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**Redistribution of
Farm Land in
Seven Countries**

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LAND SETTLEMENT IN SYRIA

PRESENT-DAY Syria together with Lebanon forms the western part of a larger geographical region, known as the Fertile Crescent, which includes Iraq to the east and Jordan to the south-west. From a geographical point of view the region may be regarded as the heart of the Arab Middle East, its total area being about 767,000 square kilometres. In Syria the cultivable land is limited both by the amount and distribution of rainfall and by the possibilities of irrigation from the main rivers (the Euphrates, the Orontes, and their tributaries) and springs. Thus the coastal mountain ranges and plains receive an average rainfall of 30-35 inches while the precipitation in the interior plains of Aleppo, Homs and Horan averages only 15 or 25 inches. It is in the regions where rainfall is sufficient that most of the cultivable and fertile lands, whether private or government owned, are to be found. The extensive dry lands (i.e. lands receiving less than 4 inches of rainfall) are known as Mawat lands (i.e. near-desert lands) and virtually all of them are government property and available for land settlement should means of irrigation be applied on a wide enough scale.

The following table shows the various types of land, including the area under cultivation:

	<i>Hectares (approx.)</i>
Desert land	6,651,200
Mountains	2,534,000
Pasture lands	3,600,000
Forests	350,000
Cultivable lands	5,425,200
Lands under cultivation	<u>2,300,000</u>
Total	<u>20,860,400</u>

Less than one-seventh of the total area under cultivation (about 300,000 ha.) is irrigated, the balance depending on rainfall for normal crop yields.

The so-called private domain of the state, i.e. cultivable land under the disposition of the government, amounted originally to a total area of 1,334,000 ha., or about 23 per cent. of the cultivable (non-desert) area. The major part of these lands, however, seems to have been

already disposed of, mostly to large landowners. Thus, in the district of Aleppo, government lands amount to about 300,000 ha. distributed over some 600 villages. Almost all of this area is already controlled by large landowners to whom it has been let by the government. In the same district about 90,000 ha. of Mawat lands are under government control, of which the government has already delimited and surveyed about 30,000 ha. for final distribution. But the determination of the extent and limits of government lands can only be tentative on the basis of existing conditions of land survey and registration. Not until more accurate and comprehensive surveys are carried out can a final estimate be made and meanwhile the question of survey and registration is the subject of present land legislation.

The three decrees that have been issued recently by the government describe and determine the limits, the distribution and the use of government lands.

Decree No. 135, which was issued in October 1952, stipulates that all unclaimed Mawat lands shall become state lands and be legally treated as such even if they have not been so registered hitherto. The decree also stipulates that the maximum area of government land which can be owned or claimed by any private person is not to exceed 200 ha. for himself and each member of his family. All government lands possessed by persons in excess of that maximum shall revert to the state without compensation.

In November 1952 the government issued Decree No. 768 which regulates the distribution and registration of government lands. The main features of the decree can be summed up as follows:

1. Every Syrian subject, eighteen years old and above, has a right to register in his name a maximum of 50 ha. unirrigated government land or 10 ha. of irrigable government land (clause 1).

2. Land cultivators who live in densely populated areas and own no land shall have priority in receiving government lands (clause 2).

3. Applications for government lands should be classified, starting with applicants with large families who possess means of cultivation, followed by married applicants who possess means of cultivation, then by unmarried who possess means of cultivation, and finally those who possess no means of cultivation (clause 4).

4. The applicant must certify that he possesses no land of his own, that he will himself cultivate for three consecutive years the land he is to receive from the government, and will build himself a house during that period (clauses 3 and 10).

5. The Minister of Agriculture shall designate government lands that are to be distributed free of charge and lands that are to be paid for. The extent of the charge, if any, and the manner of payment shall also be prescribed (clause 11).

6. Land receivers shall neither sell nor dispose of their land within a period of fifteen years from the date they receive it from the government. The land can be used, however, as a loan collateral with the agricultural bank (clause 14).

7. Should any of the above conditions be neglected by the beneficiary or his successors, he will lose his right to the land (clause 13).

Finally, in January 1953 the government issued Decree No. 168 which determines the charges to be paid by those receiving land from the government on a purchase or rental basis. Thus the land can be purchased by eligible cultivators upon payment of a charge amounting to 25 per cent. of its actual value under the conditions set by the previous land decrees. Also the Department of State Domains is authorized to let out government lands to land cultivators for periods of three years at a time.

There are at least four major factors behind recent plans for land settlement in Syria, namely, population growth and concentration of the rural population in certain regions of the country, the settlement of the Bedouins (the Syrian nomads), the cultivation and development of new lands, and the need to encourage the creation of a prosperous rural population based on small and medium-sized peasant farms.

With an estimated total population of 3,200,000 and a total area of 185,000 sq. km., the density of population in Syria is a little more than seventeen persons per sq. km. A more significant ratio, however, is that which relates the rural population to the cultivable area, taking into consideration the extent of the lands under actual cultivation. This ratio averages for the various districts of the country 38 rural inhabitants per sq. km. The table on p. 73 shows the distribution and density of the rural population. Should we, however, restrict the calculation to the actual area under cultivation, the ratio of man to land rises to about ninety-four rural inhabitants per sq. km. or about 2.6 acres per rural inhabitant.

It is noted that the highest concentration of the rural population is in the Latakia district, which is located in the coastal and north-western part of the country. At the same time the Euphrates and the Jazira districts, which represent the extensive cultivable plains of north-eastern Syria, show the lowest density of rural population and

constitute the most promising frontier for future development and land settlement.

It is difficult to draw any final conclusion concerning population pressure on currently cultivated lands in Syria. The concentration of rural labour varies between the different agricultural districts. Localities also differ with respect to soil fertility and intensity of cultivation, as well as in the system of land distribution. For example, the Latakia

<i>District</i>	<i>Rural population</i>	<i>Rural population per sq. km. of cultivable land</i>
Damascus . . .	322,000	75
Aleppo . . .	554,000	38
Homs . . .	116,000	18
Hama . . .	89,000	19
Latakia . . .	426,000	108
Euphrates . . .	227,000	14
Horan . . .	114,000	36
Jazira . . .	147,000	17
Druze Mt. . .	81,000	45
Total . . .	2,076,000	38

district which shows the highest density of rural population, has a very fertile soil and a very intensive and mixed system of farming which demands a higher ratio of rural labour than do other districts. Again, as in all Arab countries, the system of land ownership with its extremes of inequality complicates and aggravates the problem of the pressure of population on the cultivated land. In Egypt, for example, more than 3,000,000 out of the 4,000,000 people actively engaged in agriculture either own no land or own less than 1 acre each. In Syria the distribution of land ownership is less uneven. None the less, about half the surveyed and settled land consists of large estates. The cultivable area is sufficient, however, to absorb a large increase in population as well as any excess in the present farm population in a systematic programme of land settlement. It is estimated that the 5.5 million ha. of cultivable land can adequately support some 840,000 peasant families, which would be more than double the present farm population of the country, on the basis of holdings, each consisting of 8.5 ha. of unirrigated and 2.5 ha. of irrigated land, which recent studies have shown to be a sufficient area to maintain a peasant-proprietor family of six persons. Thus the availability of a reserve of cultivable land and the requirement of additional rural labour for the full development of Syria's land resource suggest that a proper distribution of the farm population among the various agricultural districts of the country

would go far towards solving the problem. Such a course would help to absorb the growth of population, the present rate of which averages about 2 per cent. per annum, and would tend to equalize the differences between the more densely populated northern and coastal regions and the sparsely populated northern areas, especially the Jazira and the Euphrates regions.

Land settlement is also an important means of settling the wandering tribes of the country, which account for about 10 per cent. of the population. In this connexion land settlement plays an important social part besides its economic role in cultivating and developing new regions. For it means that an important section of the rural population will change its mode of living and become more productive by turning from a nomadic culture to settled and systematic farming.

The only serious process of land distribution by the government has taken place in the Jazira region where about 500,000 dunums¹ of government land (out of a total of 2,000,000 in that region) have been distributed to land cultivators, mostly from other regions. A small part of this newly distributed land went to landless peasants or to the nomads. This in turn has raised more problems and difficulties of land settlement. To start with, large areas of cultivable land, including government land, remain unsurveyed and without a proper settlement of land titles. It is important that the government should ascertain finally the land that is under its jurisdiction and which it can distribute to landless peasants. This calls for a comprehensive process of land survey and settlement of titles which will cover the various regions of the country by stages. The process of land survey and settlement of titles is going on at present but concrete action is needed in order to speed it up. Then comes the problem of capital. Most landless peasants need financial help to start cultivating new lands. The Agricultural Bank of Syria provides partial help to farmers who have lands they can use as collateral against loans, but the capital of the bank is inadequate to help landless peasants to settle hitherto uncultivated lands. Still more significant is the question of executing certain capital projects which are basic for land settlement and development, such as the major irrigation and hydro-electric projects of the Jazira and Euphrates regions which, once achieved, will multiply the farm land ready for cultivation as well as the range of crops and rural industries that can be developed. An adequate net of rail and road transport is also needed to connect the developing new frontiers with

¹ Approx. 4 dunums = 1 acre.

the old centres of population and industry in western Syria, thus enlarging the market for farm products and providing cheap means of transportation. Most of these basic projects have reached the final stage of technical survey and many of them have already got under way. But providing the necessary capital to finance such basic projects from both internal and foreign sources remains a challenging problem.

Another problem which obstructs land settlement in Syria is the lack of a systematic programme of rural education and training. Illiteracy is highest in rural areas and there is a crying need for more education and technical help to peasant cultivators. Training centres and experimental agricultural stations need to be established in the various rural districts of the country, especially in the frontier regions of the Jazira and the Euphrates. Such training centres could also be used to foster the co-operative organization of the peasants in both old and new regions.