Local Intermediaries in post-2011 Syria

Transformation and Continuity

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Building from the Wreckage
Intermediaries in Contemporary Syria

Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur

Seven years of war in Syria have shattered many of the social and political relations that existed before the conflict. The uprising that began in March 2011 turned into a multi-front war, and the violence and physical destruction that followed are unprecedented in their scale and intensity. Amicable relations between villages or urban neighborhoods have turned to hostility and mistrust as communities find each other on opposite sides of conflict; trust between local leaders and state authorities, built haltingly over decades, has been broken by the regime's use of violence against civilians; and even family relations have been cut by relatives taking opposing sides and joining rival armed groups in the war. This destruction has redefined relations among Syrians and, out of the destruction, a new order has begun to emerge. New connections are being forged that will shape the internal politics of Syria for decades.

The violence, destruction, and displacement that have resulted from years of war raise the following questions: To what extent has the war changed the relations between individual Syrians and larger social units, such as families, tribes, and religious and national groups? How have these units' relations with outside authorities evolved? And what remains of the previous socio-political order?

The shattering of relations forged over decades does not mean their obliteration. Just as stone blocks of ancient ruins can be incorporated into contemporary dwellings, some of the connections and solidarities from the pre-2011 period are being put to new uses and combined into new ties and alliances to constitute the post-war Syrian socio-political order. Where rebel forces were able to expel the regime, local councils, sharia bodies, and other local institutions sprang up, often led by leaders of influential local families or local residents who were technocrats in state institutions. Yet the regime's re-conquest of these areas destroyed the local revolutionary institutions and made the regime, once again, a central player in establishing order. In the areas retaken by the regime, vast swathes of the population have been displaced and much of the physical and social fabric has been destroyed—by indiscriminate violence and fighting involving regime forces, pro-government paramilitaries, local armed groups, and foreign-backed militias. Yet even in these locales, the relationship between the local community and outside forces governing it could not be remade out of whole cloth.

The essays in this volume address questions of transformation and continuity during the uprising and war through the lens of intermediaries, which we understand as the social actors connecting individuals and local communities with the regime and other outside powers. This set of actors includes the »usual suspects«, like heads of historically influential local families and religious leaders, as well as actors in newer social formations, such as employees of state institutions and even members of clandestine activist networks. Intermediaries play an important role in establishing and maintaining political domination, facilitating communication, negotiation, and resource flows between outside authorities and local actors on the ground. But they can be a force impelling change; their defection from established patterns can promote conflict and competition, and incorporating them into new governing structures can promote the stabilization of a new political order.

Each piece in this volume describes social relations found in a locality or region of Syria before 2011 and traces out how conflict has altered relations among local residents and between average citizens and outside powers. By tracking the evolving role of existing intermediaries, as well as the rise of new mediators between local society and outside actors, the essays demonstrate concretely which relations were shattered by conflict, which legacies of pre-2011 rule persist, and how new relations build upon or negate older intermediary connections.

Though the regions studied in this volume each have specificities and unique conflict dynamics, several themes emerge across the studies. First, the war has changed relations between local communities and the regime but it has not changed the methods used by the regime to connect with and manage local populations. Before the 2011, the relationship between the regime and many segments of Syrian society was shaped through agreements between local security agents and intermediaries from local communities. Armenak Tokmajyan's study of security forces' heavy but indirect influence on traditional dispute resolution practices in rural Idlib and Darʿa demonstrates a technique employed by the regime to coerce its citizens without resorting to direct violence. When faced with demonstrators from these same communities making demands for reform, the regime attempted to use these established techniques to achieve compliance. Yet, in the face of regime violence against civilians, intermediaries refused to play this role in some cases, and were shunted aside by local community members in others. This continuity of regime practices was not limited to the early months of the uprising; Ayman Al-Dassouky demonstrates how practices it developed during the 2000s, of relating to traders in small cities and localities, continued during the height of the war.

Second, the continuity in regime personnel and strategies stands in contrast to the structures found in local communities, many of which proved to be malleable or, at least, prone to relatively rapid adaptation. The regime's reliance on its established contacts in Darʿa to confront demonstrations had the effect of intensifying rather than moderating challenge. As Armenak Tokmajyan's contribution demonstrates, local actors refused to recognize their elders' authority when they perceived those elders as siding with the regime to the detriment of the interests of the local community. Similarly, Hadeel Al-Saidawi's work on rural Idlib demonstrates

how rule through intermediaries forced many local residents to rely on extended family members, but the conflict greatly changed the socio-political position and even structure of many of these families. Some historically marginalized families became the leading lights of their town through new alliances with outside powers, some were split entirely by members taking opposing sides in the uprising, and still others managed to hold onto their pre-conflict position.

A third theme that emerges from the pieces is that while the model of political control connecting the regime in Damascus to localities through security agencies, state bureaucracies, and local notables has shattered, important pieces of this structure remain, and will continue to be relevant in the future. For example, Sana Fadel's work on youth mobilization in Damascus in 2011 suggests an important role for networks formed within neighborhoods, which enabled residents to participate in the uprising and persist in the face of state repression. These networks are indicative of divisions between the city's original residents and more recent arrivals, which have not been erased by the uprising and war, and stand to structure future social relations in the city. Similarly, Roger Asfar's work on the relations between Christian religious authorities and Aleppan Christians suggests another fragment of the pre-war order likely to be used in constructing a new order; the wide range of social domains in which Christian religious authorities played an intermediary role augurs strongly in favor of their continuation in this role for local communities in the future.

The remaining sections of this introduction place the intermediary relations examined by the studies in this volume into theoretical and historical context.

I. Conceptualizing Intermediaries

The Need for a Concept

Understanding who holds power in society and how that power bears upon average citizens requires an understanding of who has access to the central state. In industrialized democracies, these questions can be answered, in large part, by studying formal state institutions and the data they produce, such as results of national and local elections and reports from government agencies

like the public health ministry and tax authorities; the formal procedures for accessing state resources are followed in practice, and the same set of rules and punishments for their violation are, generally speaking, applied to all members of the society, regardless of their political or social standing. Moreover, data from the aforementioned sources provides a reasonably accurate picture of who holds resources and the role of the state in sustaining or modifying that distribution.

Yet in many societies, formal state institutions play a less central role in the creation, management, and distribution of resources and elections are a less reliable indicator of who actually holds power. Official statistics, if they are available at all, provide an incomplete or distorted view of resource distribution and access to state power. In societies where power is mostly exercised informally, the relationships that influence resource flows are largely based upon face-to-face connections, forged in many cases by common regional origin or extended family ties. The vast majority of citizens in polities like this lack these direct connections to power, and must seek out other, indirect means to connect to powerful decision makers. The holders of central power in such societies face a corresponding challenge: monitoring and securing the obedience of vast swathes of the population to which they have no direct linkages. These situations create a space for actors who can connect local society to supra-local powers—the central state in times of routine politics, and its competitors in the form of militias and international actors during revolutions and intrastate wars.

Informal connections of this sort are central to political life in Syria. Nikolaos van Dam notes the role of personal ties in constituting what he calls the »power elite« of Syria.[1] Extended family links, shared villages of origin, and common membership in military units during the pre-Baʿth period formed the lion's share of the links that would afford access to the heights of executive and military power. Personal connections were no less important for average citizens seeking resources, aid, or redress from government agencies. A person's ability to obtain things from the state—such as permission to travel abroad, preferential allotments of fertilizer and seed, or, in some cases, papers as fundamental an identity card or property sale registration—depended fundamentally on his or her ability to call on the right person in a state institution or security service branch to ensure that the request would be granted. Before the 2011 uprising, most Syrian citizens

lacked direct access to the state officials controlling these essential resources, forcing them to depend on other members of local society to secure this access. Depending on the specific local context and the type of good in question, one of a wide range of social actors might provide such access. The actors connecting to state authorities to provide this access ranged from traditional local notables of a village or tribal unit, to the elder members of a large extended family in an urban quarter, to a family member with a civil service job.

Syria has been under al-Asad family rule for nearly half a century. The 2011 uprising and ensuing violent conflict are by no means the first events during this period to cause wrenching change in social relations; Syria experienced war with Israel in 1973, confrontation between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood between 1978 and 1982, involvement in the Lebanese civil war in late 1970s and the 1980s, and the economic liberalization policies adopted in the early 2000s.

The changes occasioned by the 2011 uprising and 2012 war are, by far, the most sweeping and dramatic in Syria's recent history. Indeed, these events have shattered the previous social order; hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed, millions have been displaced, and entire towns and urban neighborhoods have been destroyed. In areas where regime forces were expelled, a myriad of linkages between localities and outside powers prevailed; some armed groups sought to deal with local communities by forging alliances with the figures who held historical positions of power in the local community and had formerly interfaced with the regime, while other armed actors sought to deal with more marginalized figures or youths who had spearheaded anti-regime protests and armed resistance. Even among communities that did not experience a change in political control, established trust and patterns of interaction—with the regime security forces, state institutions, and even neighboring communities—have been indelibly altered.

In sum, the pre-war social order has been shattered, but some of the relations that constituted this order have persisted and new relationships have sprung up out of the wartime environment that will prove central to the future socio-political order. Making sense of structures of power from before 2011, the unfolding of conflict, and conflict's aftermath, therefore, requires a detailed understanding

of intermediary structures and their local variations. By focusing attention on the actors connecting communities and outside authorities, the intermediary concept can help observers track and understand changes in the wartime order that otherwise seem chaotic and opaque.

What is an Intermediary?

We define an intermediary as the actor that connects a local community to outside authorities. By local community, we mean a spatially-concentrated network of people linked by dense social ties. These ties typically extend across multiple facets of social life, including trade, employment, worship, and marriage. Examples of this sort of network include residents of a small village, members of an extended family living in an old urban quarter, and recent rural migrants to a city's new informal quarters with a shared tribal or village background.[2] By outside authorities, we mean powerful actors not rooted in the community who interact with it in some way, ranging from sovereign political control to providing support to insurgent local actors challenging a standing political authority. In times of political stability, the main outside authority that intermediaries and local societies interact with is the central state. When conditions of war loosen the state's territorial control, armed non-state actors, as well as the armed forces of other states, can play such a role in relation to local communities. These actors can bring significant resources and force to bear on the community—whether to aid, coerce, or harm its members—and both the local community and outside authority are in need of actors to facilitate this interaction.

Intermediaries, therefore, occupy an important position in the network structure of society. This role is more than just that of a broker arranging transactions between the local society and outside powers; it entails having a network that makes the intermediary able to control and dispense resources, delivering benefits to both the local community and outside power alike. To the local community, the intermediary provides access to resources controlled by the outside actor and, in some cases, protection from it. For the outside actor, the intermediary can aid in its goal of controlling or gaining the assent of the local community, by passing on information about members of the community or assuring community members' compliance with the will of the outside power.

The intermediary role is shaped by the prevailing political and economic order, whether the long-accreted bonds of imperial rule, imperatives of a vanguard party toppling old ruling structures, or the transient political agreements forged during intra-state war. These structures above the level of the local community create the situations into which intermediaries insert themselves or out of which intermediaries emerge. As a result, the connections intermediaries forge can take a wide variety of forms and are subject to continual renegotiation. Elderly heads of influential families may play this role in many cases, a civil servant or young person with ties to other local communities or actors abroad may also play the intermediary role. Multiple actors may compete to play the intermediary role for a locality, and relations between a local community and outside powers may break down even in the absence of such competition.

Though intermediaries largely adapt to macro-political and economic developments, they are not merely an effect of external structural conditions. How outside powers link to local communities creates legacies; a role or specific personage may retain influence over its local community, even after the material situation that impelled an outside authority to select it as an intermediary fades away. This is particularly the case when those forms of linkage are in place for a long period of time. New outside powers may capitalize on the persistence of these structures and re-empower these intermediaries, or they may seek new partners to marginalize old intermediaries and contain their influence. For example, as the historically influential families in the town of Binnish competed for recognition by the political opposition to the Syrian regime, an armed Islamist group seized the opportunity to make an alliance with a more marginalized family, increasing its influence over local affairs at the cost of the historically prominent families (see Al-Saidawi's contribution to this volume).

In other cases, intermediaries can even draw in outside actors. Sana Fadel's work on the leadership of the protest movement in Damascus shows the power that a generation of young activists had in connecting the initial demonstrations in that city to the rest of Syria and to global media and political actors. In the neighborhood of Barzeh, in particular, the activists gradually overcame divisions between the city's generational residents and relative newcomers, and became an

important point of reference for the entire movement in Damascus, as well as a connection to the opposition inside and outside the country.

III. Intellectual Background

The intellectual lodestar for much of the work on intermediaries in the Middle East is Albert Hourani's essay entitled »Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables«. Hourani defines notables as »those who can play a certain political role as intermediaries between government and people, and—with certain limits—as leaders of the urban population.«[3] Focusing on Damascus and Aleppo in the late 18th and early 19th century, Hourani asserts that the primary intermediaries in these cities were »*ʿulamaʾ*«, leaders of local garrisons, and secular families with large landholdings or a tradition of military and political influence.

Hourani's concept was influenced by theoretical trends dominant in the social sciences at the time he was writing, in the mid-1960s. The work draws on structural-functional theory and its notion of a »patronage system«. The basic assumption underlying structural functionalism is that members of a society share a value system that makes the society an internally cohesive unit that tends towards stability. On this account, a patronage system is one stable form of social order, where cultural values reinforce the legitimacy of status distinctions among patrons and clients in the society. Structural-functional theory has come under criticism for positing »coherent, durable, and self-propelling social units«, when societies are, in fact, composed of discrete actors who often come into conflict, hold multiple and often ambiguous identities, and occupy shifting network positions.[4]

It should be little surprise, in light of the broader criticism leveled at this theoretical approach, that Hourani's concept of intermediaries would come in for criticism for positing a static relationship between local society, the intermediary, and the central power. James Gelvin, for example, argues that the structural-functional concept of patronage that Hourani adapted to the late Ottoman Arab context makes the intermediary relationship timeless and all-encompassing, and suggests a stable society effectively free from internal conflict.[5] Subsequent research on the role of local families in urban governance, as well as their relationship to

central authorities, has suggested that these ostensibly harmonious, exhaustive relationships relationships were, in fact, »impermanent, circumstantial, and non-exclusive«.[6] Specifically, recent work on the late Ottoman period has demonstrated that the formation and incorporation of the Ottoman intermediary class occurred in tandem, and that popular classes played a dynamic role in contesting and negotiating these relations.[7]

In addition to this theoretical criticism, the political conditions in which intermediaries might assume their role have changed radically in the intervening 200 years. To name but a few of these changes, the central Syrian state has penetrated society to a far greater extent than its forebears and the diversification of economic activity in the past century has given rise to far more complex and dispersed relations than those found in an Ottoman city quarter. In light of these criticisms, Gelvin raises the question of whether scholars should »throw out the patronage baby with the patronage systems bathwater.«[8] Gelvin answers his own the question in the affirmative, arguing that Hourani and hierarchical concepts of patronage should serve primarily—or even exclusively—as points of contrast for future research, rather than a living concept that might highlight important aspects of social life.

Yet other theorists of informal state-society linkages have been less ready to toss out the concept of patronage, and have taken significant steps to show how patronage relations need not take a single form, nor remain fixed over time. James Scott, for one, articulates a concept of patron-client relations not beholden to structural-functional assumptions about the cultural content and consensual nature of these ties. For Scott, patron-client relations are a form of »instrumental friendship« between unequal partners, in which the higher status partner provides »protection or benefits« and the lower offers, in return, »general support and assistance, including personal services.«[9] This relation is not merely a product of value orientations internalized by the parties, but has at its heart a continual exchange between them. Crucial to this notion of patron-client relations are (1) the status imbalance between partners, (2) their face-to-face character, and (3) the fact that they are »whole person« relationships rather than »explicit, impersonal-contract bonds«.[10]

The concept of intermediaries we propose draws on the informal, face-to-face, and whole-person character of patron-client relations, but goes beyond the patron-client relationship in important respects. Whereas the patron-client relationship is essentially about two parties transacting, the intermediaries we focus on in Syria are the middle node of a three-actor exchange. Scholars like Scott conceive of such relations as a pyramid of patron-client relations, in which the intermediary is the outside power's client and the local community's patron.[11] Yet the intermediary does more than merely provide services to the outside power, or protection to the local community; the power of an intermediary in contemporary Syria derives in large part from the need of outside authorities to connect with and manage the local community. Precisely because the outside authority lacks the know-how and trust networks to penetrate the society, the intermediary can amass and retain power and resources independent of those he—and the intermediaries are almost without exception men—receives from the outside authority and transfers to members of the local community. Roger Asfar's work on the role of the Christian clergy in linking Christian local communities to the state and regime demonstrates precisely this independent power. The clergy's predominant role in a wide array of Christians' relations with the regime affords its members the latitude to pursue the Church's corporate interest—for example, in claiming and developing land—independent of the interest of individual community members. The connections an intermediary develops to outside powers, in turn, can provide him leverage over local society. In the town of Sarmin in rural Idlib, for example, a former construction worker linked his battalion to a powerful, foreign-funded Islamist faction. This move allowed him to dictate local affairs and even altered the informal rules of inter-family marriage in the town (see Al-Saidawi's contribution to this volume).

III. Intermediaries and Trust Networks

Understanding intermediaries as part of a system connecting local societies to outside authorities brings into relief the specificities of the Syrian political order, but also helps make this order comparable to other systems of rule and access to power. Charles Tilly's work on trust networks and their relationship to central state authorities provides a framework to theorize the similarities and differences between intermediary-based governance and the more direct rule typical of

industrialized democracies. For Tilly, trust entails »placing valued outcomes at risk to others' malfeasance, mistakes, or failures«.[12] A trust network is a densely-tied community from which entry and exit are difficult, and whose members utilize this network for their high-risk undertakings, such as significant business ventures and marriage decisions. In this respect, the Syrian local communities examined here bear important similarities to trust networks; members are densely linked and rely on one another for high-risk activities.

Trust networks can be connected to central political authorities in myriad ways, ranging from total disconnection to integration. Examples of total disconnection of a trust network from central political authority include autarkic nomads and religious cults living in isolated mountainous areas, which are increasingly rare in contemporary times. Examples of the latter, trust networks integrated into public politics, are increasingly common, though primarily in industrialized democracies. They include the direct, individual exchange of military service for benefits from veterans' associations and the involvement of formal religious associations in political parties and electoral campaigns.

In between the extremes—of trust networks integrated into and segregated from public politics—lies the world of intermediary politics. Tilly calls these forms of linkage »negotiated connections«, and isolates two distinct types: patronage systems and brokered autonomy.[13] In patronage systems, an isolated trust network takes on an intermediary from outside that trust network, and the intermediary negotiates with the central authority on its behalf. The traders emerging in the course of the Syrian civil war exemplify this type of network. For example, Mohieddine al-Manfoush, a small merchant who became one of the biggest war traders in Syria, facilitated trade between regime- and opposition-controlled areas of Damascus' Eastern Ghouta region without having an influential role in the local communities before the uprising (see Al-Dassouky's contribution to this volume). In the case of brokered autonomy, the central political authority recognizes the autonomy of the local community in return for a negotiated payoff from the community, and its leaders come from within the trust network; the linkages between the regime, Christian clergy, and lay Christians in Aleppo, sketched by Roger Asfar in this volume, exemplify this type of relationship.

The trust networks approach thus avoids reifying the intermediary position or the solidarity of the family. As the connector between a wide variety of local networks and outside authorities that also vary in their power and openness, intermediaries can have varying roles and identities, which can evolve in response to the changing resources and demands of those they connect. Similarly, trust networks can consist of a relatively closed extended family or be based primarily upon direct relationships between an outside authority and nuclear families and individuals. Even in the former case of family-based networks, Tilly notes that the existence of kinship structure, in the formal sense of a biological lineage, does not automatically entail the existence of trust networks; fictive kin relations are often invented to justify the existence of non-kin trust networks, and kin groups only function as trust networks when their members not only mention their shared descent, but actually perform the duties stipulated by group ideologies (e.g., tribal commitments to collective defense and solidarity).[14]

Benefits of the Intermediaries Approach for Understanding Syrian Political Life

The central virtue of the trust networks approach is that it does not place intermediary-based forms of governance in a radically different category from more direct, programmatic forms of rule, but illustrates the processes and incentives that block trust networks from becoming more integrated into public politics. In the Syrian case, intermediaries and the state authorities were in many cases mutual beneficiaries of their agreements that deprived citizens of direct control over the course of political and economic affairs.

Examining the connections between local communities and outside authorities—and, especially, the actors mediating these relationships—reveals the dynamic processes by which actors on the ground negotiate and renegotiate the terms of exchange with outside authorities. Reliance on extended family networks and intermediaries does not necessarily reflect any deep psychological attachment to or preference for traditional arrangements, but is often a response to the absence of state authority or the failure of state projects to deliver on their promises and fully incorporate citizens. The retreat of modernizing Arab Socialist state welfare systems has been associated with an increased dependence upon kin networks and

informal channels of welfare provision;[15] this unraveling of established patterns of welfare provision accelerated rapidly in Syria during the 2000s.[16] Beyond the Arab world, Georgi Derluguian accounts for ethnic and Islamist mobilization in the Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union in similar network terms. Networks of senior state bureaucrats organized along ethnic lines—by Soviet nationalities policy rather than internal sorting of actors—struggled to control resources as the Soviet state collapsed, and these actors mobilized others to their cause along ethnic lines, giving rise to conflict on ethnic lines.[17]

The intermediary concept also helps observers to reconcile the contradictory images of the Syrian state given by its official statements and what it does on the ground. Armenak Tokmajyan's research in this volume on inter-family dispute resolution in rural Syria demonstrates that the Syrian state claimed to treat all of its citizens equally and on the basis of formal legal codes, but its security services would frequently refrain from intervening in violent disputes between extended families. Instead, the security services would often decline to arrest offending parties and indirectly exert pressure on local notables to reconcile, using traditional dispute resolution processes. In this respect, the Syrian state resembles what Joel Migdal calls a regime of »dispersed domination«, wherein »neither the state nor any other social force manages to achieve countrywide domination and where parts of the state may be pulled in very different directions.«[18] A focus on intermediaries directs attention to the actors who connect local communities to the state and to the autonomy and conflicting mandates of the state actors charged with implementing policies emanating from the national capital.

The focus on intermediaries is particularly important for understanding how the socio-political order is constituted during and following war. An important recent strand of research on intrastate violent conflict focuses on what Ana Arjona calls »wartime social order«.[19] Even in polities in a state of civil war, many areas will be free of active conflict and rules of interaction between residents, state actors, and militias will develop, formally or informally, that manage violence. The extent to which rebel groups are invested in the local community and the robustness of pre-conflict institutions in local communities influence how rebel groups will treat civilian populations and with whom among those populations they will interact. Work on wars in sub-Saharan Africa has also identified intermediary

structures as an important factor in understanding how rebel groups relate to local populations and how local communities secure their daily needs. William Reno identifies the configuration of networks between local communities and central state authorities *before* the onset of violence as a significant factor in how armed groups relate to local communities during periods where no single outside power holds full authority over territory.[20]

Dynamics of wartime life in Syria made informal connections to the regime and other outside powers even more important for average citizens and powerful actors alike. As parts of the country began to fall out of regime control, state institutions ceased to deliver services, and rival military groups competed for control over territory. In this environment, face-to-face connections to militia leaders, traders, and regime officials became the primary means of ensuring physical security and the provision of essential goods (see contributions by Al-Dassouky and Al-Saidawi to this volume). Similarly, where the regime and its competitors sought to control territory, they were compelled to draw in influential actors from local communities in one way or another—for example, by absorbing local militias into their own forces and making payments or delivering services to local communities.[21]

Finally, the intermediary lens may help to illuminate the processes of reconstruction following the period covered by studies in this volume. A large academic literature examines the role of international institutions in post-war reconstruction,[22] but the trajectory of the Syrian conflict departs from the one commonly observed; the incumbent regime has retaken much of the country after years of intrastate war and, along with its foreign allies, is reshaping the physical and social fabric of the areas that challenged it. The wide latitude that the incumbent Syrian regime has for post-war governance suggests that interventions by a neutral, well-meaning international community are not forthcoming. In fact, the Syrian trajectory calls into question the dominant »fragile state« paradigm of post-war reconstruction, which is based upon the notion that the »fragility« of the state was what caused conflict in the first place, and that the parties to the conflict might be able to collaboratively build new institutions, with the help of the international community.[23] Paying attention to how some formerly rebellious local actor reconcile with the regime, and who is selected by the regime and its

allies as partners in the reconstruction efforts stands to provide insight into how this process unfolds.

One theme emerging from the studies in this volume is that, for all of the destruction wreaked upon the physical and social fabric of the country, the fundamental means employed by the regime to connect with local communities has not been significantly altered. Throughout years of violent conflict, the regime cultivated informal relations with influential members of local communities to gain their compliance. How these connections are re-established or forged anew out of the fragments of the old socio-political order may provide the best clues to understanding the construction of a new order.

Notes

1. Dam, Nikolaos van. 2011[1979]. *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Baʿth Party.* London: I. B. Tauris, ch. 9.

2. We do not mean the term »local community« to connote an entire religious or national group, but a collection of individuals linked by face-to-face social ties; these networks are smaller than entire ethnic groups. However, local communities are typically composed entirely of members of the same religious and national group, not least because they tend to marry amongst themselves to reproduce the community.

3. Hourani, Albert. 1981. »Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables.« In *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East*, Oxford: Macmillan Press, 44.

4. Tilly, Charles. 2008. *Explaining Social Processes*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 69.

5. Gelvin, James L. 2006. »The ʿPolitics of Notables' Forty Years After.« *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40 (1): 19–29.

6. Ibid, 24.

7. See, for example, Hathaway, Jane. 2008. *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule*, 1516-1800. Harlow: Pearson Longman; Khoury, Dina Rizk. 1997. *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540-1834.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Toledano, Ehud R. 1997. »The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites (1700-1900): A Framework for Research.« *In Middle Eastern Politics and Ideas: A History from Within*, edited by Ilan Pappé and Moshe Maʿoz, 145–62. London: Tauris Academic Studies.

8. Gelvin, »The 'Politics of Notables',« 24.

9. Scott, James C. 1972. »Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia.« *American Political Science Review* 66 (1): 93.

10. Ibid, 95.

11. Ibid, 96.

12. Tilly, Charles. 2005. *Trust and Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 12.

13. Ibid, 110.

14. Ibid, 46.

15. See, for example, Baylouny, Anne Marie. 2010. *Privatizing Welfare in the Middle East: Kin Mutual Aid Associations in Jordan and Lebanon.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press; and Zubaida, Sami. 2012. »The ʿArab Spring' in the Historical Perspectives of Middle East Politics.« *Economy and Society* 41 (4): 568–79.

16. Elvira, Laura Ruiz de, and Tina Zintl. 2014. »The End Of The Baʿthist Social Contract In Bashar al-Asad's Syria: Reading Sociopolitical Transformations Through Charities And Broader Benevolent Activism.« *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (Special Issue 02): 329–349.

17. Derluguian, Georgi M. 2005. *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus : A World-System Biography.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

18. Migdal, Joel S. 2001. *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 100.

19. Arjona, Ana. 2016. *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

20. 20. Reno, William. 2005. »The Politics of Violent Opposition in Collapsing States.« *Government and Opposition* 40 (2): 127–51.

21. Khaddour, Kheder. 2016. »The Coast in Conflict: Migration, Sectarianism, and Decentralization in Syria's Latakia and Tartus Governorates.« Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/12682-20160725.pdf.

22. For example, Girod, Desha M. 2015. *Explaining Post-Conflict Reconstruction.* New York: Oxford University Press.

23. Heydemann, Steven. 2018. »Civil War, Economic Governance & State Reconstruction in the Arab Middle East.« *Daedalus* 147 (1): 48–63.

Politics of Rural Notables

Armenak Tokmajyan

◼ Introduction

With the onset of the Syrian uprising, the regime reached out to rural notables in many parts of Syria, asking for their help in containing protests in their communities. It dispatched senior officials to protest cites, including during the first weeks of the uprising in Darʿa. It also received delegations that included notables from different parts of Syria. Through this form of outreach, the regime was relying on a pre-conflict intermediary structure which the security forces used to contain conflict in Syria's countryside. Security forces, by threatening to use high levels of violence, frequently utilized the localized authority of rural notables to resolve intra-societal conflicts through informal reconciliation processes.

This mechanism was ineffective in the face of spreading protests. While senior security officials held meetings with Darʿa notables or while security forces in Idlib reached out to their established contacts in society, all in the hope of stopping the protests, the social movement widened. The regime's tried-and-true methods for dealing with social actors failed in the uprising primarily because the security forces used high levels of violence from early on, which diminished the chances of any constructive intermediation but also, as the uprising displayed more clearly, many notables did not necessarily have authority over or represent those protesting from their communities, as wrongly perceived by at least some in the regime.

To help understand the regime's approach to containing the uprising through intermediary structures, and why it failed, this paper analyzes the relationships the regime developed with rural notables and their role in containing intra-societal conflict prior to the uprising. The processes described here can be found, with significant local variation, in villages, towns, and small cities throughout Syria, but examples in the paper are drawn primarily from the rural areas of the Idlib and Darʿa governorates.

Before the uprising, the security forces often relied on an intermediary structure as an informal alternative to the official conflict resolution system to resolve large inter-familial conflicts in Syria's countryside. When conflicts broke out between civilians and escalated to involve their extended families, they threatened to destabilize the locality, or even spill into nearby towns. The security forces were thus faced with a choice: follow the formal legal procedures of making arrests, charging suspects, and subjecting them to trial and punishment, or encouraging the parties toward a customary reconciliation process between the conflicting families, with mediation led by local notables. A notable in Idlib or Darʿa could be a family elder, a religious shaykh, a tribal leader, or an educated or wealthy man with localized authority; in many cases, a notable would have several of these qualities. The terms of the agreement were negotiated and accepted by the elders of the conflicting families.

The element of force was an important defining characteristic in security forces' relationship with the notables and conflicting families. In such conflicts, the security forces deployed law enforcement units to break up fights, arrest people, and ultimately control the situation. Having the upper hand, judicial and extra-judicial powers, they had the means of using a high level of violence. Instead, however, they often only used the threat of such violence as an effective tactic to steer the conflict towards an informal reconciliation. The security forces, but also the intermediaries, often found that this method could deliver a faster, more effective, and more durable solution.

This structure of local conflict management was not effective during the early stages of the uprising primarily due to two factors. First, the logic of violence that the security forces employed to handle the early protests departed from that

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used previously in inter-family disputes. They actually used significant or high levels of violence that they had previously threatened to use as a way to steer the disputes towards reconciliation. This change in the rationale violated the existing implicit agreement between them and the notables in terms of what was acceptable violence and what was not. Firing at protestors was unacceptable and intolerable form of violence, whether for the notables or the protestors in their communities. This violence fueled the rebellion by fracturing the relationship between security officers and notables in many cases, ultimately diminishing any chance for intermediation.

The intermediary structure was ineffective also because the uprising revealed that the relationship between the notables and the youth in their communities had been undergoing a long, slow transformation. The regime's outreach to notables suggests their enduring faith in notables' authority over their communities. But events in Darʿa and Idlib suggest that hardly anyone, including community elders, represented or asserted effective control over the protestors, many of whom did not necessarily believe in the intermediary structure as a way to reason with the regime, whose security forces employed unacceptable forms of violence against them. With the increasing counter violence by the protestors, and later with the first signs of armed rebellion, notables' role was further marginalized. They may have remained notables in name, but they were not intermediaries anymore.

I. Alternative Conflict Management Mechanisms before the Uprising

The regime primarily relied on its security forces to manage inter-familial conflicts that escalated, got out of police control and threatened to destabilize the locale. Though the circumstances surrounding individual cases and localities varied considerably, a consistent theme across all instances of this mediation was the unequal power relationship between the security forces and other actors involved in the conflict. After containing the situation, they threatened to use high levels of violence against the perpetrators but refrained from doing so. They used the threat of significant violence to steer the conflict from escalation to resolution through informal reconciliation processes.

Given the wide powers that the security forces had, in addition to their reputation for being willing to use them, one might wonder why didn't they just lock up all the offending parties from both families and start a court case. The security forces often found the informal conflict resolution method to be more effective. The fact that they could use official institutions to back up or facilitate the informal reconciliation indicates that there was a relatively methodical approach to alternative reconciliation.

Threat of Violence as an Effective Tactic

Official involvement in local informal reconciliation processes is neither new nor exclusively the business of intelligence services, but the latter have increasingly assumed a central role in these processes since the Baʿth Party came to power. With the expansion of the state since 1960s, its intervention in local conflicts increased not just in the form of imposing state laws and security measures, but also in its taking part in informal conflict resolution processes. The Peasants' Union, for instance, was one such example in 1960s; it resolved conflicts between peasants to avoid clan hostilities escalating and involving the whole village in the conflict.[1] Another commonly cited example is the intervention of deputies from the National Assembly with ties to the locality where the conflict occurred. Their dual—official and unofficial—identity helped them to facilitate a reconciliation.

The security services gradually assumed a more central role in mediating intra-social conflicts with the Baʿth Party's arrival to power, and especially after the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion (1976-1982).[2] They gained judicial but also extra-judicial rights to use violence to manage conflicts in society, including inter-familial conflicts. They often, however, employed a particular form of force to manage these conflicts. After physically containing the conflict, instead of following the formal legal process and opening a court case that would end in an official ruling, they used the threat of high levels of violence to pressure the conflicting families to pursue an informal reconciliation process.

That was the case in a major inter-familial fight in 1996 in Saraqib, a city of about 30,000 in Idlib province, where a large family and a smaller one that was known for its courageousness clashed. By the time the local police contained the

situation, the fight had taken two lives, one from each side. But this was not a solution and the situation exploded again after two weeks. The subsequent events of this case illustrate the intervention of the security forces and their tactics of using the threat of violence to steer the conflict toward an informal reconciliation.

> A few weeks later [when it exploded again] about 50 people from family [A] came insultingly knocking the door of family [B]. Though the latter was outnumbered, one of the younger members couldn't stand the insults. He took a shovel, opened the door and attacked. He cut someone's arm, broke other's skull, etc. The police contacted the *amn* (security forces) who deployed three law enforcement units—about 300 people. They came, hit, arrested, and broke off the fight. By the time they arrived, some members of the fighting families had escaped. The soldiers settled in their houses, with their women, ate and drunk on residents' expense (*akil sharib*), until the perpetrators came and surrendered.[3]

Deploying law enforcement units, arresting people, and occupying houses are clear demonstrations of force—a reminder that the regime is strong and capable of using significant violence. These methods, especially invading peoples' private spaces, were undoubtedly discomforting for the victims' families. But they remained within the borders of what is tolerable because they were temporary and remained on the level of threats and not actions. The security forces showed the possibility of using significant, or intolerable, violence in order to compel the belligerent parties to make a reconciliation agreement, and with that the uncomfortable measures were lifted.

Demonstration of force can take many different forms depending on the scale of the conflict and locality. In 2010, a village of 6,000 in central Idlib province called Ihsim witnessed a major fight between two big families, which destabilized the entire village. The law enforcement units had to lay siege to the town for a month until it was solved through informal reconciliation.[4] In another conflict, taking place in a village near Darʿa city in 1990s, the security forces had to deploy as many as 1,500 security personnel to be able to contain a conflict between two large families.[5] In all these cases, however, the threat of violence was used tactically to force the sides to reconcile.

Arrests can also be a tactical move towards pressuring families to reconcile rather than see their relatives get long jail sentences. Arresting an accused party could mean an investigation, an entangling court case and possibly a jail sentence, but not necessarily so; in practice, it was typically a measure to pressure the families by keeping the accused temporarily, or giving them much reduced sentences upon reconciliation. In Ihsim, for instance, 55 people were arrested by the security forces. Upon the resolution of the conflict with a reconciliation agreement, which included the sums of compensation that victims would get, all charges were dropped or shortened.[6]

The events in Saraqib had a different dynamic but a similar finale. The member of family [B] who used a shovel permanently paralyzed someone. The charges were not dropped. But by the time the security forces arrived he had escaped following the principle of: he who kills, escapes in order to avoid a revenge killing. During the reconciliation process, his father said: »If you find him, kill him.« The father took this step to defuse the conflict. By that time, his son had left the country altogether.[7]

It is also possible, especially in the case of accidental killing, that the perpetrator, right after the incident, would immediately hand himself in to the police to protect himself from revenge. After a few days or weeks, the elders of perpetrator's family come to see their counterparts from the victim's family to seal an agreement that gets the perpetrator his freedom back. That often means blood money, which can be agreed during the reconciliation process.[8] A now-notable, but then a young man living in Aleppo city, recalled a traffic accident caused by his uncle in the late 1980s that led to someone's death.

Before going to the victim's funeral »we first went to our village [in northern Aleppo] to ask the representation of our village elders (*rhna li-natlub wajahatahum*)«. During the funeral, whispers about blood money started circulating. »They were talking about 100,000SYP«, a big sum of money back then. »Suddenly our village elder called out referring to the elder of victim's tribe: those—referring to our family—are people who attend our funerals and we attend their funerals; they attend our weddings and we attend their weddings, and

your understanding is enough (*fahmak kifaya*).« After a moment of silence, we »wrapped 20,000SYP and passed it to the family«, and the dispute was resolved.[9]

»Occupying« people's private space, while women are there, is another form of this tactic. It touches men's honor in a conservative rural context but seemingly doesn't violate it; the practice remains within the borders of what's tolerable because it remains a threat rather than an actual violation of men's honor. Like the above example in Saraqib, this method was also effective in the case of a conflict that happened in a village in the northern Aleppo countryside. After a few failed attempts to solve a conflict between two families, the security forces intervened. Several security personnel sat in each perpetrator's house »eating, drinking for free«. They stayed in a »separate room without harassing anyone, but they would be like ›oh you have sheep, aren't you going to serve us some?‹« The families eventually pressured their relatives to solve the issue.[10] This peculiar tactic as a means to pressure the families to reconcile was also evident in the case of a conflict near Darʿa city that required 1,500 personnel to contain it. The soldiers »actually stayed [in the houses] for a month; eating, drinking and sleeping« until the sides agreed to reconcile.[11]

A long-serving Baʿthist from Idlib explained the logic of how the security forces face these societal confrontations as follows: »The state can crush you, or you can reconcile. Everyone wins.«[12]

Reconciliation Under the Threat of Violence

The alternative to »crushing« is an informal reconciliation process that leads to an agreement between the fighting sides in which town notables, under strong pressure from the security forces, play a crucial mediating role. The perception that dealing with the security forces is potentially troublesome is already enough to effect reconciliation among social actors, who, especially in cases of smaller conflicts, prefer a swift reconciliation in order to avoid security forces' intervention. The pressure factor is clearer in the cases when security forces deploy law enforcement units or even become part of the mediating team along with notables. They effectively utilize the tradition of reconciliation, notables' authority and legitimacy to defuse the conflict.

Often, conflicting families reconciled among themselves and did not inflame the issue because that could mean state intervention through the security forces. Ultimately, the latter was the most powerful institution in the regime; it had extra-judicial powers, and often also a bad reputation. »People in Darʿa were cautious of him (ʿamalu hsabu)«, a notable from Darʿa city said about a senior security officer in the province. »He was feared. He'd done harm to many people.«[13] But avoiding their intervention also simply meant a quicker resolution, no arrests, no violence or threat of violence.

Elements of both rationales were part of the motivation behind a reconciliation agreement in one village in northern Aleppo province between two families from the Baggara tribe; the dispute ended with the knowledge, but not the intervention, of the security forces. »One day, I was in my shop in Aleppo [city], when my brother came saying ›Yalla amshi, (come on) we have to go to the village‹«, a notable said, recalling his mediation experience in his native village. After meeting the elder of the first family, and convincing him to reconcile, the mediation team went to the second family. »My father and your father were like brothers. *Allah yirhamun* (God have mercy on them). I said to the elder of the other family«, the notable reported. With these carefully selected words, the delegation was successful with the second family as well. Over a feast, the families celebrated the achievement.[14]

Official intervention did not necessarily mean security forces' intervention. A common pattern is the intervention of MPs with, for instance, personal ties to the locality where the conflict occurred. In these cases, though, the border between a state official and a notable becomes blurry. Such people were accepted by the regime, and must have had the personal potential to influence the conflicting actors. That was the situation with Abu Rumiyeh, a prominent notable from Darʿa's Hawran plain and a deputy in the parliament since 1990. He was known and tolerated by the security forces as a conflict resolver and respected by many in Darʿa as a fair arbitrator. »You walk and walk and you are still on his land. He owned vast lands«, a native from Hawran said in an attempt to characterize him. »He of course didn't do any agrarian work himself. He helped people, lent them money, solved problems; you can say dispute resolution was his job (*shagheltu*

kant hal mashakil).«[15]

Abu Rumiyeh had the profile of an ideal rural intermediary. He had access to the authorities through his position as an MP, and had the blessing of the security forces. At the same time, he was a respected notable with vast wealth, which plays an important role in deciding notability. He used his official power, respect and money to mediate conflicts and »save« the state resources to deal with localized conflicts. The outcome was that the regime had fewer inflated conflicts to deal with and the parties to the conflict achieved a quick resolution without the intervention of the security forces. Abu Rumiyeh benefited too: he has repeatedly been re-elected to the People's Assembly since 1990, primarily due to authorities' consent, but also due to the votes he gathered due to his popularity.

Security forces' utilization of local traditions and notables, however, is most clear when they establish a physical presence and directly show that they can use high levels of violence. They take advantage of local reconciliation traditions, and the legitimacy that notables have, to maintain the stability in the area. They do so practically by leaving the conflicting sides with two options, reconciliation or rebellion against the regime. This was the dynamic in the case of Ihsim. The reoccurring conflict between the families was destabilizing the entire town. The families either had to reconcile or face the security forces that had encircled the town and arrested the perpetrators of the violence.[16] The Saraqib case had a similar outcome. One difference was that the representatives from the security forces took part in the negotiating team that shuttled between the two families to find a common agreement.[17]

Giving informal reconciliation a chance had a simple rationale: it was often more effective and sustainable, and the security forces were well aware of that.

A More Effective Conflict Resolution Method?

Given the judicial and extra-judicial powers of intelligence services, their capacity, and the history of being willing to use it, one would wonder why they wouldn't just always »crush« the parties to the conflict. Evidence shows that sometimes the security forces saw the alternative approach—that is, utilizing

reconciliation traditions and the localized authority of the notables, and solving the conflict under the threat of significant violence rather than the execution of it—as more effective option and in rarer instances even a necessity. There are even designated state institutions that could be used to support such an unofficial alternative reconciliation process.

In mid 2000s, a financial dispute between members from an influential tribal group in the eastern, informal part of the city of Aleppo, and members of a national religious minority group living in the city escalated, making violent clashes very possible. Some from the latter group owed unofficial loans to shops owned by the tribal group, who gave them very unfavorable terms. The accumulated debts became the reason for members from the tribal group to harass and threaten members of the minority group. Eventually, the latter sought the help of their official political and religious representatives.

One of these representatives, who played the role of intermediary between the state and the minority group and negotiated with the tribal representatives, narrated how the issue was solved through informal reconciliation.

> We first went to the neighborhood's security chief, who couldn't help. We also didn't get help from his superiors nor from the mayor. We took ourselves and went to Damascus (*fa-hamalna halna wa rihna ʿa-l-sham*) to meet a very senior security official.[18]

He came to Aleppo. Without opening an official investigation, he ordered the local security forces to arrest a few people from the large family, and then invited one of its heads to see him, »who came with gifts, and was received well«. The aim was to force the family to negotiate terms agreeable to both sides. The issue was solved through an informal reconciliation agreement, where those who had taken loans had to pay it back but with more reasonable conditions. The intermediary concluded:

> The senior security officer could jail many people and open a court case. He had the power. But that wouldn't have solved the problem. Only exacerbated it. Therefore, he tried to find a solution through [informal] negotiations.

In other cases, intervention through formal legal bodies is not just ineffective, but could inflate the conflict rather than solve it. In some impoverished areas in Idlib, the state was absent, which gave »local shaykhs, elders and educated people more legitimacy. Some people would refer to shaykhs for problems like land inheritance, divorce, etc.«[19] rather than go to court. In such circumstances, the security forces would delegate the solution of a localized conflict to the local notables rather than intervene themselves. [20]

In rarer instances, the security agencies may need the involvement of specific influential notables in the region to contain a conflict through informal reconciliation. A verbal fight in a village in northern Aleppo between two men from Kurdish and Christian backgrounds escalated and ended with the former shooting the latter. Despite all the money the family of the Kurdish man spent on bribes, their son got a jail sentence. »The judge went by the book«, a notable from the area affirmed. Due to an incident in the jail, the Kurdish man (and few others in his cell) died. The issue grew bigger and the security forces feared that it could draw in the parties' extended families, the whole village, and possibly cause the sectarianization of the problem. But the conflict was contained:

> The *amn* (security forces) called shaykh [name] and asked him to contain the conflict. He was an influential religious figure in the region. The shaykh summoned representatives from the fighting sides and solved the issue through reconciliation. You know, the state sometimes fears that things can get out of hand. So they want to contain the problem beforehand. [21]

Informal reconciliations fall into the unofficial domain. Even though there are some patterns, there are no set-in-stone rules. The security forces' reliance on these alternative resolution means, however, can be methodical. The indication of that is the presence of official channels, within official state institutions, that could be used to support the unofficial conflict resolution process. One good example is the official channels that connect the head of the local security forces with the town *mukhtar*, who is »one of the representatives of the central authorities on the level of small administrative units [which are] the villages under 5,000 inhabitants and neighborhoods.«[22]

With a strong local knowledge, the mukhtar becomes a key focal point for the intelligence services. The contemporary mukhtarship is a remnant of an Ottoman heritage, preserved and modified under Baʿth rule. The Neighborhood Councils and Mukhtars Act of 1956 gave wide powers to the mukhtar,[23] most of which were transferred to local councils by legislation passed in 1971, under Hafez al-Asad, and this situation has endured through legislation passed in 2011.[24] After ceding its powers to the local councils and working under it (at least on paper), the mukhtar's most important role shrunk to carefully monitoring those residing in his administrative unit and their affairs.[25] In other words, part of the mukhtar's job is to be the eyes and the ears of the society and help the authorities when asked. He, for instance, could be officially relied upon to name the relevant notables and influential people in the locale who might be utilized by the security forces to resolve disputes.

The mukhtar's participation in the reconciliation process was a commonly cited factor by the interviewees. It was referenced as being used during the inter-familial conflict in Saraqib in 1996, for instance. After the law enforcement units stopped the parties from attacking one another, »the head of the intelligence services sent a warrant officer (*musaʿid*) who, with the help of the mukhtar, found the relevant notables« who could potentially mediate a reconciliation process.[26] The same could be said in the incident in Ihsim in 2010 when the then mayor of Idlib province formed a negotiating delegation that included notables, deputies, and the town mukhtar.[27] The role of the mukhtar may differ from one place to another. In fact, the intelligence services might include the mukhtar only for ceremonial reasons or not include him at all. Since the reconciliation process is happening in the unofficial domain, even the personal networks of the intelligence official may play a role. What is certain in all the cases, however, is that the security forces have the possibility of relying on the institution of the mukhtarship, which every town or a village has.

Summary

By utilizing the notables to resolve conflicts through informal reconciliation, the regime enabled an intermediary structure that could be a more effective conflict management tool and of interest to the intermediaries and conflicting parties.

In this structure, the regime remains the dominant social force because of its ability to threaten to use high levels of violence, and by doing so influence the behavior of other social actors. Even though the security forces were frequently able influence notables' behavior, this was not necessarily against notables' interests. Being part of the structure gave them access to state authorities, which empowered them in their locality. The effectiveness of this structure is also indicative of the preference of conflicting individuals or groups for this informal conflict resolution method over the formal one.

II. The Syrian Uprising and the Ineffectiveness of the Old Intermediary Structure

With the first protests of the Syrian uprising, the regime received delegations of notables from many parts of Syria, including Darʿa and Idlib, with the hope that they could contain the growing protests. The old intermediary structure that they wanted to use, however, was ineffective. Security forces' handling of the uprising had violated the implicit understanding that existed between them and the notables by using significant violence rather than threatening to do so. That was a violation of the implicit agreement that existed in the framework of the pre-uprising intermediary structure, between the security forces and the notables in terms of what is an acceptable form of violence and what is not. Besides the factor of violence, the structure failed because the uprising revealed the weakened authority of the notables in their communities.

The early protests that started in Darʿa show how the implicit understanding broke down when the local security forces mishandled the situation by using unacceptable violence. The central authorities in Damascus tried to re-establish the former intermediary structure by rebuilding the broken implicit understanding, but security forces' humiliating behavior with Darʿa's notables, the mismanagement of children's files, and attempts to stop protests by firing live ammunition had violated the old understanding. This different logic of violence left little space for intermediation.

Another crucial reason that made the intermediary structure fail, as the unfolding events in Darʿa revealed, was the transformation (at least to some extent) that

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had happened on the level of notables' relationship with their families and communities. Many notables overestimated their ability to control protests in their communities, where angry crowds did not believe in reasoning with the authorities through intermediation. As counter violence against the regime's security-military forces grew, the notables effectively lost their role as mediators.

Failed Attempt to Rebuild the Old Intermediary Structure

The implicit agreement began to unravel in Darʿa with local security's mishandling of the first steps of the Syrian uprising. For at least a month, the central authorities tried to reach out to their established contacts in society with the hope of utilizing their localized authority to contain the spreading protests. Despite the breach of the old agreement by use of high levels of violence, many notables were not unreceptive. At least some elements in the regime, and some notables, believed that the intermediary structure may be able to contain the protests.

On 12 March 2011, anti-regime graffiti appeared on street walls of Darʿa. The Political Intelligence arrested 15 children, mostly underage, for spraying on their school wall.[28] Stories of arrest and torture sparked outrage. Notables from Darʿa, among them Abu Rumiyeh, formed a delegation »that matched [head of the Political Intelligence in Darʿa] ʿAtif Najib's weight« to ask for the release of the kids and make sure that the incident would not be repeated.[29] Narratives about ʿAtif Najib's involvement, the maltreatment of the children, and the notables vary.[30] What's certain, however, is that notables from Darʿa visited security officials and left the security branch humiliated. This led to small-scale angry protests in Darʿa city, which sparked the first major protest on 18 March.[31]

While protests and violence escalated, the central authorities tried through different means to re-establish the formerly existing implicit understanding with the notables. On the day of the first major protest, a delegation from Damascus, including head of the National Security Bureau Hisham Ikhtiar and head of the Syrian National Intelligence Agency Rustum Ghazala, arrived to meet some of Darʿa's notables.[32] With the escalating situation, the Syrian president himself received delegations of notables from Darʿa, and elsewhere, in the hope that these meetings might get people off the street and contain the mushrooming protests.

Many notables were not unresponsive. A delegation from Darʿa went to meet the president on 14 April to submit their demands.[33] Shaykh Ahmad al-Sayasina from Darʿa, one of the main figures who intermediated between the protestors and various representatives from the regime, was part of the delegation.[34] Prominent cleric Sarya al-Rifaʿi claimed that he and his brother, also a prominent figure, were called by President al-Asad who asked them to go to Darʿa, meet the notables, and come back with their demands.[35] Over the course of the first few months, various delegations from different parts of the country met the president.

Some notables believed that the situation could be contained through the old conflict resolution mechanism, where they played an important intermediary role, and which preserved their localized authority. »When the first two martyrs fell in Darʿa, Bashar sent money in an envelope«, one notable commented regrettably. »Had he come himself, things could have been solved over a cup of coffee.« This example underlines the notable's overconfidence in the old mechanism, which was unlikely to contain a rapidly spreading protest movement that was not an intra-social dispute but a conflict between the state and society.

This notable's view echoes with that of Abu Rumiyeh and Shaykh Ahmad al-Sayasina, two prominent figures in Darʿa. »The Hawranis were waiting for the arrival of Mr. President, his apology and condolences to the families of Hawran«, Abu Rumiyeh said during the parliamentary session on 27 March 2011. Had that been the case, nothing would have happened in Hawran »despite the [high] number of casualties«.[36] Similarly, Shaykh al-Sayasina, who was directly involved in the events, claimed to have said to the president during the 14 April meeting in Damascus: »The situation would have calmed down … had you come to Hawran, talked to its people, told them that their demands would be answered, and passed your condolences for their martyrs.«[37]

These efforts did not lead to the containment of the situation because the logic of violence had changed but also because the notables had limited authority over the angry youth who disobeyed them. The regime and, to a certain extent, the notables themselves, wrongly perceived that traditional authority, within the framework of the intermediary structure, could contain protests.

Notables Without Being Intermediaries

The security forces' different logic of violence, on one hand, and the disobedience of the youth, on the other, marginalized the role of notables as intermediaries with the ability to contain localized conflicts between the regime and society. From the first day, the security-military apparatus operated with a logic of violence that was not acceptable to either the notables or the protestors; it aimed at killing, rather than resorting to the threat of violence as a tool to contain the situation. This new logic was a breach of the unwritten agreement that existed between the regime and notables, and a blow to their role as intermediaries. It fueled counter violence among the youth who oftentimes disregarded their elders' advice and commands to deescalate the situation; this raises questions about the effectiveness of traditional authority.

After the children's episode that ended with humiliating Darʿa's notables, the second example of the changing logic of violence occurred on 18 March, during the first major protest in Syria. When law enforcement units could not control the situation, four helicopters from an anti-terrorism unit landed in Darʿa city and started randomly shooting at people.[38] This irresponsible behavior of the security forces from the very beginning created a cycle of violence that took many lives on both sides.[39] Each time the security forces and the military, which intervened at a later point, clashed with protestors there were new casualties. The next day, crowds joined the mourning families for the funerals, which turned into protests that in turn led to new casualties on both sides.

The bloody events in al-Sanamayn, in the northern part of Darʿa province, show another face of the new unacceptable logic of violence that is not tactical but deliberate, and it goes beyond the borders of what's tolerable:

> After the Friday prayer [25 March 2011], protestors gathered in front of the *makhfar* (police station). They were shouting all sorts of slogans including sectarian ones that targeted ʿAlawites. After a while, someone from the *amn*, known for being unscrupulous, took an AK-47 and shot at people. That night the security personnel that served in the town escaped.[40]

With the new logic of violence, notables could not be the regime's intermediaries in society. In other words, through open use of violence against demonstrators, the state bypassed the intermediaries to confront the social actors directly. In doing so, it caused the intermediation structure crumble from below as well. The early events in Darʿa show that hardly anyone, including notables, controlled the protesting crowds, many of whom did not necessarily believe that reasoning with the authorities through the intermediary structure could yield any results. With the increasing levels of counter violence by protestors, and later rebels, the restraining authority of the notables decreased further and so did their role as intermediaries.

Soon after the uprising began in Darʿa, it was becoming increasingly clear that no elder community member could assert authority over the protestors, including the notables who were responsive to the mediation calls of the authorities. The account of a protestor in Darʿa city, on the second day of the uprising, 19 March, is an example of that:

> The young men set off for al-ʿUmari Mosque but there was [a heavy security presence]. They were only one hundred meters away from us. Shaykh Abu Zayd [a notable involved in the protests] tried to calm us down. We didn't listen to him.[41]

There was a similar dynamic during a protest in al-Sanamayn, one day before the bloody events and at the same spot, when some protestors engaged in vandalism even though »those who led the violent acts were told not to«.[42]

To what extent many angry youths accepted their elders' intermediation is also questionable. One incident that occurred in Izrʿa, an important town in center of Darʿa province, shows that the angry crowd did not even want to listen to one of their town notables, who had been part of delegation from Darʿa that met the president on 14 April, and had a message to convey.

> After a delegation from Darʿa went to meet [president] Bashar on [14 April] the checkpoints were removed and there was a big demonstration. A *wajih* (notable), about 80 years old, [who had been part of the delegation] took the

stage and started talking: ›We went and met President Asad …‹ the crowd immediately said ›tiz[43] in al-Asad‹. The man dropped the mic and left the stage.[44]

Counter violence effectively weakened notables' role as intermediaries, and opened the way for enthusiastic youths who thought of direct violence as the only means to counter the authorities. Various accounts from Darʿa and Idlib indicate the diminishing authority of elders with the increasing levels of violence. The bloodshed was simply too much for notables to play a constructive role, as was the case with Sarya al-Rifaʿi, a prominent cleric, who admitted his inability to calm down a young man who had lost relatives and had bad history with the regime.[45]

In Saraqib, during the early protests, the security forces had a policy of not provoking big families. They used their old channels to the heads of these families to contain protests. When they saw members of a big family protesting, they did not arrest them; they called upon the family heads and told them to »come and discipline their sons«.[46] With the escalation of the situation, this tactic »worked with some families and didn't with others«, and it was eventually dropped with the increasing militarization of the uprising.[47]

Two accounts in the early days of the uprising, from Jabal al-Zawiya in Idlib province and Izraʿ city in Darʿa, also illustrate how elders tried to hold youth back from counter violence and favored reasoning with the authorities. »My grandpa was from the elders of Izrʿa«, a native from the town said. »He and pretty much all others like him warned the young guys saying, ›calm down the situation, they [the security-military apparatus] are capable of burning down everything‹.«[48] But the youth didn't listen to them, their »blood was boiling«.[49] This was also the case in Jabal al-Zawiya where »elders favored a peaceful means of conflict resolution. But after the bloodshed, [their] role receded and young men took over the armed struggle.«[50]

These examples, though crucial for hinting that a generational gap may had been forming in Syrian society before the uprising revealed it, should not be taken as a dominant trend. In fact, examples of respecting elders' decisions can also be

found both on family and individual levels. In Saraqib, two young adults, about the same age, from two known families, chose different paths when the uprising broke out. One yielded to the command of his family's elder who prohibited him and his brothers from fighting even though they »wanted to take up arms and fight with the [Syrian regular] army.«[51] Whereas the other defied his uncle who was the head of the family, and prohibited him from protesting »deriving from family interests«.[52]

Such a pattern can be found on familial level, as is the case with two large, prominent families from Saraqib. Members of one such family largely maintained their traditional stance, which could be described as neutral—neither with the regime nor with its opponents—in addition to prioritizing their material interests. Another large family, on the other hand, split along political lines: one part of the family supported the regime, and the other supported the opposition. The roots of the divide, however, go back to the pre-uprising period where one part of the latter family was close to the regime, while the other part of that family, which preferred the opposition, had suffered material losses and saw a financial opportunity in the rebellion.[53]

Ultimately, it is still hard to determine which pattern has been dominant in the uprising. But what is clearer is that the security forces' logic of resorting to unacceptable levels of violence, on one hand, and the revolutionary euphoria that made some youth difficult to control, on the other, marginalized notables as intermediaries. The transformation of relations on these two levels left the intermediary structure ineffective.

Conclusion

Before 2011, the regime, through its security forces, capitalized on the local authority of rural notables and their informal reconciliation methods to resolve local inter-family disputes—frequently encouraging social actors to resolve their differences outside of official state courts. The alternative method prevented destabilization, delivering faster and often more effective results, while perpetuating the security forces' central role in managing society. The structure, by necessity, left a narrow space for the rural intermediaries to exercise authority

over their communities. But this did not threaten the hegemony of the regime, which was guaranteed by the regime's ability to use or threaten to use coercive force.

When demonstrations against the regime began in 2011, the regime turned to notables and intermediation structures in its attempt to contain protests. The forms of violence practiced by the security forces as a response to the uprising—and the counter violence that it triggered—left the old conflict resolution mechanism ineffective, and marginalized the role of intermediaries. From the very beginning, the regime may have misjudged notables' ability to manage protestors. Uncontrollable crowds and cases of protestors' disobedience from the first weeks of protest, and their disregard for notables' intermediation efforts, are indications of the regime's misconception of traditional authority and its ability to represent and dictate to social groups »below« it. The misconception about traditional authority perhaps also applies to some of the notables as well, who were responsive to the regime's early attempts to repair the intermediary structure, where they play an important role, and overestimated the structure's ability to defuse the situation.

The armed conflict in Syria has shattered many of the rural communities that had previously been subject to this form of intermediation. Massive swathes of the population of the Darʿa countryside have been displaced outside the country, and rural Idlib was subject to several years of regime violence and civil war before becoming the prime receptor for Islamists displaced from the rest of the country by regime victories. Yet the wrenching effects on local communities have not put an end to the politics of intermediaries. On the contrary, the regime, as it gains more territory from the opposition, has been rebuilding a new intermediary structure where, like the old one, the security forces have assumed a central role in managing society. The identity of these intermediaries and the terms of their implicit bargains with the security forces are currently emerging and constitute topics for future research. What is fairly certain, however, is that the informal processes by which security forces reach into and attempt to control local society will remain relevant to governance and social life in Syria's foreseeable future.

Notes

1. Raymond Hinnebusch, »Local Politics in Syria: Organization and Mobilization in Four Villages Cases,« *Middle East Journal,* vol 30, no. 1, 1976, p.14.

2. Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for The Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 4th edition, p. 338; Ahmad Abu Saleh (former Syrian Revolutionary Command Council member), interviewed by Ahmad Mansour on *Shahed ʿala al-ʿAser* program, Aljazeera Arabic (Part 4, 30:10-30:30). https://bit.ly/2Oxvdfv

3. Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 8 September 2017; the ›settling in people's houses‹ method was confirmed by several interviewees. Skype with an activist from Saraqib, 18 August 2018; interview with a former political intelligence officer, Jordan, May 2018; Interview with a notable from Darʿa city, Jordan, 20 June 2018; interview with a former resident of a village in northern Aleppo countryside, Lebanon, December 2018

4. Skype interview with a journalist who covered the issue, August 2018; Aslim, Saʾir. »Bi-Tadakhul Min al-Wujaha' … Sulh ʿAʿilatayn Shahiratayn Tashajara ʿAla Mada Sanawat Fi Idlib [With intervention from the notables … reconciliation between two famous families who conflicted over many years in Idlib] », Aks al-Sir, 2 January 2010. https://bit.ly/2Qf0qp9

5. Telephone interview with a notable from Darʿa city, June 2018

6. Skype interview with a journalist who covered the issue, August 2018, ibid.

7. Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 8 September 2017

8. Telephone interviews with a notable from Darʿa city, April, June, 2018

9. Interview with the narrator of the story, May 2018

10. Interview with a former resident of a village in the northern Aleppo countryside, Lebanon, December 2018

11. Telephone interview with a notable from Darʿa city, June, 2018

12. Telephone interview with a retired Baʿthist from Idlib, 21 November 2018

13. Telephone interview with a notable from Darʿa city, June 2018

14. Interview with the narrator of the story, May 2018

15. Interview with a resident from al-Sanamayn, Beirut, April 2018

16. Skype interview with a journalist who covered the issue, August 2018, ibid.

17. Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 8 September 2017

18. Conversation with a religious leader from Aleppo city, 28 September 2018.

19. Skype interview with a journalist from Jabal al-Zawiya, 20 July 2017

20. Ibid.

21. Interview with a notable from northern Aleppo countryside, June 2018.

22. Nouh, Muhanad. al-Mukhtar«, *The Arab Encyclopedia*. http://www.arab-ency.com/detail/6549/المخترات

23. See: Act No. 215/1956 of »Neighborhoods Councils and Mukhtars Act«

24. Nouh, M. al-Mukhtar [al-Mukhtar], *The Arab Encyclopedia*. http://www.arab-ency.com/detail/6549/المخترات; Khawatimi, Muhammand. Wazaʿef al-Mukhtar Wa Majlis al-Haiyy [Tasks of the Mukhtar and Neighborhood Committees], 19. January 2015, *al-Jamahir*, http://jamahir.alwehda.gov.sy/node/392251

25. For example, in the (107)2011 Local Administrative Act (Article 93) these roles are clearly stated in 11 points. Except the first one, all 10 duties of the mukhtar involve population monitoring, i.e. monitoring those who have avoided compulsory military service, registering birth and death incidents, monitoring children who have dropped out of their primary education, helping the police and judicial authorities to arrest or locate a wanted person, and accompanying them to the house of the person.

26. Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 8 September 2017

27. Skype interview with a journalist who covered the issue, August 2018, ibid.

28. Barout, Muhammad Jamal. 2012. *al-ʿAqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah [The Last Decade in Syria's History: Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform]*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat. p.183

29. Telephone interview with a notable from Darʿa city, April, 2018.

30. Dukhan, Haian. 2014. »Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising«, *Syria Studies*, 6(2), pp.7-8; Orient News, *On the Road to Damascus* program, meeting with Shaykh Ahmad al-Sayasina, 28 May 2012, (min. 05:15) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSSpmjBHZLY

31. BBC News, »Middle East unrest: Three killed at protest in Syria«, 18 March 2011. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12791738; International Crisis Group, »Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution,« Middle East/North Africa Report N°108, 6/7/2011, p. 11.

32. Human Rights Watch (2011) *»We've Never Seen Such Horror« Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces*. p.8; According to Barout Ikhtiar had other meetings too. For instance, on 22 March, he met 30 prominent notables from Darʿa and the meeting was not announced.Barout, Muhammad Jamal. 2012. *al-ʿAqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah [The Last Decade in Syria's History: Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform]*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat.pp.189-190, 196.

33. International Crisis Group (2011) *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): the Syrian People's Slow-Motion Suicide*. p.4

34. Orient News, al-Tariq Ila Dimashq [The Road to Damascus] TV program, meeting with Shaykh Ahmad al-Sayasina, 28 May 2012, (min. 15:12) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSSpmjBHZLY.

35. See: Orient News, al-Tariq Ila Dimashq [The Road to Damascus] TV program, meeting with Sarya al-Rifaʿi, 2 November 2012, (min. 6:23) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnDjyiHKBGI; the fact that the president called upon al-Rifaʿi was not an isolated case. During the early phases of the uprising, at least two prominent Syria experts that the author knows personally were called by President Asad for consultation.

36. Abu Rumiyeh's intervention in the Syrian parliament. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVgt-i8fVm8 (2:10-2:27 min)

37. Orient News, al-Tariq Ila Dimashq [The Road to Damascus] TV program, meeting with Shaykh Ahmad al-Sayasina, 28 May 2012, (min. 15:12) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSSpmjBHZLY.

38. Barout, Muhammad Jamal. 2012. *al-ʿAqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah [The Last Decade in Syria's History: Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform]*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat. p.186

39. Even though the protests remained largely non-violence at the beginning of the uprising, the cycle of violence took the lives of many members of the state police, army and security forces. A graph published by the Institute for the Study of War shows the gradual increase in regime casualties. See: Joseph Holliday, *The Asad Regime: From Counter Insurgency to Civil War*, Middle East Security Report 8 (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2013), p. 28 http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf p.28; International Crisis Group (2011) *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): the Syrian People's Slow-Motion Suicide*. pp.6-8

40. Interview with a resident from al-Sanamayn, Beirut, April 2018

41. Yazbek, Samar. 2012. *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*. Haus Publishing. p.88.

42. Interview with a resident from al-Sanamayn, Beirut, April 2018

43. *Tiz* in spoken Arabic refers to disregard and derision.

44. Skype Interview with a former resident of Izrʿa, 20 April 2018

45. Orient News, al-Tariq Ila Dimashq [The Road to Damascus] TV program, meeting with Sarya al-Rifaʿi, 2 November 2012, (min. 19:30) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnDjyiHKBGI

46. Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 22 June 2017; Skype interview with an activist in Saraqib, 18 August 2018

47. Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 22 June 2017

48. Interview with a resident from Izrʿa, 20 June, 2018

49. Ibid.

50. Skype interview with a journalist from Jabal al-Zawiya, 20 July 2018

51. Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 5 September 2018

52. Skype interview with an activist from Saraqib, 17 August 2018

53. Ibid; Skype interview with a resident from Saraqib, 5 September 2018

What We Can Learn from the Rise of Local Traders in Syria

Ayman Al-Dassouky

Introduction

The approach of Hafiz al-Asad, who took power in 1970, in breaking with radical Baʿthism resulted in the emergence of unofficial business networks between the occupants of power and major owners of capital. These networks grew gradually and were reformed throughout the stages of the Syrian economy's liberalization, beginning at the start of the 1970s. Perhaps the most important of these stages was that which took place at the start of the millennium, with Bashar al-Asad's assumption of power. It resulted in the rise of a class of businessmen who pursued globalized trade, whose business networks, local and trans-local trade relations, financial wealth and position with the authorities enabled them to direct government policies and develop their economic interests.

The rise of the businessman class was accompanied by a change that was implemented discreetly and tacitly, and in local areas far from the large commercial centers in Damascus and Aleppo. Appetite for profit and expansion led these businessmen to integrate local traders into commercial companies, especially those present in medium-sized cities, i.e. those with a population of 100,000 or more; these companies and growing capital gave local traders the opportunity to be incorporated into the business networks.

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It was this economic approach that pushed a large part of the Syrian population to join the popular movement in 2011. Over time the situation slid into open conflict, which split apart Syrian geography and the national economy, clearing the way for the emergence of areas of influence and the prominence of the war economy, in which the different sides in the conflict were given the opportunity to profit. The situation that unfolded led to the increased importance of local traders in their role as suppliers of goods and middlemen between the local areas and the center. This can be seen in how they contributed to changes in the socio-economic system on a local level, and in the geo-economic outcomes which followed, which can themselves be corroborated by examining the role of the local trader in the regions of Dirʿ al-Furat and Eastern Ghouta.

Dirʿ al-Furat emerged as a Turkish area of influence in northern rural Aleppo in spring 2017. Local traders in this area, whose point of focus moved from Aleppo to Turkey, played a role in the shift in the economic center of gravity from Aleppo to Gaziantep, and likewise in what this shift meant in terms of reconstruction, the formation of trade networks, and their centers of gravity in Syria, Turkey and the wider region.

Eastern Ghouta, meanwhile, is an area on the outskirts of Damascus, which was retaken by the Syrian regime in spring 2018 following years of besiegement. The siege impacted the area's economic infrastructure and contributed to the emergence of business networks driven by local traders. Among the most prominent of such traders was Mohhieddine al-Manfoush; he was recognized as the leading contractor extorting additional duties on goods passing through this frontier, and it was through him that the regime controlled the economy of Ghouta and put a decisive end to the battle there. This put Manfoush in the favor of the regime, which incorporated him into its business networks, a process that took place in phases and through unofficial channels.

The war created an opportunity for local traders to consolidate their role as middlemen within the emerging economic hierarchies, on a local level. Their ownership of wealth, their favor with central powers and their potential role in the period of reconstruction, has strengthened their existence for decades to come as key players in local politics.

I. Business Networks: From Centralization to Decentralization

As Hafiz al-Asad took power, business networks governed by a duality of opportunities and risks emerged. They gradually shifted from centralized to decentralized networks, in the context of the liberalization of the Syrian economy. The fragmentation and disruption of the economy born of the conflict contributed to the networks' decentralization, through the integration of the central with the local, and thus consolidating the role of the local traders as middlemen.

The Emergence of the Business Networks

Hafiz al-Asad took power in 1970, and implemented an approach that would put an end to radical Baʿthism and establish a new political legitimacy for his regime. This required him to open up to conservative and urban bourgeois powers, while at the same time he was hindered by long-standing political animosity towards the owners of capital, and was concerned about the risks of opening up to them. The solution was to establish selective, unofficial relationships with representatives of these powers in order to avoid them becoming a threat to him, and to help create an economic elite that was organically connected with him. This resulted in the emergence of complex, unofficial business networks between those in power and the owners of capital, starting from the 1970s.[1] As for the membership of these networks, it was cross-sectarian and represented a coalition of the establishment, capitalists and bureaucrats, with survival within these networks dependent on personal loyalty to Hafiz al-Asad.[2]

The networks were subject to a restructuring which extended to its users, their relationships, and their centers of power. This mostly took place during stages of the liberalization of the Syrian economy; in the state-led growth stage (1970-77) the relationships were restricted to the regime's top elites in its military, security and political class (i.e. the bourgeois bureaucracy), and a number of major owners of capital (i.e. the commercial bourgeois of the state) such as the troika of Saʾib Nahhas, ʿUthman al-ʿAidi and ʿAbd al-Rahman al-ʿAttar.[3] In the stage of government austerity (1978-85), these networks expanded with the

addition of representatives from top-level bureaucracy and public-sector leaders, and newcomers who stockpiled their wealth through illegal shadow-economy activities, such as the president's brother Rifaat al-Asad. They did so during two periods, one being the intervention in Lebanon and the other being the foreign cash crisis in the 1980s.[4]

In the next stage, namely the second opening up of the economy (1986-2000), a new class of businessmen was added to these networks: those whose growth was linked to the export of goods abroad. Also added were members of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and their successors for whom the opening up of the economy, as per Investment Law 10, presented an opportunity to merge their capital with the Syrian economy through setting up service-based projects. By the 1990s, the representatives of these networks had become members of parliament, members of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and members of the Advisory Committee.[5]

Business Networks at the Start of the Millennium

The business networks were subject to further restructuring in the mid-1990s, before taking final shape in 2005, the year in which Bashar al-Asad consolidated power far from the influence of the old guard. The regime took apart the existing networks and formed new ones which were more closely linked to Bashar and his allies. This led to a number of the economic elite losing their positions within these networks, such as the protégés of the traditional corrective current, who lost the majority of their positions in 2006, after vice president ʿAbd al-Halim Khaddam fled abroad. Businessmen who were opposed to the rise of Bashar al-Asad likewise lost their positions within these networks, such as Riad Sayf,[6] whereas there was an increased presence of liberalizers, most prominently Rami Makhluf, who belonged to one of two coalitions, that of Cham Holding[7] or that of Surya Holding.[8] They had benefitted from the liberalization measures, which broke down the monopoly of the state into multiple sectors of production, and so too from the government's reliance on them as ways through which to draw in both Gulf and Syrian financial surpluses for investment and raising growth rates. The Gulf surpluses were estimated at 281.1 billion dollars, and those of Syria were 135 billion dollars, in 2005.[9]

The liberalization of the economy to the advantage of global businessmen led to the growth of the local traders' role, given their centrality in expansion and profit generation. The focus was mainly on local traders in medium-sized cities, i.e. those with a population 100,000 or more, who had local trade networks and a distinct location in the local market. They were therefore relied upon as agents for the large-scale traders, known colloquially as *hitan*,[10] whose businesses were primarily based in the two main centers of commerce, Aleppo and Damascus. Often, they would grant exclusive agency, which would be passed down in what were effectively closed groups; the relationship between the large-scale trader and his local agent would comprise a kind of patronage in return for the latters' distribution, such as granting him trade benefits, which would include discounts and the possibility of exchanging or even returning goods in cases where they were not sold. There were also financial benefits such as the offering of soft loans to deal with financial problems or to expand a commercial business. Further to this was the provision of security protection and bureaucratic get-outs by virtue of the leading traders' relationship with the elite of the regime.[11] This partnership and patronage allowed the local traders to accumulate capital and enter into business networks.

The business networks became the main characteristic of the Syrian political economy,[12] against the background of the shrinking role of the state on an economic level, with the percentage of private sector contribution to GDP increasing from 40 per cent in 1970 to around 65 per cent in 2010. To a certain extent, these networks are considered responsible for the developmental and economic crises that triggered the popular movement in 2011, given their monopolizing nature and their investment style, which targeted quick-profit sectors. According to businessman Haytham Jud, the first of these sectors is trade and transit, followed by tourism—which is Syria's oil—and the service sector, then agriculture and finally industry.[13]

Decentralized Business Networks

During, and as a result of, the conflict, the networks were weakened, and they were re-formed through the reconstruction of the central level and its integration with the local level. The centers of power at the presidential palace went about

restructuring the business networks at the central level,[14] eliminating those who showed reluctance in their support of the regime, such as Imad Ghreiwati.[15] By contrast, businessmen who were able to manage their private (and state-linked) businesses gained new partnerships and were granted patronage. Prominent names emerged, such as up-and-coming businessman Samer al-Fawz, who was backed by Major General Dhu al-Himma Shalish,[16] while businessman Mohammad Hamsho—favored by Maher al-Asad—faded in significance and was targeted by American and Western economic sanctions and shunned internally by competing businessmen, all of whom were close with a center of power in the presidential palace.

Likewise, the palace's centers of power and its economic elite made indirect trade links with influential local traders, whose importance grew because of the disintegration of the central economy, and they found in these traders partners for the management of their commercial operations and evasion of the sanctions system. They relied on the local traders to enter the growing local business networks to secure the continuation of their trade activities and get locally sourced products. They likewise looked to influence the economy on the local level, and relying on the traders to make local deals, related to border management and transit of goods, without having to play a direct, visible role.

Local trader Hussam al-Qatirji is an example of how the central was merged with the local; Rami Makhluf entered into an unofficial trade partnership contract with al-Qatirji to make local deals in oil and wheat in his own interest, given al-Qatirji's network of local contacts in the northern and eastern region. In return, his commercial businesses in Aleppo and the eastern region were backed by Makhluf, he was given security protection and he was granted a political role, becoming a member of the Syrian parliament.[17]

The business networks, in their first phase, were restricted to large-scale businessmen and the upper echelons of the regime, personal allegiance to Hafiz al-Asad being a condition of membership. The networks gradually grew to include new members coming from diverse backgrounds. Last to enter these networks, perhaps, were the local traders, with whom the influential centers of gravity at the palace made trade links through unofficial channels; it was with this that

decentralized business networks emerged. Each network was linked with a center of power at the palace, with survival continuing to be based upon on allegiance to the palace, which represented the heart of the regime.

II. Aleppo's Winter, Gaziantep's Spring

Aleppo is considered the economic center of northern Syria, given its reliance on its own industrial base and commercial networks. It remained as such even after its links with Damascus were upheaved following independence. It lost this position during, and as a result of, the conflict, to the benefit of other cities that were previously part of its wider metropolis, and which succeeded in embracing and linking with Aleppo's local traders.

The Economic Standing of Aleppo

On both an administrative and economic level, Aleppo was one of the most important Ottoman provinces due to the expansion of its wider metropolis to the east of Syria and the south-east of Turkey.[18] Its position weakened as the size of this area shrunk, owing to newly formed borders and subsequent administrative measures, which turned it from a state into a governorate. The governorate answered to the center Damascus and its administrative area shrunk from 86,000km^2 as a province to 18,482km^2 as a governorate. Following independence, Aleppo's economic and political standing saw ebbs and flows. It retained its parallel importance to Damascus in the first stage of independence, because of its political importance (e.g., The People's Party based in the city) and economic importance (e.g., Five Hajjis Group).[19] However, its position was damaged in the period of unification with Egypt and the rule of the radical Baʿath Party in the early 1960s, which marginalized it politically,[20] and weakened it economically with the nationalization of its capital. The situation did not greatly change in Hafiz al-Asad's time, against the backdrop of the traditional bourgeois elite's conflict with the recently established pro-regime elite and its political position on the events of the 1980s. This remained the case until the traditional elite became economically marginalized and retreated from competition during what remained of Hafiz's rule.

Aleppo's economy began to prosper at the start of the millennium, as demonstrated by its percentage contribution to Syria's GDP; according to Aleppo's Chamber of Commerce, it reached 24 per cent, i.e., about 15 billion dollars of the 60 billion dollars which made up the GDP in 2011. This was the result of its production activity, evidenced in its having 50 per cent of the total labor force and industrial exports,[21] and 30 per cent of Syrian industrial facilities. It furthermore gained a considerable portion of investments, with capital of over half a billion Syrian pounds (SYP); it gained 18 out of Syria's 63 investment projects—i.e., a share of 28 per cent—with total capital exceeding 15.5 billion SYP. Such prosperity would not have been possible had the regime not opened up to Aleppo's economic elite in its endeavor to attract financial surpluses from abroad. It would also not have been possible had the Aleppo traders not activated their commercial networks, both in their local and trans-local manifestations. They relied on Aleppo's industrial base, given its role as the stopping point for re-exporting across its wider metropolis, extending out to the east and west of Syria, and extending later to the north as it opened up to the Turkish market.[22]

Aleppo's Marginalization

Aleppo's traders were able to link with its wider metropolis through commercial networks made up of central ports containing cities with a population of 100,000 or more. These were al-Bab, Manbij, A'zaz and ʿAfrin. They also contained peripheral cities with a population of less than 100,000, namely Mari', Atarib, Darat ʿAzza, al-Zirba and al-Safira. In these cities, the traders linked their businesses to Aleppo city, and were effectively ports through which to reach Aleppo's extended wider metropolis.

The local traders residing in these cities took it upon themselves to activate these commercial networks. They were effectively, one local trader put it, the lifeblood connecting the heart to the extremities through their connections to Aleppo's large-scale businessmen, whether importers of goods from abroad or manufacturers and exporters of goods. These connections are attractive for local traders, given their wish to access goods monopolized by the aforementioned businessmen, as well as protection and patronage of their businesses; as one local trader put it, »they«, meaning the large businessmen, »are the state«.[23]
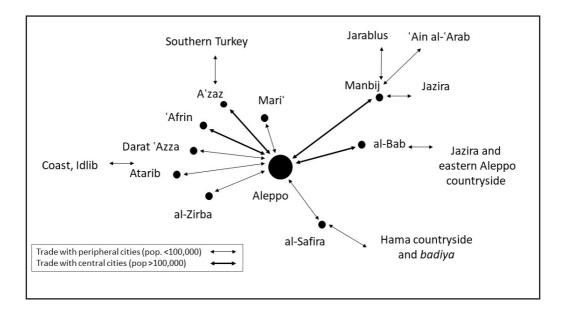
Figure 1: Main lines of trade networks in Aleppo before 2011

In parallel to this, the local traders themselves had an added value to the large-scale businessmen of Aleppo, evidenced by the latters' competing to attract these traders; they considered them »their guys«, a term used as shorthand for the relationship between them. This relationship includes the provision of security protection and economic backing, and defense of them if necessary by supplying them whatever needed to stay in the local market. This was driven by the large-scale traders' desire to strengthen their commercial standing in the face of their rivals, and to get rid of their financial surpluses through the local trader networks without needing to rely on other structures which would take time and involve financial cost.[24]

The business networks remained active, to a certain extent, during the first year of the popular uprising. This changed from the summer of 2012, when the opposition factions launched the battles of Rural Aleppo and took control of the border crossings with Turkey. With this ended the brief period of prosperity that Aleppo had enjoyed owing to new arrivals from other areas; approximately 300,000 people had arrived, reviving the real estate sector and commercial markets.[25] Aleppo's economic struggle began with the breakdown of industrial

production networks; the migration of a large number of its traders (estimated by Aleppo's Chamber of Commerce at 50 per cent)[26]; the migration of a large number of its manufacturers (estimated by the head of the Chamber of Industry for Damascus and Rural Damascus, Bassil Hammudi, at 90 per cent)[27]; and the city's split into regime-held and opposition-held areas. Perhaps the city's hardship and regression were exacerbated by the breakdown of its networks with the surrounding areas and the loss of its connection to its geographical countryside. This area is currently divided between the area of Turkish influence, Dirʿ al-Furat, which emerged following Turkey's success in driving out ISIS from the cities and towns of Aleppo's northern countryside in March 2017, and two areas of influence, one in Manbij controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the other in western rural Aleppo controlled by armed opposition factions.

The war added a new group of local traders from different backgrounds who flocked to Dirʿ al-Furat; the fact that they made renewed trade links with Turkey majorly impacted the shift of the economic center of gravity from Aleppo to Gaziantep. Trade movement was energized in Dirʿ al-Furat, attracting agricultural landowners to make their living there given their inability to invest in their lands. It also encouraged armed actors to trade, as it was a way to make a quick profit and increase their social standing. Moreover, it attracted incoming local traders, especially from the eastern area, with the aim of turning a profit. All of them repositioned themselves in terms of location during the conflict, both within Aleppo province and outside it, based on their assessment of the opportunities to profit and the risks. Some preferred to stay inside Aleppo province, heading to the safe border cities, in order to facilitate their entrance to the Turkish market without the risk of losing their local networks; meanwhile others chose to stay where they were and adapt to the new situation, because of their inability to leave and the fear of losing their financial assets and their connections if they left the area. Still others, meanwhile, decided to seek refuge in Turkey in the search for security and pursuit of larger investment opportunities.
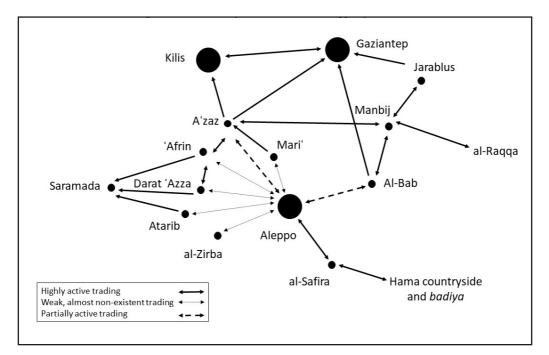
Figure 2: Main lines of trade networks in Aleppo after 2012

The Gaziantep Economy

Gaziantep is one of the Turkish states bordering Syria. It used to be part of the state of Aleppo in the Ottoman sultanate, before it was separated and became part of modern-day Turkey, with an area of approximately 7.642km^2 and an economy based on industrial production. The state became one of the preferred destinations for Syrian refugees, particularly those from Aleppo; it is the fourth largest destination among its Turkish counterparts with the number of refugees who sought refuge there at 392,998, out of the 3,548,273 refugees officially registered with the Turkish authorities in 2018.[28] This is owing to its geographical proximity to Aleppo province, just 90km away, their historical ties and the economic relationship between Aleppo and Gaziantep, which was set in motion by a Syria-Turkey commerce agreement in 2006 and the mutual scrapping of visas between the two countries in 2009. Gaziantep gained greater importance after the opposition factions gained control of the three border crossings in summer 2012, and also benefitted from the disintegration of Aleppo's trade networks and the erosion of its industrial capacities. It attracted a number of traders and

manufacturers from Aleppo, with the number of registered Syrian companies in Gaziantep increasing from 12 in 2011 to 1,247 in 2017, according to a report by Gaziantep's Chamber of Commerce.[29]

Yet it was not only these that were responsible for the relative economic prosperity of the city; the local traders at the central gates and surrounding cities had a role linking the locally emergent trade networks with Gaziantep, which meant that Turkish goods and those produced in Gaziantep found their way deep into Syria's internal market and as well to the Iraqi market via Syria. This can be demonstrated by the increase in Gaziantep's trade with Syria by 411 per cent between 2012 and 2013, from $54.4m in 2012 to $278.3m in 2013.[30] The figure continued to rise and reached $386.4m in 2017 with a 19.74 per cent increase in exports from 2016.[31] This is corroborated by a description by one of the local traders from that period; he said: »You could see for yourself the queue of commercial lorries from the Bab al-Salama crossing towards the Turkish city of Kilis stretching back around 10km.«[32]

Local traders in their networks and Aleppan traders and manufacturers residing in Gaziantep participated in the revival of the city. This is reflected in the Gaziantep's economic indicators; it was the fifth largest manufacturing city in 2018, exceeding the manufacturing output of Ankara, and likewise its foreign trade share of Turkey's total trade reached 4.45 per cent in 2017 ($6.56bn), exceeding the exports of three states combined, namely Denizli, Konya and Kayseri. This is shown in the below table, taken from the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, on the role of Syrians in the revival of the state economy, who were considered almost ambassadors of Turkey for the Arab world.[33]

Year	2000		2005		2010		2015		2017	
City	Export (1000s of $)	(%)	Export (1000s of $)	(%)	Export (1000s of $)	(%)	Export (1000s of $)	(%)	Export (1000s of $)	(%)
Gaziantep	420,108	1.51	1,746,030	2.38	3,593,632	3.16	6,270,202	4.7	6,522,854	4.45
Kayseri	255,472	0.92	580,655	0.79	1.137.476	1.00	1,581,953	1.2	1,613,872	1.10
Konya	96,193	0.35	424,051	0.5	994.569	0.87	1,373,312	1.0	1,564,646	1.07
Denizli	480,000	1.7	1,506,929	2.05	2.209.583	1.9	2,523,669	1.9	3,067,302	2.09

Table 1: The movement of exports from a number of Turkish cities between 2000 and 2017[34]

The importance of local traders motivated Turkey to institutionalize its relationship with them in two distinct ways. First, a number of those who established projects and set up investments in Turkey were given nationality, and they then gave them preferential treatment in their trade with Syria, and added them to the Turkish chambers of commerce. Secondly, Turkey inferred that the local councils[35] in the Dirʿ al-Furat area should establish chambers of commerce »in Turkish fashion«, and made it a condition on the local traders wanting to trade with Turkey to register in these chambers, whose fees differed from one area to another. They also linked these chambers to their counterparts in Turkey, just as they linked the administrative governing of the two areas known as Dirʿ al-Furat and Ghusn al-Zeitoun with Turkey's border states, and linked the cities of al-Bab, Jarabulus and al-Raʿi with the state of Gaziantep.

The transformation of the local trade networks and the institutionalization of Turkey's relationship with them played their part in bringing about Aleppo's »winter« and Gaziantep's »spring« on the level of their economies. It does not seem that the traders of Aleppo will be able return there in the near future, and even if they returned, their interaction with the city would be different. This is what one local trader living in Gaziantep expressed when he said: »Aleppo will not return to how it was before; and if it does it will be as a branch for my business and not a center for it.«[36]

III. Local Traders as the Decisive Factor in the Battle of Ghouta

The Syrian regime regained control of Eastern Ghouta in April 2018 after years of besiegement, which impacted the area's local economy and brought about new business networks that were driven by the local traders. Some traders were able to integrate into the regime's business networks, while at the same time being barred from gaining any political power, whereas those newly engaged in the protest movement of their local neighborhood were met with exile. It was this that subsequently decided the battle for Damascus in the face of Ghouta's ambitions.

Ghouta's Local Economy and its Connection to the Center

Eastern Ghouta has an area of approximately 185km^2 across four geographical areas, namely Duma, al-Awsat, al-Janoubi and al-Marj. As for its local economy, it derives its strength from the diversity of the activity in its economic centers—the most important of which is located on the motorway connecting with al-Janubi—and from the inter-reliance of its units on the production of certain goods such as furniture. It is furthermore where the depots of Damascus and Rural Damascus traders are located, and is a source of trained laborers.[37]

The Ghouta economy was affected by the housing boom of 2006, and so too by the consequent rise of a class of real estate trader, owing to the pull of the area for newcomers. Some were those whose economic ventures were damaged by the government's economic liberalization policies, while others were drawn in by the opportunity to make a fast profit in real estate, since, as one local trader put it, there is nothing more profitable than construction.[38] This group was expanded with the inclusion of agricultural land owners, who by virtue of the laws issued were granted the possibility of investing in communal land.[39] One local trader expressed this by saying: »The smallest farmer in Ghouta among the agricultural land owners was transformed into a trader—all he had to do was sell his land and set up an investment project, or enter into a partnership with one of the construction traders.«[40]

The awareness in Eastern Ghouta of its economic weight, geographical spread and unjust marginalization by the government led it to demand a relationship of greater independence from the central authority in Damascus. This came to light in a proposal submitted by residents of Ghouta to the governor of Rural Damascus, demanding Ghouta become an independent governorate. The proposal was rejected, and the government continued to pass economic and administrative measures justified as being positive steps in the development of Ghouta and management of its service crises. A local political activist, meanwhile, had a different view; he considered the measures as a way to tighten the grip on Ghouta, by breaking down its local markets and restricting the services there.[41]

The cities and towns of Eastern Ghouta were involved early on in the popular movement in 2011. The regime tried to contain the movement by meeting with delegations and assigning local brokers, among them traders, to calm the streets; this was not successful given that they were considered to be from »the regime's lot«, as local activists phrased it. The situation on the ground started to escalate, culminating in a siege and with it the profound change it engendered in terms of the local economy of Ghouta. This was apparent in the way in which the nature of the activity of its economic centers and centers of gravity changed, and through the formation of new business networks driven by local traders. One of the traders of Ghouta summed up the extent of the change by saying: »Ghouta has never before farmed wheat, but we are now forced to, as a result of the siege.«[42]

The Manfoush Phenomenon

New business networks emerged in Eastern Ghouta during, and because of, the conflict, and these were driven by traders of different backgrounds. The regime succeeded in linking itself to these traders and making them economically reliant upon it, and chose to clear the way for a select number to enter its business networks, without giving them any significant political influence. It was in this way that the regime was able to control the nascent local business networks in Ghouta.

The evolution of trade in the Ghouta passed through three stages; the first was between the spring of 2011 and the summer of 2012, and was dominated by

open trade with Damascus; the second stage lasted from summer 2012 until the autumn of 2013 and was dictated by restricted trade across checkpoints and crossings, which were corridors for transportation in the militarily monitored buffer zone between the regime-controlled area and the opposition-controlled area. The third stage consisted of the siege economy, which extended from the end of 2013 until the spring of 2018 and which was dominated by trade through tunnels and crossings.[43]

The damage wrought on the production process and the restriction on the movement of trade in Ghouta during the siege led to Ghouta's increased dependence on Damascus to meet its needs in terms of consumer goods. The siege economy had led to the emergence of a class of diverse local traders who were in control of the entry of goods into Ghouta, the most prominent of whom was Mohhieddine al-Manfoush, who was also widely known as Abu Ayman. Manfoush was not particularly well known in Eastern Ghouta before 2011, at which time the 40 year old had been content with trading dairy products in his town of Misraba with capital not exceeding 20 million SYP at that time.[44]

Manfoush continued to export his factory products to Damascus without restriction until the summer of 2012, from which time until autumn of 2013 he began making joint agreements with two sides of the Wafidin crossing; these comprised exporting goods at no cost and importing goods at cost.[45] These gave him the opportunity to get his products out and bring in what he needed for his factory, namely fodder and fuel. Meanwhile, his name gained considerable prominence during the siege of Ghouta, as he became the most prominent contractor for importing goods through the Wafidin crossing, as per an agreement to pay additional, extortionate duties for the import of a particular amount and type of goods during the agreed upon period. The culmination of this was the »five-thousand-ton contract« made in this informal fashion, the amount of which reached 2,000 SYP for each kilo. It was this that allowed Manfoush to accumulate capital to the extent that he reached the ranks of the large-scale local traders, or *hajji*, as the residents of Ghouta would describe him. At this point he was able to expand his commercial business in Rural Damascus to the sectors of building and construction and real estate,[46] while some residents talked about his ownership of commercial businesses in other countries as well.[47]

Manfoush's name would not have gained prominence had he not been engaged by the palace.[48] This was a process that largely happened in different stages, in which high-ranking officers in the security services and the army played a role in his security recommendation to the palace, while the large-scale traders facilitated his integration into the regime's business networks.

At the start of the protest movement, Manfoush sided against the regime; he was a member of the local council of the town of Misraba between 2012 and the beginning of 2013, before reconsidering his relationship with the local opposition authorities in Ghouta and retreating from his work with the local council. It was after this that his name emerged as a contractor with the One Million Barrier, also called the Wafidin crossing. This could have happened on the suggestion of a security officer who had a good relationship with Manfoush,[49] and it was perhaps he who recommended him to the palace. Another possibility is that Manfoush was able to build links with officers from the Republican Guard and later the Fourth Brigade, who were responsible for managing the Wafidin crossing, and that it was through these ties that he was able to reach the palace.[50]

Both narratives give the impression of the centrality of high-ranking officers in the recommendation of Manfoush and his engagement by the palace. He would be in charge of the contract to pay extortionate duties, according to the account of one local trader, who said: » He would announce the bid for the duty contracts (ʿuqud al-atawa) under the supervision of the palace, and all traders participating would have links to influential officers and businessmen, whereby they would deposit the amount for securing the contract in the central bank, in dollars, for the announcement to be made later on which trader had presented the highest offer.[51]

The duty contract would not be given to local traders, among them Manfoush, directly, rather it would be given as an investment to one of the large-scale businessmen who would in turn grant the contract to the local traders. This way, an unofficial relationship grew between the two sides, which contributed to the integration of local traders into the regime's business networks. Most of the stories circulated indicate that businessman George Haswani was granted the duty contracts of Ghouta.[52] Later, the name of up-and-coming businessman Wasim Qattan became known, after Haswani was targeted by Western and American

sanctions in 2015.[53]

Manfoush was able to outrun the competition and gained the largest number of duty contracts, and this would not have happened if it were not for the palace's continued use of him, as well as his trade experience. He did face fierce competition from the tunnel traders (from 2014 to May 2017) and from Duma's traders' alliance. However, his dependence on a key center of gravity within the palace at the time that the patrons of his rivals were growing weaker,[54] and his experience in managing trade businesses, enabled him to carry on while his rivals collapsed. The regime could, through duty contracts, link itself to Ghouta's traders in a network of unofficial relationships, and this is what gave it the ability to control the economy of the area; Manfoush was able to make everyone in Ghouta depend on him, and as one said: »Without Manfoush we would not be able to work.« Likewise, Manfoush established trade networks for himself within Ghouta made up of traders and distributors, in which traders of his town and those who had traded with him before 2011 had preferential treatment with regard to the price and quality of the goods. This connection had both political and economic benefits that were manifested in the protection of these traders from the vengeance of the regime, as well as the prosperity of their trade businesses during the years of the siege. Meanwhile, those who refused to cooperate with Manfoush and those who supported Ghouta's popular movement were cast off as »terrorists«.[55]

The palace's engagement of Manfoush, and the privilege they granted him in duty contracts, came at a price. Manfoush carried out a census of the residents of Ghouta using the ration cards distributed through local councils, and it seems that this information made its way to the regime, according to a relief worker. Manfoush also played a role in promoting the regime institutions, with one worker in the local councils saying:

> We were displaced from al-Marj to Misraba, and we requested to rent out a school for a second shift to teach the children from our area, with an amended curriculum from that of the regime; Manfoush offered to provide assistance, including securing the salaries for the teachers, with the condition that we teach the regime curriculum and send the same teachers as in Damascus. We refused this.[56]

Manfoush's influence remained on an economic level without gaining significant political influence, with his role restricted to mediating to get certain detainees released, and smooth over the situation of some of those close to him. Meanwhile, he was unsuccessful at mediation in his own town of Misraba, because of the opposition factions' refusal, and the regime's invasion of the town. At the same time, the regime gave him a license to build three factories to produce breeze blocks in Harasta, Salima and al-Maliha in Rural Damascus,[57] yet the regime also prevented him from putting himself up for the local elections in Misraba, preferring to depend on the Baʿthists who had been living outside the town throughout the conflict of Eastern Ghouta.[58]

Conclusion: A New Socio-economic System

The depth of the ongoing economic transformations, and the emerging influential powers at the local level, were recognized by both Damascus and Ankara. It was this which led them to embrace the local trader class, and while they had the same aim, the two countries differed in what was driving their actions and in the tools they used. Ankara was looking for opportunities to develop its economy, the only way to do this being to attract capital and expand trade, and it found its answer in the traders of Dirʿ al-Furat in northern rural Aleppo. These traders, to some extent, participated in the economic revival of Gaziantep, and its gaining of prominence as a regional economic hub at the expense of a diminishing Aleppo. In order to guarantee its impact over the long term, Ankara decided to institutionalize its relationship with these traders by giving them nationality and managing its relationship with them through official channels.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime resorted to emulating the old rules in integrating the local traders with its business networks. It did this through unofficial channels, and in stages, in which the high-ranking officers had a role in choosing the traders and recommending them to the palace. This led to them being taken on by the palace, and to the creation of tacit commercial and business networks between the two sides. This contributed to the decentralization of the business networks by integrating the central level with the local level, and this change guaranteed for the local traders, among them Manfoush, economic prestige without being concurrently granted a political role.

The role of local traders grew as middlemen in the emerging socio-economic system. This was the result of an extended process of change which started with the Syrian government's economic liberalization policies at the beginning of the millennium. The war accelerated these and exposed their outcomes openly, whereas they had previously taken place behind closed doors. The local traders are not considered a homogenous social group, and a coherent unity on a social level is not likely to take shape. They are divergent in their social background, their economic interests, their political leaning and their relationship with the central powers. Yet this does not negate the local traders' rise to their central standing as players on the local political-economic scene for future decades, especially given their wealth and their prestige with the central authorities as middlemen, and likewise their potential role in the reconstruction process.

Notes

1. For more information see Haddad, Bassam (2011): *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

2. Rifaat al-Asad did not lose his place in this network because of his involvement in corruption and smuggling deals, but because of his attempt to form an independent center of authority and a challenge to the authority of the president. For more information see Perthes, Volker (1995): *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*. New York: I.B. Tauris. p. 153.

3. Haddad, Bassam. »The Syrian Regime's Business Backbone.« *Middle East Report*, no. 262 (2012): 26-27.

4. Barout, Muhammad Jamal (2012): *al-'Aqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah [The Last Decade in Syria's History: Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform]*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat, edition 1 2010, pp. 62-63.

5. Sottimano, Aurora (2016): »The Syrian Business Elite: Patronage Networks and War Economy.«*SyriaUntold* (blog). September 24, 2016; available at http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2016/09/the-syrian-business-elite-patronage-networks-and-war-economy/

6. Dahi, Omar *al-Sulta al-Siyasiyya Wa-l-Shabakat al-Iqtisadiya Fi Suriya [Political Authority and Business Networks in Syria]*, Biddayat magazine, Issue Two / Summer 2012; available at https://bit.ly/2NSTWes

7. Cham Holding company, al-Iqtisadi website; available at https://bit.ly/2MA8ezS

8. Suriya Holding company, al-Iqtisadi website; available at https://bit.ly/2BuhiQg

9. Barout, Muhammad Jamal (2012): *al-ʿAqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah The Past Decade in Syria's History: Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat, edition 1 2010, pp. 44-61.

10. *al-Hitan* is a term commonly used in Syria which describes the large-scale businessmen and traders who control the trade markets and the economy, on a national or regional (such as governorates) level.

11. Interview by social media between author and Ghiath Dakk al-Bab, a former local trader and head of the local council in Menagh, May 2018.

12. An analysis of a sample of 100 owners of big businesses in Syria in 2010 sheds light on the economic elites of the businessmen-state networks which were present prior to the popular movement, with the list not including the businessmen of the ruling family and their close allies. Twenty-three per cent are sons of officials, or their partners or their representatives, while 48 per cent are new businessmen who have close ties to state officials at different levels and from different backgrounds. Then 22 per cent are protégés of old trading families, with the remaining seven per cent being businessmen working outside Syria. In terms of categorization by sect, 64 per cent are considered Sunni, 15 per cent Alawi, 14 per cent Christian, and one per cent Shiʿa, while none of them is Druze, Ismaili or Kurdish. Source: Bishara, Azmi (2013): *Suriya, Darb al-Alam Nahwa al-Hurriya: Muhawalah Fi al-Tarikh al-Rahin [Syria, a Path to Freedom from Suffering: An Attempt in Contemporary History]*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat. p. 311

13. Al-Iqtisad's dialogue with businessman Haytham Jud about the priorities of the Syrian economy, 1.7.2011; available at https://bit.ly/2MU8c5i

14. »The presidential palace«, or »the palace« is a common phrase to describe the powers that influence the decision-making process in Syria; these powers include the Asad, Makhluf, Shalish and Akhras families, and important security and military officers.

15. Damascene businessman Imad Ghreiwati was among the most prominent founders of the construction company al-Sham and also the Sham Holding company and al-Sharq bank. He was also considered the largest agent for importing and accumulating cars in Syria. He had the position of the head of the Chamber of Industry for Damascus and Rural Damascus for two consecutive terms before resigning at the end of 2012 and leaving Syria.

16. Businessman Samer Zahir al-Fawz is from the governorate of Latakia and owns a number of investments inside and

outside Syria, and among the most prominent of his companies is Aman Holding which signed an investment contract with the Damascus governorate to invest in the area of Marota City, a building project authorized by the 2012 law known as Decree Number 66. His name was made prominent after Major General Dhu al-Himma Shalish gave patronage to his businesses. Dhu al-Himma is considered the cousin of President Bashar al-Asad, the head of his personal guard and the manager of his office (information based upon a conversation between the researcher and one of the businessmen living in Syria via social media, September 2018).

17. Interview by the author with a Syria journalist, who is a specialist in economic affairs, via social media, June 2018. For more information on al-Qatirji and his companies, see profile of Hussam al-Qatirji, al-Iqtisadi website; available at https://bit.ly/2NxJXqL

18. For more information on the administrative arrangements of Aleppo during the Ottoman period, see Abdallah, Hussein Ali and Shaltagh, Ban Rawi (2015): *al-Taqsimat al-Idariyya Li-Wilayat Halab 1866–1918 [Administrative Divisions of Aleppo State 1866–1918]* al-Qadisiya University, Journal of Babylon for Humanities, vol. 5/ Issue 1, pp. 62-72.

19. 19. This includes a group of businessmen in Aleppo, among them al-Hajj Kamil Haykal, Tawfiq al-Hajj ʿAli Khadir, Abu al-Nour Hamami and Nuri al-Hakim, and they established an financial investment portfolio for the acquisition or formation of companies, see Barout, Muhammad Jamal (2012): *al-ʿAqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah [The Past Decade in Syria's History: Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform]*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat, pp. 67.

20. This can be seen by examining the number of Aleppan ministers, whereby their share of the total number of members of the governments reduced from 20 per cent during the governments formed between 1942 and 1958 to 14 per cent. This saw a relative increase in the period before the Baʿthist coup and increased to 20 per cent of all members of governments formed between 1963 and 1966, and started to decrease significantly in the following period; out of the members of governments formed between 1963 and 1995 it was no more than eight per cent. For further information, see the annexes in Dam, Nikolaos van. 2011[1979]. *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Baʿth Party*. London: I. B. Tauris.

21. What Has Syria Lost With the Destruction of Aleppo? *The Syrian Observer* (16.12.2016); available at https://bit.ly/2wsEFpg

22. According to Barout, the development of Turkish-Syrian relations had a positive effect on Aleppo, as it took the largest portion of Turkish capital (Turkish investors made up 40 per cent of the foreign investors in the industrial zone in Aleppo, according to data from Aleppo's Chamber of Commerce in 2010). It also regained control of part of its historical market, as well as the ability of its manufacturers and traders to avoid the negative impact of the opening up of the economy to Turkey, by virtue of their experience, and Aleppo's trade style being long-term trade. For more see Barout, Mohammad Jamal: *al-ʿAqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah [The Past Decade in Syrian History / The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform]*, p. 374. By contrast, the president of Aleppo's Chamber of Industry Faris al-Shihabi had a different view, whereby he welcomed the ending of the free trade agreement with Turkey in 2011, considering it an opportunity to sort out the economic and industrial situation which had been worsened by this agreement.

23. Interview by author with local trader currently living in Turkey, via social media, June 2018.

24. Interview by author with a local trader from northern Rural Aleppo living in Gaziantep, via social media, June 2018

25. Barout, Mohammad Jamal (2012): *al-ʿAqd al-Akhir Fi Tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyat al-Jumud Wa-l-Islah [The Past Decade in Syrian History: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform]*, p. 380

26. 26. Hamidi, Saleh: Dabbagh: Nisf Tujjar Halab Kharij Suriya [Dabbagh: Half of Aleppo's Traders Are Outside Syria], *al-Watan al-Suriya*, (24.4.2018); available at https://bit.ly/2Qme7OV

27. 90% Min Sinnaʿi Halab Ghadaru al-Balad Wa 1350 Munsha'a Tadarrarat Bil-Harb 90% of Aleppo's Manufacturers Have Left the Country and 1350 Facilities Have Been Damaged in the War, al-Souria Net, (20.9.2014); available at https://bit.ly/2Ndv1gy

28. ʾİçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü, Geçici Koruma Kapsamında Bulunan Suriyelilerin İlk 10 İle Göre

Dağılımı; available at: http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik3/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713.

29. Gaziantep Ticaret Odası, Faaliyet Raporu 2017, sayfa 20; available at: http://www.gto.org.tr/upload/download/Faaliyet-Raporu-2017-307946.pdf

30. Baran Ucaner, *Gaziantep: An Industry and Trade Center on the Historical Silk Road*, Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, 2014; available at https://bit.ly/2ohY4FM

31. *Gaziantep: A Trade, Culture, and Gastronomy Center Located on the Historical Silk Road*, Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, 2017; available at: http://www.gto.org.tr/upload/Gaziantep_Ekonomisi_Eng.pptx

32. Interview carried out by research with ʿAbd al-Basit Dibu, the head of NOONTEK company in Gaziantep, and a member of the organization SIYAD, via social media, June 2018. NB: It could be said that the origin of this amount of trade was Kilis and not Gaziantep; however, data from the Chamber of Trade for Gaziantep shows the difference between the size of exports for Gaziantep (6.7 billion) and Kilis (89,000) in 2016. For more information, see the report by the Gaziantep Chamber of Trade; available at https://bit.ly/2wu7wJV

33. »Iqtisad« Yiltaqi Raʾis Ghurfat Tijarat ›ʿEntab‹. Bi-Matha Waʿad al-Mustathmirin al-Suriyin? [»Iqtisad« Meets the Head of Gaziantep's Chamber of Commerce … What Did He Promise Syrian Investors?] *Zaman Al Wasl* (2.12.2017); available at https://bit.ly/2MD2sh5

34. *Gaziantep: A Trade, Culture, and Gastronomy Center Located on the Historical Silk Road*, Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, 2017; available at: http://www.gto.org.tr/upload/Gaziantep_Ekonomisi_Eng.pptx

35. A local council notice in Jarablus on the registration procedures for traders and manufacturers, social media page of the local council for urban and rural Jarablus, front page (1.9.2018); available at https://ly/2PsckXX

36. Interview carried out by the author with a local trader from northern Rural Aleppo currently residing in Gaziantep, via social media, June 2018.

37. Interview carried out by the author with a local trader currently residing in Turkey, via social media, June 2018.

38. Interview carried out by the author with a local trader from Eastern Ghouta currently residing in Mersin, via social media, April 2018.

39. The most prominent of these is Law 33/2008, as well as Law 15/2008; for more on laws governing real-estate matters see the website of the General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs; available at https://bit.ly/2xRZzjb

40. Interview carried out by the author with a local trader displaced from Eastern Ghouta currently living in Idlib, via social media, July 2018.

41. Political activist Nizar al-Samadi tells the author that they had made a delegation to meet the governor and submitted a proposal to turn Eastern Ghouta into an independent governorate, but they were refused this, and al-Samadi was detained. Source: conversation carried out by the researcher with the political activist from Eastern Ghouta Nizar al-Samadi, via social media, June 2018.

42. Interview carried out by the author with a local trader from Eastern Ghouta currently residing in Mersin, via social media, April 2018.

43. Interview carried out by the author with Mohammad Beqaʿi, the head of the Administrative Development Center, currently residing in Northern Syria, via social media, June 2018.

44. »I dealt with Manfoush before 2011, he would get the milk from dairy farms, and his commerce was small, and he had established in 2003 the Manfoush Trade Company, with a logo of Damascene pastures.« Interview carried out by the author with a former member of a local council in Eastern Ghouta currently residing in Idlib, via social media, April 2018.

45. Manfoush asked permission from the Civil Administration to export his goods to Damascus, while he paid bribes to border officials of the Wafidin crossing from the Republican Guard in order to bring in essentials for his factory; interview carried out by the author with political activist Nizar al-Samadi, June 2018.

46. Manfoush returned to Eastern Ghouta, having left during the military campaign which was launched by the regime and which led to the opposition's departure from the area. Manfoush began to concentrate his attention on the real estate sector, and building and construction, through purchasing land in Misraba, and also by obtaining licenses for three breeze-block factories in Harasta, al-Maliha and al-Salima in Rural Damascus. This is according to a local source still living in

Eastern Ghouta. Interview carried out by the researcher with one of the residents of Eastern Ghouta who stayed there, via social media, August 2018.

47. »We would ask about *Hajji* Abu Ayman when buying goods for our relief organization from his company in Misraba, and would hear that *Hajji* was on a trip abroad to Spain or the Emirates,« from an interview carried out by the author with the head of one of the relief organizations in Ghouta currently residing in Istanbul, July 2018.

48. This is a locally used phrase to describe the powers which influence the decision-making process in Syria which includes the Asad, Makhluf, Shalish and Akhras families, and important security and military officers.

49. »Manfoush had good relations with Major General Tawfiq Yunis the head of the state security in Duma«, from an interview carried out by the research with local political activist Nizar al-Samadi, via social media, June 2018.

50. »Manfoush has good links with the Republican Guard; one can simply look at his acquisition of a duty contract contract for the city of al-Tall which was taken over by Brigadier General Qays Farwa from the Republican Guard.« Interview carried out by the author with a political activist from Ghouta currently residing in Idlib via social media, June 2018.

51. Interview carried out by the author with a local trader displaced from Eastern Ghouta currently residing in Idlib, via social media, July 2018.

52. Asfar, Roger: The Business of Smuggling Supplies in Besieged Eastern Ghouta, News Deeply (25.4.2018); available at https://bit.ly/2NCRnJe

53. 53. Salehani, Raed, al-Ghuta al-Sharqiya: »al-Tariq al-Tijari« Li-Tashghil Maʿamil al-Manfush? [Eastern Ghouta: Is »The Trade Route« There To Keep Manfoush's Factories Running?], al-Modon website (12.10.2017) available at https://bit.ly/2wyt34K

54. Some accounts point to Manfoush's connection to Maher al-Asad from the Fourth Armored Division, as opposed to the connection of his rivals from Duma to Brigadier General Qays Farwa from the Republican Guard. The latter had lost his influence in the palace given a scandal involving his participation in an attempt to move soldiers from Barzeh's First Brigade, who refused to reconcile over Ghouta and hand over their weapons. This was discovered by the Fourth Brigade, and the weapons of the First Brigade were taken away, and they had to choose either to go to Ghouta or to be displaced to the north; after this, the Fourth Brigade took over the Wafidin crossing from the Republican Guard.

55. Interview carried out by the author with a local trader displaced from Eastern Ghouta currently residing in Idlib, via social media, July 2018.

56. Interview carried out by the author with a former member of a local council in Eastern Ghouta currently residing in Idlib, via social media, April 2018.

57. Interview carried out by the researcher with one of the residents of Eastern Ghouta who remained there, via social media, August 2018.

58. Interview carried out by the author with a local activist from Misraba who recently left Eastern Ghouta and is currently residing in Turkey, September 2018.

Informal State-Society Relations and Family Networks in Rural Idlib

Hadeel Al-Saidawi

◼ Introduction

Informal relations with extended families were important to the Syrian state's interactions with the residents of many small cities, towns and villages. These connections allowed the state, from the administrative and political center of the country, to monitor, negotiate with and ensure the compliance of residents of these localities. Far from following a single model of state–society connection across all of Syria, these informal relations took a wide variety of forms. The rural areas of Idlib province, which are the primary focus of this study, alone illustrate some of this diversity—ties were forged by giving influential members of local families positions in the formal apparatuses of the state (e.g., the Baʿth Party and Peasants' Union); interacting directly with family networks to influence inter-familial reconciliation mechanisms; and supporting certain candidates for municipality elections, among others. In this manner, local community members were put in a position to play a role in connecting their localities to Damascus. In turn, this strengthened the role of these individuals in their localities, creating channels of access for their family members to state resources. While this form of state-society connection gave many local residents access to the state, not all extended families enjoyed such access, resulting in a local power structure characterized by unequal access to these resources.

The 2011 uprising and the violence that followed pushed state authorities out of many areas of the country, including much of Idlib province, creating a multiplicity of power centers, each of which tried to approximate a state-like existence. The erosion of state control shattered the links that many families had forged to the political center in Damascus and changed the choices faced by families and their important members; many families attempted to seek protection in associating with outside structures, especially with the dominance of Islamist organizations.

New forms of informal family networks emerged during the conflict in some localities, and the unequal forms of access enjoyed by families have been reversed in others. Some family networks ceased to be a source of resources and solidarity, with members preferring to join armed factions or participate in local councils without regard to family ties. In other cases, family structures have continued to be a source of sustenance for local residents, with influential members establishing ties to military factions and gaining status and power through these new affiliations.

The evolution of relations between extended families and the state and other outside authorities in rural Idlib provides a window into how conflict has affected local communities in Syria more broadly. War creates new power dynamics within communities and in their relations with outside actors, but there are also many continuities with pre-conflict patterns of social organization.

The intermediary role played by families' important members during the war is a legacy of their relationship with the state before it. In addition, by focusing on the social fabric of local communities—rather than just the organizations that arise during conflict or are imposed from outside—this study provides an additional angle from which to observe processes of informal governance. From this angle, we can see the creation of new organizational structures and the destruction of old ones, but also the ways in which many of those organizations appropriate ties, techniques of governance and partners from local communities present in old orders.

I. Family Networks in Rural Idlib—the Old Order

An individual's tie to his or her extended family can be important to social life. For many Syrians, and particularly in rural Idlib, these ties are strong not just for historical reasons, but because they are regularly relied upon for social and financial support. A family in Salqin, a town close to the Turkish border, for example, runs a dedicated fund to support the education of and relieve financial crises faced by extended family members, under the management of its *wajih* (family leader).

But the continuity and reproduction of these strong family networks is hardly uniform across Idlib province. These relations have gradually lost their relevance in many urban circles; families no longer live in close geographical proximity due to the expansion of cities, and the division of property has decreased the cohesion of the extended family in many cases. As a result, rights and duties of solidarity and material support have, for many, become limited to immediate family members, rather than extending to branches of cousins.

Even in rural localities, the patterns of solidarity based upon extended family background, its networks and social status in relation to other families within a locality became much more fluid in recent decades. Family members increasingly focused on education and obtaining jobs in cities and in the Gulf. In many cases, despite continuing to live in adjacent neighborhoods, these concepts became limited to social perceptions within a locality about the historical roles played by certain families and their leaders.

Although many families kept a respected elder, his role in modern times is more centered around representation in local social events. Some old family networks, however, were reproduced and translated into forms of family solidarity only when the need arose to connect with the state in order to access the limited resources available, which often forced some families to look inwards, invoking some of these old and seemingly almost forgotten concepts in the process.

Historical Roles and Norms of Families before the Modern State

With many variations, a village's residents descended from a small number of lineages. Although families in the Idlib region are generally clanless peasants,[1] some can identify a tribal ancestry. The lineages typically formed residential neighborhoods and political blocs within the village. The leaders of the various lineages, usually respected older notables informally chosen and recognized, maintained stability, resolved conflicts and made necessary decisions on an informal basis since they controlled the money necessary to end disputes. With their powerbase in influential extended families of which they were the leaders, they were endowed in some areas like Saraqib, located to the east of Idlib city, with the title of *Zaʿamat* (*zaʿim* in Arabic, *zuʿamaʾ* in plural), denoting their superior status.[2] These leaders formulated policy in discussions with other leaders in their own *madafa* (guesthouses).[3]

Those families not related to a lineage usually aligned themselves with the one in whose *hara* (neighborhood) they lived and mostly developed relations of *musahara* (intermarriages), forming a sociopolitical informal network—a single locality could contain multiple family networks. Nonetheless, some urban neighborhoods maintained these characteristics; although Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman is considered the second largest city in Idlib governorate, it kept a mixed urban-rural character. For example, in one western neighborhood lives a large family where, in the absence of reliable courts, the family elder took on an even larger role after 2011 in resolving extended family conflicts. These aspects have almost disappeared from northern and eastern neighborhoods as many inhabitants left before 2011 to study abroad and never returned or pursued jobs in Lebanon.[4] With the advent of the modern state since the 1950s, the family leader concept was expanded, and in many cases altered altogether, to educated members and those with religious and administrative authority. Similarly, family networks, in many cases, no longer followed the geographical limitation of *hara*.[5]

The size of the family, in terms of its number of members, played an important role in defining a family's social status in some rural localities. These are the families that typically have significant presence in weddings, funerals and in resolving conflicts. In addition to their extended families, these families at the top of the

social structure were in some cases responsible for families in their networks that were not part of the lineage, where their notables pay money and represent these families in negotiations to resolve conflicts. By contrast, other families lived on the periphery of these informal networks and had limited interaction with them. In association with a larger influential family, families could get economic, protection and/or conflict resolution benefits.

Family networks are traceable in their emergence to families' resettlement in rural areas during different times. The concept of who arrived first is important and those who arrived later tend to hold a lesser social status, under which they are cast to some extent as outsiders. For example, one family in the town of Jarjanaz is still referred to as al-Kufayriin, in reference to a nearby village from which one of the family's ancestors came over 200 years ago.[6]

Peasant families in Idlib typically lived in the long-settled uplands of Idlib that are rich in orchards and provided Syria's supply of fruits and olives[7]. Often combined in modern times, families continued to work the land while holding civil service jobs. Prior to the restructuring in the 1950s and 1960s of landed property, families were economically differentiated between large, middle and small proprietors; the breakdown of this differentiation varied from one village to another. However, a great body of peasants' families were landless and earned little more than a bare subsistence.[8] As some villages were under the authority of large proprietors in nearby towns tasked with taxing and containing dissidents, a mixed model of tenure was in place since the *tanzimat*. For instance, families in Jarjanaz had an almost uniform economic status; they were almost all given equal-sized small patch of land on which they lived but worked on lands owned by the sultan paying their taxes to a landed family in Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, whereas in nearby Tal Minnis village, lands were half owned by the landed family and half by the sultan.

In Saraqib, on the other hand, a vast difference already was in place between the two main landed families and the rest of the families.[9] Local conceptions around family power structures and the nature of interfamilial competition within those structures also varied along these lines. In other words, while in Saraqib these concepts were around wealth and land ownership, in localities where families

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had an almost equal economic status, family social status concepts centered more on things like family size.

Families Under Arab Socialism

The triumph of socialist ideas significantly impacted the agrarian structure in Idlib and other areas in Syria,[10] as well as in reshaping the social structure of families and their networks; the Baʿth Party's arrival to power was the first major shock in power balance that localities in Idlib received. And it is comparable in its impact to the current conflict. The aforementioned landowning family in Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, for example, lost most of their vast lands in an estimated 40-50 villages in the town's eastern periphery, in addition to factories, due to nationalization policies. Most members of the family migrated in the aftermath of these reforms.[11]

At the same time, these harsh agrarian reform policies by the Baʿth Party in the 1950s and 1960s created opportunities for advancement for poor families, and some managed to break away from the complete dominance of landed families.

This is not to say that a new middle-class was not already in motion due to gradual social change prior to the ascendance of the Baʿth. A beginning of a change in this social composition occurred when rival political parties began forming, and a vibrant political life was taking shape under the French Mandate. A small village like Saraqib starting from 1954 hosted in its main street branches of the Baʿth party, the communist party and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).[12] The spread of education since the beginning of the 1930s and 1940s also contributed to the development of a new middle class, creating such occupations as the police and civil service.[13]

The arrival of new political parties and development of new non-agrarian classes had its effect on the relationship between local families, particularly the socialist agrarian movement inspired by Akram al-Hourani's ideas.[14]. Precisely how these ideas and social transformations played out can be seen clearly in the town of Saraqib, with the growing sentiment against feudalism that was emerging with the rise of a socialist ethos.

Two landed dominant families resided, respectively, in the western and eastern neighborhoods of Saraqib. They competed to rule Saraqib during different periods; one, for example, occupied administrative roles and was significantly wealthier during the French Mandate period. The leader of the less wealthy family identified with al-Hourani's calls for peasants' rights.

The impact of socialist ideals on Saraqib took a clear form in 1943. A division emerged in the town that pitted the two large families against each other and pushed other families of the town towards an alliance with one of the two. The word *gharbiyin* (westerners) came to denote families that sided with the wealthy family, residents of the western neighborhood, while those who allied with the other were referenced by *sharqiyin* (easterners). Using the western family's oppressive policies against peasant families working on their lands as a rallying cry, the *sharqiyin's* leader alongside the families in his network launched an armed attack on the wealthy family. As a result, families of landowners sided with the latter, while families of lower economic status generally went with the former and kept their loyalism for decades.

This competition continued into the 1960s and affected local networks. The *sharqiyin's* new family leader got closer to the Baʿth and identified the family with Salah Jadid's line within the party. He became a member of the Baʿth Regional Command Council, the leadership body of the party between 1968 and 1970 and the head of the party branch in Saraqib. In 1968, he occupied the other family's *madafa* and turned it into the party's branch premises. In order to reclaim their lost influence, the historically wealthy family's leader found an opportunity to align with Hafiz al-Asad in 1970s. The matter aligned the two families and their networks along the lines of division in the Baʿth Party. As a result of the new affiliation, the wealthy family managed to attract a coalition of families of traders to its network.[15] This coalition included five families, descendants of al-Naʿim tribe. Together with the wealthy family, members of this coalition arranged to have a photo taken with Hafiz al-Asad as they sought to strengthen their social status against the other family; they later also got the family a new *madafa*.

With time this particular rivalry held less importance, as the primary fields of competition transformed to education and business. The *sharqiyin*'s leader

for example, turned to trade in the 1990s and managed to accumulate some wealth.[16] Nonetheless, the competition between families in the pre-Asad period demonstrates the potential for outside powers to connect with leaders of local extended families to pursue their interests. At the same time, the heads of extended families actively sought out these connections. This demand from local actors would be put to good use once Hafiz al-Asad consolidated power and eliminated alternative power centers with which local actors could connect.

Families Under the Asads

Though the Baʿth Party's declared strategy was to lead and modernize society, the party under Hafiz al-Asad often used, in practice, relations with family networks and made agreements with families from a variety of social backgrounds—not just the historically powerful or historically downtrodden. The relationship of family networks in Idlib to the state is a legacy of this strategy.

Family structures that dominated the localities for nearly a century predating the Baʿth largely remained intact.[17] However, new families were also upgraded in social status through occupying positions in the Baʿth Party's centralized institutions. Others were left out, and had to find other means to maneuver their way in order to get resources.

In Salqin for instance, a family of feudal owners in a number of villages during the Ottoman period shifted to creating indirect connections with the state starting from the 1970s through marriages with influential traders in Hama, Damascus, Latakia and Aleppo, areas where the family was commercially active.[18] The family was able to get licenses to practice trade through these relationships. At the same time, a new class of originally popular families in Salqin was promoted and ascended in social status. Due to his high education, a member of one of one such family, Muhammad Najib al-Aktaʿ, occupied important positions from the 1980s onwards: he held posts from minister of education to governor of Raqqa and the Damascus suburbs, making the large family the most prominent in Salqin, with better access to employment than other families' members up until 2011.[19] Family networks in the localities of rural Idlib under the Asad were made to compete over the control of municipality positions and the leadership of local

Baʿth Party branches. Holding influence in municipalities was important as it could impact peasants' lives. Family networks could control the path of new roads away from their lands and prioritize licenses for wells, sewage, and irrigation channels within the network. In these small localities, municipality elections, for instance, reactivated old small competitions over distribution of resources, in which the size of the family played an important role.

For example, Jarjanaz, a town of 10,756 lying 8km east of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, is inhabited by some 15 families.[20] The largest of these descends from al-Naʿim tribe in ʿIzz al-Din, north of Homs, and constitutes a bit more than a third of the town's population. The family lived in the southern neighborhood together with five extended families and other families, in contrast to the second largest and oldest in Jarjanaz that resided in the northern neighborhood. An old rivalry existed between the southern and northern families since a larger number of family members meant a better social status in old perceptions.

The southern neighborhood family fell behind in this competition in the 1980s when three youths from the family were caught up in the Islamist uprising of 1979 to 1982, and were arrested or forced to flee. As a result, the state directed patronage appointments to other families in the town, including those who participated in countering the Muslim Brotherhood movement.[21] When a municipality for the small town was formed in mid 1980s, the head position was occupied by the son of the northern neighborhood family's leader for the following 15 years without contestation. The family also led the Baʿth local branch in Jarjanaz through a family from their network. They would thwart the other family's requests to join the party, fearing their entry would mean an end of their status outside the municipality and threaten the benefits this entailed.

In these circumstances families who failed to associate with the central authority were left without the benefits that came with it. The southern neighborhood family members' applications to enroll in the police and army were faced with rejection as they lacked the necessary membership in the Baʿth Party, in addition to the Muslim Brotherhood stigma that affected the whole family. The family alternatively invested in pursuing education, but the family elders still felt the need to end the family's isolation. A change in the family's fortune occurred

with the general amnesty decree n.11 that released 1,200 political prisoners from Saydnaya prison.[22] The family elders bypassed their local Baʿth branch and headed to the Baʿth leadership in Idlib city ostensibly showing their willingness to join the party, which reflected a need rather than a belief. Their request was granted and they succeeded in heading the Baʿth branch in Jarjanaz. The family was able to get its own *mukhtar*, a position limited to other family networks for decades. During the next municipality elections, family networks were invoked in order to win the leadership seats; two other large families sided with the northern neighborhood family; however, the southern won, due to their large number and the networks they maintained, as well as their new connection to the state.[23]

For more populous localities, municipality positions created a higher scale of competition due to the influence over larger budget allocations such positions entailed. A small city's annual budget would reach around USD 1 million. If a national government minister hailed from a locality, the municipality head position (*raʾis al-baladiya*) would typically remain in his extended family and network for the period of his tenure. Otherwise, the Baʿth Party and security branches' new elites, often from outside these localities, had the final say in nominating those best placed to serve their interests. This was in contrast to villages' municipalities that were not attractive to officials of high rank to play a role; annual budget allocations corresponded to population size, so villages with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants would have relatively insignificant annual budgets. In such cases, municipality heads were chosen according to their membership in the Baʿth Party, which created competition between families. In the end, municipality elections and their budgets were subject to security approval. Furthermore, heads of municipalities were announced with a presidential decree.[24]

Within this limited room for families' influence under the tight interlinked grip of the state, families were left somewhat to their own devices, in the sense that family notables were given room to manage the affairs of and disputes between family members, with the state often fostering inter-familial reconciliations. This practice has preserved families' network structures and also old competitions to some extent; culprits depend on their elders to pay the cost of compensating the aggrieved party in order to escape the repercussions of their acts. Families' elders in Binnish and Jabal al-Zawiya were given space to resolve conflicts outside

the official judiciary systems, invoking familial networks to pay compensation. Baʿth officials from outside the localities mediated, often taking a cut of the compensation payment. In 2007, for example, a conflict erupted in Binnish between the two main families and resulted in the death of a child. The state placed police members from outside Binnish in the houses of the warring parties until the conflict was resolved between the two families and financial arrangements made.[25]

Ultimately, the Syrian state's methods of indirectly maintaining order in the decades prior to 2011—a »hands off« approach that did not strive to ensure equal access to resources—resulted in entrenching small old cleavages in some areas that would take little time to re-emerge during the conflict. This would also become apparent in the opposite directions these families took.

II. Families in Conflict—the New Order

The descent from civic uprising into prolonged violent conflict weakened and, eventually, removed entirely the central authority that residents of a locality formerly depended upon and competed for access to its resources. Its absence provided an opportunity for families to act independently. However, this does not mean that families coalesced into uniform political and military units as a result of this opening. Families suffered divisions either in the early days –between state and opposition supporters—or at later stages, where different members chose to join competing armed factions or political opposition entities as a reflection of how the centralized state mutated. Families with stronger internal ties were able to limit this deviation to a few members, while ones with weaker ties could not fully control their members' choices—these members' ties with their family were, in some cases, sacrificed as loyalty to the faction rose above that of the family. The new environment allowed for the emergence of multiple new important family members linked to charities and military organizations for example, from which extended family members drew the »new« needed resources.

One of the most remarkable features of the uprisings that swept rural Idlib localities in 2011 was the absence of political parties, Islamist movements, and established civil society organizations from the ranks of those protesting against

the incumbent regime, which created a leadership vacuum, pushing families in different directions away from old networks. In this manner, families and members upholding a pro-revolution stance formed a new type of network around this new »collective identity«. These families gained a new type of influence by their new important members taking up active roles in the early days of the uprising through participation in demonstrations, and later in the formation or joining of nascent civilian and military structures, mainly factions, charities and local councils. By contrast, families who took a pro-regime position, or were previously strongly linked to its institutions failed to »belong« and were marginalized to some extent. Consequently, they either left their areas or kept to their homes. That was the first period, between 2011 and 2012, which was marked with the opposition's attempts to politically unite under alternative centralized opposition bodies.

A second period of change in social power relations started by the end of 2012 with the emergence of countrywide, ideologically coherent, armed organizations that competed to prevail over multiple localities, hindering previous forms of collective local organization and in fact, altering and competing with the first short-lived change in power structure. The early networks were, because of their intrinsic incoherence and diversity under a weaker centralized organization,[26] highly prone to fracturing, thus paving the way for others to take advantage of the political openings that their efforts had secured.

Some of the localities that witnessed a limited demonstration movement, where most families did not play active roles, were susceptible to fall early on under the sway of outside powers. Salqin and Harim, for example, fell under the control of al-Nusra Front (now known as Haiʾat Tahrir al-Sham) in 2015 after the capture of Idlib city.

Family Factions and Families in Factions

The removal of state control and state networks coupled with the chaotic security situation meant that local communities needed to make new alliances. While some did so in a cooperative way, others competed for control under the influence of multiple outside military powers.

During the early period of the uprising, early forms of military organization were not along family lines. Members across localities organized under the leadership of defected military officers or within their areas under the leadership of one family. The spread of arms was light and limited to these defected officers. Small amounts of money arrived via networks of Syrians living abroad to fund early small groups to protect towns that participated in the 2011 uprising.

The weakening of a central authority created a diversity of rebel linkages to local families—through some cooperation, pre-war family networks were rearranged around the new power dynamics as families sought to protect themselves. For instance, the wealthy family historically associated with the state in Saraqib area did not occupy leadership positions in rebel groups and governance structures, and several of its leaders—who were influential in police and state institutions through marriages and friendships with influential figures before the conflict—moved to state-held areas, while new young influential leaders emerged from middle-class families either as political or military leaders.[27] Some of the new families, which some of these new young leaders belonged to, were previously linked through commercial and financial interests with the two influential families before the war, which indicates the beginning of the change in the social structure after 2011. Shortly before Saraqib's capture by opposition forces, Saraqib's people united across family lines for a collective defense against opportunists recruited from nearby towns and were widely claimed to be engaging in opportunistic behaviors like looting and kidnapping on the nearby highway, which encouraged local factions under these new leaders to unite, forming the Saraqib Rebels Front (Jabhat Thuwwar Saraqib) in June 2012. Although each faction within the front gradually came to be dominated by members of a single family, the factions managed to protect the town collectively.

However, starting from the end of 2012, a move away from the first participatory model towards family based-factions started to take shape. In many cases, the new leaders faced a challenge in taking organizational decisions around communication processes, control over resources and leadership. The impact of outside forces acting on the locality took a different form in these localities as smaller family factions were not able to sustain themselves. For instance, families within small villages of peasant background, such as Taftanaz and Ihsim, sought

to act independently from each other after an earlier period of joint activism. Taftanaz's three main families each formed or joined a faction, although the families did not clash but operated separately. In Ihsim, the largest two families had a history of bloody clashes between 2006 and 2010, which resulted in the deaths of two people. The two families forgot their problems after 2011 and actively worked side by side in civil resistance against the Asad regime. With the spread of arms and outside funding, they each joined a separate military group. [28]

Civilian Structures: Local Councils

Local councils started forming to respond to dire service needs which coincided with the absence of the government since 2012. Local councils created the space for new families' members to play a role they did not have before 2011, shifting family power dynamics to meet with the new reality. In many cases, families came to have new important members placed in both civilian and military structures. Although some local councils presented good examples of collaboration with local armed groups in the provision of services and security, since these mostly hailed from the locality and shared the same experience of war, with the proliferation of larger armed organization, military groups in many localities shifted from collaboration to competition with family notables and activists who formed the first councils by establishing Shura and notables' councils. Armed organizations, however, had varying levels of success in different localities, depending on whether they had to negotiate their influence or had the ability to practice full dominance.[29]

Outside armed powers tried to penetrate local councils (LCs) through local families by creating new networks based on membership to a faction. The strength and influence afforded those who joined the armed groups attracted some families' members, though for varying and ambiguous reasons. In some cases, we can observe an overlap between families' previous marginalized social status within their localities and their attraction to the array of economic, logistical and security benefits provided by their new ally.

Activists formed the early local coordinating committees (LCCs, *tansiqiat* in Arabic) and in many cases they continued to lead some LCs in 2012. LCCs played a role in the organization and documentation of early demonstrations and aid

provision, while LCs were tasked with service provision following the collapse of municipalities. In Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, eight members of eight families formed the first LCC, and moved to play a role in forming the council with the approval of the local factions. Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman ran open elections starting from 2015, expanding LC membership to members of other families before shifting to form LCs through a smaller committee of *faʿiliyat* (a term referring to new influential community figures) .[30]

In the case of Saraqib, outside military groups had to negotiate their leverage. The council was formed in early 2013 by activists. Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa later made some families influential in the community by giving their members important military leadership roles within the movements, which placed them as intermediaries to these factions' aims to preside over the council; Ahrar al-Sham wanted to control the council since it attracted a lot of Western funding, and Jund al-Aqsa wanted to implement Islamic Sharia over Saraqib. This power dynamic meant that candidates needed to be approved, and not imposed, by both the factions and the activists' networks, which helped to push civilian heads of the Council with bureaucratic expertise. A major challenge was the difficulty in conducting elections due to heavy bombardment; also challenging was the larger responsibility of the head of a local council in comparison to the mandate of a municipality—LCs were responsible for running bakeries, water provision, sewage and civil registry; this was not case under the state. This added an extra difficulty in finding a candidate who all parties agreed on and who also had the needed experience.

The activists' bloc had an edge at times when Western donors' funding was impacted by the military council's attempt to appoint a head for the council. By 2016, Ahrar al-Sham formed a notables council (*majlis al-aʿyan*) of 116 nominees from all families in Saraqib based on each family's size and placed a civilian Shura Council on top to supervise the work of the LC.[31] However, in July, 2017, Haiʾat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) broke into Saraqib on the background of its clashes with Ahrar al-Sham. That was right after the last election which restructured the old notables' council and worked to ensure widespread participation by the people of Saraqib. HTS formed its own police force and controlled the provision of services under its Salvation Government. In its aim to connect with the community, HTS

promoted a few elders from well-known families. From summer 2018, HTS created its own notables' council to choose a new LC president, and staffed the notables' council with local HTS affiliates.[32]

This was not the case in Ihsim, a town in Jabal al-Zawiya, where the LC followed a military representation model—weapons would make new powers, and they would get civil authority disproportionate to their former status in the town, compared to the places that had *tansiqiat* and organized elections based upon activists only, or old families. The more members it had, the more seats a faction would get. During this period, a family's influence was practiced through its membership in the faction. By the end of 2012, conflicts arose between the factions as they sought to increase their size in order to get more seats. The LC was divided as a result and consequently this mechanism was replaced by representing families based on their size; the main families would get the largest number of seats and get factions they belonged to represented in the process. Smaller families had to group together in networks separate from those of the larger families in order to get a representative.[33]

In many cases, outside powers such as HTS, associated concepts of influence to their forms of organization. All in all, this played out within an environment of diminished security, of which the next section examines families' adaptation mechanisms in aligning with outside powers.

III. Aspects of Change: Families under Islamist Organizations

The conflict started as one between an opposition and the state. In time, it did not just transform into other types of conflicts, but also enabled other conflicts within localities. The absence of a centralized state authority created an immediate need for security throughout rural Idlib by the end of 2013. This forced local communities to seek protection through unexpected networks and new forms of allegiance; these new linkages often involved individuals and small family units, rather than entire extended families. Radical groups such as al-Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-affiliated groups rooted themselves in these areas, often complicating interfamilial relations; creating new conflicts,

loyalties and networks; damaging social cohesion; and isolating localities and families from each other. As much as the families of Idlib were affected by the war dynamics, where outside powers' rivalries extended to impact them, some families also affected these dynamics. A remarkable aspect is these families' ability to shape and adapt to these dynamics by seeking new allies; many families did not stay idle and aimed to recreate a safer environment by attempting to redraw and rebalance the lines of contention inside their localities.

Families' Old and New Competitions

Familial and factional identities overlapped with the loss of security in rural Idlib, but unprecedented acts of violence broke out between some families either as a continuation of old competitions that were normally resolved without, or with minimum casualties, or new conflicts between family-led factions that had no historical grounding. In some areas new rivalries were transformed to create new enemies of previously allied families—a situation made possible by outside powers' divergent interests that have affected families' relations.

Sarmin, a town 11km southeast of Idlib city, presents a stark example of the emergence of new conflicts between families and networks. The town's family power structure went through a dramatic process of reshaping—almost extreme in comparison to the rest of Idlib. The conflict among families resulted from competition that broke out between Ahrar al-Sham and ISIL, within the wider campaign that aimed to expel ISIL from Idlib, but had the effect of pitting families against one another that had no major history of conflict, breaking old networks.

Although a historical cleavage in Sarmin existed between the two main families in the town, it was resolved in the 1960s and did not reoccur even after the uprising. The largest family in Sarmin, in terms of number, was composed mainly of peasants and civil servants, resided in the southern neighborhood and had *musahara* (intermarriage) relations with a smaller one, a family with five branches residing in in the western neighborhood. Members of the large family started the demonstrations against the Asad regime in Sarmin and were also the first to form a military faction in the town under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) umbrella. The other family's members would join the faction.[34]

The FSA's inability to sustain funding, in addition to attractions offered by outside powers, inhibited family-led factions' ability to maintain the loyalty of other families. A member of the smaller family defected and formed his own brigade and associated it with the broader Suqur al-Sham militia, a strong Islamist faction formed in Jabal al-Zawiya that sought to replace the Asad regime with an Islamist state.[35] He managed to attract many of the families' members in Sarmin and slowly grew to become the de facto leader of Sarmin. Those who joined were granted salaries, weapons, food and massive authority.[36]

The rise of the new faction as a coalition of newly empowered families reversed the old power structure, and further shifted concepts of family influence to the faction. Members of previously large families were recruited under its leadership. The leader was a construction worker who hails from a modest background and fought in Iraq in 2003. Additionally, new forms of intermarriage occurred between the »new« important families and the old, which social boundaries had previously impeded. By this time, the faction grew to constitute almost half of the Suqur al-Sham faction's total number of recruits. They owned tens of tanks and heavy military equipment, turning Sarmin into a large military base, while the large family's influence further dwindled.[37]

As a response, the large family defected from the FSA in 2013, and gathered the remaining troops in a new brigade that joined Ahrar al-Sham, bringing a strong competitor from outside into Sarmin. The other faction leader, in response, ordered a series of assassinations against the family's leadership in Ahrar who were killed one after the other, forcing the rest to escape. Shortly after in 2014, he pledged allegiance to ISIL and went to Raqqa with most of his troops where he became Amir of Homs. Remnants of his faction reorganized under Jund al-Aqsa and attracted many foreign fighters to Sarmin. The two large factions, Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa, tried to jointly run the town but they disagreed over who should control mosques, schools and courts, which resulted in frequent violent clashes that were extended to local families. Sarmin's notables intervened every time to stop the fighting, reminding both parties that they are families of Sarmin.[38]

In contrast to how new feuds emerged in Sarmin, Binnish is a case in point for how old feuds resurfaced. In many villages in rural Idlib, two families

competed for social dominance over various periods. Binnish is small town, seven kilometers from Idlib city, inhabited by families of similar social and economic status. Prominent families in Binnish also share similar characteristics such as the large number of family members and their strength. The two main families each were referred to colloquially as *Abu-Binnish* (meaning »the father of Binnish«, in reference to their dominance) and occupied the northern and western neighborhoods respectively with their extended families. Before 2011, competition between the two families would range from who performed the best dance at a wedding to actual clashes that also involved families in their respective networks. The latter clashes would be resolved by elders of the two families, and at times would call in notables from the other two important families who dominated the remaining Binnish neighborhoods.[39]

As some old local disputes were forgotten after the uprising when members of different families participated side-by-side, it was not long before this short-lived peace broke down and the old feuds reignited. This dynamic fractured relations between families, blurred lines between belonging to a family and belonging to a faction, and, furthermore, allowed new families to emerge as influential due to their association with a strong outside power. Binnish's main families quickly ended their fitful collaboration and fell into clashes, competing over positions in the National Coalition as well as in forming factions. A family that was outside the former power structure formed a brigade, which later became the core of Ahrar al-Sham, by attracting members of other small families of a similar social status. The advent of these families under the leadership of this family's important member, a previous Saydnaya prisoner, was apparent when the movement divided Binnish into sectors, replacing old notables of the large families with ones from the new network. These new influential families would also play a role in conflict resolution; for example, a newly influential family played a role in the resolution of a conflict that erupted between families in a nearby camp in 2013, replacing the role played by older family notables.

Protection and Adaptation Strategies: Linking with the Muslim Brotherhood and Inventing Tribal Lineage

The loss of security during the war necessitated identifying with various outside

powers in order to get protection and safeguard against the overwhelming power of armed organizations. Conditions in Idlib meant that allying with an outside power, in many cases, ceased to be based on ideological groundings and became a pragmatic necessity for families remaining in the province in order to manage their economic, political and security needs. This section deals with two mechanisms families used to further this aim: identifying with the Muslim Brotherhood-led military organization and seeking unproven tribal lineage.

In many cases, a few members of an Idlib family got involved in the events of the 1980s that erupted between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government, without inspiring an ideological shift for the whole family. Some families lost a few members to imprisonment or permanent exile, mainly to Jordan and Qatar, while the rest of the members were marginalized in their communities throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[40] Some had to change the family name to get rid of the stigma that afflicted them. The state enacted Law 49 after these violent events, which made membership in the movement a capital offense.[41] After 2014, in order to protect against the other extreme groups in their localities, some families sought to align themselves with the politically strong, militarily loosely organized, non-ideologically imposing, MB-affiliated armed umbrella of factions that did not take the form of a unified militia.

Despite being well organized and having an active political life in exile, the MB's armed organizations, launched in Istanbul, suffered from internal divisions and from scarce funding in spite of their many successes in 2013 and 2014 in forming MB factions.[42] A larger network called Sham Legion emerged in 2014 under the leadership of Mundhir Sarras, succeeding earlier iterations of organization.[43] Its leaders espoused a moderate Islamist ideology aiming to unify the ranks of Syria's moderate Islamists while disassociating itself from the MB—a move that successfully attracted Saudi funding. The network appealed to those factions of MB background, which were a part of the movement's earlier attempts to organize militarily, as well as, to some independent family-led factions since it acted as a political front rather than an ideological group, and did not practice hegemony over localities.[44]

Families in areas that fell under the control of al-Nusra Front sought a moderate

alternative to the organization's radical ideology, thus found the security and influence needed in joining the Sham Legion. This occurred, for example, in Salqin, a border town within kilometers of Turkey, that witnessed limited anti-regime demonstrations until it was first captured by FSA factions who came from outside, mainly Liwaʾ Shuhdaʾ Idlib from Idlib city. One of the main families in Salqin was a historically large family of landowners, traders and olive oil producers that sought to protect its many properties and formed a local faction that included members of the family, in addition to other allied families. About a fifth of the extended family members migrated to Turkey and aimed to resume the family business across the border with the isolation of Idlib from its olive oil markets in Damascus, Homs and Latakia. Additionally, the family was known to be pious of a conservative background, which carried grievances dating back to Hafiz al-Asad's rule. Under the former president, the state turned a religious boarding school the family *wajih* built in the 1960s into a public school for girls, then into a sports club and wedding hall, which disturbed the peace of an adjacent mosque that had also been built by the family. Requests and bribes failed to bring the school ownership back to the family, yet it was the first thing the family faction controlled after the state's departure from Salqin, turning it into a Qurʾan memorizing institute. The family later established a partnership with a worldwide Turkish Islamic organization that funds higher education for Syrian students in Turkey, and helped the family establish five schools in Salqin. When al-Nusra took control of Salqin in 2015, the family faction joined the Sham Legion in an attempt to balance al-Nusra's extreme ideology in Salqin. al-Nusra was perceived as being foreign to the community, even by its religious elements. The Sham Legion took a neutral stance in the clashes between al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham and even tried to mediate between the two. Being a member of a faction accepted by other militant organizations in Salqin endowed the family with more leverage in running their trade business to and from Turkey, and in running their schools. This relationship therefore was important in sustaining the business and in connecting the family across the border. The MB's pragmatism in rebranding itself was met with a similar pragmatism from families looking to protect themselves.[45]

Families that were not strongly organized or allied to a strong, armed ally had to look for other means of support. Although tribal structures had lost

their significance as outside powers worked to undermine their solidarity,[46] a phenomenon in the later years of the civil war is emerging in looking for tribal origins outside the boundaries of a locality. Membership in an outside tribal structure is sought to provide protection within localities divided along divergent outside factional powers. Starting from 2016, families started holding extravagant feasts inviting tribal notables over to declare their lineage, although they were lacking documentation to prove it. Such practices carry significant economic strains that families are willing to take, especially in periods of violent factional clashes in areas where radical factions completely dominate. Associating with the larger clan families compensates for the sense of lost security. In Salqin for example, a town controlled by Haiʾat Tahrir al-Sham since 2015, one family claimed an unproven lineage to al-Damalkha tribe; this linkage is dubious as al-Damalkha's main center is far away, near al-Sajur River and the town of Jarablus. Another family sought to associate to al-Hadidiin, a tribe in eastern Hama and southern Aleppo suburbs, and a third family to al-ʿAqidat tribe, located primarily in Dayr al-Zur province.[47] This practice is not totally new in other areas in Idlib where the geographical location played a role, an absent variable in Salqin's case.

Saraqib's geographical location is unique in being the last urban centre in Idlib with proximity to areas dominated by tribes rather than families to its east. Some families sought, since the mid-twentieth century under the French Mandate, to pledge allegiance to large, strong tribes in the east during turbulent times for protection. For example, the most important families approached al-Mawali and al-Hadidiin tribes. Neither of the families belong to any of these tribes since one descended from al-ʿAfadila in Raqqa while the other is arguably of Kurdish origin. The trend continued after 2011 when two families pledged allegiance to al-Mawali tribe, which took a pro-revolution stance.[48]

Conclusion

The case of Idlib suggests the resilience of the intermediary relationship linking local communities to powerful actors outside the community. These ties took diverse forms prior to 2011 and subsequent contention and war have further increased this diversity, changing the identity of individuals occupying these positions and linking communities to new outside powers. In other words, the

need for the intermediary role remains because communities and outside powers each seek ties to one another, but who within local society can play that role—and which families get what varies with the goals and resources of the outside power.

The social structure of rural Idlib province has, in fact, proven malleable as outside powers asserted their influence during the conflict. This influence has caused a deep change in most localities' cross-family networks and hierarchies, shattering the pre-war order at the locality level and even at the family level in many cases. It has not affected all families equally, however; some families have managed to conserve a degree of their pre-war social status and solidarity, absorbing the impact of outside powers with minimum damages, perhaps because of their important members' ability to establish bargains with outside powers that maintained the interdependent relationship between the family members.

Families are rooted in their communities and are important to social life; individual family members in many of the localities of rural Idlib examined in this study depend heavily on the financial, political and social support of family members. The family, then, forms a type of interlinked safety net that makes the intermediary relationship to outside powers crucial to networks that extend betond just the individual doing the intermediation; an entire web of individuals depends on it for essential activities including accessing jobs, obtaining licenses, and managing violence. While this latter function consisted mainly in resolving conflicts before the war, it grew to providing physical protection during the war. Therefore, the reliance of average people on family ties remains a constant, even as the outside power and the local actor with access to it shift repeatedly.

Nonetheless, the importance of extended families persists today, in large part, because of how the Syrian state reinforced these relationships through decades of using intermediaries placed in state and Baʿth Party positions who served as a medium to disburse resources to average people. In other words, the Syrian state's approach in governing peripheral towns and villages through either formal or informal mechanisms has, in practice, re-emphasized the importance of the family structure. In doing so, it paved the way for the reproduction of the intermediary relationship between families and the various outside power centers emerging during the years of war. In this manner, families outside the old power

structure attempted to duplicate this relationship with the new outside powers and managed to get resources to their members

The extended family, therefore, is likely to remain an important part of governance in Idlib for the foreseeable future, though the form that this governance takes is likely to change—just as it has under the Baʿth Party and during the conflict. Crucially, however, families are in need of forms of local reconciliation to address the divide and cleavages within cross-family networks inflicted upon them by the process of war. War upends social ties and creates irreversible repercussions. Current discussions about reconstruction should not neglect this aspect as part of the complex process. The case of Idlib shows that many of the cross-family relationships maintain a degree of continuity with the past. Similarly, the relationships between families in these localities will, in the future, be shaped by the present conflict.

Notes

1. See Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 22f.

2. Author interview with a current resident of Saraqib, Skype, May 4, 2018. Problems in Saraqib used to be resolved by the *Zaʿamat* of two historical families; this position, if not inherited by the son, remained within the leading branch of the family. Problems between tribes in the eastern peripheries of Saraqib were also resolved by these two families in the area that spread beyond Saraqib administrative boundaries reaching Abu Dhuhur to the east. These problems included shootings, killings and disagreements over financial matters. The notable was expected to pay money and resolve the issue. However, the interviewee notes that there are no notables in that sense now. A nephew from the same leading family branch is considered as one but he does not have enough money to play that role.

3. *Madafa* was an important public space of hospitality, for socializing, and local politics, and a standard feature of a family or clan's influence in some localities. One interviewee reports TV sets entering Idlib's *Madafa* before its homes as an indication of *Madafa*'s social importance. *Madafa* is known by the word *odha* in Binnish.

4. Author interview with a current resident of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman via telephone, April 6, 2018.

5. Extended families in areas of the countryside around Ariha and Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman are referred to colloquially by the term *Tayfeh*, denoting a group of different families of different names that share intermarriage relations, which reflect the vast difference in social perceptions in areas of rural Idlib.

6. Author interview with a previous resident of Jarjanaz via telephone, August, 2018

7. Hanna Batatu, *op.cit.*, 11f.

8. Ibid., 39f

9. Author Interviews with previous residents of Saraqib, Binnish and Jarjanaz, via Skype, in April, May and August 2018

10. Hanna Batatu, *op.cit.*, p.32

11. Author Interview with a current resident of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, via skype, April 6, 2018

12. Author interview with a researcher, via Skype, Idlib, April 25, 2018

13. René Spitz, »State-Civil Society Relations in Syria: EU Good Governance Assistance in an Authoritarian State,« Dissertation, Leiden University, Netherlands, 2014, p. 95, https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/28916

14. Hanna Batatu, *op. cit.*, p.185

15. Author interview with a previous resident of Saraqib, Istanbul, July 6, 2018

16. Ibid

17. Hanna Batatu, *op. cit.*, 23f.

18. Author interview with a current resident of Salqin, via Skype, July 7, 2018

19. Interview with a current resident of Salqin, via Skype, May 4, 2018

20. Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria. 2004. »2004 National Census.« http://www.cbssyr.org/indicator/hp-f.htm (accessed June 20, 2013).

21. Interviews with pervious and current residents, via Skype, Gaziantep, September 6, 2018; Jarjanaz, April 11, 2018.

22. The decree was enacted by Hafiz al-Asad as means of celebrating the 25th anniversary of his corrective movement in 1995.

23. 23. Author interview with a current resident of Jarjanaz, via Skype, August 19, 2018

24. 24. Author interview with a former municipality member in Saraqib, via Skype, Gaziantep, July 23, 2018; This tallies with Batatu's observations the town Busra in Darʿaduring the French Mandate; whereas then the town's dominant clan answered to the French Conseiller at Darʿa, it now answers to Darʿa's Baʿthist governor or Baʿth Party branch secretary. See Hanna Batatu, *op. cit.*, p.25

25. Author interview with a previous resident of Binnish, Gaziantep, September 1, 2018

26. Kheder Khadour, (2017) Local wars and the chance for decentralized peace; available at https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/03/28/local-wars-and-chance-for-decentralized-peace-in-syria-pub-68369 (last accessed on November 11, 2018)

27. Interview with local researcher from Idlib, June, 2018

28. Author interview with a previous resident of Jabal al-Zawiya, April, 2018

29. Many of local councils did not emerge through elections but were established by elite self-selection mechanisms (i.e., a group of leaders including rebel fighters, notables, tribes, families and revolutionary activists agree to share the local council seats among themselves by consensus without elections). See Agnès Favier, »Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition Controlled Areas,« Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya (Italy: The European University Institute, Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, and Middle East Directions, 2016), pp. 6–15, http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20wars_2016.pdf (last accessed 30.11.2018)

30. Interview with a previous head of the local council in Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, via Skype, Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, April 6, 2018

31. Each family was represented by one to eight members based on its size. The Shura council comprised seven members and was elected by the notables council.

32. Interviews with previous and current residents of Saraqib, via Skype, May 2018

33. Interview with a former resident of Ihsim, via Skype, Killis, April 10, 2018

34. Author interviews with current residents of Sarmin, via Skype, August 2018

35. See Stanford university mapping of militant organizations; available at http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/525; (last accessed on November 1, 2018)

36. Author interview with an Ahrar al-Sham leader, via Skype, Idlib, May 2018

37. Ibid

38. Author interview with former resident of Sarmin, via Skype, June 2018

39. Interview with a resident of Binnish, via Skype, April 11, 2018

40. The regime strategy in crushing dissent in the 1980s turned families against each other. It used small families, armed and funded them to carry out actions against MB members of their communities. In 2011, the regime called the same families that managed to confront the MB movement. A family in Sarmin played in the same role in the 1980s and in 2011, it gathered people and acted as participants in the demonstrations. When the army arrived, their task was to inform about the demonstrators.

41. Yehuda U. Blanga, »The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War,« Middle East Policy, Vol.24, No. 3 (Fall 2017), site of Middle East Policy Council, https://www.mepc.org/journal/role-muslim-brotherhood-syrian-civil-war (last accessed on 25.6.2015)

42. Ibid

43. Raphaël Lefèvre and Ali el Yassir, The Sham Legion: Syria's Moderate Islamists, site of Carnegie Middle East, 15.4.2014, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55344 (last accessed on 14.09.2018)

44. Interview with a previous resident of Idlib city, via Skype, Gaziantep, April 2018

45. Its estimated that 20 per cent of the family's 2,700 members moved to Turkey since the beginning of the conflict. The family runs its business in olive oil production across the Syrian-Turkish border through the extended family members; interview with resident of Salqin, July 2018

46. Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur (2017) Eastern Expectations: The Changing Dynamics in Syria's Tribal Regions; available at: https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/02/28/eastern-expectations-changing-dynamics-in-syria-s-tribal-regions-pub-68008 (last accessed on November 12, 2018)

47. Author interview with residents of Salqin via telephone, May, 2018

48. Author interview with a researcher, via Skype, Idlib, April 2018

The Role of the Christian Clergy in Aleppo as Mediators

The Nature of Relationships and their Attributes

Roger Asfar

Introduction

The Christian clergy in Aleppo today play the mediating role between the Christians of the city and the authorities, firstly because of their historical role representing the Christian community and secondly because the regime strives to adopt them as an essential, semi-exclusive mediator between itself and the Christian community. Most Christians—in the absence of civic, non-clerical leaders—barely recognize anyone other than the clergy as mediators with such representative status. Historically, the clergy have been able to play this mediating role because of the power bestowed upon them by successive authorities, as well as their own ability to not only constantly reproduce this role but also to emphasize their ability to serve both the authorities and the people to the extent necessary for the continuation of this mutual relationship, all the while heeding the caveats and red lines set by the regime.

The nature of the relationship between the Christian clergy and the authorities is neither official nor institutional, and it tends to pass through security personnel, either directly or indirectly. Even if the relationship were to ostensibly follow the official conventional bureaucratic channels of government, it would still be forced to pass through security channels and be influenced by the personal relationships between both parties. This relationship explains the short lifespan of the clergy's influence as well as their ability to act as mediators and provide services via such mediation. This security of the relationship calls attention to, among other things, how the regime perpetuates its image as the protector of minorities.

As for the relationship between the clergy and »the laity«,[1] it is either »patriarchal protectionist« or based on mutual benefit, whereby every time the clergy accepts to be the mediator or to offer services through this role, it is deeply contingent on the benefits they will receive in return for being the mediator. Even if the services originally appear to be free of charge, in reality they serve to reinforce the clergy's role as a mediator between both parties: the security officers and the laity.

The clergy appear as a strong presence throughout history as representatives of their community, and as mediators for it. They have maintained this role until today at a time when the survival of their community is marred by anxiety and uncertainty about the future. Transformations since 2011 have been radical and profound with regard to this community's conditions and the form of its surroundings, as well as the community's size and the type of individuals that constitute it.

I. On the Role of the Christian Clergy

The Christian clergy in Aleppo have a longstanding representative role dating back to the early presence of Christians in the city. According to both contemporary and older testimonies and writings on the history of the city,[2] this role was consolidated through the dealing by consecutive ruling powers with Christians as a group rather than as individual citizens. And in the absence of any other genuine representation, the Christian clergy took over the representation of Christians under successive political authorities.

The Historical Root of the Representative Role Played by the Christian Clergy

The representative role of the Christian clergy in Aleppo is in keeping with its role as mediator between the Christian community and the authorities. The two roles, in a sense, produce each other. They have undergone minor changes under successive forms of government and authorities in the city, but it wasn't until the security nature of the Asad regime reigned supreme that a radical transformation occurred.

During the Ottoman period, and especially during the *Tanzimat* Era—during which a set of legal reforms was enacted—and the confessional Millet System from 1839 onwards up until the rule of the Baʿth Party in Syria, treating Christians as a group led to the strengthening of the role of the clergy as their representatives. The *tanzimat* made the head of every church the representative of its followers, and the church head was considered the only head in the absence of any other representative. Even dignitaries or the wealthy, despite their prominent social status, would usually remain under its authority when facing official authorities. In the same context, the concept of the people of the *Dhimma*,[3] which was applied on a discretionary basis but ever-present as a concept, also resulted in the treatment of Christians as a monolithic group under Ottoman rule.[4]

An example of such collective practices is the monetary penalties, tribute (*jizya*) and royalties that were paid in times of necessity in a collective, solidaristic manner by the clergy with cooperation of wealthy and notable Christians. These payments were made as a way to guard Christians from injustices or assaults by popular actors or state authorities. The latter exploited unfair laws against Christians, or their internal disputes, to extort them for tribute and royalties when the situation required it.[5] Regardless, these policies contributed to giving the Christians a relative level of freedom and respect for their particularities. For example, they were given legal recognition of their own personal status courts and the relative respect for their right to practice their own religious rites and rituals.[6]

At the time, the laity, especially the dignitaries amongst them, had a role in »electing« the clergy, especially the bishops, which somewhat strengthened their role as representatives, in addition to their role as leaders of the community. And even though the laity played a role beyond the traditional ecclesiastical framework, thanks to their trade relations with foreign commercial and political consulates, they nevertheless remained in agreement with and under the wing of the clergy where they formed a complementary relationship—with the clergy maintaining the highest rank for moral and spiritual reasons, even though the laity had in fact more power in certain cases than the clergy.

The Christian clergy maintained their role as mediators and semi-exclusive

representatives during the Ottoman era in general. The situation changed slightly during the French Mandate: On the one hand, Muslims considered Christians to be on the French side; on the other hand, the French would try to use the Christians to their advantage one way or another, while some Christians made use of the power of the French who had occupied the country.

However, this era produced patriotic politicians and statesmen, many of whom were Christians, including a number of Aleppan Christians. This made many Christians feel they had someone who represented them and spoke in their name other than the clergy; these politicians were political representatives who nevertheless maintained very good relations with the clergy, always taking their stature into consideration.

While the laity, as mentioned previously, played a role in dealing with religious taxes and royalties through their power, wealth and connections, the position of the clergy nevertheless was maintained. Even if the clergy and the Christian businessmen disagreed, their mutual bond to their sect and religious community led to continued coordination between them, with good relations preserved in order for both to maintain their respective roles in a mutually beneficial relationship where interests and services are exchanged.

Later on, after the French had left Syria, the situation did not become stable enough to define the contours of how the state should interact with Christians. Nevertheless, the status of the Christian clergy was generally maintained and their position was respected. While the personality of the clergyman and his connection played a role in his position, the new authorities—who did not manage to stabilize their rule—would try to win over the clergy, or at least avoid any unnecessary hostility with them.

One of the most prominent events in the history of the relationship between the Christians and the state through mediations with the clergy was the conflict over nationalization/state seizures of its agricultural, commercial and industrial property, as well as its schools. Christians were not the only group affected by seizures of property, but the nationalization or seizure of the schools created a conflict almost exclusively between Christians and the government. The seizure

of schools highlighted the role of the clergy and, once again, positioned them as mediators in defense of their subjects. However, the Christians lost this battle almost completely, leaving a wound that has yet to be healed. This is what Christian clergy today see as the first lesson Baʿth rule taught them—their authority and position as mediators is limited, and the authorities always have the final say. When state authorities decide something they will implement it regardless of whether it is right or just, or whether it tramples on the interests of bishops and those they represent.[7]

The desire of the authorities to impose their decisions on the clergy is not taken lightly, even when it comes to trivial matters. Here we can recall that it is known that the sermons of Syrian clerics are subject to regular censorship no matter what their affiliations may be. In one case, for instance, when a Christian cleric did not include thanks to the head of the regime and the authorities and express loyalty to them during a mass celebrating a religious holiday, he was sent a strong warning through a high-ranking Christian layman with ties to the security services, whose message was: »It will be considered an unintentional mistake, but be warned that if repeated they will interrogate him and will expose his connections.« This message contained an implicit threat that the regime would fabricate charges against the cleric of associating with an enemy.

On the other hand, the regime maintains a permanent presence of Aleppan Christians in the Aleppo City Council, in the national Parliament (three seats: Catholic, Orthodox and Armenian) and sometimes in the Cabinet. The individuals who represent this presence, even if only formalistically, are only appointed after the bishops are informally consulted by Baʿth Party and security apparatuses, who often do not share the same view; this is especially the case for the Parliament. Political representatives such as Members of Parliament and ministers usually tend to maintain the best relations with the clergy who in fact hold more permanent positions than politicians.

In the absence of true civic leaders representing Christians after the Baʿth party had abolished pluralistic political life and suppressed civil society, Christians became thirsty for new leaders other than the religious ones, even though the latter were good and bold, but their religious nature limited their role and the scope of

their action. This thirst for representation divided Syrian Christians, including the Christians of Aleppo, into supporters of political groups in neighboring Lebanon, including the Lebanese Forces led by Samir Geagea and the Free Patriotic Movement led by Michel Aoun. Following Lebanese news since the start of the Lebanese civil war had become a familiar habit.

In the absence of any political life in Syria, Syrians turned to the nearest political model, which is Arabic-speaking and supposedly free and democratic. The appearance of power that the Gemayel, Franjieh, Chamoun, Geagea, Aoun and other families had—even if it was manifested through thuggish militancy—nevertheless awakened a dormant desire among these Syrian Christians for leaders who could express their sentiments and represent them. It reached a point where some Syrian Christians fought alongside the Christian militias during the Lebanese civil war.

In any case, Syrian Christians who followed the news of Lebanese Christian politicians and their political statements were not necessarily in agreement with the latter's views on the Syrian regime.

In this context, it is necessary to recall that the role played by European countries through their consulates, Western missionaries and relations between the Ottomans and European authorities made a fundamental contribution to the consolidation of the status of the clergy and their role as representatives.[8] These relations gave the Aleppan clergy the impression that their links with Western consulates—embodied by their citizens, who worked as translators, and foreign missionaries—would make their voices heard. Thus their role as representatives of the Christian community in the city and mediators in the matters that concern them would be recognized on a broader scale.

The Contemporary State's Treatment of Christians as a Community rather than as Individual Citizens

Even after the end of Ottoman rule and the era of the French Mandate up until the modern Syrian national state, it seems that the way of dealing with Christians has reproduced itself. They have remained, in the eyes of the state, a group rather

than individual citizens, despite the modern constitutional and legal forms of the state and its administration. Under the French Mandate, dealing with Syrians as religious groups was evident through the establishment by the French, during some periods of their rule, of mini-states based on sect, such as the state for the ʿAlawis and the state for the Druze. The Syrian Christians stayed out of this equation for two apparent reasons—first, the project of the state of Lebanon at the time as, first and foremost, a Christian state; and second, the spread of Syrian Christians across all Syrian soil without a clear concentration of sufficient density except in Wadi al-Nasara, which was said to have been planned to be a part of Greater Lebanon and not part of Syria.

This type of interaction facilitated the consolidation of the state's authority, defined channels of communication with these groups and clarified who would play the intermediary role between them and the state. An »innocent« interpretation of this approach is that it accords with the nature of the population and their high degree of supranational religious affiliation. It is not necessarily inconsistent with this first interpretation that it was also one of the tools used to consolidate dictatorial authority, preferring to address the instincts of demographic groups in order to impose its authority and sustain its rule. For example, the state nationalized private schools in the second half of the 1960s; these schools which were largely Catholic, and subject to seizure whether they belonged to Western missionaries or local Catholic churches. Some affected Christians prefer to call this the seizure of private schools. At the time, the picture for whomever followed this issue was not a legal or rights dispute between individuals and their government. Rather, the dispute revolved around the rights (or privileges) of the Christian community as a whole, the Catholics in particular, and the government.[9]

Fundamentally, it seems that the presence of private schools with a predominantly religious Christian character alone confirms, regardless of the later seizure of these same schools, that Christians were treated as a group rather than as individuals/citizens of a modern state.

In addition, the special courts for Christians known as the »spiritual courts«, namely the personal status courts, which deal with matters of marriage, annulment, divorce, custody, child support and the like, are an Ottoman legacy offered as a

privilege to Christians, pretending to preserve their rights. These spiritual courts, under an all-inclusive personal status law, however, perpetuate the notion of the group, and not of individual citizen who would seek state justice rather than the justice offered by their sect.

According to one layperson, spiritual courts during the Ottoman period had the positive outcome of allowing Christians to preserve their rights under a religious state. However, under a secular state presumed to be based on citizenship rather than religion, personal status courts become a matter that perpetuates discrimination, and become very negative as they deny equality between citizens.[10] It goes without saying that just because Christians were dealt with as a homogenous group and not as individual citizens does not mean that the Sunni majority or others were dealt with on the basis and principles of equal citizenship.

During the French Mandate, the French maintained the same approach. Despite the emergence of civil leaders in the city, they still fell under the authority of the Church, which remained at the head of Christian representation. As for the successive Syrian authorities since independence from the French in 1946 until the 1963 Baʿthist coup, none seem to have stabilized or survived long enough to change the method of approaching the Christian population. So they maintained the same approach as before, with perhaps some slight changes during the period of unity with Egypt.

The Asad regime maintained the nature of the existing relationship between the government and the Christian population and contributed to reinforcing it in order to bolster its rule. So the essence of this relationship did not change, and it was as if the acquired right of the clergy to represent the Christians was recognized and maintained, reinforcing the collective dimension of Christians' identity as a basis for dealing with them. However, certain significant exceptions to this had their implications, in which the regime imposed its decisions, such as the seizure of Christian schools, bypassing of the representative and intermediary roles of the Christian clergy in the city.

II. The Relationship of the Christian Clergy to State Authorities

Matters like official applications and requests for approvals and permits all appear to adhere to the official bureaucratic procedure, and are considered as the decisive criterion in the case of any given request by a Christian denomination. However, real power—the final say—lies with security officials rather than civil servants or technocrats. Thus it is the clergyman's relationship with the security official that determines the success of the former in their role as intermediary, rather than official processes that were, nevertheless, respected where necessary. This may be understood through the security nature of the Asad regime, which determined the form of the relationship between the regime and the clergy.

The Official Bureaucratic Forms of the State—Respected Only on Paper

In all cases that require taking an official bureaucratic track, Christians are subject to the same laws as all other Syrian citizens and religious organizations, even if merely formalistically. This includes matters relating to the judiciary, legal procedures and requests for licenses, permits and exemptions, and applies to the laity, clerics and the Church as an institution, with all its subsidiary institutions such as schools and charities. In the example of the expropriation of private Christian schools, Christian spiritual leaders resorted to the official courts to file petitions and complaints for the infringement that has befallen them as a result of the confiscation of their schools and some of their annexes, just like any other legal entity in the state, and followed through the full judicial process of the complaint until the decision of December 9, 1974, when the Syrian Higher Administrative Court overturned the decision to confiscate and close Catholic schools.[11] Another channel parallel to the judicial one in place was the intervention with regime officials who were clearly from a security or military background asking them revise their decisions, but this was to no avail.

Even in certain exceptional cases that required extraordinary mediation reaching the top of the regime's hierarchy, they maintained, despite the exceptional nature,

the official request form with all the necessary approvals, stamps, seals and signatures as per standard procedure. A clergyman who was interviewed pointed out that keenness to follow the bureaucratic process was necessary, fundamental and worthy of respect. In his view, one of the reasons that the government applies this respect and imposition of bureaucracy despite accepting mediation is to keep the door for corruption and bribery open for employees and bureaucrats, who will ask for bribes even if the request is coming from a religious entity and mediators of high rank among the security staff. These employees, of course, will not obstruct the processing of the request, but will not miss the chance to pick up some crumbs along the way.

For example, every archbishop has the right to import a private car with yellow license plates known as »temporary entry plates«, which exempt the car from customs fees. In one of the cases mentioned in the interviews, an archbishop brought up the subject of bringing in a car with yellow plates as was usual and the officer assured him by saying »this is your right«.[12] Yet it was necessary during the process of importing the car and issuing the yellow plates to bribe the employees, who were not ashamed to ask for it. They referred to the bribe as a »celebratory dessert (*tahliyya*)« or »the price of a cup of coffee« or »a holiday gift for the kids«.[13] The employee charged by the diocese to oversee the process could have refused and mentioned the name of the archbishop or called a security officer to ease the process, but this would have resulted in further difficulties or punitive delay from the employees who could use bureaucracy as an excuse. Besides, any future applications by the diocese, such as bringing in school buses that are exempt from customs fees, would have faced immense difficulties.

In another case, a church violated urban planning regulations, which were enforced relatively strictly in Aleppo. When building a residential building on the former site of a church school, the church built more floors than are typically allowed in buildings, due to facilitation that was said to come from an influential figure. Though this building violated formal regulations, all formal bureaucratic procedures were still followed, with builders obtaining the necessary building permits with exceptional specifications.

Another example is from 2006, when a new personal status law specific to

Catholic sects in Syria was issued. Even in this case, the informal assent from security agencies was needed for the legal process to proceed. Without this consent, Catholics could not even think about formulating and getting the law passed through the formal legal channels. This approval was necessary in spite of the unfairness faced by Christians due to their compliance with Islamic laws concerning personal status, especially in terms of inheritance and adoption.[14] It is important to note here that other sources working on Christian rights confirm security factors or roles in the process of issuing this law, yet find it unlikely that the security approval was given before work began on drafting the law.

The law that was in effect previously would split the inheritance according to Islamic law, where the female's share would equal half of the male's share, and would not acknowledge adoption. After the law was issued, which was considered a »courtesy« from the president, there were introductory seminars that included expressing gratitude and thanks to the president for allowing the issuance of this law. Yet the surprise came later in the form of annulling the most important articles in the new law, such as adoption and other parts, due to what was described at the time as the reservations and objections of Sunni clergymen to some of the contents of the law. Therefore the matter took on a security dimension and some articles were annulled![15]

Repeated highlighting of the security dimension here reinforces the concept of protection for Christians as a community. It is painted as follows: We allowed you the right to litigate according to your own laws, but others (implicitly, Muslims) who resent the legalizing of things contravening Islamic law, such as adoption and equal inheritance between men and women, might have also pressured us. Out of our fear for your safety and to prevent this from developing into trouble, we have decided, for your own protection, to annul some articles of the law.[16]

Clergymen have to go through the Security Apparatuses to Facilitate their Affairs

Despite the preservation, to a great extent, of the official and bureaucratic formalities of the state, there is near unanimous agreement between the clergymen and laity interviewed on the obligatory security route, which goes

through security officials and officers. All the clergymen admit—despite their pro-government stances—that actual rule belongs to security authorities, at least concerning issues that relate to them as Christians. Out of deference to the reality of the situation, and to facilitate their affairs and those of Christians, they planned these matters according to the authority of the security officers.

For the approval of any private application or request, such as a permit to build a church or school, as mentioned previously, even for scouts' camps and field trips for youth groups, there is prior coordination of a bureaucratic nature, but with the security apparatuses. It is well known to those concerned with this information that the true power in the country belongs to the security officials, each according to his position and current influence, and out of recognition of this inescapable reality, the clergymen resort to administering their affairs and those of their groups through their relationship with the security officers appropriate for each case and time.

In the weightiest cases, such as those related to the return of Syrian Christian dissidents back into Syria, clergymen of the highest order (patriarchs) would deal with a high-ranking security officer, who would be charged by the Presidential Palace with the case. After the patriarch submitted the name of a Christian dissident to the officer of the Presidential Palace, the latter would oversee the matter and then follows up with the patriarch with a permission or rejection. This relationship between the patriarch and the Presidential Palace was outlined by a clergyman who worked within the inner circle of a patriarch of a sect in Lebanon for a Syrian Christian wanted by security authorities for his dissident activities.

This relationship, between the patriarchate and the Presidential Palace, appears to be new, and it emerged after the revolution in 2011. It can be interpreted as a desire to contain Christian dissidents and leave the door open to the return »back to the bosom of the homeland (*ila hidn al-watan*)« which might reinforce the regime's narrative that it is a conflict between a legitimate authority and Islamic extremist terrorism.

This last example allows one to conclude that, even in the cases where the mediating party is a political authority, the relationship must pass through security

channels. In this case, that means an officer with the rank of brigadier or colonel in the Presidential Palace.

A Christian Lebanese university professor described some of his interactions with his sect's patriarch, with whom he is close and who primarily resides in Damascus. The professor said that on one of his visits to the patriarch, the latter requested from him a file that the professor had not brought with him from Lebanon. When the patriarch learned that the professor left his suitcase full of files with a clergyman who manages the patriarch's office, he reproached him for this and warned him that most clergymen have connections to the security apparatuses.[17]

The Higher Administrative Court's overturning of the decision on the seizure and closure of Catholic schools, mentioned above, remains unimplemented until this day, 44 years after it was issued, despite the fact that the decision was arrived at by the highest judicial authority in its jurisdiction. What's useful in the context of this research is that the bureaucratic path alone, be it governmental or judicial, is futile in the cases studied here.

In another example from the same context, the expansion of private Christian schools that had not been seized were prevented from expanding, as they accepted a »deputy director« appointed by state authorities in accordance with the rules in effect at the time. They were not granted licenses to expand, such as opening classes at another educational level. The grounds for this decision, offered by officials in informal meetings, were that the authority trusts the Christians and their patriotism and schools, but the granting of new licenses for education necessitate the granting of similar licenses to »others« who are not trusted by the authority due to their extremism. This instance confirms the security dimension of dealing with Christians, as the issue seems to be an issue of security, not of rights, and perpetuates in the minds of Christians the idea of protection provided to them by the regime.

When the head of one of the Christian denominations recently visited President al-Asad, the subject of discussion was the local Baʿth Party branch's attempt to consolidate its seizure of church property that it had informally taken possession

of and used for its own purposes since the seizure of schools. The Party branch had recently made use of a judicial ruling that the Ministry of Agriculture had jurisdiction over a wooded area that constituted a large part of the church's property and purchased the property, giving it formal control. The president's reply was that the judiciary is independent in Syria and its work cannot be interfered with. The person offering the testimony expected that the matter would conclude with a deal/extortion by security forces and the Party, with the concerned church to re-purchase the land that it already owns. This returns the discussion towards the fundamental and definitive role of security forces, not official tracks and channels.

It merits mention that Christians lack an official governmental apparatus equivalent to the Ministry of Awqaf, which is an official governmental body that deals with Muslims in some of their affairs; regardless of the effectiveness of this body and its connections, it regulates their relationship as a group with state authorities. By contrast, testimonies of Christian clergymen and the laity active in the Christian community in Aleppo mention the presence of a security officer or personnel in most security apparatuses assigned to follow the affairs of the Christian sects.[18]

These are all examples and cases which confirm that Christian clergymen in Aleppo, when they wish to effectively exercise their role as mediators, realize that the informal security channel, i.e., direct security relationships with security officers, is the most effective route.

The Measure of the Clergyman's Success in his Role as a Mediator and his Connection to Security Officers

The formal bureaucratic and legal relationship of an individual or a group with the state imposes standards and conditions that are followed, which leads to obtaining something that is stated by the law, yet in the case of Syrian Christians, and their relationship with the regime and its security aspect, a different approach is necessitated in order to obtain the same thing.
Clergymen, like most Syrians, know that in most cases, every security official has a certain level of influence and a time limit in his position; they have always learned that with the passing of time, the influence this or that officer recedes or

he is transferred, demoted or terminated from his role. Throughout the lifetime of this regime, spanning almost 50 years, even the senior security and army officers were subjected to this treatment, such as Naji Jamil, ʿAli Duba, Hikmat al-Shihabi, Ghazi Kanʿan and Rustum Ghazala. Therefore a clergyman seeks to form a variety of relationships with a number of security officers, yet in a manner whereby the clergyman does not fall victim to the competition between these officers.

Consequently, the more solid the clergyman's relationship with the officers, and the better the choice of officer he makes, the more influence he has and the better he is able to perform the role of mediator and provide services and benefits when necessary. This also explains how a clergyman with the rank of »priest« can have higher influence than that of his church superior with the rank of »archbishop«. This can create tensions within the institution of the church, which security agents do not fail to exploit to their advantage.

The former Aleppan archbishop of Jerusalem, the late Hilarion Capucci, who was imprisoned by Israel after being charged with smuggling weapons to the Palestinian resistance in his car, was known to have close relationships with security officers in Syria. After his release, when he was under something approximating house arrest near the Vatican, he visited Syria and Aleppo almost annually, and met with the usual officials such as the governor, the police chief and the local secretary of the Baʿth Party, as well as officers at various security apparatuses around the city. Later in his life, he was part of the official Syrian delegation to the Geneva conference. This constitutes a remarkable case of reliance on a specific Christian clergyman above all others to participate in a negotiating political delegation.[19]

In an incident that took place after 2011, which was well known in Aleppo, the Air Force Intelligence, the security apparatus well known for its brutality, arrested two young women in December 2013. One was Christian and the other Muslim, and both had ties to a Christian relief organization run by a clergyman well known for his public opposition to the regime. They were interrogated and tortured by a Christian intelligence officer with the rank of brigadier. It was said that the reason behind this arrest was to pressure the clergyman and reduce his role and push him out of the picture. Even the intervention of the archbishop of one of

the sects, first at the Political Security branch where the women were being held and then through contact with the Attorney General, did not succeed in freeing the women despite the promises given to the archbishop. The women were not released until February 2014, and the relief organization itself was subjected to immense pressure in order to control its activities and direct it according to the desires of the security officers.

There is without a doubt an importance and significance to the hierarchy of the church, and this is accentuated by the protocols and formalities during official visits and ceremonies. More important, however, are relations with security officers, which ignore this hierarchy. There are clergymen of the lowest rank who form relations with security officers; clergymen of high rank who, for reasons of their personal character, look down on this sort of relationship; clergymen who hold foreign passports; and clergymen who commission a lower ranking clergymen to play this role with security in their place.

In addition, there is competition among Christian clergy for greater influence with the security apparatuses, which has led in some cases to struggle and hostility between them. Between 2000 and 2006, the city of Damascus witnessed a competition between a Catholic archbishop and bishop from the same sect. One of the reasons behind their feud was the security apparatuses' favoring the bishop after he was able to strengthen his relationship with them throughout the years, which made him more influential and better able to perform the role of mediator than his superior, the archbishop, who considered it a belittlement of his status and an insult to his position, according to testimonies by clergymen after the fact. This competition, along with other causes, was turned into a struggle within the church that ended with transferring the bishop to Homs, which reduced his influence and power. He was later exiled to Lebanon and subsequently to Venezuela with the approval of the Vatican.[20]

Since the power of a clergyman, no matter how significant, is connected to the power of the security officer he is associated with, often a powerful and influential clergyman's status is diminished and it becomes clear that it is due to the transfer or demotion of the security officer who was the source behind the influence and benefits.

The strengthening of the clergyman's relationship with the security officer is done through various means; for example, through providing benefits such as enrolling the officer's son in a private Christian school despite it being known that Christians desire to keep the numbers of Muslim students in their private schools low in order to keep the larger share of places for Christians. It can also be done by providing security reports, oral or written, on clergymen and their connections, such as the reports—according to testimonies by clergymen— written by a clergyman in Damascus and a nun in its countryside on Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, who headed the Dayr Mar Musa (Monastery of Saint Moses the Abyssinian) in the Qalamun Mountains.

As an indication of how extensive the practice of enrolling the children of security officers in private Christian schools became, one school, known as al-Sadaqa Private School, had such a high number of officers' children enrolled that this contributed to the decision of the monastic order that owned it to shut it down. The nun in the previous example was Agnes, the head of the Dayr Mar Yaʿcub (Monastery of Saint Jacob) in Qara, Qalamun, who formed strong relationships with security officers despite not being a Syrian citizen, but a Lebanese Palestinian. One clergyman's testimony stated that this relationship went as far as a direct relationship with General ʿAli Mamluk, the head of National Security and the former head of the General Intelligence Agency. It went so far that the French journalist Caroline Poiron accused the nun of being involved in the assassination of her husband, the journalist Gilles Jacquier, in Homs, in coordination with a Syrian security apparatus. In addition, this relationship gave her the power to play a role in negotiations with the Syrian opposition in certain cases.[21]

It is clear that this relationship was developed and defined especially after 2011, as the events and the circumstances prevailing in the country necessitated taking alternative means. The security aspect of this approach became increasingly tyrannical, or perhaps its control of the course of events has become more apparent. This has been the case, specifically, in dealing with the Christian minority and its spiritual leaders.

In a famous incident that took place in April 2013, the Syriac Orthodox

archbishop of Aleppo, Yohanna Ibrahim, and the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, Boulos Yazigi, were kidnapped while performing what was thought to be a mediating role in order to free two Aleppan priests who were previously kidnapped. This mediating role would have never taken place without the coordination or knowledge of regime security apparatuses, and communication between the two archbishops and armed rebels. The kidnapping took place after the archbishops left opposition territories and were coming from the Turkish borders in the direction of Aleppo, and before arriving at the first checkpoint manned by government forces.

Ibrahim was known for his connections with the Muslims of the city before the 2011 revolution and his interventions with the governorate due to his relationships with those considered to be part of the opposition. Clergymen who followed the kidnapping were of the view that the mediating role of the archbishop was not welcomed by the regime or its security apparatuses. The fate of the archbishops is still unknown to this day. Another archbishop from a different area in Syria was threatened with the same fate if he did not cease his activities that are not in support of the regime, despite not appearing to be in opposition to it.[22]

Regime supporters circulated the belief that an Islamist opposition group of Caucasian origin was behind the kidnapping of the archbishops. The opposition, meanwhile, circulated another scenario—the archbishops were kidnapped directly by the regime or a group working for it and, in this context, a message was delivered from a trusted governmental security officer, saying a government authority is behind the kidnapping. The message was said to be delivered to one of the leaders of the Aleppo Christians and was then forwarded to Christian clergymen in the city.[23]

Whatever the validity of the circulated scenarios and the aforementioned message, the kidnapping incident had an influence on Christians locally, regionally and internationally. Lebanese Christians hung a picture of the two archbishops in the place of a giant picture of Bachir Gemayel in Sassine Square in the heart of a Christian neighborhood in east Beirut. Christians felt targeted for the first time since the start of the revolution in March 2011. This also led to regulating and restricting the mediating role that might be played by Christian clergymen;

therefore, the mediating role Christian clergymen could have played before the kidnapping was not the same as after the incident.

On the other hand, the evidence that suggests the regime's involvement in the kidnapping of the archbishops, points to how the regime will never allow any mediating role by clergymen that contradicts the lines it sets.

III. Concerning the Relationship Between Christian Clergymen and Laity

Unlike in previous eras, there is currently no official role played by laity in choosing clergymen, which coincides with a crisis in educating clergymen; there are too few and their training is inadequate. At the same time, the only activities open to the laity are explicitly associated with the church or attached to it or under its cover with respect to the regime. In the face of this sort of relationship between the parties, clergymen and the laity set out different positions.

Laity Currently Hold No Power Over Clergymen and Have No Role in Choosing Them

Students who are nominated to become clergymen are chosen in the monasteries and seminaries that have suffered for decades from decreasing enrollment, which is a Christian phenomenon across the globe and could be explained by the decrease in religiosity, the reluctance to practice religion and growth in the trend of secularism.

In addition, these seminaries suffer from substantial issues in regards to notions of spiritual, behavioral and scientific (i.e., theological and philosophical) education. According to testimonies of clergymen and seminary students, these issues have manifested themselves in the religious authorities' stumbling to determine the path of these seminaries; their methodology and the clergymen in charge of administering and directing them; and the inability to adapt to the demands of the times and scientific advancement.

One of the clergymen interviewed describes this system as being corrupt, likening it to a governmental department where an honest worker starts a job among a majority of corrupt and venal workers, which gives him few choices: either become venal and corrupt just like them, withdraw alone and leave this department where he does not fit in or stay and persist in his honesty while the other workers do what is needed to get him fired.[24] Within this framework, a layperson who is active in church circles asks: »Has the church been infected by the Syrian regime, or is it the other way around?«.[25] However, other clergymen and laity feel that this example is harsh and a misrepresentation, because the church as well as the seminaries are full of well-intentioned men who are trying to do the best they can despite difficult circumstances.[26]

Unlike in the past, the laity have no role in selecting the clergymen and religious authorities and the laws of the church, in effect, give the clergymen broad powers that become broader the higher the rank of the clergyman. A bishop, for example, has nearly total fiscal, administrative and spiritual authority in his parish (»eparchy« in the Orthodox Church); in other words, he has near total authority in the geographical area under his authority. While he might be required, in some cases, to consult with the clergy, he is not bound by their opinions; even if they unanimously hold an opinion contrary to the wishes of the bishop, their voice is advisory rather than decisive.

Many Activities of the Laity Are Under the Umbrella of the Church and Conditioned Upon its Approval

The schools, the scouts, the youth groups and whatever is attached to them are activities associated with the church for Christians; Muslims were excluded from them as Muslims for a long time.

While scout organizations in Syria were banned in 1982 and replaced by the Baʿth Vanguards and the Revolutionary Youth Union, the Christian scouts under the umbrella of the church were overlooked. Non-Christians were not allowed to keep private schools, despite the state diminishing these schools' role after seizing many of them in the 1960s. Regarding the religious charities, a decree was issued in 1984 to shut down all Islamic charities in Syria[27] while yet again Christian

religious organizations were excluded from this decree. These are all examples of the treatment of Christians as a group differentiated from other citizens in the same city or country.

Without the umbrella of the church »covering and protecting« these activities before the state, they could never have been put on in the first place and could have been terminated in an instant, or even considered a dangerous and unauthorized assembly under the Emergency Law or for other reasons. From this we can gather the vital role played by the clergymen, who provide this cover.

Even the activities of Father Frans van der Lugt,[28] a Jesuit who organized activities in Syria for many years, would not have been allowed without security approval. Father van der Lugt organized annual hiking trips that brought together thousands of Syrian youth from different sects for the environmental Bayt al-Ard project in rural Homs. He was not known to have relationships with security officers, which means he usually took the conventional official routes to conduct matters of his service as a priest and a monk.[29]

Therefore, the laity are bound to the clergymen for cover and to provide them with this privileged space. Whether they like the clergy or not, and even whether they are believers or non-religious or atheists, there is no escape from affiliation with the Christian community in order to benefit from the space given through the clergymen to the community—there are no civil or secular choices available. Without the cover that allows these activities, »the Christian community« would be dead and deprived of what it considers its gains and what distinguishes it from others in the country.

The Role of the Laity in Maintaining the Clergymen's Role as Mediators

The interviews done in preparation for this research with Christian clergymen and laity presented two opinions on the nature of the relationship between clergymen and laity.

The first opinion compares Christians with a flock, which is a familiar church

term. The clergymen are the shepherds, while the regime is supreme authority. With varying degrees of knowledge of the regime's faults and negatives, the shepherds realize that there is no alternative to dealing with the regime. For the shepherds, this entails providing the regime with services—especially in times of crisis—in their capacity as mediators between the regime and the flock for which they are responsible.

The time of crisis is either the state of a minority living within a majority that it distrusts due to psychological, historical and doctrinal reasons, or the state of security agitation, such as »the Muslim Brotherhood events« of the early 1980s and the Syrian revolution that started in 2011. Both represent security agitations that they view as a direct threat to them, even if it does not target them directly as Christians.

They then accept the behavior of the supreme authority, and the solutions it forces upon the flock as well as the shepherds, even if its dealings can be harsh at times. This equation governs the relationship between clergymen and laity according to this view.

This opinion also mentions how Christians are dealt with as a community and not as individuals, and imposes a securitized nature on the relationship by establishing the concept of the regime's protection of the Christian community. This protection assumes there is an enemy/danger. Popular Christian beliefs suggest that it is an enemy or danger common to Christians and the regime, represented by the Sunni majority, and based on historical grounds—some of them real and some of them imagined.

As for the second opinion, it views the clergyman as serving the laity or another clergyman within the framework of his role as mediator for only one of two reasons: that the service granted would lead to material or immaterial compensation the clergyman needs, or the service granted is ostensibly free of charge and without a visible compensation, which would reproduce the clergyman's role as mediator to the laity and the security forces.

According to this view, the clergyman looks after his own interests above all.

These interests at times require the exchange of services, and the provision of free services when necessary. Reproducing the role of mediator is a vital and continuous process necessary for the maintenance of relationships with security authorities, and for keeping up in the competition between the clergymen themselves.

These two opinions seem contradictory, and they might be, but at the same time they might be complementary, as one does not exclude the other.

Furthermore, the relationship between the clergymen and the laity seems to be mutually beneficial in the neutral sense of the word: each party needs the other. For example, the clergymen in Aleppo are now bringing in donations and funding from international Christian organizations. They offer aid to Christians to help them stay in the city, and also work on restoring their homes and supporting small- and medium-sized businesses to provide employment opportunities. Moreover, the Maronite archbishop went on a European tour with a local choir in an effort to fundraise to rebuild the ceiling of the Maronite cathedral that was destroyed by the bombings, and the image of the church without a ceiling has become an icon for the state of Christians in the city. However, some Christians raise questions—despite their emotional ties to the church—such as: »Who will pray in these churches?«.[30]

Clergymen in Syrian have always played the role of fundraisers and collectors of donations of all kinds to help Syrians generally and Christians especially. This role was tied to the clergy's network of connections in Western countries and to the Vatican, as well as the image it has built of itself over the years. Yet since the start of the Syrian revolution, in March 2011, the flow of aid and funds through the clergymen has had a significant effect on the evolution of their role as mediators and reaffirmed their representative role. This has been particularly the case after the early period of the revolution and in the areas with a Christian majority being affected by it, including the damage done to some churches by military operations.

This flow has assisted the clergy in their desperate attempts to preserve the »Christian presence« after realizing how evident the receding of their role and

their importance as clergy is, with the decrease in the number of Christians in Syria. This attempt has not precluded the clergy from providing benefits and advantages to the families of Christians, their relatives and those close to them. Within this framework, the old and emerging Christian organizations headed or supervised by clergymen had a role in procuring this funding. Christians, unlike others in Syria, had experience with well-organized collective charity work due to the regime allowing them to continue organizational activities of a spiritual and religious character and with civic local substance.

▰ Conclusion: Rich Past, Tense Present and a Doubtful Future

Christians are not gone from Aleppo, yet the previous period—which started in the Ottoman days and was followed by the Mandate, independence, the coups, the Baʿth Party and the Asad regime—is over.

In December 2016, the Syrian regime concluded its takeover of the eastern side of the city that was outside of its control for years. There is stable security and the bombings that targeted civilians have stopped. Many Christians and clergymen have expressed their joy that the city has been »cleansed«. Generally, Christians who left the city during the difficult days have not returned after the stabilization; on the contrary, they increasingly left the city for one reason or another during 2017 and 2018.

The number of Christians in the city has sharply decreased,[31] while the clergymen, whose numbers have not decreased at the same rate, have realized that they are losing the role they played as representatives and mediators for centuries, with the decrease in size of the community they serve. So they attempt to reproduce their role by procuring funds in order to keep the Christians that remained and prevent their immigration, and to even work on the return of some who have left by offering facilitation and exceptional offerings in this context.

The small number of elderly Christians that remained in Aleppo might be a basis for a new start, similar to a previous one witnessed by the city and its Christians centuries ago. It also might be the beginning of an end, considering the lack of tangible response to the clergymen's efforts, where the city's remaining churches are restored, yet empty.

Notes

1. The word »laity« here refers to every person of the Christian faith who is not directly linked to the Christian church, such as priests and nuns, according to Christian concepts and church literature. The term will be used with this meaning unless otherwise noted.

2. See Yusuf Qoshakji (ed.), *Akhbar halab kama katabaha Naʿum Bakhash fi dafatir al-jamʿiyya [Aleppo News As Written by Naum Bakhash in the Association's Notebooks]*, four volumes; Also: Néophytos Edelby (1983): *Asaqifat al-rum al-malakiyyin bi-Halab fi al-ʿasr al-hadith [The Roman Melkite Bishops of Aleppo in the Modern Era]*. Aleppo: Matbʿat al-Ihsan, pp. 296, 361, 364.

3. An Islamic jurisprudential term referring to Christians, Jews and others, which distinguishes them from Muslims and imposes discriminatory provisions on them. The application of these provisions was at the discretion of the rulers and the times.

4. Bishop Butrous Mirayati and Mahran Minasyan (eds.) (2008), *Thawrat al-halabiyyin ʿala al-wali khurshid basha al-ʿUthmani 1819–1820 [The revolution of Aleppans against the Ottoman Wali Khurshid Pasha 1819–1820]* Aleppo: Manshurat Matraniyat al-Arman al-Kathulik, Dar al-Dad li-l-Tibaʿa wa-l-Nashr, p.10–11; Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters (2004): *al-madina al-ʿUthmaniyya bayna al-sharq wa-l-gharb [The Ottoman City Between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul]*. Riyadh: Maktabat al-ʿUbikan. »The origin of the privileges is that Islamic law is based on the theory of the »character of the laws«, in relation to the People of the Book. As the law to which a person is subject is not determined by their nationality, but by their doctrine and religion. According to the Holy Quran: »You have your religion and I have mine.« For more, see Rukniya al-Shihada, »Adwaʾa ʿala al-qanoun raqam 31 li-ʿiam 2006 al-mutaʿalliq bil-ahwal al-shakhsiyya lil-tawaʾif al-katholikiyya fi suriya [Lights on Law No. 31 of 2006 on the personal status of the Catholic communities in Syria]«, Syria's Women Watchdog (9.11.2016); available at https://nesasysy.wordpress.com/2006/11/09/31-2006/.

5. In a May 1, 1772, letter, the Melkite Archbishop of Aleppo (1761–1776), Ignatius Jarbuʿ, reminds community leaders and »the entire Christian nation« of the necessity of fulfilling the tithe (al-ʿushr), i.e., indulgences to the patriarch and the archbishop in order to carry out their duties towards the state in securing payment of the tribute. See Archives of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Aleppo, record 13/8, unnumbered.

6. Rukniya al-Shihada, ibid.

7. Interview conducted by the author with an Aleppan cleric who lived through that period, Beirut, July 2018.

8. Néophytos Edelby, ibid.

9. Interview conducted by the author with an Aleppan cleric who lived during that period. Beirut, July 2018.

10. Interview conducted by the author with a secular Aleppan who lived through that period. Beirut, August 2018.

11. Kivam Jamil Poloyan (1997): *al-muslimun wa-l-Islam fi al-majallah al-ʿarabiyya al-masihiyya, »al-masira« (1910–1996) [Muslims and Islam in the Arab Christian Magazine, The Path (1910–1996)]*. Rome, Jounieh: Maktabat al-Boulsieh, 1997. p. 69

12. Interview conducted by the author with a former clerical student, Beirut, July 2018.

13. Excuses and misdirections used by employees to ask for bribes come under the guise of providing a dessert for some occasion or as if the bribe is in exchange for a coffee the payer of the bribe offers the employee, or a sum of money offered to children for the holidays. The employee avoids using the word »bribe«, which might have legal repercussions, and uses these words instead.

14. Interview with an Aleppan Christian lawyer by phone call, October 2018.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Interview conducted by the author with the professor in question, Bikfaya, Lebanon, July 2018.

18. Interview with a layperson who is active in church milieus, Beirut, August 2018.

19. Field observations by the author, and an interview with a clergyman, Jounieh, November 2018.

20. Interview by the author with a priest knowledgeable of the case, Beirut, November, 2018.

21. Interview with Lebanese priest who served previously in Damascus, Jounieh, Fall 2012; interview with Caroline Poiron, Jounieh, December 2012.
22. Interview conducted by the author with the archbishop, Beirut 2017.
23. Interview conducted by the author with a Lebanese political figure, Beirut, 2016.
24. Interview conducted by the author with a Lebanese priest who had previously lived and served in Aleppo and other Syrian areas, Beirut, July 2018.
25. Interview conducted by the author with a layperson active in the church, Beirut, August 2018.
26. Interview conducted by the author with an Aleppan priest, Beirut, July 2018.
27. Unpublished paper by Carnegie Middle East Center.
28. A Dutch Jesuit monk who served in Syria for decades.
29. Interview conducted by the author with an Aleppan priest, Beirut, July 2018.
30. Interview conducted by the author with an Aleppan layperson, Beirut, October 2018.
31. Roger Asfar, Masihiyyu Halab, al-masar wa-l-maal [Christians of Aleppo; the Track and the Prospects], Arab Reform Initiative, 2017; available at https://www.arab-reform.net/ar/node/1188

The Leaders of Damascus

The Intermediary Activists in the 2011 Uprising

Sana Fadel

Introduction

The capital city Damascus is considered among the first cities active during the 2011 popular movement, which was initially driven by activists from the city's »locals«, as well as resident »dwellers«, who began organizing protests within separate groups. Despite the limited activity of political forces and organizations at the time, they coordinated with the emerging opposition forces through these pioneering activists.

The popular uprising in Damascus was marked, from its beginning in March 2011 until its end, by two characteristics, the first resembling the uprisings in popular (*sha'bi*) neighborhoods of cities in the rest of Syria, the second is more diverse, taking place in markets and administrative centers. The uprisings were led by youth, mostly under the age of 35, who organized protests demanding political change. The Damascus uprising started in the city's historical center and was later constricted to its popular neighborhoods; this was followed by attempts to return the demonstrations to more modern neighborhoods and commercial centers. Nevertheless, these attempts were abandoned after the mobilization took on an armed form in some popular neighborhoods with a Damascene Sunni majority and had halted completely in others, including those with a mixed population, composed of Damascene »locals« and »dwellers« coming from other governorates, and neighborhoods with a strong presence of governmental institutions, and commercial centers.

I. The Locals and the Dwellers

The inhabitants of the city of Damascus can be divided according to a number of factors, such as religion, sect and economic background, yet origin is the most explicit factor dividing the city into two major groups: the Damascene »locals« (*ahali*) and the non-Damascene »dwellers« (*sukkan*) from all other governorates. Both are diverse in terms of class, and »locals« are distinguished by their urban origins and affiliation with the Sunni majority, while the »dwellers« are distinguished by their rural origins and their affiliation with other religious groups.

The City of Damascus

Damascus includes a number of old and new neighborhoods and its Eastern and Western Ghoutas, peri-urban areas that intertwine with the city. The old neighborhoods within the old city walls are Bab Tuma, The Jewish Quarter, Shaghur al-Juwani, al-ʿAmara al-Juwaniyya, al-Jura, Bab al-Salam, the Citadel and the commercial markets. Among the old neighborhoods outside of the city walls are those established before 1900 CE, such as Shaghur al-Barrani, Qanawat, al-Midan, al-Salihiyya, Rukn al-Din and al-Muhajirin.[1]

In the early twentieth century, modern construction extended into the old neighborhoods outside the old city walls and resulted in multi-story buildings being adjacent to the old, abutting horizontal construction. The expansion began in the direction of the new neighborhoods with urban infrastructure influenced by the European style.[2] Families of landowners and government employees left the old city houses and moved to modern neighborhoods that provided better services for their residents.

The new neighborhoods were al-Mazraʿa, al-Malki, al-Jisr al-Abiad, al-Shaʿlan, Baghdad Street, al-Qassaʾ, al-Tijara, al-ʿAbbassiyyin and al-Baramka. In parallel, spontaneous neighborhoods (*al-ʿashwaʾiyyat*)[3] were established in areas such as al-Tabbala and Duaylʿa. All of these neighborhoods were built in the twentieth century, with only decades between the establishment of one neighborhood and another. As for neighborhoods that were previously considered villages, and part

of the Eastern and Western Ghoutas, and were administratively annexed into the city, they are: Qabun, Barza, al-Mazza, Dummar and Kafar Susa.[4] The name »Rif Dimashq (Damascus countryside)« was adopted in the early 1970s[5] and divided Damascus into two governorates: the city of Damascus and the Rif Dimashq, which includes the Ghouta.

The Distribution of Locals and Dwellers and Differences Among Them.

The Damascene »locals« reside in the modern and popular neighborhoods, and have a variety of class backgrounds. Those from lower classes live in popular neighborhoods, while the middle and upper classes settle in neighborhoods with modern buildings, which they share with non-local »dwellers« from other cities, such as public employees, military staff and those working in the arts and culture sectors, while the spontaneous neighborhoods in the city are distinguished by their »dweller« population.

Historically, the majority of the population of Damascus was Syrian Arab in terms of ethnicity and Sunni Muslim in terms of religion. Many small communities have settled there, for various reasons, hailing from Arab, Turkish Kurdish and Balkan origins. With time, they have mostly integrated into the fabric of the city and formed what is known today as the »Damascenes« or the »Shwam« who consider themselves the city's »locals«.

»Locals« in popular neighborhoods, both middle and lower class, uphold their customs and traditions of a religious Sunni nature. In contrast, »locals« in modern neighborhoods live less traditional lifestyles, and enjoy higher rates of education. Women in these neighborhoods are more active in the workforce and in social life.

Being the capital city, Damascus is considered the administrative center, home to all the ministries and important state institutions. During the Baʿth era, immigration from the countryside, with the purpose of employment in governmental, military and security jobs, increased. Spontaneous housing then became the destination of these communities, in neighborhoods such as al-Tabbala and Duaylʿa east of the

city, ʿIsh al-Warwar in the northeast and al-Mazza 86 in the west.

The Baʿth Party claimed to represent minorities and rural Sunnis, in the name of »the workers, the farmers and the proletariat«, against »the reactionary and separatist bourgeoisie« represented by the Damascene and Aleppan political classes, as well those of Homs and Hama. As such, hundreds of Sunni officers from Damascus, Aleppo and Hama were dismissed under the charge of supporting separatist rule. This led to the departure of most Damascene Sunni politicians and bourgeoisie from Syria, while traditional merchants and the lower classes maintained a position of rejecting the political authority yet complying with it at the same time. A rift persists between these populations and the current regime and its representatives among the »dwellers«; there is no real presence of Damascene officers in the military or security agencies of the regime since the attempted coup of 1981,[6] and state administration is also considered an area exclusive to »dwellers«.

The old markets and popular neighborhoods remained spaces occupied by the »locals« despite establishing commercial and business ties with the »dwellers«. However, the »locals« have long considered the »dwellers« to be intruders in the city and a cause of, or accomplices in, the generation of their suffering, creating poor housing conditions and limiting employment opportunities, imposing commercial partnerships on exploitative terms, and generally ruling by force and profiteering.

II. Activists in the City

The general consensus on the 2011 protest movement in Syria associates religious minorities with support of the regime, and the Sunni majority with opposition to it. However, Damascus was a different space, in which the two distinct groups, »locals« and »dwellers«, both engaged in the peaceful uprising. Early activists' motivations for taking part in the uprising and their methods of organization varied. They were more in harmony than the rest of the governorates in terms of their presence as collaborative blocs, each of which performed a mediating role that enabled the sustaining of the uprising in the city, and its spreading across neighborhoods.

The Protest Movement in the City

Damascus is considered the stronghold of the regime. Activists there sought to create a visible urban state of protest in a large city square, following the Egyptian example, which they thought would paralyze the capital and thus lead to the fall of the regime. However, this was not achieved for a variety of reasons, which included the city's urban structure, its social demographics and the activists' affiliation with these diverse demographics, and being affected by their conflicts.

The slogan »The Syrian people will not be humiliated« was raised in the beginning of the uprising, in February 2011, due to an incident at al-Hariqa market that took place between the »local« merchants working at the market and the police.[7] It was preceded by a demonstration in solidarity with the 25th of January 2011 revolution in Egypt, which was organized by »dweller« veteran activists and politicians, in an attempt to mobilize the Syrian street. It was followed by a similar demonstration in solidarity with Libya.

The calls for mobilization, on Facebook, were unsuccessful until March 15, when a protest took place near the Umayyad Mosque in Suq al-Hamidiyya, an ancient commercial market and a touristic and symbolic center of the city. »Local« and »dweller« activists protested there, while others, mostly »dwellers«, organized a sit-in at the Ministry of Interior the next day to demand freedom for political prisoners. On March 18, 2011, protests began in Darʿa, while the protest at the Umayyad Mosque encouraged many to repeat the experience the following week despite heavy a security presence. The public square was the target, so a large march on March 25, 2011, launched from the Umayyad Mosque, filled Suq al-Hamidiyya and occupied al-Marja Square before being forcibly dispersed; many of its participants were detained.

Security presence grew on April 1 in order to prevent a similar scenario, or to eliminate the possibility of something this large taking place in the heart of the city. At the same time, there were other protests in popular neighborhoods such as Barza al-Balad, near al-Salam Mosque, and the Kafar Susa Square near the Rifaʿi Mosque, which included Damascene »local« and »dweller« activists. The large

mosque, across from the State Security building, attracted demonstrations for an additional two weeks, before the regime tightened its security grip in the area, preventing any opportunity for assembly or organization after Friday prayers, which is the only time it is possible to find a large mass of people in the same place and at the same time.[8]

By the end of April, al-Hasan Mosque in al-Midan neighborhood became the next destination for the activists.[9] This was accompanied by the mobilization of more popular neighborhoods such as Rukn al-Din and Barza, where narrower alleyways enabled escape from security forces and facilitated hiding. Then the regime tightened its security once again in the area surrounding al-Hasan Mosque, so the movement in al-Midan was relocated from the wide streets under the Southern Ring Road and the corniche into the neighborhood's interior streets, where they continued for some time.

Women's participation was low in most demonstrations because Friday prayers are exclusive to men, and because of the violent nature of clashes with security.[10] However, in May 2011, a group of »local« female students of religion organized a silent sit in in al-Salihiyya Market,[11] followed by a march among »dweller« women.[12] Later, a group of »dwellers« organized another demonstration, all of which ended in arrests by security forces.[13]

As the summer of 2011 arrived, the mobilization was mostly transformed into protests in popular neighborhoods, whose opposition tendencies became increasingly visible. These neighborhoods included Kafar Susa, al-Mazza Basatin, Dummar al-Balad, al-Qadam, Jobar, Qabun and Barza. Later, what were known as »flying demonstrations (*al-muzaharat al-tayyara*)«, which lasted only minutes and took place on days other than Friday, began in other neighborhoods where local protests did not take place.[14]

The traditional neighborhoods offered more opportunities to hide and provided a higher sense of security for participants from the neighborhood, being among their families and neighbors. Despite protestors' persistent desire to occupy large squares once again, the risk of detention—and torture at security facilities—was so high that it made avoiding detention the default priority of participants.

The Southern Ring Road separates al-Midan, Kafar Susa and al-Mazza neighborhoods on one side from Ghouta on the other. The latter is a vast space containing groves that sheltered the early armed revolutionaries. The uprising in the former neighborhoods stopped at the peaceful stage, or with attempts towards armed mobilization. Meanwhile, other neighborhoods, which remained directly connected to Ghouta, went beyond the peaceful protest stage and towards armed rebellion, such as Jobar and Barza.

The Early Mobilizers

The early activists in the city belonged to both groups, »locals« and »dwellers«. They collaborated in organizing the protests, and alternated in its leadership roles in the period between March and late September 2011. These groups were distinct in the shape their protest movement took at times, and similar at others. They consistently sought to unify their activities in the same direction, but a number of factors prevented this.[15]

These activists played a role in generating and organizing protest movements in the city, which placed them in a position of power and control at the level of the protest event. Therefore, they were in various intermediary positions, which enabled them to gain a leadership status and quickly heightened their capacities and elevated their position within a short timespan. This experience, however, was not destined to last very long, due to change in a multitude of factors surrounding the uprising as 2011 came to an end, as well as the detention of activists or their attempts to escape it, which excluded them from the arena of direct protest activity in a nearly definitive way.[16]

Some »local« activists in modern neighborhoods played a mediating role between »local« and »dweller« activist groups. As for those living in the outer, peripheral popular neighborhoods of the city, they established pockets for the opposition. On the other hand, »dweller« activists had another mediating role, being between the »local« activists on one side, and political forces and organizations inside and outside of Syria, on the other.

The early peaceful activists in the 2011 uprising in Damascus were mainly

born in the 1980s, the largest demographic of the population at the time. They belonged to various social and demographic segments in the city, and unlike their parents, who lived under the regime of Hafiz al-Asad, they had wider channels of communication.[17]

With time, the children of public employees who arrived in the 1970s started to belong to the city, and they spoke the dialect common in Damascus.[18] They enjoyed the city's rituals, holidays and traditions, but practiced them differently, with more mixing between the sexes[19] and different celebrations and dishes.[20] The arrival of people from different governorates to the capital continued, for study and subsequent work, and a number of these recent arrivals formed the most liberated groups in terms cohabitation (of males and females). Many of them worked in arts, culture and civil organizations, and engaged more than others with foreign non-Arab residents of the city, who came to learn Arabic or work in international organizations.[21]

»Locals« and »dwellers« had different reasons for taking an oppositional stance. »Local« activists had family members or acquaintances who were accused of being members of the Muslim Brotherhood and detained on that basis, with the fate of some remaining unknown.[22] This created a sense of victimization that intertwined with other factors to produce the mobilization of 2011. The appropriation of lands owned by the »locals«, through agricultural reform and urban zoning laws, was among the most important of these factors, in addition to the business partnerships forcibly imposed by powerful »dwellers« with state influence on »local« businessmen and merchants.

As for »dweller« activists, they had a clear prior political interest, and knowledge of the experiences of previous dissidents, most of whom were leftist. They also possessed connections to artistic or cultural projects, volunteering or developmental work. Despite the fact that many of their relatives—non-leftists living in their governorates of origin—tend to support the regime rather than oppose it, their direct contact with its policies towards freedom of expression negatively affected their attitude towards the regime.

The early activists' participation in the uprising, regardless of the disparity

between their »local« and »dweller« origins, and the difference in their presence within the city space, between popular neighborhoods with »local« features and other modern and more mixed neighborhoods, shows both the current diversity of the city of Damascus and the mechanism by which the mobilization was transmitted between groups, and how it was sustained or halted.

A »Local« Activist

One of the earliest participants in the mobilization—a 29-year-old living in Rukn al-Din neighborhood—is a middle class Damascene Kurd.[23] His political views were formed by a number of factors, such as the regime's security practices, the influence of Islamists and the lack of accord with available political channels. He was able to organize protests in his neighborhood and help organize protest movements in other neighborhoods. He is therefore an example of the early leaders who had a very brief experience ending with imprisonment. His testimony was as follows:

> When I was young, Nowruz was the holiday that introduced me to the oppression by the regime, after security forces were deployed in the neighborhood to prevent gatherings. In the same period I became aware of the existence of Kurdish political parties from whom I was ordered by my parents to stay away, in order to avoid trouble. Belonging to communist parties was no less dangerous, and they would not have represented me anyway. On the other hand, meeting Islamists was easy, as they lived in the spontaneous areas in the neighborhood. At the Abi Nur Jurisprudence Institute, our teacher was a Salafi and through him I participated in sit-ins at the French and Danish embassies after the cartoons mocking the prophet Muhammad were published.
>
> I witnessed a few political arrests, once when the preacher at our neighborhood mosque was imprisoned for two years after being accused of insulting the president. Another time, when someone reported one of my neighbors to the security forces and political security agents arrived with four buses full of agents, they surrounded the area and berated the residents. One of them screamed at me, ordering me to enter my house. The neighbor, his wife and their teenage daughter were arrested. No one has heard of them since.

Despite all of this, I was an active member of the Revolutionary Youth Union [the Baʿth Party youth organization] and obtained the rank of major at debate. Intellectual activity was only available through these channels, but I hated the marches and celebrations of loyalty at school and avoided them when I could. My friendships in my teenage years were made mostly through school, the neighborhood, the Jurisprudence Institute and work. Most of my friends rejected the Syrian regime and searched for banned opposition websites on the internet, but no one thought of doing something, fear was the main reason deterring them from even thinking of taking action.

A number of factors came together and pushed the »local« activists into popular mobilization. Among them were fear of security forces, religious influence, the opposition parties becoming out of touch with the concerns of the youth, in addition to the danger of joining them, frustration with the impossibility of the rotation of power and its concentration in the hands of a few, as well as the news of the Arab spring increasing their enthusiasm. This activist was waiting for the moment the peaceful mobilization would start in 2011, and was searching for calls on social media pages and asking his trusted acquaintances who share his oppositional stance, desire and readiness to take part in a movement.
He continued:

We were awaiting some mobilization, when a call for »days of rage« was announced on Facebook in February 2011. I took part in the first demonstration at the Umayyad Mosque on March 18 and the following Friday on the 25th. I was in Duma the following week, relying on a neighbor's son who coordinated these demonstrations, which were not announced beforehand. I was accompanied by my brother who shared my interest in this matter. I was introduced—through the neighbor's son—to other young men who wanted to conduct protest activities, this resulted in a protest in our neighborhood in Rukn al-Din on the second Friday of April.

It became difficult to demonstrate in commercial centers due to the heavy security presence on Fridays; Friday prayers were the best opportunity to amass during that period, the circles of actors were limited to individuals who were only able

to connect to others through trusted acquaintances.

On the third week of April, the first demonstration emerged from the Saʿid Pasha Mosque in the Rukn al-Din neighborhood with around 35 participants. They were neighbors and from the same generation so they quickly became acquainted. They chanted »Darʿa we are with you till death«[24] and marched through seven alleys before deciding to disperse before the security forces arrived. They agreed to inform one another if one of them was detained.[25]

Throughout the following week, all the participants were subjected to various forms of pressure, either from their parents who feared for them or from neighborhood notables who demanded they accompany them to meet regime representatives. The notables of the neighborhood were either people in scientific, religious or official positions, or possessed financial means, were philanthropists, heads of old families or social leaders among the locals. In one of the meetings between political security agents and neighborhood notables, a cleric, a teacher and a doctor from the neighborhood outlined their demands, such as a solution to informal housing and electricity problems. On the other hand, the youth insisted that their demands were not limited to the neighborhood but included national demands for the end of killing and detainment by the regime.[26]

During the uprising, young leadership emerged, which worked on mobilizing, organizing and representing the masses. The first task of a leader was to determine an appropriate location, a start and end point for the demonstration and divide tasks between the participants. There were those looking out for security deployment,[27] others made banners for the demonstration, there was the »chanter« and the one who launched the demonstration—the »spark«—as well as one who recorded video and sent the footage to others, who in turn communicated with media networks and television stations. Among them was the previously mentioned »local« activist, who continued:

> Due to my knowledge of computers and the internet, a friend and I launched a page for the Rukn al-Din coordination committee. We posted pictures of the demonstrations in Darʿa, Baniyas and Barza in order to motivate people to participate in the demonstrations. We also copied these clips on CDs and

flash drives, distributed them and showed them to our trusted acquaintances that had no prior interest, attempting to evoke in them a sense of responsibility towards what was happening and therefore join us in the demonstrations.

Then, in May, in their quest to coordinate the mobilization in the city, the activists branched out of their immediate circles, attempting to form a large coalition that would advance towards a city square and occupy it. According to the perceptions of activists at the time, the goal was to imitate the successful example of the Egyptian January revolution and establish a central place for the all of the dissidents to head towards. This would allow them to halting the city's economy and turn the sit-in into a general strike with the end goal of bringing down of the regime.

The implementation of this plan required substantial efforts by all the parties, communication was established through intermediaries who were nominated by trustworthy acquaintances, who would start a collaboration with one group that in turn nominated others to do the same. This expanded their circles of secret contact and coordination. The »local« activists played the role of mediation between mobilization on the street and veteran politicians, as well as »dweller« activists who did not possess the same resources to access and influence it. The aforementioned »local« activist explained: »I became acquainted with veteran Kurdish and communist dissidents, some were from al-Qamishli. I connected them to a few members of large families in the Rukn al-Din neighborhood whose contributions to the mobilization were very prominent. Through these dissidents, I met other activists from different governorates and Syrian Palestinians.«

Together, these young men and women coordinated many small »flying demonstrations«, attempting to reclaim the city center in modern neighborhoods that had diverse demographics of »locals« and »dwellers« and had no previous demonstrations. They wanted to motivate the »dwellers« to participate in the protests, show the media that the mobilization was present in a larger part of the city and avoid direct confrontations with security. The regime's security strategy was failing to suppress the protests, and instead caused the gathering of exponentially larger numbers of disgruntled protestors. Yet, it succeeded in distancing the protests from the city center.

The mobilization and organization of the demonstrations prepared the activists to play other roles, such as representing nascent groups when communicating with other groups[28] or individuals lending support. They made decisions regarding the sites of demonstrations, the needs of the protestors and the means of securing them. The initial needs were financial and medical: financial for the detained or those who lost their jobs as a result of participating in the protests, and medical to aid those injured in the demonstrations and those who feared going to a government hospital and facing arrest or retaliation by the medical staff.[29]

One could come to be considered a leader in the uprising through implicit recognition by those he mobilized and by the representatives from other groups, who assessed a leader's importance according to the size of his group and the group's commitment to participation in opposition activities. The »local« activist explained: »By July and August, new young men emerged as leaders of groups in the Rukn al-Din neighborhood, they emerged in succession according to their personal initiative. I became responsible for securing the necessities they required. Later I was detained, in September 2011, and spent seven years in prison.«

A »Dweller« Activist

The »dweller« activists engaged in political, cultural or artistic activities in Damascus and formed working relationships and close friendships with veteran politicians and organizations interested in development in Syria, which enabled them to develop a clear political vision concerning the relationship with the regime and the future of Syria,[30] yet they were a minority that lacked channels of communication with the »locals« in the manner that was made possible in 2011.

Among them was a young man (38 years old) from a middle-class family residing in al-Tadamun neighborhood and originating from al-Suwayda᾽, his father had come to Damascus for employment. The activist had no political leanings but one of his brothers was a communist. He studied chemistry at Damascus University and began his political activities in his first year in university when he called for demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada in 2001. He talks about this period and says:

I founded a student committee in support of the Palestinian Intifada that organized weekly sit-ins at the university and burned the Israeli flag. During this time, I began to have an interest in Syrian domestic issues, and met other young men at the university whose parents were previous detainees, I was detained in 2004 after being accused of forming an alternative student union. Some parties such as the Syrian Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, as well as some activists in the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, sought to attract us as student groups, but their bureaucracy when compared to how quickly we made decisions among us was a factor that made engaging with them unappealing, especially when it came to mobilization on the street, which politicians extensively planned while we swiftly took and implemented decisions. In 2005, we protested in Bab Tuma and chanted »Down with the dictator! Long live democracy!« and I took part in establishing the Democratic Secularist Youth Movement, and we were pursued by security forces.

The activists in these groups along with the politicians and other interested individuals gradually formed a closely-knit community. Among them were artists, journalists, politicians and »dweller« activists, and a small number of »locals« who lived in modern neighborhoods. Therefore, there was a semi-organized structure that could internally mobilize and communicate. This enabled coordinating protests from the beginning of 2011, yet the structure was disconnected from other social currents in the city. The »dweller« activist lists some instances of his participation:

Some of my friends and I called for a sit-in in front of the Egyptian Embassy at the end of January, in solidarity with the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. We later attempted to organize public gatherings in the city to protest detainment and rising fuel prices and monopolization of telecom networks; we later organized a sit-in by the Libyan Embassy when the Libyan uprising began. I was at the demonstration on March 15 at Suq al-Hamidiyyah in Damascus and then the sit-in to demand the release of political prisoners the next day, and the two following Fridays at the Umayyad Mosque.

This »dweller« activist's increasing collaboration with other protestors, and

his connections at the university with activists among »dwellers« and »locals« living in modern neighborhoods, as well as his efforts to found communication networks with the local movement in popular neighborhoods, qualified him to be a representative of a group of »dwellers«. He was also among those who suggested the name »the coordination committee (*al-tansiqiyya*)« in reference to the term used during the Algerian revolution. Yet, coordination committees, which were founded on the basis of specific localities, impeded attempts made by »dwellers« and »locals« living in modern neighborhoods to contribute to managing the movement. So they attempted to establish groups on alternative bases. The »dweller« activist continues: »By May, it was necessary to unify the various formations and direct their efforts. The establishment of a more inclusive committee was suggested, which included a large number of ›dweller‹ activists and representatives of local committees in Damascus and its countryside. There were other collectives of various forms under its umbrella, such as a committee for women, another for students and a committee for medical doctors.«

The activists in the city sought to unify opposition efforts and aimed to strengthen the organizational structure of the movement and establish unified techniques for opposition activities, from demonstrations to handing out flyers and other forms of protest. The organizational process necessitated deep communication—occurring for the first time in the city—between »dwellers« and »locals«. However, the need to find a common vision highlighted the incompatibility of the two groups at the level of the right to exist and take action within the city space, and the subsequent ideological and religious differences. The »dweller« activist explains this issue:

By May, we wished to establish an inclusive structure, like a coalition at the level of governorates, but coordination was obstructed by diverging visions regarding responsibilities, mutual accusations of disorder and the lack of recognition of the activists as representatives of relatively small groups when compared to the increasing mobilization of the residents of local neighborhoods. Many people considered me an outsider who had nothing to do with the mobilization in the city, and a secularist unlike the rest of the local neighborhood representatives. I was detained in July 2011 and then left the country after sensing a change in the medium that had brought us together as

activists, and the increasing direction towards militarization and Islamization.

An Activist from the »Locals« Living in Modern Neighborhoods

The activists among »locals« living in modern neighborhoods shared some characteristics with both »dweller« and other »local« activists, as they had the same motivations as the »locals« for opposing the regime while they moved through more diverse circles and engaged in civil activities in one form or another. They were middle class and mainly played the role of mediators between the »local« and »dweller« activists on one hand, and later between expat »locals« outside of Syria and their groups on the other. They primarily contributed to securing the logistic necessities for mobilization, such as food, medical care and shelter for the displaced.

The activist I met (31 years old) is from al-Muhajirin, according to her civil documents, and a resident of Mashruʿ Dummar. Her father worked as an executive producer and her mother graduated from a commerce institute. One of her uncles was detained in the 1980s under suspicion of involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood, while a neighbor of hers was detained for many years on the charge of being a communist. In the years before 2011, she studied fine arts and majored in sculpture, volunteered in the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and worked with the Society for the Speech and Hearing Impaired. She was also part of associations aimed at raising youth awareness and addressing their problems. She has taken part in UN youth development programs and traveled to several other countries to participate in workshops on human rights and youth leadership. She explains her motives and activities:

> To me, the nationalist education books in our curriculum and how their contents' disconnect from lived reality was enough to make me reject the status quo since adolescence. When protests began in Syria, I participated in the funeral procession of a young man form the Red Crescent killed in Homs, I later joined with the scout team, to which I belonged, in the licensed protest that was held in the al-Jalaʾ Park across from the Four Seasons Hotel in central Damascus on May 29, 2011.

I established a working group along with some acquaintances I had met through the activities in which I was interested. During the months of July and August we participated in various activities, which mainly included participating in »flying demonstrations« and distributing flyers and posters. We also staged scenes, such as the hanging of an effigy of Bashar al-Asad, hung flags off of bridges, released balloons and blimps with the word »Freedom« written on them, and distributed CDs that contained videos of demonstrations.«

My responsibility was for printing and designing flyers due to the relation of such work to my own expertise. But by 2012, I moved towards relief work because I owned a car, which facilitated the transportation of relief supplies. I also communicated extensively with other groups using social media for donations and relief for the displaced people of Homs. Many Syrians I had never met—inside and outside Syria—also communicated with me to help provide necessities for the active groups, and those impacted by the uprising, and to coordinate the training necessary for developing organizational skills, and filming and recording human rights violations, and for media. I was detained for three months at the end of 2012, after which I traveled to Jordan and launched activity in support of the movement in Syria, along with other Syrians, and later from my current refuge in Germany.

Activists from among the »locals« living in the modern neighborhoods were relatively late to get involved in the mobilization, when compared to their »local« peers in the popular neighborhoods or »dwellers« with political or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, their mission was less leadership oriented and primarily involved mediation between the two groups, due to their family relations with »locals« and their work and activism alongside »dwellers«.

The relationship between early activists, older political forces and supporters inside and outside the country was the pillar of the city's ongoing mobilization. It evolved from individual and small group relationships into coordination committees and various working groups, which organized protests and opposition activities, conducted the accompanying media coverage and provided financial and medical needs.

The relationships that emerged between the new leaders of the movement and the older political organizations, which were Kurdish, leftist and, to a lesser degree, Islamist, were marred by disagreements around mobilization strategies, from political goals to practical tactics. These early mobilizers played an important role as mediators between the older organizations and the street, at the same time they organized activities and represented these groups before foreign powers and organizations. Yet they quickly lost this role after the peaceful uprising became militarized, which made their mediation appear as merely a means to support the existence of areas outside of regime military control.

III. Some Neighborhoods Escalate and Others Submit

The mobilization continued in the popular neighborhoods on the periphery of the city in an escalating manner until reaching the stage of »protected demonstrations«, which were guarded by soldiers who had defected from the Syrian armed forces. Meanwhile, modern neighborhoods with a mix of »locals« and »dwellers« were an open field for occasional »flying demonstrations« but did not establish a state of popular protest. The peaceful uprising halted completely in most of the neighborhoods in the city of Damascus by the year 2013, and turned into armed conflict in some neighborhoods, such as Bazra, Jobar, Qabun and Yarmuk.

The differences in social and urban fabric had a major effect on the form of activists' mobilization. The »local« activists were able to benefit from their environment due to the availability of old relationships of trust and an urban environment that was easily controlled due to the horizontal building plan, adjacent houses and the narrow winding alleys. They were therefore able to escalate the uprising in these neighborhoods. On the other hand, activists from among the »dwellers« and »locals« living in modern neighborhoods were unable to control their areas, which had wide streets and the presence of state administrative and military agencies. They did not have strong trust relationships due to the regional differences between the »locals« and »dwellers«.

Barza: The Local Neighborhood Model

Barza is an example of the »local« Damascene neighborhood that is homogeneous

in terms of religion and class, with a Sunni middle-class majority. Its activists represent a model of »local« activists in their neighborhoods, as it was among the first to launch peaceful opposition mobilization and continued with it to the armed mobilization stage.

Barza was a village in the Duma district until the first half of the twentieth century. In the early part of the century's second half it was annexed into the city of Damascus and became one of its neighborhoods. It connects to the Ghouta through its groves and has a population of around 35,000. It is considered one of Damascus' modern neighborhoods, except for its the older quarters named Barza al-Balad, which to this day is still referred to as »the village (*al-daiʿa*)« by its locals. The majority of its current residents have come from other Damascus neighborhoods, especially al-Salihiyya, as Barza is an extension of Damascus towards the east. It is one of the city's most densely populated neighborhoods, compared to both planned and spontaneous neighborhoods, and it is divided into Masaken Barza (meaning »Barza housing projects«), Tishrin neighborhood, ʿIsh al-Warwar and Musbaq al-Sunʿ (meaning »prefabricated housing«).

In early 2011, economic, social and religious factors came together in Barza and led to the mobilization. The state had seized large areas of agricultural land previously farmed by its »locals« and on it established the Tishrin and Hamish Hospitals, a scientific research building, and the ʿIsh al-Warwar and Musbaq al-Sunʿ neighborhoods. The government compensation for these seizures was very modest, generating resentment among the people of Barza toward the regime[31]; a diverse group of more affluent »locals« and »dwellers«, as well as military officers and state employees from religious minorities, settled in these expropriated areas. This resentment was exacerbated when the real estate prices for the seized lands rose greatly when they were annexed into the urban plan.

When the first demonstrations in Barza took off on March 25, 2011, in Barza al-Balad, there were approximately 200 demonstrators. They gathered behind al-Salam Mosque and headed towards the Baladiyya (Municipality) Square, chanting in support of Darʿa, while regime forces formed a human barrier to ensure they did not reach the main street separating them from the other Barza neighborhoods.[32]

Demonstrations every Friday followed thereafter. Barza al-Balad was divided into two halves. On one side, supporters—i.e. the security forces and groups of junior government employees—chanted for the president, outside Baladiyya Square and closer to the neighborhoods of Barza with modern buildings. On the other side, dissidents chanted inside the square and towards the old popular neighborhoods. In the beginning, and until early April, demonstrators were armed with stones, which they threw at the security forces, who responded by beating them with sticks. Throughout the following months, the security forces started shooting at protestors, and guns started appearing in the hands of some demonstrators for protection.[33]

The mobilization in »local« popular neighborhoods was marked by the fact that demonstrations and protests escalated, and this was done by the locals of the neighborhood themselves. They later expanded spontaneously, due to the actions of the security forces against protestors, which formed what is known as the »local incubator (*al-hadn al-ahli*)«, which contributed to sustaining and maintaining the ongoing mobilization.

By the end of 2011, Barza became known for its »protected demonstrations«. »Local« and »dweller« activists from other neighborhoods started heading there to participate in its demonstrations, which were relatively lengthly and celebratory in comparison to the minutes-long »flying demonstrations«. They were also drawn to the local protection, namely the homes that opened their doors to shelter the demonstrators in case security forces arrived, who in turn let protests take place in small limited areas and came the following day to detain—through informants—the participating »locals«.[34]

Barza al-Balad became an assembly point for the »local« and »dweller« supporters of the uprising living in the modern neighborhoods; the organizational structure of activists from those neighborhoods was not developed based upon a specific location, as was the case for »locals« in popular neighborhoods, but on participating in the mobilization and supporting it wherever it existed. The movement of activists into places like Barza al-Balad consecrated the notion of the opposition area, and the »local« activists there were rendered central leaders, while other activists remained representatives and mediators for opposition

collectives, and their roles became increasingly limited to media coverage and logistical support of civilians only.

Many youths from the area became wanted or were detained. The proximity of Barza to the Ghouta, the center of the popular revolution in Damascus, aided the rapid involvement of Barza in armed mobilization, which ended with the surrender to regime forces in 2017.

al-Salihiyya: An Example of a »Dweller« Neighborhood

al-Salihiyya is a model of a modern mixed neighborhood with »locals« and »dwellers«, as well as daily commuters who come to the neighborhood due to the presence of government agencies, markets and restaurants. al-Salihiyya witnessed many protests through intermittent periods, which differed from those in local neighborhoods in character and frequency.

al-Salihiyya neighborhood was established on the foothill of Mount Qasiun in the Ayubbid era. It expanded to the west in the Mamluk era, and then markets and the Rukn al-Din neighborhood emerged as Kurds arrived and settled in its east. It remained an independent settlement for 800 years, separated by the Ghouta from the old city of Damascus. The neighborhood only became part of Damascus in the second half of the twentieth century due to the population growth of that period.

al-Salihiyya is considered a city for migrants to Damascus, and later gained fame as a commercial market, and was more open to welcome what is »new«. Therefore, locals of Damascus who had traveled to the west or studied abroad preferred to live in al-Salihiyya, with its houses built in the western style and which reflected a middle-class image in Damascus. They were later joined by groups of high-ranking state officials.

On May 1, 2011, dozens of veiled women, students of the preacher Hanan al-Lahham, marched to ʿArnus Square in al-Salihiyya's central market, in solidarity with the besieged city of Darʿa.[35] Security forces dispersed the protest and detained some of the participants. This was repeated two days later when a large

group of »dweller« women staged a silent demonstration for the same cause. Later there was a large demonstration staged by »dweller« activists chanting the Syrian national anthem, but this did not prevent their arrest by security. These events were filmed and widely circulated, as they served as proof of the regime's abuse and the arrival of mobilization to central neighborhoods in the regime's capital.

In July 2011, a similar protest was staged in the neighboring Shaʿlan Market and was met with the same severity. It was followed by small »flying demonstrations« later in 2011, in a number of popular neighborhoods with low security presence, such as the Friday market and Sheikh Ibrahim Square, and near old mosques such as Shaykh Muhiyyiddin Mosque, Hanabila Mosque and Sukkar Mosque. These came in late 2011 and 2012, ending as the year came to a close.

The protests in al-Salihiyya were not planned by the neighborhood residents themselves, nor according to their wishes. They were forced upon them by the »local« and »dweller« activists who wanted mobilize the neighborhoods and prove their participation to the media. The area also witnessed other opposition activities, such as hanging posters and the dissemination of flyers bearing opposition slogans in secret, in order to avoid actual confrontation with security.

Activists from among the »dwellers« and »local« living in modern neighborhoods targeted al-Salihiyya in their mobilization, and were not joined by »local« activists living in popular neighborhoods. Likewise, al-Salihiyya did not develop its own local mobilization, as the protests within it were restricted to attempts to prove the existence of mobilization in a central neighborhood in the city. Despite its ideal location and strong desire of many activists for al-Salihiyya to be the site of a massive sit-it that would bring the city to a halt and cause the fall of the regime, this was never achieved.[36]

Conclusion

The »locals« constituted the main demographic in popular neighborhoods suffering economic, social and political marginalization, while they shared modern neighborhoods with »dwellers«. »Local« activists in popular neighborhoods

remained in their neighborhoods and their mobilization maintained social and familial coherence. This mobilization escalated with time, until the popular neighborhoods turned into the last site that attracted the »dweller« and »local« activists who resided in modern neighborhoods. Conversely, the regime's control of modern neighborhoods prevented the escalation of the mobilization there, especially in the absence of the necessary social protection and trusted relationships.

The activists' early relations were a fundamental element in forming the connections and intermediation necessary to organize, yet the »local« activists' control led to the marginalization of both the »dweller« activists and »locals« living in modern neighborhoods. As a result, members of the latter two populations retreated and settled for logistical and media support, performing the role of mediators between various structures inside and outside of the city, and benefiting from their social influence during the period before 2011.

Notes

1. Ali Iflis, Aswar Dimashq al-Ijtimaʿiyya wa-l-nafsiyyah 2, [The Social and Psychological Walls of Damascus, Part 2], Rqiim website (12.11.2017); available at https://www.rqiim.com/ali-eflis/أسوار-دمشق-الاجتماعية-والنفسية-2.

2. Albert Hourani, *Tarikh al-Shuʿub al-ʿArabiyya* [*A History of the Arab Peoples*], (Damascus: Dar Tlass lil-Dirasat wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr,1997), p. 454.

3. Spontaneous areas are unlicensed housing areas that did not follow regulatory planning, they are mainly concentrated in the periphery of Damascus. The spontaneous areas began appearing in limited and specific areas in Syria in the mid-1950s. They increased in number noticeably in the 1980s due to migration from rural areas and have continued increasing ever since. They are characterized by a local of services and primarily home to poorer classes. For more detail, see Akthar min Milyunayy Muwatin fi ʿAshwaʾiyat Dimashq [More Than Two Million Citizens in the Spontaneous Areas of Damascus], Elaph website (14.9.2009); available at https://elaph.com/Web/Reports/2009/8/472134.html.

4. Original residents of Kafar Susa still call those living in modern buildings »Shwam«. Interview conducted with a dweller in the neighborhood, Damascus, March, 2018

5. About Syria, Syrian Government Website, http://portal.egov.sy/page/en/121/0/عن+سورية.html.

6. Fawaz Tallo, Idaʾat Thawriyya Dimashqiyya, la Tazlimu al-Dimashqiyyin, [Revolutionary Illumination from Damascus. Do Not Misjudge the People of Damascus], al-Sulta al-Rabiʿa (news website) (1.4.2016); available at: http://alsulta-alrabi3a.com/2016/04/6325.html.

7. Muzahara bi-Dimashq - Hayy al-Hariqa al-Tijari [A demonstration in Damascus—al-Hariqa commercial Neighborhood], Souriana4all Youtube Channel (17.2.2011); available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NykGjfKn3TU.

8. Branches of Secret Security Services (*mukhabarat*) are spread out through most of the neighborhoods in the capital, forbidding unlicensed assembly. Interview conducted by the author with a female activist from Damascus through social media (15.8.2018).

9. Witnessed by the author, see: Masjid al-Hassan, Fi al-Midan al-Jumʿa al-ʿAzima [al-Hassan Mosque in the square—The Great Friday], 3ayeef Youtube channel (22.4.2011); available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNJdQE9lZdg.

10. 10. During the demonstrations, men would ask women to stay in certain areas—behind the demonstration—and withdraw early under the pretext of protecting them. Interview conducted by the author with a female activist from the field, through social media (23.3.2018).

11. Sham al-Salihiyya Iʿtisam Nissaʾi Mutalaba bi-fak al-Hissar 30 4 [Sham al-Salihiyya, women's protest to demand the end of the siege 30 4], S.N.N. Shaam Network Youtube channel (30.4.2011); available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82xes190V2w.

12. Witnessed by the author, see: Iʿtisam ʿArnus [ʿArnus sit-in], shamfreedom Youtube channel (2.5.2011); available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPhnaqZcgtQ

13. Witnessed by the author, see: ʿAnasir al-amn tafudd iʿtisam ʿArnus bi-l-quwwa [Security forces forcibly disperse the ʿArnus sit-in], AllforSham Youtube channel (9.5.2011); available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7DH4oUpd-U

14. Muzahara fi Dimashq shariʿa Baghdad mantiqat al-Simana [Demonstration on Baghdad street in Damascus al-Simana area], syriarcu Youtube channel (5.7.2011); available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdvUAx9qhww.

15. »You have no business here«: This was said to a representative of a group of »dwellers« in more than one meeting between »locals« and »dwellers« to express their rejection of »dwellers« interfering with decisions pertaining to the mobilization in their neighborhoods. Interview conducted by the author with an activist from al-Qamishli through social media (12.4.2018).

16. Every activist interviewed—as an early mobilizer—was subject to detainment. By September 2011, they had all left the country due to being wanted by security.

17. The Run-up to the Crisis, website of Synaps network (16.4.2018); available at http://www.synaps.network/syria-trends#chapter-3699080.

18. The »white accent« was invented in Syrian drama and resembles the Damascene accent. See Ahmad Muhammad al-Sah, Ketabat al-ughniyyah bi-l-lahja al-suriyya … Kuttab al-ughniyyah al-suriyya abdaʾu bi-l-lahja al-mahaliyya wa tawwaʿu

al-fusha wa ajadu [The Syrian Songwriters were creative with the local dialect, commanded Fusha and excelled], Al Watan website (2.7.2017); available at http://alwatan.sy/archives/113610.

19. »Dwellers« host their relatives visiting from other governorates. While it is not common among »locals« to host friends or family. »Dwellers« mock »locals« with the saying »Would you rather eat here, or at a restaurant? Sleep here, or at a hotel?« in reference to their reluctance to host guests. Interview conducted by the writer with an activist from Darʿa through social media (14.5.2018).

20. During Islamic holidays, »dwellers« of Damascus make various holiday cakes and sometimes have Damascene dishes. Interview conducted by the author with a »local« of Damascus, Damascus (7.15.2018).

21. Interview conducted by the author with a female activist who came to Damascus in 2003 from one of the villages in Tartus governorate, through social media (15.4.2018).

22. Interview conducted by the author with a »local« early mobilizer through social media (March-August 2018).

23. Syrian Kurds who settled in Syria's central cities at or before the end of the nineteenth century are considered to be Syrian residents of Kurdish origin; they integrated to a high degree with their Arab social environment due to shared religion and common economic and social interests. See: Azad Ahmad ʿAli, »Dawr Akrad Suria fi al-Motaghayarat al-Siyasiya [The Kurdish Role in Political Variables]« in: Nabil Marzouk et al. (eds.), *Khalfiyat al-Thawra, Dirasat Suria*, [*Background of the Revolution: Syrian Studies*], (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Arabi li-l-Abhath Wa-l-Dirasat al-Siyasiya, 2013) p. 335.

24. Solidarity with other cities was the broad heading characterizing the slogans in the early demonstrations in Damascus, which were subjected to violence by security forces. Interview conducted by the author with a few »dweller« and »local« activists in Damascus through social media (March-August 2018).

25. Interview conducted by the author with an activist from Rukn al-Din neighborhood through social media (12.4.2018).

26. Ibid.

27. Some were monitoring certain areas for days to observe security forces and their schedules, before nominating them as suitable sites for protests. Interview with a »dweller« activist, though social media (25.4.2018).

28. These groups included the »Free People of Damascus and its Suburbs for Peaceful Change [Ahrar Dimashq wa rifaha li-l-taghir al-silmi]«. Interviews conducted by the author with »dweller« and »local« activists, through social media (March-August 2018).

29. Interview conducted by the author with an activist medical practitioner from Barza, through social media (17.6.2018).

30. Interviews conducted by the author with »dweller« activists from other governorates, through social media (March-August 2018).

31. Similar acquisitions were done in al-Mazza, interview conducted by author with an activist from al-Mazza, through social media (20.5.2011).

32. Awwal Muzahara li-l-Ahrar Qabil Hujum al-Shabbiha [The first demonstration by the Free of Barza before the attack by thugs], BaronDamascus Youtube channel (1.4.2011); available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRI22RZuKGw.

33. Interview conducted by the author with a »dweller« in Barza, Damascus (12.8.2018).

34. Interview conducted by the author with a »dweller« activist from Barza, through social media (28.8.2018).

35. Hanan al-Lahham was giving a religious lecture in Dak al-Bab Mosque in ʿArnus; interview conducted by the author with a »dweller« of Damascus, Damascus (7.15.2018).

36. Interview conducted by the author with a female activist from al-Salihiyya, through social media (23.7.2018).