

J. L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*, London, 1822. P. 196-199

The Emir Beshir is at present master of the whole mountain from Belad Akkar down to near Akka (Acre), including the valley of Bekaa, and part of the Anti-Libanus and Djebel Esssheikh. The Bekaa, together with a present of one hundred purses, was given to him in 1810, by Soleiman Pasha of Acre, for his assistance against Youssef Pasha of Damascus. He pays for the possession of the whole country, five hundred and thirty purses, of which one hundred and thirty go to Tripoli and four hundred to Saida or Acre; this is exclusive of the extraordinary demands of the Pashas, which amount to at least three hundred purses more. These sums are paid in lieu of the Miri, which the Emir collects himself, without accounting for it. The power of the Emir, however, is a mere shadow, the real government being in the hands of the Druse chief, Sheikh Beshir.¹ I shall here briefly explain the political state of the mountain.

It is now about one hundred and twenty years since the government of the mountain has been always entrusted by the Pashas of Acre and Tripoli to an individual of the family of Shehab (شهاب) to which the Emir Beshir belongs. This family derives its origin from Mekka, where its name is known, in the history of Mohammed and the first Califes; they are Mussulmans, and some of them pretend even to be Sherifs. About the time of the crusades, for I have been unable to ascertain the exact period, the Shehabs left the Hedjaz, and settled in a village of the Haouran, to which they gave their family name;² it is still known by the appellation of Shohba; and is remarkable for its antiquities, of which I have given some account, in my journal of a tour in the Haouran. The family being noble, or of Emir origin, were considered proper persons to be governors of the mountain; for it was, and still is thought necessary that the government should not be in the hands of a Druse. The Druses being always divided into parties, a governor chosen from among them would have involved the country in the quarrels of his own party, and he would have been always endeavouring to exterminate his adversaries; whereas a Turk, by carefully managing both parties, maintains a balance between them, though he is never able to overpower them completely; he can oppose the Christian inhabitants to the Druses, who are in much smaller numbers than the former, and thus he is enabled to keep the country in a state of tranquility and in subjection to the Pashas. This policy has long been successful, notwithstanding the turbulent spirit of the mountaineers, the continual party feuds, and the ambitious projects of many chiefs, as well of the Druses as of the reigning house; the Pashas were carefull also not to permit any one to become too powerful; the princes of the reigning family were continually changed; and party spirit was revived in the mountain whenever the interests of the Porte required it. About eighty years ago the country was divided into the two great parties of Keisy (قبیسی), whose banner was red, and Yemeny (یمنی) whose banner was white, and the whole Christian population ranged itself on the one side or the other. The Keisy gained at length the entire ascendancy, after which

¹ Beshir is a proper name borne by many people in the mountain. The accent is on the last syllable: the sound would be expressed in English by Besheer.

² A branch of the family is said to inhabit some mountains in Mesopotamia, under the command of Emir Kasem.

none but secret adherents of the Yemeny remained, and the name itself was forgotten. Then arose the three sects of Djonbelat, Yezbeky, and Noked. These still exist; thirty years ago the two first were equal, but the Djonbelat have now got the upper hand, and have succeeded in disuniting the Yezbeky and Noked.

The Djonbelat (جنبلات) draw their origin from the Druse mountain of Djebel Aala, between Ladakie and Aleppo: they are an old and noble family, and, in the seventeenth century, one of their ancestors was Pasha of Aleppo; it forms at present the richest and most numerous family, and the strongest party in the mountain.

The Yezbeky (يزبكي), or as they are also called, El Aemad (بيت عماد), are few in number, but are reputed men of great courage and enterprise. Their principal residence is in district of El Barouk, between Deir El Kammar and Zahlé.

The Noked, whose principal Sheikh is at present named Soleiman, inhabit, for the greater part, Deir El Kammar; seven of their principal chiefs were put to death thirteen years ago in the serai of the Emir Beshir, and a few only of their children escaped the massacre; these have now attained to years of manhood, and remain at Deir el Kammar, watched by the Djonbelaty and the Aemad, who are united against them.

The Djonbelat now carry everything with a high hand; their chief, El Sheikh Beshir is the richest and the shrewdest man in the mountain; besides his personal property, which is very considerable, no affair of consequence is concluded without his interest being courted, and dearly paid for. His annual income amounts to about two thousands purses, or fifty thousand pounds sterling. The whole province of Shouf is under his command, and he is in partnership with almost all the Druses who possess landed property there. The greater part of the district of Djesn (اقلية الجسن) is his own property, and he permits no one to obtain possessions in that quarter, while he increases his own estates yearly, and thus continually augments his power. The Emir Beshir can do nothing important without the consent of the Sheikh Beshir, with whom he is obliged to share all the contributions which he extorts from the mountaineers. It is from this cause that while some parts of the mountain are very heavily taxed, in others little is paid. The Druses form the richest portion of the population, but they supply little to the public contributions, being protected by the Sheikh Beshir. It will be asked, perhaps, why the Sheikh does not set aside the Emir Beshir and take the ostensible power into his own hands? Many persons believe that he entertains some such design, while others, better informed perhaps, assert that the Sheikh will never make the attempt, because he knows that the mountaineers would never submit to a Druse Chief. The Druses are certainly in a better condition at present than they would be under the absolute sway of the Sheikh, who would soon begin to oppress instead of protecting them, as he now does; and the Christians, who are a warlike people, detest the name of Druse too much ever to yield quietly to a chief of that community. It is, probably, in the view of attaching the Christians more closely to him, and to oppose them in some measure to the Druses, that the Emir Beshir, with his whole family, has secretly embraced the Christian religion. The Shehab, as I have already mentioned, were formerly members of the true Mussulman faith, and they never have had among them any followers of the doctrines of the Druses. They still affect publicly to observe the Mohammedan rites, they

profess to fast during the Ramadhan, and the Pashas still treat them as Turks; but it is no longer matter of doubt, that the greater part of the Shehab, with the Emir Beshir at their head, have really embraced Christianity: that branch only of the family which governs at Rasheya and Hasbeya continue in the religion of their ancestors.

Although the Christians of the mountain have thus become more attached to their prince, their condition, on the whole, is not bettered, as the Emir scarcely dares do justice to a Christian against a Druse; still, however, the Christians rejoice in having a prince of their own faith, and those counselors and household are with few exceptions of the same religion. There are not more than forty or fifty persons about him who are not Christians. One of the prince's daughters lately married a Druse of an Emir Family, who was not permitted to celebrate the nuptials till he had been instructed in the doctrines of Christianity, had been baptized, and had received the sacrament. How far the Shehab may be sincere in their professions, I am unable to decide; it is probable that if their interests should require it, they would again embrace the religion of their ancestors.

In order to strengthen his authority the Emir Beshir has formed a close alliance with Soleiman Pasha of Acre, thus abandoning the policy of his predecessors, who were generally the determined enemies of the Turkish governors; this alliance is very expensive to the Prince, though it serves in some degree to counterbalance the influence of the Sheikh Beshir. The Emir and the Sheikh are apparently on the best terms; the latter visits the Emir almost every week, attended by a small retinue of horsemen, and is always received with the greatest apparent cordiality. I saw him at Beteddein during my stay there. His usual residence is at the village of Mokhtar (مختار), three hours distant from Beteddein, where he has built a good house, and keeps an establishment of about two hundred men. His confidential attendants, and even the porters of his harem, are Christians; but his bosom friend is Sheikh el Nedjem (شيخ النجم), a fanatical Druse, and one of the most respected of their Akals. The Sheikh Beshir has the reputation of being generous, and of faithfully defending those who have put themselves under his protection. The Emir Beshir, on the contrary, is said to be avaricious; but this may be a necessary consequence of the smallness of his income. He is an amiable man, and if any Levantine can be called the friend of an European nation, he certainly is the friend of the English. He dwells on no topic with so much satisfaction as upon that of his alliance with Sir Sidney Smith, during that officer's command upon this coast. His income amounts, at most, to four hundred purses, or about £10,000. Sterling, after deducting from the revenue of the mountain the sums to be paid to the Pashas, to the Sheikh Beshir, and to the numerous branches of his family. His favorite expenditure seems to be in building. He keeps about fifty horses, of which a dozen are of prime quality; his only amusement is sporting with the hawk and the pointer. He lives on very bad terms with his family, who complain of his neglecting them; for the greater part of them are poor, and will become still poorer, till they are reduced to the state of Fellahs, because it is the custom with the sons, as soon as they attain the age of fifteen or sixteen, to demand the share of the family property, which is thus divided among them, the father retaining but one share for himself. Several princes of the family are thus reduced to an income of about one hundred and fifty pounds a year. It has constantly been the secret endeavour of the Emir Beshir to make himself directly dependant upon the Porte, and

to throw off his allegiance to the Pasha; but he has never been able to succeed. The conduct of Djezzar Pasha was the cause of this policy. Djezzar, for reasons which have already been explained, was continually changing the governors of the mountain, and each new governor was obliged to promise him large sums for his investiture. Of these sums few were paid at the time of Djezzar's death, and bills to the amount of sixteen thousand purses were found in his treasury, secured upon the revenue of the mountain. At the intercession of Soleiman Pasha, who succeeded Djezzar at Akka, and of Gharib Effendi, the Porte's commissioner (now Pasha of Aleppo), this sum was reduced to four thousand purses, of which the Emir Beshir is now obliged to pay off a part annually.