in the "Arab belt." Moreover, Tayi in Hasakah living next to or together with Kurds has been a close tie with the Ba'ath party since 1960' and is considered as a pro-Asad regime side even today.

Therefore, the occupation of the area along the border with Turkey by the Kurdish force would be for Kurds to regain the deprived land or interests, that is to expel the settle Arabs and tribes. If the tribes tried to fight against the expansion of the sphere of the Kurdish influence by gaining the support from the Islamic extremists or the Asad regime, the "ethnic issue" would come up again in Syria. In addition to this, Dukhan showed a concern about possible "power vacuum" in the Syria North East area after mopping up of the "Islamic state [Dukhan 2015]. This concern is based on the prediction that the regime will fill in the "power vacuum" with high possibility that the regime at least temporally revenges the tribes that have supported "Islamic state" etc. There is a high possibility that the spheres of influences such as the ranking order of the local tribes mainly in the Raqa, Dayr az Zawr, and Hasakah will be largely changed after the mopping-up of the "Islamic state" and the end of the civil war.

Finally this study discusses the question whether the Syrian "dissolution" is irreversible, in view of the political and social roles of the tribes. The Asad regime has been clearly weaker in terms of military force than before the civil war. Thus, they may enhance the cooperation with the tribes or the use of tribes to cover the loss of the military force or regain the control of the local areas. In such a case, the Syrian administration will be decentralized or the tribes will have more seats in the council, cabinet, military, and the intelligence institution. On the other hand, because the Asad regime has made different approaches to different tribes or subtribes throughout the civil war, the possibility to "establish a Sunnah government system in comparison with the Asad regime = Alawīya" is not so realistic. If a "Sunnah government system" occurs based on a simple sectarian concept in Syria, the government system will be instable one including various chasms such as between tribes and cities, between different tribes, and between Arabs and non-Arabs. Here, it is important to note that the relationship between the government/society and the tribes is not one side is influencing the other in one way but both sides are influencing each other in two ways. This means that the lack of strengths in the city areas and the government power therein adversely affects the lives of tribes in terms of, for example, keeping the ranking order within the tribes or with the outside forces. Such an anarchic environment where the tribes each struggle to protect or expand their interests by force would not be beneficial for the tribes either.

Even though they are grouped as "tribes," each tribe makes a homogenous and uniform reaction to a certain political environment or approach, or makes a homogenous and uniform approach to the state or government, without any differences among the tribes. This is the reason why the tribes have taken various attitudes in the Syrian Civil war since 2011. We can consider that the policy by the Syrian government, especially, the Asad regime to the tribes are accumulations of approaches to and relationships with individual tribes and the individuals acting as the tribe leaders. Thus, if the presence or the roles of the tribes is considered as important in studying the future Syrian situation, the analysis on the tribes should be based on the accumulation of observation of the behaviors made by individual tribes and the leaders thereof.

Referential Literatures

However, these were not to completely restore the statuses of the tribe leaders. The suppression on the tribe's influences was also continued by enforcing stricter farmland reform etc. [Takaoka 2011: 159] According to Chatty, there were 30 "Bedouin" senators in the 250-membered People's Council in 2010, almost doubling the number of tribal senators from 10 out of 134 in 1943 [Chatty 2010 47]. This report is based on an anonymous information source and is not clear whether it has checked the origins of the

senators referring to the actual list of senators and the council members. However, it is still interesting as information showing one aspect of the tribal political status under the Asad regime.

An incident in which the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama city in Hama pref. The city of Hama was completely destroyed. It is said a few thousand to 30 thousand people were killed in the incident.

See [Middle East Investigation Committee, Islamic Extremist Monitoring Group 2015: 116-125] for the women, marriage, and sexual satisfaction as welfare for fighters in the "Islamic state."

The latest PR image published by the "Islamic state" for the relationship with the tribes as of writing this paper is a 10-min video created by the state of Nineveh, titled "Good News on the supports to the tribes." In the video, they condemned the attitudes of the U.S., Saudi Arabia etc. to the Iraqi tribes and describes the good relationship between the "Islamic state" and the tribes.

The "Islamic state" has published "Royalty to Islam, not to homelands or ethnic group" created by Hinma Library in August 30, 2015. It seems that the "Islamic state" considers the sense of belonging or royalty should be directed to "Islam", and does not welcome the sense of belonging or royalty to the communities other than Islam.

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