

Treating the State as a Rival Clan

[זויכראב שופיח](#)

Haaretz Op-Ed Page, August 16 1998

[תובתכ תשיכר](#)

Rabinowitz Danny

[עדימ זויכראה לע](#)

The call by MK Taleb a-Sana'a (Democratic Arab Party) for a Bedouin blood feud against the Nature Reserves inspector who shot a young man of the Azazma tribe last week has sent ripples in many directions. From Jews, there have been calls to indict a-Sana'a for incitement to murder. His words, which were interpreted as a call for vengeance, appear to be a direct attack on the rule of law. The call for private vengeance contradicts at least two fundamental principles of the modern western state: that the government has a monopoly on the use of force, including for purposes of punishment and deterrence, and that people are held responsible only for their own actions. The Bedouin law that allows relatives of a murdered man to attack any male member of the murderer's family whose kinship is within the fifth degree permits injury to people who had no part in the crime - people who, in the eyes of western law, are innocent of all wrongdoing. This is apparently the reason that not only the inspector went underground last week. According to press reports, many of his colleagues at the Nature Reserves Authority also took off their green uniforms last week, for fear of random vengeance.

[זובשח בצמ](#)

[המסיס יוניש](#)

[תוריח](#)

[תובוגת](#)

[המסיס יתחכש](#)

However, other opinions can be found among the Bedouin community of the Negev. Obviously, many Bedouin view a-Sana'a's outburst as extreme, unnecessary and dangerous. Many others, however, see it as a proper and legitimate expression of their feelings of frustration and powerlessness against the agencies of the state, including the justice system. Last Thursday, hundreds of Bedouin demonstrated in support of a-Sana'a's position. The site chosen for the demonstration

- in the heart of Be'er Sheva, not far from the court that released on bail the man seen by the Bedouin as a licensed killer only a few hours after his arrest - is no less significant than the fact that it was held at all.

The Bedouin blood feud is not capricious. It is not a crime of passion by people who may be temporarily irrational, whose nerves have betrayed them in a moment of pain, who have lost control, and therefore set out, in a state of perturbation, to take revenge and assuage their anger.

The institution of the blood feud developed due to a governmental vacuum. The central government, if it existed at all, was vague, alien and far away, and generally apathetic about the job of defending the lives and property of those who lived on the periphery. In such a situation, the principal source of strength and defense was the cooperative group. Among the Bedouin, this group was defined according to blood relationship among men - what anthropologists term an agnate relationship. The extended family, the larger group that included five generations of related men, the tribe - all of these represent various levels of cooperation between agnates.

Every act of violence immediately casts doubt on the agnate group's ability to defend its members against other groups. Hesitation, or forgoing the obligation of vengeance and agreeing to "forgive" the crime, were liable to be seen as a sign of group weakness. In the absence of a central government that could guarantee personal security, such hesitation might damage the group's prestige, worsen its economic and political bargaining position, and even invite other attacks.

Over the longer term, such weakness could even cause the group to

disintegrate, and its members to disperse into isolated splinters at the mercy of other groups for protection. The Bedouin blood feud is therefore part of the effort to achieve status, involving long-term considerations of prestige, position and credibility.

Taleb a-Sana'a and those who support him have generalized the tragic encounter between Suliman Abu Jlidan and the Nature Reserves inspector, turning it into a conflict between cooperative groups. The level of generalization, of course, can vary. There is a Bedouin saying which goes: "I and my brother stand together against my cousin; my cousin and I stand together against the stranger; we and the stranger stand together against the government."

The cooperative groups could have been defined at the family level (relatives of the deceased against the inspector's family or friends), at the tribal level (the Azazma tribe against the Nature Reserves Authority), or at the national level (all the Bedouin of the Negev against all the agencies of the state). It appears that the Bedouin have opted for the latter choice.

The Bedouin of the Negev have for many years experienced humiliations and severe injuries to their property (land, grazing areas, flocks and other means of livelihood), their bodies and even their very lives. Like other minorities in Israel, they have not found restitution in the courts. The banality of firing at a young man on the back of a small van that apparently wandered into an IDF firing zone, the shocking images of the hot pursuit and the mental anguish the Bedouin suffered at the judge's decision to release the killer on bail - all of these caused them to finally give up on expecting the state to protect them, and to retreat to a known line of defense, which has considerable symbolic value.

The willingness of so many Bedouin to stand behind a-Sana'a is a direct reflection of the degree of alienation they feel from a state

which falsely claims that it wants, and is able, to spread its protective wings over all its citizens - regardless of nationality, religion or color.