

Playing the Sectarian Card

Identities and Affiliations
of Local Communities in Syria



Playing the Sectarian Card

Identities and Affiliations
of Local Communities in Syria

Edited by
Friederike Stolleis

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT 
STIFTUNG**

Imprint

Published in 2015 by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

P.O.Box 116107 Riad El Solh

Beirut 1107 2210, Lebanon

Not for sale

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be printed, reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publishers.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the original authors. They do not necessarily represent those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Translation: Ali Barazi, Karam Nashar et al.

Language editing: Linda Mayes

Cover design: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Printing: Dakroub Printing Press s.a.l.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	6
 1. Discourses on Minorities and Sectarianism in Syria	
<i>Friederike Stolleis</i>	7
 2. The Alawite Dilemma	
(Homs 2013)	
<i>Kheder Khaddour</i>	11
 3. A Government City“ amid Raging Conflict	
(Tartous 2013)	
<i>Kheder Khaddour</i>	27
 4. A Static Revolution: The Druze Community	
(Sweida 2013)	
<i>Mazen Ezzi</i>	39
 5. Attitudes of Christians in the Syrian Capital	
(Damascus 2013)	
<i>Rand Sabbagh</i>	71
 6. Tension in the Christian Valley	
(Wadi al-Nasara 2013)	
<i>Samer Masouh</i>	90
 7. Ismailis: a Minority-Majority in Syria	
(Salamiya 2014)	
<i>Abdallah Amin al-Hallaq</i>	102
 About the Authors	114

Preface

The current conflict in Syria is often traced back to a revolt by a Sunni “majority” against a ruling Alawite “minority” which could count on the support of other religious “minorities”. Another interpretation invokes a conservative, religious population rising up against a secular ruler. While both are crude simplifications of a complex matter, the core ideas are not completely false. But they allude to general tendencies rather than clearly defined population groups fighting each other. With the uprising in 2011, most Syrians had to position themselves somehow as being “with” or “against” the regime, “with” or “against” the revolution, with little space between the two categories. These political divisions cut through families - separating parents and children, siblings and spouses - and drove stakes between neighbours and friends. The different “minorities” - such as Alawites, Christians, Druze and Ismailis, to mention the most important groups - are no exception to these internal divisions.

The aim of the articles in this publication is to provide an inside view of how members of different religious communities in Syria experienced the years 2011 to 2014. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung asked a number of young researchers to write about their home communities based on interviews with people from various backgrounds. The interviewees did not have to be experts on politics or history; the spotlight was on their personal views on and interpretations of current developments. The guidelines for questioning included: What were the main changes that the interviewees witnessed taking place around them and how do they interpret them? What are their hopes and their fears concerning the future of their community? To which conclusions do they come, and what makes them be “with” or “against” what is going on? In short, the aim of the articles was to portray a more subtle, differentiated picture of the current situation of some of

the various religious communities in Syria as a counterpoint to that portraying them as unified blocks supporting the regime.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, large-scale opinion polling was impossible. The research needed to be done on a small scale within a restricted circle of people in order to put neither the interviewees nor the researchers at risk. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face and allowed a certain degree of “participant observation” within the respective community. Others needed to be conducted via Skype and accompanied by internet and social media research because the researcher had been forced to leave the country. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

The results are rather personal accounts which describe a certain place at a certain time in the Syrian conflict. When scientific research is risky and situations change quickly, narratives are as fragmented as the country itself. This collection of articles is representative of a moment in Syrian history when issues of collective and individual identity and affiliation are in flux and being redefined. The articles may not always meet the customary standards set for international academic research, but they will hopefully inform the discussion on the spread of sectarianism and the situation of local communities in Syria by contributing first-hand accounts and analysis from the ground.

This publication would not exist without the continuous support of numerous people. I thank them for their suggestions of authors, follow-up through the writing process as well as their contributions to translation and editing of the texts. Not all wish to be named here, but they know who they are.

Friederike Stolleis
Berlin, December 2015

1. Discourses on Sectarianism and “Minorities” in Syria

Friederike Stolleis

Syria is undergoing profound changes: some of its borders have become irrelevant, new power relations have developed, interstate and transnational conflicts now overlap. Social, economic and political order and stability have collapsed, bringing down with them the framework that formerly enabled the state to maintain - some say enforce - the coexistence of its diverse population groups. Consequently, identities and affiliations of local communities are today assuming an unprecedented importance. While concepts of ethnicity in Syria are a highly relevant topic (the role of Syrian Kurds, to name the most prominent example) as well as questions of national identities (such as the Palestinians) this publication focusses on religious - or sectarian - communities.

Membership of a religious community in Syria is usually determined by birth. Precise statistic data on the demographic share of the different groups is unavailable, and estimations vary: Members of the Sunni community represent the “majority” (64-74%),⁽¹⁾ followed by the two larger “minority” groups, Alawites (11-18%) and Christians (10-12%). Smaller, but politically relevant “minorities” are Druze (3-5%) and Ismailis (1%).⁽²⁾ Other small “minorities” are Shiites, Yezidis as well as very few Jews remaining in Damascus and Aleppo.

Statistics of this kind may provide a broad orientation, but are of limited use to understand the reality of multi-religious societies. Sectarian iden-

tities are never absolute categories. They often form as a result of a mixture of recollections of certain founding myths and crucial historical events and, in no less measure, the current political and economic situation. Sectarian identities have the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, very often in a local, not national context. They also leave room for individual choices, meaning that the degree to which someone identifies him or herself as belonging to a certain religious groups may vary considerably from person to person and change according to the individual context.

To reduce the war in Syria to a “sectarian conflict”, an uprising of a “majority” against “minority rule” or even to a war about the “true interpretation of religion” is misleading and ignores the complexity of other, much more decisive factors in this conflict. But at the same time, to ignore the power of sectarian identity, as has been done by many Syrian activists and observers, especially at the beginning of the conflict, would be naïve and portray only part of the picture either.

Talking about identity in Syria before 2011

Topics such as sectarian identity or the relations between the various communities have not been openly discussed in Syria for a long time. Nevertheless, they have conventionally been a subject of private conversation and often represented important information on occasions when a situation had to be judged, a person or group needed to be understood, or professional and personal opportunities and constraints needed to be assessed. But although sectarianism seemed not to exist - often in a very agreeable way - in many situations, it was often an underlying theme and rarely completely absent.

The relations of peaceful coexistence that prevailed among the various ethno-religious groups in Syria undoubtedly stood out as a social specifi-

(1) Not all Sunnis are Arabs. Most of the Kurds, who are estimated to make up 9% of the population are Sunni, as are Turkmens and Circassians.

(2) The data presented here is a combination of information gathered in different studies on Syria. Its validity is certainly debatable, but this goes beyond the aim of this publication.

city which accounted for part of the country's special charm. The tolerance shown by the various groups towards each other was a source of pride for many Syrians - a pride often tinged with condescension for neighbouring Lebanon with its recent history of fifteen years of sectarian civil war. And indeed, some high and low points notwithstanding, the various communities in Syria did live together mainly peacefully over a period of many centuries. In modern times, many Syrians refused to define their identity through their belonging to a religious community or use the term "minority" as this implied the acceptance of a sectarian division of society. The peaceful surface, however, often concealed a sense of mistrust and prejudice based on sectarian affiliation which was not uncommon among Syrians.

Two main narratives dominate the talk about sectarian identities in Syria. One claims that generations of Syrians had chosen to set themselves above sectarian differences and had lived together as one large family. This narrative was promoted by the Syrian regime, which unceasingly stressed its role as the guarantor of peaceful coexistence among the various sectarian groups - because this coexistence was under threat by foreign "agents" who imported conflicts to generate mistrust, fear and physical conflict among the various groups. The other narrative, put about mainly in private, stressed the "eternal" differences between Sunnis and Shiites, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, Christians, etc., and their respective lack of trust as shored up by a range of historical justifications.

Ironically, both narratives are the result of the official discourse that negated the differences between the various ethno-religious groups and did not allow free discussion of this topic. In a country ruled by a regime that openly appointed people to positions of power and influence on the strength of their sectarian credentials, talking about ethno-religious differences was equivalent to political dynamite and therefore taboo. "Inciting

sectarian tension" was one of the standard accusations levelled at political dissidents in court, and it incurred a sentence of many years of imprisonment.

The silencing of all debate on the sectarian make-up of the country did not succeed in banning it from reality. On the contrary, it fostered ignorance about the religion of "the others" and thus nourished prejudice and sometimes far-fetched ideas about the way of life of people belonging to other sects. For example, at no time during schooling would a Syrian child learn which ethno-religious groups lived in his or her country. While religious education is compulsory in all public schools, it distinguishes only between Islam and Christianity and the pupils are segregated accordingly. This means that Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Shiites, Ismailis and Yezidis all participate in Islamic education without the differences between their religions ever being even mentioned.

Exploiting the mistrust created by ignorance, the Syrian regime has learned, in its more than forty years in power, to "play the sectarian card," i.e. to play off the various groups against each other in order to maintain its hegemony. Many Syrians are aware of this and deplore the lack of information and opportunities for information exchange. The resulting need for debate on the topics of Syrian identity and sectarian belonging has become evident over the last four years and projected these formerly taboo issues into the mainstream discourse.

Sectarianism and the Syrian uprising

With the beginning of the Syrian uprising, sectarianism became the subject of many heated debates. From the very beginning, the demonstrators were said to propagate sectarian slogans, the most famous of which supposedly was: "Alawites into the coffin, Christians to Beirut" (*al-'alawi a-tabout wa-l-masihi ila Beirut*). The demonstrators declared this to be regime propagan-

da and countered with slogans which emphasized national unity: "One, one, one, the Syrian people are one" (*wahid, wahid wahid, ash-sha'b as-suri wahid*), to name the most prominent. Or "Not Salafism, nor Muslim Brotherhood, the revolution belongs to the people" (*la salafiyeh, la ikhwaniyeh, al-thawra hiya sha'abiyeh*) to reply to the accusation of being influenced and/or financed by Islamist movements abroad.

Bashar al-Assad spoke about the threat of Islamist terrorism as early as March 2011, in his first speech before the Syrian parliament, when demonstrations were still peaceful and Islamist slogans rarely heard. At the same time, the brutal suppression of the protests began. Many peaceful, open-minded activists of those first months were arrested and killed, shot by the security forces or tortured to death in prison. Many others went into hiding or fled the country. Islamist groups gained ground, and the moderate and secular voices were forced into silence. Particularly harsh persecution awaited anyone who tried to play a mediating role, such as demonstrators who distributed flowers and water to soldiers or "minority"-community Syrians who joined the revolution or supplied humanitarian aid to displaced Sunni families.

With the militarization of the uprising came foreign financing and subsequently foreign influence. While militias brandishing an Islamist identity readily received financing from Islamic donors, such as states and individuals from the Sunni Gulf countries, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had a harder time in its bid for Western support. As a consequence, more and more fighters joined Islamist militias. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime received support from Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The conflict thus segued into the wider context of Sunni-Shiite regional rivalry. The climax of this escalation was the founding of the "Islamic State in Syria and the Levant" (ISIL) on Syrian territory in April 2013, which developed into the "Islamic State" (IS) in June 2014.

In a country where the free discussion of questions of identity had been suppressed for decades, the onset of a sectarian discourse caught the intellectual elite totally unprepared and led to a variety of reactions. The partly very emotional discussions and publications of the past four years are in stark contrast to the enforced silence of the past four decades. This is a double-edged sword: whereas a free and critical discussion of these issues is long overdue and essential in light of the current developments, the current focus on sectarian affiliations very often sidelines other, more decisive factors in the Syrian conflict such as the development gap between rich and poor and rural and urban areas and also the complex web of political and local relationships that often cut across religious and ethnic affiliations.

The Syrian Regime as the "protector of minorities"

One of the shortcomings of the Syrian opposition is undoubtedly that it has failed to attract more members of all religious communities. Of course, prominent and lesser-known members of all sectarian groups are represented in the opposition, and no community stands as a homogeneous block behind the regime. Most community are divided on the issue of opposition, with regime supporters usually displaying their views outwardly while regime critics keep a low profile because of security concerns. But members of non-Sunni communities generally do not have significant influence within the Syrian opposition.

On the other hand, Bashar al-Assad presents himself as the sole alternative to Islamist terrorism and as the "protector of minorities" - a narrative that the regime has reiterated on every possible occasion for more than four years. This has proved to be a successful strategy insofar as the international community has taken on board the idea that Assad is the better option - at least for the "minorities", especially Christians. The sight

of IS perpetrating its publicly displayed and mediatized atrocities has meanwhile reinforced the fears of the various sectarian groups.

But this conclusion ignores the fact that it is the Syrian regime itself which is mainly responsible for the danger that the sectarian communities are currently facing. As early as 2011 it relinquished its power monopoly and encouraged members of these communities to form militias, armed them and allowed them to set up their own checkpoints - allegedly for their self-defence. By so doing, it gave credence to the notion of a Sunni "majority" threatening the existence of the "minorities". By releasing Islamist prisoners and tolerating their coming to power as the Nusra-Front and later IS, the regime reinforced the fears of the different sectarian groups in order to win their backing in its fight for survival. But the international community likewise bears part of the responsibility for the chaotic situation in Syria today. Its policy of non-intervention allowed extremist forces to become stronger while all moderate and civil forces were abandoned to be slaughtered by either the regime or Islamist militias.

Are non-Sunni communities currently under threat in Syria? In areas governed by IS as well as some of the other Islamist groups this is certainly the case. In the other areas they are threatened by oppression and war just as all other Syrians are. It should not be forgotten that so far the Sunni population has paid by far the highest price in terms of being victims of oppression, warfare and displacement.

A specific threat to "minority" sectarian groups can be identified in the fact that they are perceived by many to be supporters of the Syrian regime, a perception that could lead to acts of collective vengeance in the event that the regime

were to fall. This danger is most obvious for the Alawites, but it is certainly a concern for other communities too, causing some to support the regime primarily for this reason. Another threat lies in the scenario of a Syria governed by Islamists in which non-Sunnis would have no future. But, here again, it is important to bear in mind that in this case all secular and moderate forces, including all civil society organizations, would likewise be under threat. The fate of Alawites, Christians, Shiites, Ismailis or Druze therefore cannot be analysed and discussed in isolation from that of the Syrian population as a whole.

Despite the fighting, the human rights violations and all the atrocities, those struggling for the peaceful coexistence of all Syrian citizens have not vanished. Many have gone into hiding or are keeping a low profile in order to survive the two-pronged oppression of the regime and the Islamists. Syria remains a heterogeneous country, with virtually no region which is not home to a variety of sectarian and ethnic communities. Local identities - such as "being from Homs", rather than being "Sunni" or "Alawite" - often dominate sectarian concepts. There are many examples of contact, exchange and support among sectarian communities on a local level, but such interaction is invisible to the international media. Massacres that do not take place don't qualify as headlines.

It is important not to lose sight of the sensible, peaceful majority of Syrians who are threatened from all angles. They deserve international solidarity and support. Meanwhile, ending the Syrian conflict is the only way to salvage and re-establish the sectarian and ethnic pluralism which allowed Syrians to live together peacefully for centuries before the Assad regime took over power and which, it is to be hoped, will continue to do so after its end.

2. The Alawite Dilemma (Homs 2012)

Kheder Khaddour⁽³⁾

Syria's Alawites are often portrayed as a monolithic religious community which has unconditionally and unwaveringly supported the Syrian regime throughout the crisis that has engulfed the country since March 2011. However, very little attention has been paid to the community's diversity and to reasons for its support for the regime that might extend beyond the simplistic equation: 'The ruling family is Alawite, therefore Syria's Alawites support the regime.' This research emphasizes the diversity of the Alawite community in the context of the current situation while examining the community's fears for survival and the socio-economic conditions that underpin its current solidarity with the regime.

The study focuses on the Alawite community of Homs, a city located in the economic and strategic centre of the country with numerous factories, oil refineries, fertilizer plants, power plants, gas storage facilities, etc. The region is also important militarily as it hosts the country's most prestigious military institutions. Large numbers of Alawites from Homs and its environs work in these state-run industries and military institutions, and the region's economy has suffered as a result of the current crisis, especially since the end of 2011. The Alawites of Homs and the surrounding region are a minority group,⁽⁴⁾ and their presence in the

city is relatively recent, dating back only 20 to 30 years. Most of the Alawites in Homs migrated to the city from the surrounding towns and villages and it would be misleading to discuss the Alawites of Homs without referring to their villages of origin with which many still maintain strong links through relatives, houses or land that they continue to cultivate. As residents of the city, Alawites now tend to socialize with people who originate from the same village. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the Alawites have moved their villages to the city. It has even been suggested that Homs' expansion is the result of the extension of the surrounding villages into the city rather than the customary outward urban sprawl into the countryside. Prior to March 2011, when the various neighbourhoods of Homs tended to be dominated by a single community - whether Sunni, Alawite, Christian, or Shiite - it was generally the case that society was pluralistic and peaceful. It was not uncommon to find minority-owned businesses, such as Sunni-owned shops, in Alawite neighbourhoods. Pre-March 2011, the population in some of the newer areas developed in the mid-1990s was mixed, but this diversity has since diminished.

This study differentiates between Alawites from the hinterland (*dakhel*), i.e. the Homs-Hama region, and those from the Mediterranean coastal region (*sahel*),⁽⁵⁾ and aims to explain that Alawite solidarity is not monolithic, not least by examining the difference between the life experience of Alawites in the hinterland and that of Alawites living in the coastal region. This distinction has historical antecedents, but appears to have become more pronounced in the current turmoil. Alawites from the Homs region consider themselves to be more vulnerable than their counterparts in the coastal region where Alawites

(3) This article was first published as: Aziz Nakkash, "The Alawite dilemma in Homs. Survival, solidarity and the making of a community", Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Department for Near/Middle East and North Africa, 2013.

(4) The definition of the term 'minority' used here is not only numerical but also describes a population whose economic and cultural impact on a specific geographical area is limited. In contrast, the majority is not only demographically dominant but also controls the day-to-day economy and other aspects of the broader culture.

(5) The boundary between the coast (*sahel*) and the hinterland (*dakhel*) broadly follows the coastal mountain range of Syria (*Silsilat al-Jibal al-Saheliyya*), also known as the Alawite Mountains (*Jibal al-'Alawiyyin*).

represent a majority. They also feel excluded from the power structure which, in their eyes, is monopolized by Alawites from the coast. However, the current turmoil in Syria is creating or reinforcing the sense of a shared group affiliation and is re-establishing social cohesion within the Alawite community as a whole.

This study also demonstrates that support for the regime by the Alawites from Homs is multi-faceted. Alawites depend on their jobs in state-run economic and military institutions for their livelihoods, but at the same time they fear for their lives as the present uprising is increasingly seen as an anti-Alawite movement rather than a 'popular revolution.' They therefore perceive no viable alternative for their survival to accepting and supporting the present regime. For many Alawites, support for President Bashar al-Assad and his regime is not simply a matter of endorsement but arises from a deep fear for the lives of family members and neighbours employed in the army, the secret service or paramilitary groups - the notorious Shabiha. Their support can be regarded as a way of seeking protection and as a key to survival.

This research also illustrates how the regime has used the secret service (*Mukhabarat*) to secure the allegiance of Homs' Alawites who broadly perceive it as an institution which is controlled and dominated by coastal Alawites. Finally, it shows that despite the fact that the Alawites of Homs are largely civilians, most have family members or neighbours who work for the army, the secret service or the paramilitary and have thus contributed to the 'militarization' of the community. The rise of the Shabiha in Homs can be attributed more to this community militarization than to any concerted strategy to crush the uprising. Further factors have also strengthened the community's sense of cohesion, most notably shared religious values at a time of heightened sectarian tension and the influence of the media, both state-run television and social media networks.

This study is based on observations and interviews conducted with members of the Alawite community in the Homs area during the summer of 2012. The interviewees range from army officers to paramilitaries and civilians, including students, academics, businessmen and other individuals from diverse backgrounds. While some identified themselves explicitly as religiously observant Alawites, others consider themselves trapped in the "Alawite box" as a result of the current crisis. While some interviewees were aware of the purpose of our discussions, others were not. The latter case was particularly true of the Shabiha with whom the author spent time as a "participant observer". Some of the interviews and observations gathered in outlying villages were provided by intermediaries. The interviewed sample is not representative in that it does not reflect a cross-sectional range of Alawite views, though it does provide some insight into the Alawite community in Homs. The objective is neither to censure nor to defend but to shed light on the multi-faceted and often complex political and social realities of the Alawite community in Homs today.

Ambitions and economic motivations

Homs is the main location for army officer training in Syria. Its military institutions have been and remain important factors attracting Alawites to the city, particularly after Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.⁽⁶⁾ For people living in Homs as well as in the surrounding villages, joining the army is a desirable means of securing an income.

A case in point is Salem. In 1985, when still in his twenties, Salem enlisted in Homs' famous military academy (*kulliya harbiya*) located in al-Wa'er, where all high-ranking officers started their careers. Whereas his family originates from a village to the east of Homs, Salem was born in Nuzha

(6) There are many military institutions in Homs, including colleges, weapons factories, airports and important bases and compounds.

and now lives in Wadi al-D'ahab, both places being mainly Alawite neighbourhoods in the southern part of the city. He maintains strong links with relatives in his ancestral village where he also still owns land. Now in his fifties, Salem is a colonel (*'aqid*) in the army. He enrolled at the military academy hoping to eventually become a high-ranking officer and thought that to achieve this goal he *"should work hard and follow the rules."* Salem also reasoned that joining the army would guarantee a stable income even if he did not attain the desired senior command. He was based in Damascus for about twelve years before returning to Homs six years ago.

At the time when Salem enrolled as a young man with no connections in business or other sectors of the economy, building up a career other than in the army would have been difficult. Today, Salem considers joining the army means a *"hard life"* and hopes that his sons will not follow in his footsteps. However, he also acknowledges that it would be difficult for him to change his profession now.

Vulnerability and defending the regime in the interest of survival

Salem cites economic and ideological reasons as motivating factors for remaining in the armed forces: *"We depend on the regime economically speaking, but we also depend on it for safety."* Since March 2011, he sees his role in the army as a guardian of the homeland (*watan*) and of civil peace (*silm ahli*), clarifying that *"any attempt to overthrow the regime will render Syria very dangerous."* He explains that in late 2010 or early 2011, in the weeks following the uprising in Tunis, he received a message *"from Damascus,"* sent to army officers throughout Syria, warning that units might come under attack by radical Islamist groups. At the time, he took this warning very seriously. Eighteen months later, in the summer of 2012, he states: *"Look what is happening now, they were right."*

Since March 2011, Salem has stopped wearing his army uniform when traveling between the office and home, fearing it would make him a target. He now only wears it when engaging in combat. Salem's task at the outset of the crisis was to 'escort' pro-regime demonstrations. Later, he participated in military incursions into areas held by the 'opposition.' Echoing the regime's official rhetoric, he describes the opposition as *"terrorists"* and *"armed gangs."* For a time, Salem was also charged with managing strategic check-points in conflict areas, notably Baba Amr when it came under heavy fire. He recalls asking his superiors if he could mobilize the young men of his neighbourhood to assist the army, but his request was refused. *"At the time,"* he explains, *"my superiors were not enthusiastic about the idea of having militias directly linked to the army."* It should be noted in this context that the regime's initial strategy was to maintain distinct dividing lines between the army, the militias and the secret service. As the situation deteriorated, however, the secret service was tasked with organizing paramilitary groups which then established a direct link to the army.

Colonel Salem considers that today it is not just the army which is a target, but *"Syria as a whole. The target is Syria's unity (al-hadaf huwa wahdat Suriya)."* In his view, defending what he refers to as the country's existing unity signifies above all maintaining the status quo as a necessary condition for the safety of Alawites. He describes the situation of Alawites from the hinterland thus: *"We are a minority here and the Sunnis want to drive us out."* According to him, *"the question isn't about Bashar al-Assad as a person, but if he goes, Alawites will be in danger, especially those in and around Homs and more so than those on the coast."* For Salem, the survival of the regime represents the survival of Syria's Alawites, especially those living in the hinterland.

This last point is of particular significance as it helps to open the 'black box' that the Alawite

community of the Homs region represents and addresses the greater vulnerability that they feel compared with Alawites from the coast. This sentiment is echoed by Abu Ayman, an Alawite originally from a coastal village who now lives in Homs. Like Salem, Abu Ayman attended the Homs military academy and then served in Damascus. Abu Ayman explains that in general he still feels safer on the coast. He also points out further inequalities among Alawites, in particular within the army, where a dividing line exists not only between “*sahel* and “*dakhel*, with the former rising to higher, more powerful ranks than the latter, but also between coastal Alawites themselves. Abu Ayman served as a lieutenant colonel (“*muqaddam*) in the army for 20 years. He explains: “*I realised that I couldn’t get a good position because of the existing regionalism among the Alawite sect on the coast.*” Abu Ayman further notes that “*in order to reach a high rank and especially a powerful and influential position in the army, one needs to be from a certain clan.*” So although Abu Ayman, like most powerful men in the army and the regime, originates from the coast, his clan affiliation has prevented him from rising to a position of influence.⁽⁷⁾ Four years ago, realizing that he would never reach the rank he had hoped for, he resigned from the army. “*I quit my position as a lieutenant colonel in the army and it was not easy. I needed good connections (wasta) to do so.*” Abu Ayman had contacts in powerful circles, connections in the business sector and some family members living abroad. Following his resignation from the army, he settled in the eastern Homs neighbourhood of Akrama, where his wife originates, and works today as a building contractor.

The Alawite dilemma

In addition to feeling more vulnerable than their coastal counterparts, after March 2011 the Ala-

wites of Homs had to face the increasingly critical dilemma of the political stance they should adopt, namely whether to stand behind the regime, oppose it, or simply distance themselves from the uprising. The regime did everything in its power to secure their allegiance, and Abu Ayman regards the secret service as essential in that process. He claims that the secret service holds the real power in Homs. “*From the very beginning,*” he says “*, the security forces worked to mobilize Alawites, especially the young who were out of work. They mobilized and organized them and sent them to Sunni areas of Homs to lead demonstrations in favour of the regime.*” According to Abu Ayman, this policy complicated relations among people from the various communities and areas of Homs.

Abu Ayman recounts several incidents that contributed to shaping the stance of the Alawite community in Homs. He cites, in particular, the killing of brigadier general Abdu Telawi, his two sons and a nephew near Zahra in April 2011 when anti-regime demonstrations were becoming more frequent. The killing was highly publicized and footage of the mutilated bodies of the men and their funeral in Wadi al-Dahab was given extensive television coverage. Interviews with the brigadier general’s daughter and his wife, who spoke with recognizable Alawite accents, revealed the family’s sectarian affiliation.⁽⁸⁾ This incident is considered to have been a turning point for the Alawite community of Homs. Fear and anger henceforth dominated the discourse within the community and ultimately motivated many Alawites to support the regime. Relations with other communities quickly deteriorated with a rise in tit-for-tat sectarian killings and abductions. Abu Ayman knows many people who were killed or abducted in Homs. He explains that his relations with Sunni business partners first soured and then became non-existent as sectarian ten-

(7) An individual from a powerful clan in the hinterland would encounter the same difficulties.

(8) See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7eSoRoj8uE> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUGw6-uT4ZE>, accessed 21.12.2012.

sion increasingly prevented travel between neighbourhoods. He states: *"They just stopped answering my calls."*

The narratives of both Salem and Abu Ayman draw on a similar experience of Alawites from the hinterland being treated differently from Alawites from the coast. In the words of Ghandi, a young Alawite student of agricultural engineering at the Ba'th University in Homs: *"We are so very far from Qardaha,"* the ruling al-Assad family's village of origin.⁽⁹⁾

Ghandi spent his early years in a village close to Masyaf, a town northwest of Homs and close to Hama. He moved to Homs to study and currently lives in the neighbourhood of Zahra. His father is both an Alawite sheikh (cleric) and an army officer, and one of his brothers works for the secret service.⁽¹⁰⁾ But Ghandi has never felt safe in Homs, particularly in non-Alawite neighbourhoods. He states, for example, that *"the souk is not ours"*⁽¹¹⁾ and does not allow his family members to leave their natal village because *"they are safer there than anywhere else."* In his view, the uprising in Syria targets Alawites: *"Sunnis want to drive us out to the coast, which is historically where Alawites have always been chased."* He explains that this situation long pre-dates the outbreak of the uprising in March 2011: *"Sunnis already hated us before... not all Sunnis, just the Muslim Brotherhood because they want to create an Islamic religious state."*⁽¹²⁾

(9) Qardaha is located in Jabal al-Alawiyyin, the coastal mountain range.

(10) In the Alawite tradition, a sheikh imparts religious teachings to a male student within the context of a quasi-filial relationship. The sheikh is regarded as a father figure and students relate to each other as brothers. Once the sheikh judges an adept to have gained a sufficient understanding of Alawite teachings and a formal process of request and approval has been completed, that student can in turn become a sheikh.

(11) The large souks or markets in Homs are located in predominantly Sunni areas of the city centre.

(12) Historically one of Syria's oldest opposition movements, the banned Muslim Brotherhood took up arms against the

The concept that ancestral villages are perceived by Alawites as a potential refuge or resource for the community is further explained by Ali, an Alawite military judge in his thirties. He notes that it is important for cities like Homs to maintain connections with surrounding villages, and for the roads between the city and the surrounding countryside to remain secure and open. If the roads are open, Ali explains, *"if anything happens, villagers are ready to come and help us, or we can flee from the city to the villages."* He considers it vital to maintain these links to guarantee the security of the Alawite community but does not regard economic and trade links with neighbouring non-Alawite villages as a priority, explaining that *"our main concern is not the economy but to live in security."*

Ali is the son of an army officer and lives in a village located northwest of Homs, where many inhabitants serve in the army. He works in Homs and considers his village *"outside the current situation."* After studying law, rather than completing mandatory military service, he applied directly for a position as a judge in the army. To obtain the job, he paid a bribe (*wasta*) to an Alawite from the coastal region. Ali sees the uprising since March 2011 in very negative terms: *"You can't give these people freedom... as soon as they get some freedom, kidnappings start."* He is broadly supportive of the government's approach, stating that, in general, *"Syrians can only be controlled if you scare them."*

Religion is an important aspect which Ali believes explains his community's support for the regime. *"Our villages are very religious, and we are ready to support Alawites anywhere,"* he says. Ali consigns the final outcome of the country's turmoil to

regime in the early 1970s. Its opposition turned into a full-scale uprising in the early 1980s and culminated in a blood-bath after it took control of the city of Hama. Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is based in Hama, Homs and Damascus and is represented in the opposition-led Syrian National Council.

fate. “*Bashar al-Assad*,” he says, “*will stay in power because it is written*,” though he does not absolve the president from responsibility for the situation. “*If Hafez al-Assad were still alive, this would never have happened*,” he concludes. Ali’s religiously inflected arguments are all the more interesting as he studied law, which in Syria is a combination of French and Sunni “*Shari’a* law. Ali concluded his interview with a declaration, expressed with pride, that he is willing to die for his homeland. To him, this signifies above all else that he is willing to die for the Alawite community and its continued domination of the country.

Ghandi, the agricultural engineering student, also stresses that opposing the regime is ultimately his way of supporting close relatives. He abandoned his support for the regime only after “*many Alawites were killed and kidnapped... that is the reason why I decided to defend the community*,” he explains. Rumours and reports of abductions and murders became rife within the community, and many witnessed countless funerals of victims. News of such incidents of unconstrained violence spread quickly. After Ghandi volunteered to take up arms under the supervision of the “*Mukhabarat* (secret service), he was sent to accompany military units entering the Khaldiya neighbourhood to fight. This is how he describes his involvement: “*I didn’t go for Bashar al-Assad; I went for my brothers who are working in the army and are currently fighting in Idlib and the suburbs of Damascus*.” Family solidarity rather than identification with the regime was the ultimate reason for Ghandi’s decision to engage actively in the conflict.

Regime militias

Ghandi eventually became a member of what is today known as the *Shabiha*, often described as the regime’s militia. Two explanations exist concerning the origin of the term ‘*shabiha*.’ The first and more widespread suggests that it derives

from the term ‘*shabah*’, meaning a ghost.⁽¹³⁾ The second, more plausible explanation is that the term *shabiha* is derived from ‘*shabaha*’, a verb meaning to rip something or someone apart, almost to the point of dismemberment. This term is commonly used by people in the coastal mountains to describe the tearing of an object, and it connotes brute force. The term ‘*Shabiha*’ first appeared in the 1980s in the home village of the Assad family, Qardaha, where individuals belonging to the extended Assad family and their entourage were known to act extra-judicially, operating large-scale smuggling operations and generally intimidating the inhabitants of the coastal region. A stereotypical *Shabih* (singular of *Shabiha*) sports a muscular body, a shaved head, a moustache and a full beard. He drinks whiskey, smokes Marlboro cigarettes or cigars and drives a car with tinted windows and without licence plates. Acting as individuals or in groups, the *Shabiha* quickly expanded their influence until the beginning of the 1990s, when a campaign led by Basil al-Assad, the eldest son of Hafez, sought to limit their growing power and resulted in the imprisonment of many members. Links between some of these groups and Rif’at al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad’s brother, whose relationship with the president had become problematic, is one explanation for this clampdown that suggests reprisal tactics. A further similar campaign against the *Shabiha* was conducted at the turn of the 21st century by Maher al-Assad, a younger brother of Bashar al-Assad.

Since March 2011, however, the term ‘*Shabiha*’ has been used by both the media and the opposition to designate any armed paramilitary group or militia with links to the army, the secret service or the Ba’th Party. The opposition refers to ‘*Shabiha*’

(13) The term is also often traced back to the Mercedes-Benz S600, the *Shabiha*’s vehicle of choice which was nicknamed ‘*shabah*’ (ghost) in Syria. This explanation, however, is unconvincing as the term ‘*shabiha*’ was in use long before the ‘*shabah*’ Mercedes-Benz S600 was available in Syria.

in negative terms to designate anyone who is apparently above the law. In contrast, supporters of the regime and the *Shabiha* themselves use the term with positive connotations. For them, '*Shabiha*' signifies someone who represents the government and embodies the law. Today's "*Shabiha* reject the notion that they are operating outside the framework of the law and claim instead to be adhering to military laws governing the conduct of warfare. This provides them with a moral justification for their actions and endows the group with a sense of impunity. The commanders of "*Shabiha* groups may belong to the army, the secret service or the Ba'th Party, but many are civilians" who are de facto neighbourhood or village strongmen with connections to influential individuals within the regime. Finally, *Shabiha* groups are all interlinked and their institutional bonds have become stronger since the beginning of the uprising.

The rise of *Shabiha* groups in Homs is worth examining as a means of gaining further insight into Alawite support for the regime. The most important aspect is that, like the army and the *Mukhabarat* (secret service), the *Shabiha* are not disconnected from society as a whole but are instead fully integrated at many levels. The nature of their involvement in the conflict has evolved in the period since March 2011.

From people's committees to paramilitaries

Soon after March 2011, so-called people's committees (*lijan sha'abiya*) were set up in the Alawite-dominated neighbourhoods of Homs and the villages in the city's hinterland. The need for such committees became apparent when armed gunmen started patrolling the neighbourhoods, shooting randomly into the air. Their behaviour instilled fear among residents, who saw the peaceful revolution" quickly degenerating into violence. The idea of establishing such neigh-

bourhood vigilante groups was therefore generally popular with local residents. Originally set up in coordination with the secret service (*Mukhabarat*), these new groups were composed mainly of volunteers, many of whom were unemployed young men. Initially armed only with batons, these volunteer vigilantes were posted at checkpoints strategically located throughout residential neighbourhoods. Their main duty was to check vehicles entering the area and report to the *Mukhabarat* any individual that they found suspicious, including any neighbourhood resident. The vigilantes were thus also in a position to prevent any potential mobilization against the regime from within their area. The *Mukhabarat* then encouraged these young volunteers from the committees to take part in pro-government demonstrations (*masira*), providing them with the necessary posters and banners. In a speech given in June 2011, the president personally thanked them for their work.⁽¹⁴⁾ As army forces moved into Homs in the summer of 2011, these vigilante groups withdrew from the checkpoints and finally confirmed their allegiance to the regime. By the autumn of 2011, collaboration between the people's committees and the "*Mukhabarat* had become so strong that the former began to accompany both "*Mukhabarat* agents and army units on campaigns to regain neighbourhoods held by the opposition. Having begun as people's committees (*lijan sha'abiya*), these vigilante groups gradually became the *Shabiha*, although neighbourhood residents long continued to refer to them simply as '*majmu'at*' (groups) or '*shabab*' (young men).

Shabiha organization

The *Mukhabarat* used real estate and local car rental offices as intermediaries" to organize the *lijan sha'abiya* (people's committees), the forerunners of the *Shabiha*. Even before March 2011, the secret service maintained strong relations with

(14) See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqNVDyYUelk>.

the owners of real estate businesses in Homs as these held valuable information on local inhabitants. Over time, such businesses became operation centres from which the *Shabiha* were organized. Their political stance was easily identifiable from prominently featured posters of the president and other pro-regime paraphernalia on display. Such operations existed in both Wadi al-Dahab and Zahra, two predominantly Alawite neighbourhoods of the city.

Abu Rami, the owner of a real estate business in Wadi al-Dahab, claims to be in charge of about 200 *Shabiha*. Despite a conviction and a term of imprisonment for murder, since March 2011 he has succeeded in gaining the confidence of the secret service and the army and now maintains direct contact with high-ranking officers in both institutions. He states: "*The whole neighbourhood should be thankful for what I'm doing.*"

The *Shabiha* in Zahra were to become even more powerful than their counterparts in Wadi al-Dahab. Their operations are directed from within a residential area in the centre of the Zahra neighbourhood, in contrast to the less central location of the *Shabiha* operations base in Wadi al-Dahab. Scores of *Shabiha* moved into Zahra from outlying villages, taking over the homes and businesses of Sunnis, most of whom were forcibly evicted and driven out of the neighbourhood. The *Shabiha* looted and sold their belongings in what became known locally as the 'Sunni market.' The *Shabiha* of Zahra are commanded by Abu Akram, who is known to have commandeered cars for his recruits and levied protection money from local residents. The son of a sheikh and therefore well known locally, Abu Akram ran for a parliamentary seat in the May 2012 elections. He was unsuccessful - surprisingly, given his close links to the regime.

Zahra's location is unique in that it is an Alawite-dominated neighbourhood almost completely surrounded by Sunni-majority or Bedouin-majority areas. Moreover, the neighbourhood has an al-

most rural feel, not least because its residents maintain strong links to their villages of origin.

A *Shabih* typically earns around 15,000 Syrian pounds a month (about US\$200), paid by the charity foundation, *Bustan*.⁽¹⁵⁾ *Bustan* also provides support for the family of any *Shabih* who is wounded or incapacitated. If, however, a "*Shabih* dies in combat, he is declared a *Shahid* (martyr or fallen hero) by the government and his family then qualifies for state benefits. *Bustan* later also stepped in to help maintain other facilities hosting 'on call' *Shabiha* alongside the already well-established real estate offices.

Most of the *Shabiha* in Homs' various neighbourhoods are either local men or from villages connected to the respective neighbourhood through kinship. Some were originally members of local people's committees; others came from outlying villages to join an army unit. Their motivations vary widely, ranging from financial and economic considerations such as earning a salary and the potential for looting to more 'ideological' considerations such as hostility towards the Sunni community and more specifically towards Salafists (Islamists). Some *Shabiha* are motivated by personal concerns, joining the force in order to defend their community and relatives. For others, reprisal is the key motivating factor. Still others sign up because they believe it is their duty to help the army in what they see as a battle against radicalism. A *Shabih* may be driven by one, several or all of these motivations. Many have little more than a very basic education and most have few alternative job prospects. Some, especially those from outlying villages, have no life experience other than subsistence farming. Some are

(15) *Bustan* is a charity which was founded in 1999 by Rami Makhoul, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad. The goals of the charity are to provide medical, educational and cultural aid to people in need in Syria (see <http://al-bostan.net/> accessed 21.12.2012). There are also *Shabiha* groups that are supported by influential businessmen who are not necessarily Alawites.

married; some have children. Many are religiously observant. Only a handful of those interviewed had a secondary education qualification. The more educated *Shabiha* tended to be the sons of army or secret service officers and it was to them that fell the task of organizing *Shabiha* group operations.

Shabiha talk

I spent some time with a group of “*Shabiha* at the Wadi al-Dahab centre. That night, about 30 men were on call. They wandered in and out of the centre, and occasionally an army soldier also stopped by. The men were armed with Kalashnikovs and hand grenades. Three mortars were stationed outside the centre. Sporting full beards and closely-cropped hair, the men drank “*mate* and ‘*araq*.”⁽¹⁶⁾ They talked a lot about the differences between various weapons, particularly the advantages of (Russian) Kalashnikovs over (American) M-16 rifles. To a backdrop of explosions and gunshots that went unnoticed, the men recounted stories of their exploits, lionizing incidents of personal bravery and emphasizing the Sunni’s supposedly implacable hatred of Alawites. Some of their accounts are reproduced below.

An ‘assistant’ of Abu Rami claims that “*terrorist snipers*” and “*gunmen*” currently positioned in the city’s *souk* (commercial downtown area) can fire remote-controlled weapons from their rooftops using merely a camera and a screen. He uses the term ‘*isaba* (gang) to refer to those fighting on the other side. What is interesting about his account is not the credibility of his information but his lament that “*we*” - the *Shabiha* - have no access to high-tech weaponry from abroad and his claim that being forced to use conventional weapons

signifies greater military valour. Confirming fear of the enemy, another *Shabih* speaks in the same vein concerning what he had experienced when fighting in the Nazihin area that night: he describes children armed with grenades and recounts how, after successfully disarming them, he followed them into a house to find an entire cache of grenades.

Another man in the group tells the story of how he was kidnapped: his kidnappers took him to al-Bayada neighbourhood and laid him on a blood-spattered steel table with a guillotine hanging over it. When asked if he was an Alawite, he lied and told them he was an Ismaili. Although he believes that his accent may have betrayed him, he was eventually freed or, to be more precise, “*exchanged*” for a kidnap victim from the “*other side*.”

To justify their use of violence the *Shabiha* recount stories that they have heard from others, all of which involve the “*massacre*” of Alawites elsewhere. Men from rural areas are particularly likely to attribute the current Alawite plight to God’s will, claiming that it is pre-ordained for an Alawite massacre to take place every 100 years. In a somewhat contradictory vein, others in the group point out that Sunnis are determined to exterminate Alawites and that it is therefore their duty to retaliate. In the words of one *Shabih*, the Alawites’ ultimate purpose is “*to fight and to win*.” Should they fail, he points out, this would indeed be God’s will. The men agree that they are currently engaged in a direct fight against figures such as Sheikh Adnan al-Ar’our.⁽¹⁷⁾ They consider him to be the commander of the “*opposition*.” As the men sip *mate*, they recount what they have heard Sheikh Adnan al-Ar’our say against Alawites on his television channel, perceiving these statements as being further justification for their actions. In their view, they are presently at war but

(16) *Maté* is a popular tea which has its origins in South America and is widely consumed in Syria and Lebanon. ‘*Araq* is an alcoholic spirit flavoured with aniseed that is widely consumed throughout the countries of the Middle East.

(17) Adnan al-Ar’our is a Syrian Sunni sheikh renowned for his virulent anti-Alawite rhetoric who broadcasts a TV programme from Saudi Arabia where he currently lives.

soon “*everything will be over.*” There is no mention of the future or any plans for that future.

In Zahra, the “*Shabiha* described even more gruesome stories, recounting some of the violent killings they had carried out. By doing so, they said, they were “*creating the Alawite future*” and actively participating in safeguarding their own survival. Even the army is scared of the *Shabiha*, one of them boasted. He recalls one instance when the army came to their neighbourhood and the *Shabiha* welcomed them with gunfire so loud that they could have “*taken the Golan back,*” referring metaphorically to the long disputed claim to the Golan Heights.

The militarization of the community

In the current turmoil, the *Shabiha* can be seen as having replaced the militias of the Ba’th Party which helped the army and secret service put down the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency in the early 1980s. At that time, paramilitary groups of young, armed Ba’th Party members were also involved, monitoring checkpoints and sometimes fighting alongside army units. Former lieutenant-colonel, Abu Ayman explains: “*In March 2011, the regime tried to revive the Ba’th Party militias, but there were just not enough young members anymore and the party base was too pluralistic.*” One could add that the party had also become overly bureaucratic and inert and that it was a better option for the regime to rely on the *Shabiha*, who were already established in and around Jabal al-Alawiyyin, the coastal mountain range area where the ruling family has its base. Today, young party members who become engaged in the fighting are also called “*Shabiha*”.

To conclude here, one might ask why a regime with a significant army and therefore a combat force at its disposal relies on mainly Alawite militias to shore up support. And furthermore why are these groups not integrated directly into the army or secret service? There may be more than one

reason, though the proliferation of *Shabiha* in Homs is believed to be a strategy designed more to militarize the community and secure its allegiance than solely to defeat the uprising.

Alawite families and community constraints

The regime and its security apparatus, namely the army, secret service and paramilitary units, have long been inextricably woven into the fabric of Alawite society. Virtually every family has at least one family member or neighbour who works for one or several of these establishments. This suggests that the Alawite community as a whole operates under a burden of constraints that implicates them directly or indirectly in the current conflict.

Living in a village located east of Homs, Sheikh Mahmoud has four sons in the armed forces. “*I don’t support Bashar al-Assad,*” he says “*, it is my sons that I support.*” Now retired, he was a first lieutenant (“*musa’id awwal*”) in the army for over 30 years, and was stationed in Dara’a for a time. He considers Alawites from the hinterland like himself to be far removed from the centres of power. “*We are modest people (darwish) here, and we struggle to survive economically. This is why the young enlist in the army and secret service, so as to be able to eat, not in order to gain power.*” The army is a welcoming work environment for impoverished Alawite families because it is run by members of the Alawite community. By the same token, this fact also explains why poor people from other communities in Syria choose not to join the army.

Perceived poverty is what motivates the Alawites who are currently looting Sunni homes, says Mahmoud, adding that he deplores this type of behaviour. “*Yes, it’s a sin (haram), but what can we do when our people have so little?*” The sheikh reiterates an idea that is widespread among Alawites from the hinterland, namely that it is more difficult

for them to obtain positions of influence than for their counterparts from the coastal region. He also believes that the former are more vulnerable and in greater danger. *"Here, we are a minority,"* he points out. At the same time, Sheikh Mahmoud regrets that relations with neighbouring Sunni villages have deteriorated. He explains that in the hinterland, *"Alawites need Sunnis for economic reasons, and now there's no more trust between the communities."* He also deplores the conflict from another perspective: *"It's a sin for Sunnis and Alawites to be fighting each other."*

In the eyes of the sheikh, the situation in Syria is a full-scale war with sectarian antecedents. *"It started when Hafez al-Assad came to power; it intensified in the eighties at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising and has continued to this day,"* he explains. *"If Bashar al-Assad weren't Alawite, there wouldn't be a war,"* he claims, but then hastens to add that it is the will of God. This war has also caused a new understanding of *"jihad,"* he argues, and while he does not fully support it, he also regards it as *"necessary."* He explains that in traditional Alawite beliefs *jihad* represented the spiritual struggle within oneself against the temptation to sin. But the concept of *jihad* is now also used to justify the armed defence of one's community and the Alawite religion against aggression. The sheikh concludes by calling on God to save the Alawites.

Fadi is a young Alawite man in his thirties who works in sales and is the father of a young daughter. He used to live near Akrama but moved to the coastal city of Tartous in January 2012 as the situation in Homs deteriorated and his career prospects became bleak. Many Alawites from the hinterland have moved to the Tartous area, which has been less affected by the recent turmoil than other areas of the country. Prior to March 2011, Fadi had numerous dealings with Sunnis, mainly in connection with his work. He expresses no concern about travelling in Sunni areas of Homs and goes so far as to say: *"I used to like Sunnis*

more than Alawites." He once wanted to marry a young Sunni woman he was in love with but his request was rejected by the woman's parents and Fadi eventually married an Alawite. Fadi hails from a village near Masyaf, an area which he says *"produces many sheikhs"* as its *"inhabitants are every religious."* He still has many relatives in Masyaf from whom he had grown somewhat distant over the years as many were members of either the army or the *Shabiha*. Since the uprising, however, he has felt closer to them again.

When Fadi first arrived in Tartous, he felt quite alienated. *"It felt weird there,"* he says. *"The Alawites on the coast were very different from the Alawites in Homs. So I mostly hung out with people who had also moved to Tartous from Homs."* He goes as far as to say that he felt a greater sense of kinship with people from his own region than with people of his own religion. *"When I used to work in Sunni areas of Homs, I felt closer to them Sunnis than I did to the Alawite people of Tartous."* Now, however, his feelings are mixed and his sense of commonality with Sunnis has diminished.

Fadi's case is interesting on two counts. First, it shows that not all Alawites with family members serving in the army or the secret service automatically support the regime. Second, as an Alawite with family members serving in the army and the secret service who is fully aware of the brutality of the regime, Fadi nevertheless fears joining the opposition. What Fadi is implying is a desire for change shared by many Alawites who do not support the present uprising and do not wish to participate. Ultimately he considers the opposition in Syria as lacking a *"legitimate vision."* He also believes that the opposition would not accept him within its ranks because of his Alawite identity.

"When the revolution started, I was really excited," Fadi states. In April 2011 he joined a large demonstration against the regime in the main square in Homs. He recalls that the *"secret ser-*

vice people were brutal with the demonstrators. And that same night, they started shooting at people.” Soon afterwards, he says, he heard loud appeals for “*jihad* coming from the minarets of mosques - which to Alawites meant a holy war against them. “*Suddenly I became scared and I changed my mind, as I realized that what was happening was no longer a revolution,*” he recalls. The uprising in Homs had acquired the contours of sectarian conflict and civil strife. A turning point for him came in July 2011 when three Alawite boys were killed.⁽¹⁸⁾ In reprisal, Alawite men went on a rampage and attacked local Sunni-owned stores, causing the Sunni owners and their families to flee. Now, in the summer of 2012, Fadi states: “*I don’t support Bashar al-Assad, but I cannot actively oppose him, because I’m scared for my brother who works in the army, and also for myself. And in the end, I want to be able to live, and to provide a good life to my daughter.*”

Before becoming a salesman, Fadi applied for a post in the civil service but, lacking the required connections (*wasta*) and money, he was rejected. He could have worked in the army but declined to do so. In the late summer of 2012 the army conscripted him, along with many others, as a reservist. Unwilling to serve, Fadi avoided service by fleeing to Lebanon. He is certain that many people in Syria now consider him a traitor.

The Alawite trap

Many Alawite civilians feel trapped by their situation. One is Samer, a postgraduate student at the University of Damascus. Samer was raised in the Homs neighbourhood of Nuzha after his family had moved to the city from their ancestral village about 30 years ago. They relocated to Homs because Samer’s father served in the army. Un-

like most Alawites who move into Homs from the countryside, Samer’s family no longer has connections with the family’s ancestral village.

Samer believes that his peers at the university think that because he is Alawite he has a privileged status and the right connections (*wasta*), but “*this is merely a rumour,*” he says. Some of his fellow students fear and distrust him solely because he is Alawite, and some suspect that he is working for the secret service. He confirms what other Alawites have said concerning the *dakhel/sahel* dichotomy. Non-Alawites in Homs “*think we hold the power, but this is not true, the power is held on the coast,*” he says. He goes on to explain that “*this country isn’t for us Alawites... we are a minority, and we shouldn’t hold all the power.*” In his view, his father spent more than forty years in the army “*for nothing*” and he hopes to join his two siblings who live in Australia once he has finished his studies in Syria.

Professor Nader, who studied in Russia, teaches mechanical engineering at the Ba’th University of Homs. He, too, expresses ambivalence about the situation of Alawites in Homs. Now in his fifties, Professor Nader is originally from a village located to the west of Homs where he still owns a villa. He grew up in the Nuzha neighbourhood and, until recently, lived in al-Wa’er. He returned to Nuzha for security reasons. He regrets that fears for his safety caused him to return to an all-Alawite neighbourhood. His father joined the army when he was young as service in the army was perceived as a welcome career opportunity; one of his brothers was a military doctor who was able to pave the way for his recruitment. Professor Nader refuses to label what is currently happening in Syria as a ‘real revolution by the people’ and still sees the hand of the Muslim Brotherhood at work there. But he adds that he is not in favour of “*Bashar al-Assad or the secret service*” and holds the regime largely responsible for the current crisis, claiming that “*they are playing fast and loose with this country.*”

(18) See *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, 3 توتر في حمص على خلفية قتل 3, شبان علويين, <http://www.aawsat.com>, 18 July 2012, accessed 21.12.2012.

Looking back, Professor Nader says the following about his city: *"Before the advent of Hafez al-Assad and the appointment of high-ranking mukhabarat officers from the coastal area which is the stronghold of the Assad clan, Alawites, Sunnis and Christians lived in Homs peacefully. Once the mukhabarat came in, the city began to be viewed in terms of its sectarian components, and this was also reinforced by the attitudes of some Alawites from the city."* As a result, he explains, the 'Hom-sis,' a colloquial term for Sunnis living in Homs, who were the traditional inhabitants of the city (in contrast to the Alawites who are relative newcomers from the surrounding countryside), *"regard us Alawites as being all-powerful. My colleagues at the university think that because I'm Alawite I have a lot of connections that can benefit me, but this is not the reality. It may have been true at the time of Hafez al-Assad, but now you only have preferential treatment if you are rich."* He concludes by expressing mixed feelings: *"Ultimately, if Alawites didn't have power, it would be better, because we would live without problems. But we also wouldn't have had the job opportunities we got. And now if Bashar al-Assad is overthrown, our situation will become very dangerous because of the revenge which will be visited upon us."* Professor Nader fears for his life and sees a political solution as the only safe way out of the present crisis. He cautions that *"not all Sunnis support the uprising, but like us Alawites they, too, feel obliged to support their relatives who are fighting."*

Homs: a divided city?

"In the secret service 'centres,' most of the officers are from the coast. We all grew up in Homs and did not think in sectarian terms, we all used to get along. But after they came, they began saying you are Alawite" and he is Sunni". In the current crisis, the mukhabarat are playing the sectarian card, and I have known that since the very beginning. I hate people from the coast,

because they see everything in sectarian terms." This is how Abu Ahmad explains the rise of sectarianism in Homs since the 1980s. A father of six girls and two boys, he is now a grandfather in his sixties. He lives in Karm al-Loz near Nuzha, although he is originally from a village to the west of Homs. In stark contrast to the current view of Homs being a city defined by sectarianism, Abu Ahmad states that until recently he spent his entire life living side-by-side with Sunnis who were the dominant population when he was a young man. Whether at school or in the context of his work as a painter, most of his dealings were with Sunnis - that is, until March 2011. Since then he can no longer find work because the situation⁴ has severed all relations with his Sunni clientele. He still calls his Sunni friends and former work colleagues who were forced out of their neighbourhood or left the city altogether, but senses from the way they now talk to him that relations between the sects have changed. Abu Ahmad regrets this friction between Sunnis and Alawites but understands why relations have become increasingly strained. He stresses that he cannot tell his Alawite neighbours that he is still in touch with his Sunni friends *"because I'm afraid they'll think I'm a traitor."*

Abu Ahmad continues: *"For me, 'Alawite' doesn't mean anything. I'm married to a Christian woman and one of my daughters is married to a Sunni."* He specifies that he has not been initiated into the faith by a sheikh (the traditional process for an observant Alawite), and for this reason does not feel a strong connection to the Alawite community in general. *"They treat me differently because I don't have religious knowledge"* he explains. Regardless of the clear distinctions made within the Alawite community concerning religious initiation, Abu Ahmad recognises that, generally speaking, *"people in Homs regard my family and me as Alawites."* He clarifies that because he does not have close relatives in the army or the secret service, his family is not considered to be *"part of the regime."* However, he acknowledges that in

the current situation *"all Alawites are targets, whether or not they support the regime."* For this reason Abu Ahmad is considering moving to Tartous in the near future. *"Even though I know nobody there,"* he says, *"I need to find a safe place for my family to live. I've spent all my life in Homs and if it were up to me, I would never leave, but nothing is more important than the security of my family."*

Huda, a dentist in her forties, is originally from a village outside Homs where her family still owns land. Huda was raised and currently resides in Zahra. In her view, Homs *"was already geographically divided before March 2011. Not that we had any problems with Sunnis,"* she says, *"but we couldn't live together. Our customs are different."* Huda studied medicine in Aleppo in the 1990s where she felt notably uncomfortable as an Alawite in this predominantly Sunni city. She says that the people there viewed her with suspicion, though she hastens to add that *"still, there was no problem between me and them."* Huda says that it was thanks to *"Hafez al-Assad that I was given the chance to go and study outside Homs,"* but while she acknowledges her personal sense of gratitude to the regime, she feels a greater sense of loyalty to her community. Today, she works as a volunteer in a small field hospital in her neighbourhood, helping to care for injured regime fighters because she feels that it is her duty to do so. *"The casualties are my family, they are the ones defending us, and not the government which isn't doing anything for us"* she says.

Salvation at the coast?

Echoing the experience of others, Huda recalls that in the early days of the crisis, she heard and witnessed armed gunmen entering her neighbourhood firing shots into the air. *"We became really afraid,"* she says, *"and from that point on, I no longer believed that what was happening was really a revolution."* She adds: *"In any case, I cannot trust a revolution whose leader is Sheikh*

Ar'our." Huda expresses fear for her life and for that of her daughter. She is especially fearful of being abducted *"because we are an Alawite family."* She, too, regards outlying villages as a refuge for Alawites fleeing the city and says that she sent her daughter to such a village in the summer of 2011 as it was considered safer than Homs. *"At the end of the day,"* she continues, *"we are a minority, and we are surrounded by Sunnis and Bedouins."* She speculates that if the situation deteriorates, the Alawites from Homs will flee to the coastal area. *"The coast is safer, it's quieter there. People i.e. local Alawites there are stronger than us and they can save us."*

Kamel is a taxi driver in his thirties who grew up in Akrama and currently lives in a relatively new suburb with a culturally mixed population near Wadi al-Dahab. He, too, expresses the hope that *"salvation will come from Qardaha."* He currently regards all Sunnis as *"terrorists,"* though he used to think quite differently. The son of an Alawite father and a Sunni mother, Kamel used to have Sunni friends, many of whom he met through his Sunni brother-in-law. He was once engaged to a young Sunni woman from Hama. Two events caused Kamel to change his opinion on Sunnis. First, he was kidnapped and his family had to pay a large ransom to secure his release. Given that he is half Sunni, he received no assistance from the Alawite community. Second, in mid-2011 his brother, with whom he shared a taxi business, was killed by a sniper in a mainly Sunni area of Homs. Since then, he says: *"I hate Sunnis, and I told my brother-in-law to stop coming into our neighbourhood."*

Traumatized by these violent events, Kamel embraced his Alawite identity and became active within his community. He has in effect forced his brother-in-law out of the neighbourhood by insisting that his sister and her children live in the family home with him and his mother. He has also become religiously observant and adopted an Alawite accent. Kamel harbours strong feelings of

revenge and pledges to “*remain in Homs until there are no more terrorists.*” When driving his taxi, he always carries a Kalashnikov which he requested and obtained from the “*Mukhabarat*. In the past, his feelings towards the military were not particularly positive, but now he would be the first to sign up “*if there were an opportunity to work in the army.*” If forced to leave Homs, Kamel states that he would return to his village of origin although he no longer has any connections there.

Abductions and their impact on the social fabric

Abductions have been a major factor in both further dividing the city of Homs and reinforcing intra-communal ties. The number of abductions began to rise in Homs after mid-2011, with incidents often motivated by revenge though carried out ostensibly for other purposes.

There are three basic types of abduction: those based on sectarian animosity towards another community, those committed as a form of reprisal against another community for an earlier abduction and, finally, those that are kidnaps and therefore motivated by the prospect of a ransom. The outcomes differ: whereas in the case of a sectarian abduction the victim is often killed, in the two other cases the victim is usually freed after the release of a counterpart or the payment of a ransom. The *Shabiha* are often implicated in abductions, and rivalry between *Shabiha* groups tends to increase their incidence. The *Shabiha* from Zahra, for example, have a reputation for kidnapping wealthy or influential individuals and thus for carrying out riskier abductions than the *Shabiha* from Wadi al-Dahab.

Alawites claim that scores, if not hundreds, of people from their community have been abducted since the beginning of 2011. At least one exchange of kidnap victims has been organized by the governor of Homs province with the coopera-

tion of leaders of the Sunni and Alawite communities.

Real estate offices, in addition to having become strategic locations for the *Shabiha* and the *Mukhabarat*, now also serve as centres where ‘missing persons’ are reported and kidnap victims are exchanged. Employees of these regime security institutions invariably receive a financial reward for facilitating such exchanges.

Abductions have both deepened divisions in the city and strengthened bonds within communities. It is now impossible for Alawites to travel to Sunni areas, and vice versa, for fear of being kidnapped. The associated heightened sense of fear has created a previously unknown awareness of being dependent on the arbitrary goodwill of kidnappers operating in the shadow of the regime. For example, if an Alawite from Wadi al-Dahab is abducted, the Sunni kidnappers contact the victim’s family and demand that, to secure their loved one’s release, they must contact an Alawite person or group holding a Sunni victim so that an exchange can be arranged. Such demands are now being made on Alawites in general, irrespective of whether or not they are associated with or significantly dependent on the regime.

Conclusion

The son of a brigadier general (*‘amid*) from a village in the coastal area reported the following. After a battle between the army and the opposition in the adjacent Sunni town of Haffa in the summer of 2012, his father asked one of the town’s prominent - Sunni - dignitaries: “*Why did you harbour terrorists? What more do you people want? You already control the area’s major transportation networks, as well as the largest vegetable wholesale market, and the schools. Isn’t that enough for you?*”

The brigadier general’s words highlight the point

that while coastal Alawites may dominate the area politically, demographically and economically, they also consider themselves as having 'generously' provided all residents with opportunities, irrespective of their sectarian affiliation. One is unlikely to hear such claims in the hinterland, where Alawites still feel strongly that their status is that of a minority.

This vignette provides a small illustration of the way in which Alawite identity is experienced differently and how geography and regionalism are critical to an individual's understanding and experience of his or her 'Alawite-ness.' But despite these very real differences, the first eighteen months of the Syrian crisis have led to a sense of solidarity within the community and revived its sense of selfhood as a minority.

The Alawite community from the hinterland does not perceive itself as having the alleged 'connections in high places' but rather as fearing for nothing less than its survival. This study has described the deep-rooted feelings of insecurity and the precarious socioeconomic conditions that are widespread in the community. These factors contribute to intra-Alawite solidarity and the community's generally supportive stance towards the regime in the current conflict. Financial stability due to safe government jobs combined with the currently violence-prone anti-Alawite climate in Syria reinforces the Alawites' sense of separateness and isolation, especially in the hinterland where Alawites feel that they are far more vulnerable than their counterparts living supposedly at

the 'centre of power' in the coastal region. It must be emphasized that this is the perception but not necessarily the reality. Indeed, Alawites from the coastal region may also feel an existential threat, especially those who are not political supporters of the regime and who therefore cannot count on its protection.

As a result of this sense of inferiority and their perceived distinctness from their coastal counterparts, Alawites living in and around Homs consider that their support for the regime is more a matter of supporting their family and neighbours for whom service in the army, the *"Mukhabarat"* or the paramilitary represents a livelihood than a response to any sense of loyalty to the regime or the president. Moreover, the very notion of an 'Alawite community in Homs,' identified as such by its own members, did not truly exist prior to March 2011. The emergence of this notion is thus a result of or reaction to the current conflict.

The Alawite community of Homs is currently trapped in an impossible quandary regarding its stance regarding the regime. But the outcome of that quandary has been largely pre-empted by the regime's strategy. The actions of the regime's security apparatus, particularly the *Mukhabarat*, have already aggressively militarized the Alawite community in Homs and thus implicated it in the conflict. Alawites with family members in the army, the secret service and especially the *Shabiha* now have only limited options, and the regime has exploited their precarious position to gain the support of the community as a whole.

3. A “Government City” amid Raging Conflict (Tartous 2013)

Kheder Khaddour⁽¹⁹⁾

In both the Syrian and the international media, Tartous is customarily presented as an island of calm in the ongoing Syrian crisis. The typical response of a resident of Tartous to a non-resident enquiring about the local situation is *Hon ma fi shi*,” which translates from the Arabic as *There’s nothing going on here.*” Syria’s official media are particularly keen to emphasize that the inhabitants of Tartous are safe, free, and living a problem-free existence.⁽²⁰⁾ Tartous has always been a relatively quiet city, lacking the commercial and cultural vibrancy found in Damascus, Aleppo and even Latakia. Its market areas, including the Mshabki Souk, have always closed early in the evening.

In addition to being portrayed as a safe haven, the city is officially being portrayed as the dynamic hub of the country. Syrian businesspeople continue to invest in Tartous, and some private sector companies have relocated there.

Tartous has become a city of refuge, with many newcomers and displaced persons settling there and in its environs, at least temporarily, in order to escape the conflict in their home regions. The inconsistency between the old and new image of Tartous raises a number of important questions: How and how much has the city evolved during

the current crisis? Why is projecting an image of a calm and unified city important for the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and how should this be interpreted? What is particular about the outlook and attitude of the residents of Tartous?

The city, inhabited mainly by Alawites, is known to support the Assad regime, and its allegiance is evident from the ubiquitous graphic material on display. This is of interest because Tartous has an ambiguous relationship with power and relatively few direct personal connections with the regime. Many more powerful figures in the regime come from Latakia than from Tartous. That said, demonstrations in support of the regime involving local civilian leaders and representatives of the governorate and the ruling Ba’th Party are still being held regularly in Tartous - in contrast to embattled cities such as Homs and Damascus where pro-regime demonstrations have become almost extinct.

International media coverage, to the extent that it has existed, has tended to present Tartous as an integral part of an ‘Alawite-stan’ in the making or as a coastal province to which the regime and its Alawite supporters could retreat as a last resort.⁽²¹⁾ Alawites do indeed constitute the majority of the population in the coastal region, despite their being a small minority in the country as a whole. Yet the fact that Alawites are generally tolerant of both large numbers of Sunni businesses and incoming displaced persons, together with the regional differences that exist among local Alawites themselves, suggests that the international media have falsely conjured an ‘Alawite-stan’, and that the term itself distorts more than it reveals. It is not so much ‘Alawiteness’ that is celebrated and prominent in Tartous but the population’s continued belief in the Syrian regime, along with its institutions and its ideology of ‘Syria of al-Assad’ (*Suria al-Assad*) constructed over more than forty years. Granted, this support

(19) This article was first published as: Kheder Khaddour, “Tartous in the Present Crisis: A Mirror of the Syrian Regime”, *Jadaliyya*, 12 April 2014 http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/17305/tartus-in-the-present-crisis_a-mirror-of-the-syria

(20) See, for example, this Sama television report from 24 August 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbbvKsXfbIM>.

(21) See “In Ravaged Syria, Beach Town May Be Loyalists Last Resort,” *New York Times*, 22 December 2012

is seen by many Alawites as a concomitant and implicit condition guaranteeing their survival. Tartous is thus the model Syrian 'government town,' comparable with a university-dominated 'college town' or the 'company towns' of the mid-twentieth-century American steel and car industries. It was conceived and built by the regime prior to the current conflict as a microcosm of the state itself.⁽²²⁾ The city feels like a Syrian city from an earlier time, but even this anachronistic place cannot entirely divorce itself from what is happening elsewhere in the country.

Tartous has not experienced any fighting or attacks during the current conflict. Behind its image of a quiet, pro-regime city, however, lies a more complicated situation with social and spatial disconnects. Unwritten rules are common, as is suspicion, mainly of displaced people and other newcomers. Relations between the latter groups and the city's long-established inhabitants (so-called Tartousis) are primarily a matter of having found a *modus vivendi*, punctuated by genuine moments of sharing. Rather than being a novelty, however, this *mélange* of interests echoes the way the Syrian state and society have functioned for many years. Nevertheless, numerous changes have taken place in contemporary Tartous, and paramount among them is an increased affirmation of religion for purposes of group cohesion.

This study is based on interviews conducted during periodic trips to Tartous between early 2011 and the end of 2012. Given the sensitive nature of the research, names of interviewees have been changed.

A government town

Tartous, a city located on the Mediterranean coast just to the north of Lebanon, has been

receiving a significant number of displaced people since the end of 2011. Initially, these came from nearby Homs and its hinterland, where heavy fighting erupted in mid-2011. More recently, displaced persons have been arriving from elsewhere too, for instance, Aleppo. The new arrivals include middle-class citizens, who can afford to rent an apartment, and the less well off, who are housed in government buildings and facilities such as schools.⁽²³⁾

Tartous, with its coastal location and its port, is both a commercial centre and a resort town. It consists of an urban core, a number of suburbs, including Sheikh Saaed and Dwier Sheikh Sahed, and several areas dotted with beach houses (*chaleat*). Many of the middle-class newcomers have settled along the coast. Tartous has a number of towns in its hinterland, such as Safita, located in the mountains to the east, but residents of these towns, although living within the same governorate, generally do not consider themselves as being Tartousis.

In almost publicity style, Syrian official media have been depicting Tartous as a glamorous city untroubled by the current turmoil. For example, the government television channel ran a report featuring yoga classes being held on a paradise-like beach.⁽²⁴⁾ In stark contrast, the state media also interview people complaining about the scarcity of jobs since the onset of the crisis or airing their views on the current situation. The subjects discussed, however, always relate to issues of day-to-day living, not deeper, political matters.⁽²⁵⁾

(22) It could probably be argued that the city of Sweida, in the south, is also representative of a government town. See "A Static Revolution: The Druze Community", p. 39-70.

(23) According to a state-controlled newspaper, some 42,560 displaced families, a total of 255,360 people, were living in Tartous in February 2013. See *Tishreen*, 18 February 2013.

(24) See this report on the governmental television channel, posted 30 April 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vawKBk0wm4>.

(25) See this news report on government television showing residents of Tartous complaining about abductions and problems with services and jobs, posted on 28 January 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I50if2gQ5IY>.

Tartous has thus become an important symbol in the regime's communications strategy to show what the 'Syria of Bashar al-Assad' could be like if there had been no uprising. Indeed, the regime may be using its particular image of Tartous to demonstrate that the political system is working well, implying that there is no need for reform anywhere.

The image presented by the international media is strikingly different, suggesting that Tartous has been chosen by the government to provide a safe haven for Alawites, to become an Alawite town. On the surface, this interpretation appears plausible. Tartous is the place where Alawites are most powerful and to which, it is often imagined, the regime could, in the worst case, retreat. Yet one would expect an Alawite town to be ruled by Alawites, making political decisions for the collective good of their community. This is been the case in Homs since the violence escalated there - all important public institutions are controlled by Alawites and were relocated into Alawite neighbourhoods after the city centre was destroyed. In Tartous, by contrast, government institutions are still in city-centre locations and the public discourse continues to focus on loyalty to the regime as the representative of the nation, with no reference being made to sectarian affiliation. The narrative repeatedly recited by the governor of Tartous, Nizar Mousa, has precisely this governmental quality. He frequently visits wounded soldiers in the hospital and attends seminars at cultural centres, praising sacrifices made for the good of the nation. These public appearances bear a strong similarity to the publicity events staged by governors throughout the country before 2011. The governor of Homs, however, makes no such appearances today, for security reasons and also because the government no longer provides the services that would legitimize his speaking for all Homsis.

Tartous is sacrificing itself for the country: youth in the army and the city of refuge

Though Tartous has not experienced an acute security crisis, the city is not entirely beyond the reach of the ongoing conflict. Gas shortages and electricity blackouts of more than eight hours are commonplace, and the city is surrounded by military checkpoints. Many young reservists from the city have been summoned for active service in the army. Many inhabitants of Tartous are proud that their sons signed up for military service, unlike in other regions where, they claim, young people have tried to avoid it. The widespread feeling among Tartousis is that they are sacrificing their young people for the homeland, not just for their city or an imagined, potential Alawite state. Moreover, they consider that their young men are the ones who are saving the country, unlike young men elsewhere in the country, whom they view as cowards.

This is what Hani, a government employee, thinks. The majority of the population of Tartous are dependent on the regime for their economic survival, whether as public servants or as employees of the army or security apparatus.⁽²⁶⁾ Almost thirty years old, Hani works for the ministry of education and, like most government employees, he has a second job in the private sector, in his case as a taxi driver. He shares his taxi with another man who drives it during the day while Hani works in the office.

Hani explained that as many young men from Tartous have been called up for active service in the army: *"Nowadays in Tartous, most of the young men on the street are from Homs or Aleppo, not from Tartous."* Hani is an Alawite and feels a sense of superiority vis-à-vis Alawites from the interior (especially Homs and Hama), where they

(26) Observations and interviews conducted with inhabitants of Tartous in 2013.

are minority communities. Referring to events in Homs in early 2012, Hani declared to one of his fares, an Alawite from Homs who had for now resettled in Tartous: *"All the current problems in the country are because of you. From the beginning, you were not able to stop the terrorists. If you had acted right from the first day, everything would be finished by now."* Comparing Homs and Tartous, he continued: *"If this had happened in Tartous, in one day everything would have been finished, because we are more patriotic here."* He concluded by asserting: *"Tartous is paying the price for this now. We are opening our houses to newcomers; we are sending our sons to join the army."*

Although allegiance to the regime is visible on the surface in Tartous, many Tartousis do not fully identify with Alawites from Latakia, whom they see as rivals, or Alawites from the interior, whom they consider to be cowards. Tartousis also feel that they are under pressure to make sacrifices in order to host Syrians displaced by the fighting. Like Hani's client, many of the newcomers did indeed arrive from Homs after the security situation there began to deteriorate at the end of 2011. But because of its seaside location, Tartous has always attracted visitors from Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus who would rent or buy chalets on the seafront for the summer. Moreover, many labourers came to the city seeking construction jobs as the majority of the local inhabitants are white-collar employees rather than blue-collar labourers. Recently, it has been the Homsis chalet-owners, Alawites as well as Sunnis, who have decided to settle in Tartous on a more permanent basis, or at least until the situation in other parts of the country improves. They are now being followed by residents from Aleppo, who are predominantly Sunnis. The newcomers are thus of mixed backgrounds and origins.

Chalet rental has become a lucrative business for Tartousis. According to one employee of a real estate firm, average rents rose by 30 percent

between mid-2011 and the beginning of 2013. Where business is at stake, social, regional and sectarian distinctions are fading. Or, more precisely, they are becoming cards to be played by astute Tartousi businessmen. Fouad, for example, an Alawite from Homs in his early thirties, explained that when he decided to settle in Tartous at the end of 2011, he rented a basic chalet for 3,000 Syrian pounds (US\$ 40) a month from a Tartousi owner. The owner assured him, as an enticement, that he was making him a special offer because he is a fellow Alawite. The owner even assured him: *"I never rent to Sunnis."* Fouad said that a month later, the owner changed his tune and rented a chalet to a Sunni family, telling Fouad: *"As Syrians, we need to help each other, because we are all Syrians."*

Maintaining the atmosphere of the city

Tartous has been tangibly affected by the crisis in Syria, not least by sending its sons to fight and hosting many migrants, but major effort is still being invested by various stakeholders to depict the city as a safe haven and ensure that its reputation is maintained. Anyone of any background who can afford to live in the chalet area is welcome there, because the chalets are private spaces. But in public spaces local residents and the government alike strive to ensure that newcomers do not change the city's atmosphere and that local customs and traditions remain unchanged. This environment perpetuates divisions between the various segments of the population while overlaying them with a public discourse which suggests that everyone is welcome and recalls the way the state and society functioned for many years prior to the uprising.

Umm Ramya, originally from Homs, has long owned a high-class chalet in Tartous where she used to stay every summer. She moved there permanently in late 2011. She explains that soon after her arrival, Tartousi chalet owners and the security services began attempting to scare new-

comers. She claims: *"They made us understand that we may own the chalet, but not the area."* She added: *"They used to scare us.... Every day they would come with words of Bashar, Hafez al-Assad or [Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on loudspeakers]"* Umm Ramya wonders why the authorities feel the need for this *"charade"* (*maskhara*), explaining: *"We knew very well from the beginning where we are,"* by which she meant that everyone who comes to Tartous knows that it is a pro-regime city which does not want any disturbances.

Most new arrivals in Tartous are well aware of the city's pro-regime stance but come nevertheless in search of refuge. The authorities' actions can therefore be interpreted as aiming not only to discourage dissent but also to maintain the atmosphere of the city despite the influx of newcomers. Indeed, the chalet population is under close surveillance, as practically anyone who goes to live there, whether as an owner or a tenant, must show his or her national identification card to the secret services. In the centre where they present their identity information, they are bombarded with nationalist songs, speeches, flags of Syria, and posters of the president to remind them of where they are.

The seafront promenade in Tartous also reflects this phenomenon. It is a place where people of diverse backgrounds gather, but their communication is codified. Modern, popular, and patriotic songs can be heard blaring from cars and street cafés. In business establishments, only government news channels and the pro-regime al-Mayadeen and al-Manar are seen on television screens. There is no sign of *al-Arabiya* or *al-Jazeera* here. Images of the president and his brother Maher are ubiquitous. Of course, most people seem not to notice such things any longer as they have long since become part of the scenery.

Murad, a Sunni originally from Tartous, owns a

café on the seafront promenade. He stated: *"People who are coming to Tartous should live as Tartousi people are living."* In other words, they can bring their property with them, but not their opinions. In his mind, the newcomers are like tourists. He explained that his family is conservative, or more accurately, neither radical nor openly liberal. He supports the army and secret services in the interest of maintaining public safety, as he considers that *"people have brought their problems with them."* He added: *"If I see any group disturbing the city, I will help the security services."* He was proud to point out that in Tartous one can still see a fair number of expensive motorcycles and cars. He said that these have almost all disappeared in most other places in the country as people are afraid to flaunt their affluence for fear of being kidnapped.

Large numbers of people stroll along the promenade, giving the appearance of easy mingling. A closer look, however, shows that people tend to stay in specific groups. Some people bring tables and chairs out onto the sidewalk, smoke water pipes (*arguileh*) and drink yerba maté, all the while listening to music blaring from their car stereo systems. Most of these people are natives of Tartous, and it is rare to see people from elsewhere behaving in this manner. A feeling that these people own the city and therefore are entitled to set the tone is pervasive. Pro-regime demonstrations are often held on the promenade, some small and improvised, others larger and organized.

Moving customs and traditions to the coast?

Hakim, a man in his early thirties originally from nearby Qala'at al-Hosn, has completely absorbed the Syrian authorities' message. He moved to a chalet in Tartous in early 2012 because of the turmoil in his home town. Hakim explains: *"We want to continue our lives. We left our area as it*

was too dangerous to stay there." He said that people are pleasant to him, and he has no problems with anyone, but he is careful. He knows that talking about politics or religion could create problems, so he avoids doing so. Hakim further explains that, for the same reason, he does not seek social relationships with people from elsewhere. Not wanting to have to make up false stories, he chooses to avoid initiating contact.

Hakim's experience is an example which shows that the arrival of Syrians from elsewhere, rather than stimulating the mixing of people and new encounters, has in fact resulted in disconnects among people in Tartous. It has also encouraged newcomers to recreate in Tartous networks that formerly existed in their places of origin. Indeed, Hakim chose to live in a chalet because one of his cousins was already living in that area. Furthermore, once settled in Tartous, he met and subsequently married a woman who came from his home town and had also moved to a chalet. It would not be an overstatement to say that many people simply moved their town or village, along with its customs and traditions, to the chalet area. As Hakim's case also interestingly illustrates, migrants settling in Tartous do not necessarily cut themselves off from the rest of Syria. Hakim commutes almost every day to Homs to keep his job in a government-run real-estate bank. Many communities separated before the uprising by physical space and limited social interaction are now concentrated in the space of Tartous and its environs, yet they continue to reproduce their pre-existing social divisions.

A miniature Syria outside its time?

The owner of a chain of cafés who recently opened a branch in Tartous noted that, in terms of economic opportunities and development, Tartous today, with its construction sites for luxury hotels, restaurants, and shopping malls, is reminiscent of many Syrian cities in the early 2000s. The same could be said of the city's atmosphere

and the way the city is governed. In this respect, Tartous resembles a miniature version of the Syria of Assad prior to the conflict. The analogy is not, however, perfect because Tartous is not the city from which power flows. Furthermore, since the explosion in Damascus that killed Asef Shawkat, President Assad's brother-in-law, in the summer of 2012, Tartous has had few top officials in the government. The role of Tartous in this context therefore merits closer scrutiny. Why is it that we are currently witnessing a reproduction of the regime, or the Syria of al-Assad, in Tartous? Why are Tartousis agreeing to play this game?

One answer, without a doubt, is that so many Tartousis are employed by the government, mainly its civilian institutions, and are therefore dependent on the state for their livelihoods. Most people working in other sectors, for example, those in the construction industry who 'built' Tartous, originally came from elsewhere, such as Homs or Hama. This reinforces Tartousis' sense of dependence on the state. Another reason is that the ideology and practices promoted from the 1970s on by the late president, Hafez al-Assad, appear to still hold sway in the city and the Ba'th Party's concepts of 'resistance' remain effective in many ways, continuing to inspire popular mobilization in general and public demonstrations in particular. For example, demonstrations were organized by the syndicate of workers, an association linked to the Ba'th Party, to mourn the victims of a massacre in Adra, near Damascus, in mid-December 2013. Although many of the dead were Alawites, the demonstration's official slogan proclaimed support for the 'workers' who had been killed. Other demonstrations have been organized to thank Russia and China for their unwavering support during the crisis with slogans like 'We are here to support you Syria.' The form and substance of these demonstrations - gatherings organized by party apparatuses to demonstrate solidarity with a given nation or social group - are reminiscent of

the stilted expressions of what is supposedly the popular will seen throughout Ba'th rule. The themes of the demonstrations furthermore expose the political relationships that underlie them: recent demonstrations have gone beyond thanking foreign governments for supporting the Syrian regime to include expressing solidarity with the Turkish people struggling against their own regime, a stance repeatedly adopted by the Syrian government.⁽²⁷⁾ Significantly, large-scale demonstrations of this nature, which bring masses of celebrating Syrians into major city squares, are not taking place anywhere else in Syria (except Sweida) at the present time.

A pre-crisis or post-crisis city?

The image projected of Tartous and its distinctive atmosphere suggests not only that the city is untouched by the crisis but also that it is a pre-crisis or possibly post-crisis model. As already noted, the current situation in Tartous has attracted numerous Syrian businesses to relocate or open establishments there. Tartous is presented as the place where well-off people go to settle and invest. This is true only to a certain extent, as most of the wealthiest who decided to flee their homes in fact headed for neighbouring countries or beyond. Nevertheless, some entrepreneurs did choose Tartous in preference to other 'safe' areas of the country, such as Sweida. Most investments by newcomers, however, are rather limited and aim primarily to provide goods and services for the local market. Businesses exporting to foreign markets are rare, their owners usually preferring to relocate abroad.

Muhannad is one example of a newcomer businessman. He arrived in Tartous from Homs, with an associate, and opened a dry-cleaning busi-

ness at the end of 2011. Their reasoning at the time was that the crisis would end soon and they could exploit the opportunities that Tartous offered in the interim. Numerous other small businesses reasoned likewise. Muhannad and his partner invested about US\$ 100,000 in their business and secured contracts with hotels and cafés. However, their financial hopes never materialized, and the partner, a dual-national who could easily travel, sold his share in the business and left after less than a year. We understand from Mazen's experience that, however hard the government may try to make Tartous a vibrant pro-regime city, Tartous has not and cannot become an economic hub divorced entirely from its surroundings.

In addition to debunking the myth of Tartousi economic dynamism, a closer look at Muhannad's dry-cleaning business unmasks the sometimes difficult relationships that the ongoing crisis creates among individuals. Both owners of the dry-cleaning business were Alawites who moved from Homs. The employees they hired were from various backgrounds. Muhannad said that because of the war, he has become paranoid. He hired a Sunni who sometimes works late at night, and when they are together Mazen often fears for his life, thinking his employee might kill him simply because he is an Alawite. At the same time, however, he says the employee is a "*nice guy*" and a really good worker. Their professional relationship works well, so Muhannad has no reason to fire him.

Muhannad stated that he is mainly uncomfortable because the employee, who comes from Idlib, never talks about politics or religion. Reflecting on the situation, Muhannad said that he can understand that his employee is unwilling to talk about such sensitive issues at the workplace. What worries Muhannad even more, however, is that the employee always employs the rhetoric of the regime, for example referring to the rebels as

(27) The government television channel shows one such demonstration supporting the Turkish people in Tartous, posted on 26 June 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avbzTk-sYAGA&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

“terrorists.” Muhannad fears that the employee may be playing a *“double game,”* though he also acknowledges that his feelings are only suspicions. Muhannad’s account demonstrates how the dynamic of silence and suspicion reinforces divisions that pre-date the uprising and that the recent stronger emphasis on national unity exacerbates them further.

Tartous is forcing its newcomers, employees as well as businesses, to adapt to the atmosphere of the city. At the beginning of 2012, the owners of a coffee chain in Damascus decided to open a franchise in Tartous. Their cafés in Damascus embody a new concept that was launched in the late 2000s: cafés designed to resemble a private library or office appealing to an intellectual and artistic clientele. The aesthetic of these cafés is a combination of consumption and leisure, with patrons being encouraged to read books freely available from the shelves, play a piano featured in the main room and stay as long as they want. Patrons are also encouraged to order their coffee at the counter, rather than being offered table service. The owners of the chain opted to open their Tartous branch in Porto Tartous, a partially finished, gigantic development project on the seafront with hotels, apartments, and retail shopping areas. They explained that they had chosen this complex because, unlike Damascus and Latakia, Tartous has no vibrant city-centre streets featuring a concentration of high-end establishments. The location’s safety, and the fact that the owners had the connections needed to open a franchise there, further attracted them to it. The café owner said that in summer 2012, his café and others were full, but that in the winter business was less good because people were less inclined to go out. More interesting, however, is that the Tartous branch has had to adjust to the city. When the owners initially opened the café, they tried to reproduce the concept and ambience of their Damascus branches. Yet their business failed to take off until they finally

adapted the café to what the city wanted: they removed the library and the sofas, added more chairs and reverted to table service. One owner explained these changes, stating: *“What the market demands, we’ll supply (hasab al-souq, mnsouq).”* The clearest example of this sensibility is the owners’ decision to supply water pipes (*arguile*), something that would have been unimaginable and completely at odds with the image cultivated for their cafés in Damascus. We learn from this example that Tartous has an effect on all businesses that come to it, infusing them with its culture and its specific patterns of social relations that are characteristic of pre-crisis Syria outside Damascus. Significantly, the characteristics of a café aspiring to be a cultural centre - its library, its intellectual and artistic ambience and its self-service concept - had to be excised, suggesting that Tartous cannot become a genuinely central place in its own right.

An ambivalent stance

One uncertainty hanging over Tartous as a model post-crisis city is the fact that it is not a regional power centre. Latakia, located slightly further north, holds this distinction. It seems, however, that the regime is confident in the loyalty and stance of Tartous’ residents, more so than it is in the case of the Alawite community of Homs, to which it grants less power and fewer resources.⁽²⁸⁾ Nevertheless the Tartousi’s view of their identity and their relationship with the regime is both complex and ambivalent. Take, for example, Daareen, a young mother in her early thirties. Born in Tartous, Daareen grew up in Damascus as the daughter of a now-retired general in the secret service. She lived in Damascus for some twenty-five years, spending the summers in Tartous with her family. She then moved to Aleppo with her husband, a general in the army who was recently killed in the conflict. Shortly after the

(28) See “The Alawite Dilemma”, p. 11-26.

onset of the crisis, Daareen, her husband and their children settled in Tartous.

Daareen recalls that until she was twelve, she ignored the fact that in Damascus she was an Alawite living within a Sunni community, even though her father used to remind her to *“be careful of the neighbours.”* For her identity card, Daareen’s father registered her place of origin (*qeyd*, an administrative entry on every Syrian identity card) not as Tartous but as Damascus. She recalls him telling her: *“One day you will thank me for doing this.”* Being registered in Damascus would make it harder to deduce her sectarian affiliation from her official identity card.

Her father made this false statement in the 1980s when the regime was clashing with the Muslim Brotherhood and people were being killed simply for who they were. This example of a secret service general concealing his family’s true place of origin for their own security highlights the ambivalent identity of the Tartousis. Although employed in the security apparatus, the general clearly did not wholeheartedly feel part of the country’s ruling establishment and still feared that his family could be threatened because of their origins. It would be more difficult to find someone from Latakia displaying such an ambivalent stance through deception. Daareen said that she feels more at ease in Tartous than she did in Damascus.

The complexity of the Tartousi identity makes it difficult for newcomers to feel part of the city. Malaz, a schoolteacher in his forties who originally came from Hama but has lived in Tartous for more than ten years, noted that, although he eventually found a job and got married in Tartous, he has been unable to settle properly in the city. He says: *“People there are strange.”* He mentioned that after numerous vetoes at the UN Security Council by Russia and China to prevent measures being taken against the Assad regime, Tartousis started naming their newborn sons ‘Putin.’ He concluded: *“You can only see this in Tartous. Nowhere else.”*

Persistent disconnects and divisions

Concealed beneath the image of a united government city that is welcoming to all, the disconnects and divisions referred to above are an important dynamic in Tartous. As was the case prior to 2011, the government’s extensive surveillance continues to have the effect of concealing latent divisions within society. Glimpses of this are evident in the suspicions one constantly encounters when on the move in the city. Hani, the taxi driver who thinks Tartousis are sacrificing themselves for the country, illustrates how suspicion reveals division. His experience also shows how sectarian and regional lines are sometimes ambiguous and blurred. Hani explained that whenever he picks up a client, he first wants to find out their sectarian affiliation, especially if the client wants to be driven out of town. Inside the city, he caters to everyone, but he fears being abducted if he leaves the city. To discern a person’s sectarian identity, Hani pays close attention to accents. Usually he can tell whether a person is, like himself, an Alawite from the coast, as these have a distinctive accent. However, if the passenger is from the interior region, Hani usually finds it harder to discern his or her sectarian affiliation as everyone from there tends to speak with roughly the same accent. Dividing lines are thus blurred.

The disconnects and divisions discernible in Tartous affect people’s daily lives. Fadi, a young Alawite from Homs, recalled how he and his wife were about to step into a taxi when another driver noticed that his wife was not wearing a headscarf and was therefore not likely to be a Sunni. The driver came over to warn them not to take that particular taxi because the driver was from Idlib, and that could mean danger. The couple took the taxi despite this warning. The driver from Idlib explained to them that, although the governor had permitted taxis from all over Syria to operate in Tartous, he was experiencing difficulty getting clients because of incidents such as that which had just occurred. Competition among drivers of

the many taxis in Tartous is fierce, and the 'sectarian card' is often played to attract business and harm the competition.

In Tartous, sectarian identity may be something worth flaunting or, depending on the situation, something best concealed. Another taxi driver, from Aleppo, said that he eventually decided to work primarily on call instead of picking up clients on the street as many potential fares who spot his Aleppo licence plate prefer not to ride with him. His main customers, it emerged, are chalet residents, who like him, came from Aleppo.

As was the case prior to 2011, Syria's pronounced diversity extends beyond sectarian affiliation to also include regionalism. Before 2011, men on military service would often associate with others from the same region. This phenomenon continues through and despite the ongoing internal displacement of Syrians. Moreover, rivalry exists between Alawites from the coast and Alawites from the interior. Fadi, the young Alawite from Homs, said that Alawites from Tartous insist that they extend a special welcome to Alawites from the interior. However, he believes otherwise. *"This is not true. They only say or make you feel this when there are economic interests at stake,"* he claimed.

Fouad, another young man from Homs, thinks likewise. A graphic designer who settled in a chalet after leaving Homs with his wife and daughter for fear of abduction, Fouad was unable to find work in his field in Tartous and now works as a clerk in a store selling girls' accessories. He explained: *"It's the best thing, working now in Tartous,"* but then confided that he does not like the city. In the past, he visited Tartous regularly to enjoy the beach, but even then he never really liked the city. He conceded that it is good place to be now because it is safe, but he mainly associates with people from Homs, mostly Alawites but also some Sunnis. Concerning making contact with people from Tartous, he stated: *"We*

came here for a short time, so I don't have the energy to make new friends. I don't know for how long I will be here."

These portrayals of Tartous and the atmosphere they reveal depict anything but an Alawite-*stan* on the coast. The atmosphere is less an affirmation of the Alawite-ness of the city than an all-pervading sense of order and control under the regime, its institutions and its ideology. Tartousis see their power as stemming not from their region's potential viability as an independent state but from their celebration of and respect for the regime and the country's institutions - an unwritten rule with which everyone coming to the city must comply. The people of Tartous are not insular. They follow the news of events in the rest of the country where their young men are fighting. They do not instinctively focus their attention exclusively on their own city, as people from the embattled cities of Homs and Damascus might. Their interest is thus not in creating a 'country' on the coast but in defending the regime, state institutions and the nation in its full territorial extent. Their reasoning here, as already noted, is that they still consider the integrity of the Syrian state as a guarantee of their own survival. The state's integrity, however, is built on maintaining the aforementioned disconnects and divisions to instil in the population a sense of reassurance and domination.

These divisions and the maintenance of a particular Tartousi atmosphere are not affirmations of the Alawite-ness of the country. For example, after the assassination in spring 2013 of Sheikh Mohamed Saed Ramadan al-Buti, the most prominent Sunni religious figure in Syria, numerous Tartousis gathered in front of government buildings to honour his memory and reaffirm their abhorrence of terrorism.

Tartousis enthusiastically defend a secular political system and a society ostensibly inclusive of all its different components. Yet it is built on continuous disconnects. What lies beneath the

'all are welcome in Tartous' rhetoric is a perception - among 'minority' communities and the Sunni population alike - that each individual encountered from across an ethnic divide is guilty until proven innocent of posing a threat to the image thereby invoked. This perception stems from the enduring legacy of the conflict between the regime and the radical wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s and suggests that Alawites are somehow connected with the security services (*mukhabarat*) and Sunnis with the Muslim Brotherhood. Not that Syrians in their day-to-day interactions view each other primarily from a sectarian perspective. Rather, there is a pervasive concern that one will be treated by others on the basis of that perspective. This fear can be allayed only through long periods of interaction between individuals, and such protracted contact has been made impossible by the fluctuating and ever-changing population in contemporary Tartous. The fear that Mazen, the Tartousi dry cleaner, feels in the presence of his Sunni employee who echoes the terminology of the regime is a prime example of this phenomenon. The employee has given no indication that he supports the Brotherhood or the opposition, and he is probably using language unnatural to him specifically to allay Mazen's fears. By behaving thus, however, he arouses further suspicion. The ideology and modes of social interaction prevailing in the government town of Tartous have arisen from strategies deployed by people on both sides of this divide to avoid what they fear most: the affirmation and dominance of a more extremist Sunni identity in Syria.

New phenomena in the current crisis

Though the divisions in Syria today are largely a continuation of the pre-crisis social situation, Tartous is not simply a replica of the pre-2011 state. A number of phenomena are perceptible which have been occasioned by the crisis. In particular, religion seems to have become a greater factor in

group cohesion, and the makings of new inter-communal relations are evident. The latter in particular is evident in the attitude of Abu Ali, an Alawite sheikh who lives in a village near Tartous. Abu Ali explained that he thinks the war will last for some time to come, but he is ready to help anyone who needs it, for free. He regularly visits the homes of 'martyrs' (*shuhada*), people who have been killed in the conflict.

Before the crisis, Syrians would consult a sheikh for advice about everyday concerns, but now most seek information about lost or missing relatives and loved ones. Abu Ali's house is a place where the Alawite sect is brought together and intra-communal tensions, such as those based on regional provenance, recede. Alawites from all over the country visit him to seek his counsel. The sheikh opens the Qu'ran and the *Hakme* (an Alawite scripture) and asks God to help those who have come to seek aid. More important than the answers provided are the sense of communion and comfort that the distressed derive from such moments.

On one occasion which informed this study, people from various regions of the country were seated around the sheikh. One was Dalal, a resident of Tartous whose husband was abducted while serving in the army in Aleppo. In the tranquil and incense-infused environment of the sheikh's home, Abu Ali told her that her husband *"is still alive, currently looking sad, but he will one day come back, but only God knows when."* Afterwards, Dalal said that the sheikh's words had been comforting and that she had regained hope. Most importantly, she explained, she had encountered someone in the room from Damascus. They had exchanged their stories and fears, which made her feel closer to that person. The homes of sheikhs have thus been transformed from dispensaries of advice into social places where links of solidarity are formed and regional rivalries are attenuated. Thus, although the crisis-driven migration to Tartous has largely replicated pre-exist-

ing divisions, it has also created a new environment in which religion is increasingly becoming a factor in group cohesion.

Conclusion

The current trend in the international media is to present the situation in Tartous and the coast in general as part of an attempt by the regime to build an 'Alawite-stan,' a country for Alawites which the regime and Syria's Alawites in general could use as a homeland of last resort. In reality, however, it is not so much 'Alawite-ness' that is being celebrated and promoted in Tartous as an unfailing belief in the regime, its institutions, and the Syria of al-Assad which has been built up over decades. The Tartousis' support of the regime is at the same time a condition which Alawites view as necessary for their survival, but it is not reducible only to this. Unlike many embattled cities from which people are trying but barely managing to escape, Tartous is continuing to stage demonstrations to celebrate and express its support for the regime. It is thus the notion of a 'government town' that best describes the identity of Tartous in the context of the current crisis.

Tartous is a city where the rule of law still applies and where government officials, Ba'th Party leaders and local civilian leaders from different backgrounds still hold public meetings. It is a city where government buildings are used to house displaced people of various origins and from various regions, and where people still take to the streets to rejoice for Syria when, for example, the national football team has won a match. Such phenomena are most unlikely to be encountered

in any other Syrian city today. Having undergone a few adaptations, the pre-crisis logic of the regime's rule continues to function in Tartous today, and the city serves the regime well as a portrayal of what Syria under President Assad could be without the crisis.

Tartous is thus a welcome exhibit for the regime, allowing it to bolster its case that political reforms are unnecessary: if Tartous is 'doing well', the whole country could do equally well if only the fighting were to cease. But, as Syria has experienced before, the veneer of unity conceals a more complex reality of social and spatial distinctness. The 'government town' notion as evidenced in Tartous reflects the regime's vision of both ideal governance in Syria and the ideal society for Syria, as well as its own somewhat obscure *modus operandi*.

This study on Tartous is intended to shed light on the general functioning of the Syrian regime and how it is still at work in that city. It also aims to help explain how regime officials view 'the state' in Syria. One of its conclusions is that no 'Alawite-stan' is on the horizon for Tartous. Yet it could be argued that Tartous, a city shielded from much of the current turmoil, offered the regime a golden opportunity to implement reforms that were convincing and compelling in their impact. The regime chose instead to continue to portray state and society as unchanged and unchanging, implicitly asserting that all is well. The fact that this option was chosen begs the question whether the regime and its structures are, in fact, immune to reform.

4. A Static Revolution: The Druze Community (Sweida 2013)

Mazen Ezzi⁽²⁹⁾

Sweida province is located in the south of the Syrian Arab Republic, about 180 km south of the capital Damascus. Volcanic mountains give it a unique topography, surrounded as it is by plains and deserts. The people of Sweida like to describe their home as an oasis, and this hints at a sense of cultural distinctness from their neighbours. The population of Sweida - about 380,000 - is almost exclusively Druze but the province also has small Christian and Sunni minorities. Most of Sweida's Sunnis are Bedouins. The Druze have traditionally associated their religion with Islam, but it is in fact distinct from Islam. It dates back to an 11th century minority breakaway group with its own specific explanation of the Quran as a means of survival and self-protection.

Throughout their long history the Druze have managed to conceal their beliefs and tried to avert an inner-Islamic conflict. They have been more inclined to oppose foreign occupation than become involved in local conflicts, and have acquired their status in this complex region by virtue of their role in traditionally protecting Arab territory.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 the Druze have been subject to sniper attack, and each small group within this closed community, both religious and secular, has developed a specific response to this dilemma based on its own economic and intellectual criteria.

This study sought to track the various responses

to the incidents taking place within Sweida province, to document the events, and to record the various viewpoints on them. The author listened to as many ordinary people as possible describing their attitude to local events. Most of the views quoted here were not acquired through formal interviews; some of them were not recorded, merely taken as notes. The author also followed video records on YouTube and several political pages on Facebook. The method used for the study was to track the events chronologically from March 2011 to the middle of 2013 and shed some light on their historical, economic and cultural background.

With the eruption of the Syrian uprising on 15 March 2011, Sweida society witnessed a split between regime loyalists and opposition enthusiasts. The division appeared first as a spontaneous and emotional one but gradually acquired a more political nature, evolving into what became a complete societal schism. The largest bloc today comprises those who are undecided and is flanked on either side by smaller groups of staunch loyalists and determined revolutionaries respectively. Neither of these smaller groups has succeeded in gaining the upper hand.

Unlike elsewhere in Syria, the violence in Sweida was ignited by regime loyalists who, in the first few days of the revolution, staged a blatant show of force there. Members of the Ba'th party from throughout the province were bussed into the town of Sweida to demonstrate in favour of the regime. The local police withdrew from the city and traffic lights were switched off. The city centre closed down completely. Hundreds of men riding unlicensed motorcycles roared through the city for days performing absurd acrobatics in the empty streets. Many cars with tinted windows displaying posters of President Assad and the slogan "*Minhibak*" we love you accompanied them. Free meals were distributed and loud songs pledging eternal allegiance to President

(29) A first version of this article was published on *al-Jumhuriya* website as: Mazen Ezzi, "The Druze of Suwayda: The Embers of Dissent", <http://aljumhuriya.net/en/29667>

Assad and brutal punishment for dissidents blasted from newly installed speakers. This show lasted for days and created considerable turmoil in what had previously been a calm city.

Local inhabitants were terrified. A protest in nearby Dara'a that was promptly and brutally suppressed by the regime combined with this pro-regime power show in Sweida intimidated residents into locking themselves into their homes for days. An engineer named Hatem, who had studied in the former Soviet Union, recalls speaking Russian with a friend in the supermarket for fear of being overheard. He says: *"I did not know what was happening, but the celebration of the unfolding brutality in Dara'a was disgusting; they were shooting in the air like joyous lunatics."*

The motorcycle acrobatics show was the first step in organizing regime loyalists, who were known first as *"Minhibakjis"* (from the verb *"Minhibak,"* we love you) and later as *"Shabiha"* (paramilitaries). Local loyalty to the regime had previously been bolstered by a quick visit by President Assad and his family to several villages in the eastern parts of the province on 12 March, only days before the uprising started. These villages had been hit hard by a prolonged drought and were known as being the poorest in the area. The spontaneously clamorous reception that Assad was given in these villages (Facebook posts show him and his family being carried on people's shoulders) had created an image of the province as being a stronghold of support for the regime.⁽³⁰⁾ Assad is rumoured to have told the villagers that his father, on his deathbed, had asked him to be particularly kind to the people of Sweida as they would stand by him in difficult times. Many similar rumours about the presidential visit spread widely, but according to Hatem, *"everything was carefully orchestrated to convey the message that the regime supports the religious and ethnic minorities at a time when the*

Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions had already taken the Arab world by storm."

Meanwhile, the opposition was in disarray. Syrian society had been denied access to politics for half a century and people did not dare to discuss controversial issues in public. However, the 29th anniversary of the death of the anti-colonial leader Sultan Basha al-Atrash on 26 March 2011 was an opportunity for dissidents to publicly congregate. A YouTube video that appeared shortly afterwards showed tens of demonstrators shouting *"God, Syria, and Freedom"* in front of the commemorative statue of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt that also houses the remains of al-Atrash.⁽³¹⁾ The demonstration took place near the home of al-Atrash, a large blue-stone landmark that had been shelled on several occasions during the Ottoman and French eras. The history of the building endowed the demonstration with powerful symbolism and connected it to a key moment in the emergence and consolidation of Syrian national identity among the Druze community during the inter-war period from 1915-1946.

Meanwhile, the Ba'th Party in al-Karya, which is known as 'the town of al-Atrash,' summoned high school students and Ba'th party members to the town's central square. Carrying pictures of the Syrian President and cheering for Assad, they stormed a gathering of the opposition and forced the group to disband.

The Syrian regime had outlawed any commemoration of Sultan al-Atrash's death since 1987 in response to demonstrations that had been held in al-Karya on 26 March every year between 1982 and 1986. These represented a challenge to the authority of the ruling Ba'th Party at a time when the regime was experiencing a political and security crisis and economic hardship was acute. The ban was to become associated with repressive measures against activists and the blocking of the highway between Sweida and al-Karya.

(30) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9oSn858azk>

(31) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuaYPvVVkTs>

Division over Dara'a

Divisions in Sweida society started to become more and more apparent in connection with the events in Dara'a. Assad loyalists organized gatherings and demonstrations that included public sector employees and students. Meanwhile, opposition voices began to be heard.

On 30 March 2011, during a television programme recorded and aired live on BBC World's Arabic service, the artist and dissident Tarek Abdul Hay from Sweida commented as follows on the regime forces' occupation of the al-Omari mosque in Dara'a: *"The advisor to the president, Buthaina Shaaban, claimed on the day after the al-Omari mosque was stormed that 'external hands' were instigating friction and sectarian tension in Dara'a, but this was hardly persuasive. The next day, Syrian citizens there are being shot again, so who is instigating friction? What is even more appalling is that we saw celebrations in certain Syrian cities pledging allegiance for the president, while the funerals of the Dara'a victims were still taking place! Are these the true qualities of Syrians?"*⁽³²⁾

The conspiracy that the regime invoked in the first few days of the revolution had regional and sectarian dimensions which activists from Sweida quickly recognized. They realized the sensitivity of the situation and the ability of the regime to capitalize on and manipulate the smallest detail of everyday life. Although Dara'a with its Sunni majority is very different from Druze-dominated Sweida, regional interests overlap and sometimes clash, particularly those concerning agricultural land, real estate and access to water. Any clash could rapidly acquire a sectarian character.

Concern over the regime's violent repression in Dara'a, together with the conspiratorial language it used to justify it, provoked regime opponents in

Sweida into action; their initial demonstrations and protests gave prominence to slogans expressing their solidarity with the people of Dara'a. Marnal, a fifty-year-old agricultural engineer describes: *"There are those who want to incite hatred between us and the people of Dara'a in order to divert the attention of the Syrian revolution and make it appear as a sectarian struggle. In Dara'a, there are children who were tortured. Their parents rose up in their defence. What is so strange about this? Where does the conspiracy lie? This is an uprising for dignity and human rights. It is an uprising that represents the anger of our people in Dara'a over their compromised dignity."*

On the other side of the divide, there are those who perceive the people of Hauran⁽³³⁾ as inferior, as 'onion sellers.' A predominantly agricultural economy has led the people of Dara'a to seek markets for their produce outside their city. Sweida is a main destination for trucks from Dara'a loaded with vegetables, mainly onions, garlic, tomatoes and cucumbers, and advertising their produce through on-board loudspeakers. Hussein, a 74-year-old military nurse recalls: *"The armed gangs are responsible for the murder of Syrian soldiers. If it were up to me, I would level Dara'a to the ground and turn it into an onion farm."* Such language betrays a racial tension that been exacerbated by the regime's media machine with its narrative of a Jihadist plot against minority communities and the principle of peaceful co-existence. Hussein's words allude to and reiterate a rumour that Maher al-Assad, the president's brother, had threatened to raze the city of Dara'a to the ground and plant potatoes in its place.

Saado is a 65-year-old retired civil servant and a father of five who spent much of his career in Dara'a. He explains: *"I do not mean to criticize, but I have served for fifteen years in Dara'a. The*

(32) http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2011/03/110330_syrian_voices_to2.shtml

(33) The common name of a southern region in Syria which includes Sweida and Dara'a.

problem is the division that the regime created between us. Do you know that Dara'a was a formidable source of cadres for the Ba'th Party and that it is the only Sunni area which was not affected by the Muslim Brotherhood crisis in 1979-1982? Dara'a is self-sufficient. The prime minister for more than 15 years was from there; they had high-ranking security officials in the army, the party, and the state bureaucracy. The people of Hauran are wealthy due to agriculture and trade with the Gulf. They have a highway that connects them to Damascus and Amman, whereas until the last few years the people of Sweida continued to suffer traffic fatalities on the local road that connected them to Damascus. They also had hundreds of wells, when no one in Sweida was allowed to dig one!"

Saado refers here to a largely unspoken problem in the relationship between Dara'a and Sweida. The issue of water wells has been highly sensitive for many years. In Sweida, well-drilling has customarily been punishable by a fine or even imprisonment while farming in Dara'a has thrived owing to a system of wells that provide ample irrigation. The water table in most areas of the Hauran Plains lies deep below the surface, but that subterranean water was originally rainwater that fell over the mountains of Sweida.

Sweida views its western neighbour with envy. The regions suffered equally from political repression, but the strong links that the people of Dara'a had with government officials made it easier for them to obtain services that were essential for the expansion of agriculture. While Sweida's farmers had to depend on rainfall for irrigation and could therefore produce only fruits and olives in modest quantities, their counterparts in Dara'a had thriving farms producing a wide variety of vegetables. Muhammad, a furniture trader, observes that although Sweida has suffered under the Ba'th regime, the region is now pro-regime; Dara'a, in contrast, has historically stood by the regime but is now opposing it. This is a reversal of positions.

The al-Khalili affair

In mid-March 2011, a video appeared on YouTube of Abdul-Salam al-Khalili, a Salafi sheikh from Dara'a, cursing the Druze community.⁽³⁴⁾ From a mosque in the town of al-Hirak, al-Khalili accused the Druze of prevarication, insulted their women and defiled the memory of Sultan al-Atrash by claiming that the latter had 'hijacked' the Great Syrian Revolt.

In a response to al-Khalili, writer Hamzah Rastanawi published an article on the *"al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin* website in which he states: *"I do not believe that what al-Khalili said is exceptional. In closed societies, one would expect the existence of people who support him, one would expect speeches and dialogues which reflect this narrow understanding of Islam or any religion to be common, in Hauran or in other areas."*⁽³⁵⁾

Despite their geographical proximity, the people of Dara'a and Sweida know little about one other. The narrow, winding roads that pass through many villages rather than linking the two cities directly are emblematic of this separateness. Economic ties between the two regions areas, for instance, have never been sufficiently strong to create a functioning regional market. Their respective ties with Damascus remain stronger than their ties with one another. This ignorance and lack of communication have allowed mutual fear to thrive.

When the al-Khalili video began circulating in Sweida, it contributed significantly to making the Druze community more hostile to the Syrian revolution. Al-Khalili referred to three sensitive topics: he claimed that the Druze were apostates, he insulted their honour and their women, and he besmirched their history. The video spread rapidly among the Druze community, reviving ancient fears, and was also broadcast on the regime's official media channels.

(34) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqpjqycBpjQ>

(35) <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=262204>

On 24 March 2011, a statement signed by sheikhs and scholars of Hauran denounced al-Khalili.⁽³⁶⁾ It stated: *“Al-Khalili insulted our people in Sweida and thus insulted Hauran too. The leader of the Great Syrian Revolt is Hauran’s prime icon. Those mounting offensive accusations to our brothers and people in Sweida are not of us, for they are causing friction.”* The statement suggested that al-Khalili was a regime agent.

The statement failed to have a significant impact in Sweida because the religious leaders and intellectuals who are influential in Dara’a are not particularly influential in Sweida. Later, several demonstrations were held in Dara’a to support Sweida and its people⁽³⁷⁾ and denounced al-Khalili publicly. A statement that was tantamount to an apology also appeared in the name of al-Khalili.⁽³⁸⁾ Nevertheless, the damage had been done, and people were more willing to believe the video evidence than anything that followed. The next response came in the form of the circulation of poetry lionizing the history of the Druze, their attitudes and their zeal. Some were discreet in seeking to mobilize the people,⁽³⁹⁾ others openly voiced anger making it clear that the Druze could retaliate.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The poems reached a wide audience, especially in the countryside, and further alienated people from the Syrian revolution. Whether al-Khalili is really a Salafi or a regime agent as dissidents claimed is still unclear. The damage he inflicted, however, was formidable.

Non-violent protest

A report on the *al-Jazeera* website entitled ‘The Echoes of Citizenship: On the Protest Movement

(36) <http://syriapromise.wordpress.com/2011/04/25/علماء الدين الشيخ الخليلى أساء لأهلنا>

(37) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgR-hrJ8GyM&feature=player_embedded

(38) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_VfcN-IRpo&feature=related

(39) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quJ0M2uvhr0>

(40) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoFeFvKmReo>

among Syrian Minorities’ states: *“Activists in Sweida have faced since the beginning of the protest the phenomenon of Shabiha, which was a major obstacle. Any error in strategy could have served the interest of the regime in creating a real civil conflict instead of the fabricated story of armed gangs. Nevertheless, this did not stop civil society mobilization. The province of Sweida was the first to endorse the protest movement in Dara’a, when the syndicate of lawyers issued a supportive statement, and then when lawyers demonstrated in protest on 27 March, 2011, which was followed by the syndicate of engineers and then the students who reinvigorated the movement.”*⁽⁴¹⁾

On 24 March 2011, the Sweida association of lawyers sent a formal letter to the president of the republic requesting a clear stand regarding the ‘events’⁽⁴²⁾ and demanding measures to protect the country and its citizens, namely: *“lifting the siege on the city of Dara’a and setting up an independent judiciary investigation - that would include the syndicate - of the incidents that transpired there; granting the media free access; lifting the emergency law and abolishing exceptional tribunals; granting the constitutional right of peaceful assembly and demonstration; extending a special amnesty to all political prisoners, releasing them immediately, and reinstating their civil rights; separating between powers and allowing for judiciary independence; and finally, limiting the authority of the security apparatus, including its role in overseeing appointment to public office.”*

One of the lawyers who signed this letter, Alaa Saymou’a, recalls that the letter was drafted in the evening of Thursday, 24 March: *“We stayed at the headquarters of the syndicate for more than three hours,”*⁽⁴³⁾ *debating with our president the need to take a stand regarding the siege of*

(41) <http://www.aljazeera.net/mob/f6451603-4dff-4ca1-9c10-122741d17432/ad0321ab-5b1c-4609-a786-f6626280113c>

(42) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5n6Qu7Cy8M>

(43) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5n6Qu7Cy8M>

Dara'a. We agreed to deliver the letter to the governor in his office and to walk there in our formal attire in order to draw attention and mobilize the street in our favour. On Sunday the 27th of March, however, we were surprised to find the governor and his assistants waiting for us right outside the syndicate, in an attempt to prevent our procession. This made us return to our headquarters, read the letter aloud and stamp it with the syndicate official seal." The lawyers then gathered outside the building, dressed in their formal attire, and held high a banner stating: *"Dara'a: No to Murder, Yes to Freedom."*⁽⁴⁴⁾

This letter was one of most eloquent of the spirit of the Syrian revolution because it referred to all the previous taboos concerning the country's authoritarian regime. It demanded the dismantling of all instruments of oppression and the reinstatement of the Syrian people's fundamental political rights, their freedom and their dignity. The protest gathering of some 70 lawyers outside their association headquarters was also the beginning of a particular form of activism that the Syrian revolution produced in Sweida: an elite-based resistance to dictatorship that relied primarily on activists and intellectuals rather than the popular support commonly found in other regions.

From 26 March 2011 on, a group of young activists gathered regularly in al-Tirshan Square, a historic plaza in the city centre where Government House stands, majestically built in the French style. The activists staged a daily vigil to mourn Syrian martyrs. These gatherings, which never lasted for more than two hours, took place every evening and with time, grew in size. They remained silent, and the banners held aloft addressed the broader issues of freedom and social justice, touching on the recent events in Syria only implicitly. Members of the traditional opposition attended these gatherings, as did security offi-

cers. The majority of the demonstrators, however, were young activists in their twenties or early thirties, representing all those who, in the wake of the Arab Spring, had found their voice and discovered their ability to change their reality.⁽⁴⁵⁾

One of those young activists, Kinda, 22 years old, states: *"At that public square, the young activists lit vigils to vanquish the frightful darkness looming over Syria. Often they discussed politics in whispers, and set their ring tones to the famous song of Samih Shukair: 'Ya Haif'."*⁽⁴⁶⁾ *Ya Haif* was a song composed by a son of al-Karya at the end of March 2011 in response to the bloody events in Dara'a. The song became a symbol of activism in the region and represented an artistically and intellectually inspired atonement for the lack of popular support for anti-regime activists in Sweida.

A week after the daily vigils started, al-Tirshan Square was noisily surrounded by motorcyclists holding up photos of the Syrian president. Rumours started spreading that all activists were going to be arrested. In those critical moments Kinda remembers whispering to her friend: *"They want to muzzle our mouths."* Kinda remembers that day well. The crowd of 400 quickly scattered in silence. *"All shops closed, and the sound of the motorcycles was deafening. They kept driving madly around the park. The police did not interfere, even though the drivers were shouting insults and profanities at us. Rumours also circulated that two activists had been arrested."*

The next evening, when the activists tried to reconvene, they were surprised to find tens of men and elderly members of the Ba'th Party in the nearby park, singing pro-regime songs. Radwan, who works in a bookshop, recalls: *"They sang a song that described the members of the Ba'th Party on top of tanks. They stood close to one*

(44) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8aGr0QTdG0&noredirect=1>

(45) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYZd1uA_uTA. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNrntC3Su_I

(46) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ3N2KucjIY>

another, and had their backs turned to the passers-by. I thought at the time they must be ashamed of themselves. Then, I saw my former schoolteacher; he looked down, too embarrassed to face me.” Marwan, a university student studying business management states that his father was one of those Ba’thists and that he subsequently had an altercation with him about the event at home. His father explained that his orders were clear and that he had no alternative to complying with them.

The next day, a metal gate was installed at the entrance to the small garden in the middle of the square which features a statue of Sultan al-Atrash on horseback brandishing a sword. Significant historical gatherings have taken place here: it was the site of the famous speech by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1959, and it was also the site of the speech by Bashar al-Assad in 2005 in the wake of the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, prime minister of Lebanon, during which he referred to Sweida as the “strongest rock.” His message in this speech was that the Druze in Sweida are distinct from Druze in Lebanon and their political attitude to the assassination of al-Hariri should be likewise distinct.

Days later, when activists attempted to organize another demonstration at a different square near the al-Tirshan guest house, they were surrounded by security forces and ordered to leave immediately. They were also filmed and accused of supporting the Dara’a terrorists. Kinda recalls: *“The officer’s face was very pale; he stuttered but sounded genuine when he said that tens of bodies were at the national hospital. Most casualties among the security forces and the Syrian army in Dara’a were taken at the time to the national hospital of Sweida, since Dara’a was out of regime control.”*

Demonstrations in Sweida

The first demonstration in Sweida took place in Sultan al-Atrash Square outside Government

House on Thursday, 14 April 2011, with 150 people gathering at one o’clock.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The demonstrators chanted for freedom, Dara’a, and the besieged towns. The demonstration lasted no more than 15 minutes; it was then forcibly dispersed by volunteer “*Shabiha*. Some activists were physically assaulted;⁽⁴⁸⁾ others were arrested.

Rami, a mechanical engineer, was driving near the square and saw the demonstration. He stopped and joined the crowd. He recalls: *“It was an overwhelming feeling. I don’t know how I joined them. I felt my feet trembling, but I was led by a burning desire!”* Not everyone felt that way. Hassan, a public servant employed in the ministry of education who was also very near the demonstration describes his reaction thus: *“I felt the blood rushing to my eyes. They were finally in front of me; those rascals who support terrorism and the armed gangs, and want to disturb our Syrian co-existence. They did not amount to more than 20 people. I looked around and shouted: God, Syria, and Bashar. I almost assaulted them. I looked around for a stick or anything else; but the security rushed in and taught them a lesson.”*

The demonstration on 14 April was a shock to Sweida’s almost completely closed society. People were witnessing a real demonstration, not fabricated, nor led by people from other regions or countries as the official media continued to claim. Nevertheless, false reports spread about the demonstration after four people were arrested and others were pursued in the streets. Twenty-five-year-old Yazan was one of the activists who fled from *Shabiha* accusing him of being a common thief in the hope of getting help from a passer-by.

From that moment on, rumours influenced Sweida’s public opinion, changing both reality and the

(47) http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2011/04/110414_syria_newannouncements.shtml

(48) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oi26lG4PgSs>

subsequent unfolding of events. The media, personal relationships and individuals' power of imagination likewise affected what followed. Reslan, a 28-year old merchant who witnessed the demonstration, confirmed that he saw a group of Dara'a "*Hauranis*" orchestrating a demonstration in front of Government House so that they could film it and send their footage to "*devious TV channels*" (he was referring to *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*). This version of events, popular among regime loyalists, was reported frequently, though the demonstrators blamed for instigating the unrest were also often alleged to be from Douma or Homs.

The second demonstration took place a few days later, on 17 April 2011, Syria's Independence Day, and this time it began in two different places as activists failed to coordinate and, according to Hammoud, a member of an unauthorized communist party, because of differences of opinion between the two groups. Hammoud tried to reconcile these differences in order to attract a large number of demonstrators befitting the significance of the day, which "*the people of Sweida feel proudly that they have made.*" But most of the dissidents in Sweida belong to communist and leftist opposition parties which still indulge in historical disputes that prevent them from reaching a unified position on the new situation. Lacking a sense of teamwork, the activists failed to reach an agreement that day.

Thus there were two separate demonstrations. The larger one attracted around 300 people and started from al-Shu'la Square.⁽⁴⁹⁾ The demonstrators carried olive branches and pictures of Syria's independence heroes and managed to chant for around 30 minutes before security forces and the *Shabiha* used cars and buses to surround the protest and physically assaulted the activists.⁽⁵⁰⁾

(49) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaYo0V0JXx8>

(50) http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i-maJG8o0qs3WveSf_z4mHVb6ziFA?docId=CNG.20af4-d9a21c5eb93ed9eb1cf491307d3.261&hl=ar

Maha, a 35-year-old mother of two recalls: "*There were many women among the demonstrators, and the Shabiha attacked them too using bats and stones. In many incidents they tore down the pictures of the leaders of the 1925 revolt and stomped on them. The security forces did not interfere but just watched, while our relatives enjoyed beating us.*" A Facebook post from that day states: "*It was a barbaric ritual. They took a banner that says 'yes' to freedom and dignity and they beat you up with it, 'they' being our neighbours and relatives.*"

Maha insists that those responsible for the beatings were ex-convicts and illiterates. The incident confirmed the impression already prevalent in the area that the *Shabiha* are recruited from the least educated segments of society and suffer in general from an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the intellectual elite. Most of the perpetrators were unemployed or had just been released from prison. It was one of the regime's attempts in the early days of the revolution to 'shuffle papers,' to create confusion.

No one was arrested or killed in al-Shu'la Square, and live ammunition was not used as it had been in other provinces. Ghazwan even noticed a security officer rescuing one of the demonstrators when the latter nearly died at the hands of the *Shabiha*. Ghazwan believes that the ability of the security officers to restrain themselves and rely completely on the *Shabiha* was key to stemming the tide of protest and making it appear to be an intra-Druze fight. From then on the regime's strategy in Sweida was to engineer face-to-face confrontations between the *Shabiha* and the Druze dissidents and thus make the protests appear to be a local conflict within a closed community.

The other demonstration that day took place in al-Karya. Here, demonstrators entered the shrine of Sultan al-Atrash and observed a moment of silence for the martyrs of the Syrian revolution. When they left the shrine they were physically

assaulted by the *Shabiha* just as in Sweida. Abdullah, a taxi driver who joined in the attacks on the demonstrators states: *"They told me that the demonstrators were foreigners, and they had come to our area to cause trouble, scare civilians, and plant explosives, so I did not mind participating. Especially when they promised me a job as a night guard. I felt terrible, however, when I found my cousin, a schoolteacher, injured on the ground. He would never hurt anyone, and spent his entire life reading books and teaching. He had been imprisoned for his political views before. I could not believe that my friends were assaulting him. Since then I stopped beating up anyone, and realized that the matter is too complex for me to understand."*

A further demonstration was held in Sweida on Friday, 20th May, the day known as 'Azadi Friday'⁽⁵¹⁾ under the new Syrian revolutionary calendar.⁽⁵²⁾ It started in al-Mal'ab Square and the protesters proceeded about 500 meters before the *Shabiha* and security forces forced them to scatter. Thirty-three-year-old activist Ramez, an engineer, explains: *"The biggest problem in our province is the scarcity of mosques, and thus the inability of people to gather spontaneously. This made every demonstration require a high degree of coordination in order to select the time and place, and even then security forces were mostly able to know all the details beforehand."*

Although Sweida is usually quiet on Fridays and the streets half empty, on this occasion many *Shabiha* agents had been deployed in advance. The Azadi Friday demonstration also produced a new level of violence, with activists being savagely beaten before being referred to the security forces. Five activists were arrested that day, including Issam Khaddaj and Marwan Hamza from

(51) Azadi meaning freedom in Kurdish, following the Good Friday" protests the week before as a sign of solidarity among Syria's different ethno-religious groups.

(52) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emih9-sydus>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCjkiSciujE>

the town of Shahba, both from the Nasserite Socialist Union Party, and Adnan Abou Assi from the communist People's Party. All three were transported to Damascus for further interrogation. The other two - younger, non-partisan - activists remained in detention in local prisons.

The arrests and physical attacks deliberately targeted veteran opposition activists. The Socialist Union Party was about to suffer a major split in its ranks due to its indulgent position regarding the regime. The leadership of the party wanted to join the more moderate National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria but was unable to gain the support of rank-and-file members. It therefore split from the main body of this historic opposition party. Similar changes were taking place within the various communist parties.

Sweida was the scene of several other demonstrations shortly thereafter. On 27 May 2011, known as 'the Army's Friday,' demonstrators headed for Tishreen Square, but the *Shabiha* and the security forces had already besieged the area and prevented them from gathering.

On 7 July 2011, more than five hundred demonstrators gathered in al-Fakhar Square⁽⁵³⁾ and chanted for the city of Hama and for freedom. This was a very different demonstration⁽⁵⁴⁾ because the protestors were able to gain the upper hand: when the *Shabiha* tried to disperse the demonstration, the protesters pushed them back and were then able march uninterrupted for some distance. The security forces did not intervene. Muhammad and his sister Khouloud recall that they were at home near the demonstration when they heard the chants. Khouloud says: *"They soon joined in and it was euphoric! Some of the neighbours threw rice on us while girls on the balconies started the traditional cries of joy. I hadn't known that my neighbours supported the revolution."*

(53) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K54wiASGUZA>

(54) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAUhFYLcXWo>

It was a complete surprise when the *Shabiha* were beaten back by the protesters. Keeping the date and place of the demonstration secret worked well for the revolutionaries, but it had required a high degree of coordination. On the afternoon of the same day, groups of *Shabiha* circled Alfa, a gallery of modern art with an upstairs café where opposition politicians and activists often gathered. The siege lasted for hours. Marwa was among the people trapped inside, and she remembers being terrified: *“The power cut out in the gallery and the café, and through the glass we could see all these angry people waiting outside. We were all terrified, killing was everywhere in Syria, and we just didn’t know if was going to be our turn.”*

Muhannad, a 23-year-old college student, headed for the gallery when he heard about the siege on an opposition TV station. He recalls seeing *Shabiha* everywhere, along with some security officers giving directions and carrying walkie-talkies. Muhannad believes that the explanation for the siege was the security forces’ anger about the earlier demonstration and their assumption that the people in the gallery had been protesters. In a spontaneous act of resistance, locals surrounded the *Shabiha* and security officers and forced them to end the siege by midnight. The trapped people were able to leave unharmed.

The Alfa gallery was attacked again on 13 November 2011. A military vehicle rammed it and the *Shabiha* started to destroy all the artefacts inside and burnt all the books.⁽⁵⁵⁾ A statement posted on Facebook bearing the title⁽⁵⁶⁾ ‘My name is the book and the *Shabiha* of Sweida have killed me’ stated: *“They set me on fire with my friends in front of the statue of Hafez al-Assad in the Sweida province of the Syrian Arab Republic in the 21st*

*century, just as Hulagu Khan⁽⁵⁷⁾ drowned the books of Baghdad. Don’t forget my name in a future Syria and remember this date well, 31 November 2011. Write on my grave that I was killed by the *Shabiha* of Assad.”*

Social realities and the crisis of the revolution

Rashid has a specific view about Sweida and its problems: *“With time, we started to consider the possibility that we had a security breach, that there was a mole inside our ranks informing *Shabiha* and security officers of our plans. Our situation was utterly different from anywhere else in Syria due to the lack of mosques. At a time when other areas in the country were perpetually in protest, with people gathering, chanting, holding festivities, and protecting themselves, our dream was just to organize a sizeable demonstration that could withstand any likely attack, mainly by co-ordinating with all the new activists that we met during the first demonstrations. It was like walking in a minefield, we had not known each other for long, and yet we had no option but to completely rely on each other.”*

In the early days, no one could estimate the size of the opposition in Sweida province. All that was clear was that so-called local coordination committees were beginning to post announcements of demonstrations in social media and back these up with flyers and graffiti. The revolution in Sweida was evolving in a unique manner. These local coordination committees had been set up by activists to organize demonstrations and publicize these through the media and social media websites. By leading the civil resistance movement, these committees have since become very powerful.

Maha reminisces about these early days with a

(55) <http://al-mashhad.com/News/الشبكة العربية تطالب بتحرير سوريا من قبضة الأسد-/33570.aspx>

(56) <https://www.facebook.com/Killing.book/posts/318774641472760>

(57) A Mongol ruler (1217-1265) who occupied Baghdad and destroyed its library.

strong sense of nostalgia because they promised a better future. She now thinks that she and like-minded people focused on the full half of the glass, possibly expecting too much from daily political meetings that combined a legacy of opposition with the new reality of the revolution: *"They planned for tens of demonstrations and sit-ins, thinking that the moment when the Mountain would just turn around and rise was coming. It was very close when they could bring about this moment; they did not pay enough attention to the real rift in society, the real polarization that was getting more and more entrenched."*

The regime, in contrast, interpreted the situation in the country in purely sectarian terms and adopted a strategy of not antagonizing its minorities, including the Druze. Rashed explains: *"The reason protests grew bigger in Syria was blood; the more people the regime killed the bigger the protests became, until entire regions became entirely out of regime control. The first demonstrations in Syria were not bigger than Sweida's demonstrations, but murder and the savage violations of human rights gave it momentum, whereas in Sweida, the regime attacked the demonstrators and arrested some of them but never killed anyone. Thus, there was never a big revolutionary take-off in the area."* Rashed continues: *"Out of the half million people who constitute the population of the Mountain, there's more than 100,000 young men working in the Gulf or in Venezuela. Those who are most affected by the economic and political malaise are outside the country, the remittances they send to their parents are a safety valve that releases the social and economic tensions in the area."*

The relatively small number of young revolutionaries working against all odds to awaken the spirit of revolution in the Mountain finally started to recognize the limitations of their methods and possibilities and the formidable impasse they were facing. Already divided, the local community began to turn its back on the activists. It was

better, Rashed says, for them to bury their heads in the sand. What appeared later as a form of neutrality was heavily criticized at the time.

Muhammad, a philosophy graduate, believes that the regime succeeded in creating a network of mutual interests in the Mountain that served as a security valve for social tensions. He states: *"Over time, everyone became connected to the regime. The long lines of civil servants waiting in front of ATM machines at the beginning of every month are enough to realize the extent to which people had become dependent on the state. Agriculture is not generating profit anymore, nor is there a manufacturing sector that could employ thousands of employed people. There is an employment office where one can go to submit an application; the number of applications is around 20,000. Out of 500,000 people living in the province, there are around 20,000 unemployed people waiting for a job in the public sector, where the salary would not exceed 100 dollars a month!"* Asked whether this isn't sufficient reason to support the anti-regime movement, Muhammad is at a loss to answer. He is unemployed and even his academic understanding of philosophy cannot help him find an answer to Syria's changing realities. In this time of momentary revolutionary promise, like Muhammad, most people in Sweida are confused, frustrated and yet at a loss for an answer.

The regime began to raise the salaries of people employed in its so-called 'general companies.' But these small salary increases failed to offset the massive decline in the value of the Syrian pound. Inflation has hit the economy hard and people are suffering. Moreover, the exchange rate for the Syrian pound against the US dollar fell dramatically: from 45 Syrian pounds to the dollar before the uprising to 170 during it. The average salary was US\$ 200 before the uprising. The result of all these factors was a massive drop in purchasing power. Prices rose so high that the regime saw itself obliged to distribute vouchers

for diesel fuel in an effort to defuse the people's anger.

Did the regime's little bribes (as the activists called them) play a role in neutralizing sentiment in Sweida? This is another question that troubles activists who feel guilty about the course of the revolution. Some feel ashamed about what is happening, others are preparing to leave for more exciting places, and still others are participating in demonstrations in Damascus and Dara'a in order to bring back stories that will inspire and excite co-activists in Sweida. They yearn for their own mass demonstrations.

Abou Said summarizes his view of the Druze in Syria in what he calls the jars theory.⁵⁸ He recounts a joke in which the various peoples of the earth are imprisoned in closed jars as a divine punishment on Judgment Day, except for the Druze whose jar is left open. Some wonder why God had done this, what if the Druze escaped? The answer is that this is impossible, for whenever anyone manages to climb to the rim, his fellow Druze will always pull him back. This is an angry and pessimistic joke, but speaks of a certain reality in the region. Abu Said confirms that in this era of globalization, the towns of small minorities are turning into hell for their residents.

Three young women

Louai, a 21-year-old student of sociology, was present when three young women staged their own silent sit-in⁽⁵⁸⁾ on 11 December 2011 near the headquarters of the association of engineers.⁽⁵⁹⁾ The three young women, who had decided to publicly condemn the acts of murder taking place, held high a banner that stated: *"Homs is being slaughtered, save our children."* Louai believes that the courage of these young women was exceptional: the heroism required to

stand alone without protection and denounce dictatorship can be understood only by those who have lived in Syria. Particularly striking in the video footage of the event and in Louai's account thereof are the insults and other attacks that the three demonstrators had to endure. A cab driver in traditional Druze attire⁽⁶⁰⁾ tries to snatch their banner and then tries to assault one of them. A butcher in his nearby store, also in traditional Druze attire, shouts that people should condemn them. A middle-aged woman passes by and curses them. Other passers-by do the same. One woman asks in a loud voice: *"Is there no one to control those bitches?"*

The women showed great courage and fortitude. No one intervened to support them. Louai states: *"What happened here was a test involving a random sample from the street; no one could have anticipated the amount of negativity and repressed violence against the girls, and against the revolution. It was really shocking."*

One of the people present shouted: *"Someone should call the security, let them come and arrest these bitches."* A woman on the other side of the street shouted: *"Are you looking for a photographer to send your video to al-Jazeera?"* Louai explains: *"One o'clock in the afternoon was a peak hour in the street, hundreds were passing by, and the street near the mall is a central one in the city. The violent reaction against a sit-in of three girls who carried a simple banner, along with other facts and observations, made us lower our expectations of the local community's acceptance of the revolution."*

A young man named Khaldoun from the town of Shahba confirms this with his own account: *"We were subjected to a lot of harassment, and many of those who were part of the silent majority took*

(58) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrpQWYluell>

(59) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jdYDe7Fyyc

(60) One should distinguish here between those who wear traditional Druze attire for 'marketing reasons' and those who are truly religious. The latter would never attack a woman, regardless of any supposed reason.

advantage of the weakness of the revolutionary side and handed them over to the regime. Fifty years of military dictatorship ruined the moral compass of many people, and many became unpaid agents.” Khaldoun continues: “There is also a second type of people, those who simply believe the regime’s propaganda; they know the entire story, but upside down.”

Muhammad, for instance, mentions that a middle-aged woman dressed in black shouted at demonstrators in Shahba: “You dogs, you gangsters, you want to bring the US here, you want to bring Israel here!” He continues: “People were completely brainwashed. Suddenly, state-run TV channels became highly popular, and people started repeating their vocabulary: ‘terrorists,’ ‘military gangs,’ and ‘intimidating civilians.’ For instance, a neighbour of ours appeared on public TV saying: ‘The army should strike these gangs with an iron fist.’ This neighbour was a member of the Ba’th Party; he never left his home town or read a book or a newspaper; all his children worked in the Gulf, and yet he never interacted with Syrians from outside his area. Someone like this can be easily made to fear Salafis and terrorist groups; he is ready to believe such stories.”

Professional syndicates and associations: lawyers and engineers

From the first statement issued by the Association of Lawyers and their first demonstrations on 24 and 27 March 2011, it became clear that opposition to the regime was strong among professional organizations. On 19 July 2011, the lawyers of Sweida called for another sit-in outside their headquarters, which this time was also supported by many engineers, teachers, and merchants. A statement read aloud⁽⁶¹⁾ condemned the appearance of the *Shabiha* and endorsed the aims of the

Syrian revolution. The *Shabiha* encircled the building and assaulted the lawyer Ayman Shayb al-Din.

In an article entitled ‘First attempt to breathe life back into law’ which was published in the cultural supplement of the Lebanese “*Annahar* newspaper,⁽⁶²⁾ ‘Ula Shayb al-Din reports on the eight-hour sit-in: “*The assault on the mentioned lawyer triggered a stronger reaction from lawyers. They declared an open-ended sit-in on 21 July, from 2-11, demanding of the syndicate to protect its own members first and foremost.... The participants were surrounded by the Shabiha who tried to break into the building or burn it several times. Tension was on the rise, and the possibility of a province-wide movement was growing. The regime realized the danger of this, however, and decided to send its representatives to the building. They offered a cheap exchange: the lawyers should end their sit-in and the regime would allow them to leave the area safely. The regime managed through this act to end a tense situation and showcase the security forces as ‘neutral’ and ‘protective.’ It was important for the regime to maintain calm in a Druze-dominated province, in order to maintain its image as a protector of minorities in the country.*”

Hayan saw the news and headed for the building. He recounts that he saw many *Shabiha* around the headquarters but very few people in military uniforms. He recalls asking someone what had happened, but that person turned out to be a regime thug who promptly chased him away. Hayan says: “*I don’t know how he realized that I am with the opposition, perhaps my hairdo or what I was wearing!*” He decided to leave the country immediately for Lebanon because “*it was a terrifying feeling, hundreds of barbaric Shabiha encircling the lawyers syndicate⁽⁶³⁾ and trying to burn it with everyone inside. Everyone is a sus-*

(61) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIWGsIN9EPE&feature=uploademail>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tIM_RM4tpeE

(62) <http://syria.alsafahat.net/أولى محاولات نفث الروح في القانون علا ش/>

(63) <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10150317565375616>

pect in those people's eyes. All they need is an order to attack, and then they cannot be stopped."

From inside the building, calls were made to local leaders, including religious clerics. This was the first contact between the protest movement and the traditional religious leadership of the Druze community. Although it failed to yield any material results, it did pull the traditional establishment into the vortex of the conflict, confronting everyone with their political and moral responsibilities. Negotiations with the security forces achieved nothing: either the sit-in would be terminated or the *Shabiha* would be ordered to break into the building. The regime was pursuing its usual strategy of exacerbating confrontation and division within the local community while appearing to act as an observer and mediator.

As the authorities had decided at the outset of the protests to avoid an escalation in Sweida, they attempted to contain the turmoil as far as possible in the hope of preventing the conflict from crossing certain social and communal boundaries. These boundaries were crossed, however, when the syndicate movement acquired a national dimension, thus belying the regime's claim that the protests were sectarian. The authorities then reverted to a more active policy based on punishment and reward. They forcibly evacuated the protestors from the building and drove them back to their homes in police cars. The *Shabiha* first looked on and then started attacking the peace-keeping forces and accusing some officials of treason.

That day, each side drew its own conclusion. The regime started to intensify its use of force, realizing that it was facing a genuine opposition movement that, although lacking popular support, had obtained the backing of lawyers. Most lawyers in Sweida have a middle-class background and thus little in common with their lower-income neighbours, most of whom are employed in farming.

Lawyers sympathetic to the revolution in Sweida realized the need for better organization and stronger popular participation and therefore promptly set up Sweida Lawyers for Freedom, a group providing legal support for opposition figures and revolutionary activists. One such lawyer, 'Ula Shayb al-Din, states: *"The most important work done by the group was to establish a legal clinic specifically tasked with representing political prisoners."*

Sweida Lawyers for Freedom issued a mission statement⁽⁶⁴⁾ on 26 September 2012 announcing that it aimed *"to partake in the Syrian revolution and to build a state based on the rule of law that represents the general will of the people, a state that has the legal requirements and institutions that enable it to stand on its own, regardless of the individuals occupying positions of authority. Thus the state becomes protected from 'power' and is not turned into a fiefdom of its own rulers but instead remains accountable to its citizens. This state of law would be based on a modern social contract and protected by a civilized constitution that recognizes and protects basic public and private rights (political, social, economic, and cultural) for all citizens, irrespective of religion, sect, ethnicity, or race. This state of law will be the principal guarantee for the establishment of a civil, pluralist, and democratic state."* 'Ula Shayb al-Din continues: *"With this move, the syndicate appeared to be defecting from the 'one-bloc regime,' the authoritarian, motionless regime which appears to stand outside history and time. It is as if the syndicate move was opening up history."*

Lawyers sympathetic to the revolution continued to pressure their syndicate to express solidarity with political detainees and the peaceful protest movement. Several sit-ins took place outside the syndicate headquarters, primarily to demand the release of prisoners. An example was the sit-in

(64) https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=435245246522255&id=400488576664589

held on 30 April 2012 when lawyers demonstrated in solidarity with their detained colleague Muhammad al-Abdullah.⁽⁶⁵⁾ On 2 December 2012 they staged an open-ended sit-in to demand the release of their colleagues Alaa Saymou'a and Ayman Shayb al-Din,⁽⁶⁶⁾ who, the lawyers' statement asserted, *"were arrested illegally by the military intelligence of Sweida after they stormed their houses, terrorized their families and arrested the two lawyers without a legal warrant in blatant violation of the constitution and the laws which guarantee the basic rights of citizens."*

On 22 July 2013, an incident occurred outside the justice department in Sweida involving a car belonging to the Syrian military and another belonging to one of the judges. A statement issued by Sweida Lawyers for Freedom⁽⁶⁷⁾ explains the details: *"An officer from the Syrian army assaulted the judge Ayman Harfoush and insulted him with words that denigrate the judicial authority and are deemed by law to be of a slanderous nature: assaulting a judge - disparaging the state - disturbing social peace - inciting sectarian friction - undermining national unity. The officer attacked the judge in front of a crowd of lawyers and citizens in the court of the justice palace in Sweida and shouted: 'If you were a judge in Dara'a where I am placed, I would have stamped on your head.'*

Abdallah, a taxi driver who was outside the court building that day, recounts what happened: *"I was at the justice palace for a personal matter when I heard loud voices and profanities. There was a short fist fight. There were soldiers from the army, guards from the justice department, and a*

group of military cops. One bullet would have been enough for the situation to get out of hand. Everyone was nervous, and the fingers were all ready to pull the trigger."

The pro-regime attorney-general refused to have the officer arrested, a fact which caused much dismay among the lawyers and judges at the justice department. *"Tens of lawyers from Sweida submitted a request to the general attorney to pursue the man responsible for the incident, but he failed to respond. This in itself is not just a crime, it is a terrible blow to the judicial authorities that undermines its position as one of two guarantors of justice. For how could it not impose its authority on someone who publicly assaulted one of its members?!"*

This incident reflects the degree to which state institutions in Syria are now divided. A lawyer refuses to defend a judge against a junior officer who insulted him in front of the justice department on the purported grounds that a presidential decree bans legal action against military and security officers. Such aggression is not new; a lack of accountability and punishment has allowed it to escalate. The lawyers have concluded that there cannot be justice under a regime which violates its own laws.

Engineers were soon likewise demanding more freedom for their syndicate and action to distance themselves from the regime. The announcement of their first anti-regime demonstration, posted on social network websites, states that the purpose of the demonstration was to express *"solidarity with the Syrian cities that are under siege, and to condemn the killing of peaceful protestors by the regime militias and Shabiha."*

A large demonstration was held outside the engineers' headquarters on 11 August 2011. The building had been closed early that morning, which was an exceptional event. Rasheed, an engineer, reported that the security staff was con-

(65) http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=0-b4037ea7affd7e682954920381b27bd&ar=145639089

(66) <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=462129323833847&set=a.461454327234680.98026.400488576664589&type=1>

(67) <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=558489877531124&set=a.461454327234680.98026.400488576664589&type=1>

cerned that if a sit-in were staged inside the building, it could result in an incident similar to that in the lawyers' building. The engineers and their supporters, a group of several hundred people, therefore gathered outside the building, opposite al-'Inaya private hospital and very close to the market square. The police and security forces were on the ready, waiting in their cars. The moment the demonstrators started singing the national anthem, they moved in to physically assault and arrest them.

Souad, a 46-year-old engineer remembers that day: *"I was terrified. My feet felt heavy, and I couldn't really approach the demonstrators. I stood on the other side. When the security truck arrived, my heart started beating really fast. I wished I could escape, but I continued to watch as if I had nothing to do with anything, as if I was watching TV. The minute the demonstrators starting chanting the national anthem, the army men attacked them violently.⁽⁶⁸⁾ They carried them off and threw them in the truck like old pieces of furniture. I kept watching and saw my own professor being thrown in the truck. I realized then what it meant for Syrians to revolt against despotism."*

More than 30 people were arrested that day and tens were injured. It was the first time that regime forces in Sweida had engaged in a direct confrontation with the protest movement. Unusually, the units concerned were not from the *Shabiha* but from the security and military forces. The *Shabiha* entered the scene later, after the arrests had taken place, in order - as Souad recalls - to *"dance on the hot blood."*

The security forces' extreme brutality against the demonstrators terrified residents and, as Haytham, who was present, states, was a message to everyone: *"This is how we treat the educated classes amongst you; no one is immune under our rule."* He continues: *"Even in Sweida, a place*

that the regime is trying not to antagonize, repression remains part of the natural order of things. The regime cannot tolerate the voice of opposition."

Engineers sympathetic to the revolution set up their own action group, the 'Free Engineers.' This was largely in response to the opportunism shown by some co-members when fellow engineers were subjected to arbitrary arrest. Speaking as a member of the group sympathetic to the revolution Rasheed explains: *"We have no illusions about our strength. We are a weak circle within a network of relations and interests in the syndicate; we could not even get the board members to convene a meeting or a general assembly. The syndicate is completely under their control, it represents the interests of its powerful leaders."*

Rasheed also explains that the recent threefold proliferation of illegal construction projects has further diminished the power of the syndicate. The regime now ignores all objections filed by local people. Strangely, he reports, despite this building spree in which land and private property are being seized on a grand scale for partially or completely illegal construction projects, only very few engineers are finding work. The local cement factory produces cement not only for the Sweida market but also for Tartous and Latakia. Its sales are greased by bribes through which the regime buys the silence of many. At a time of war when entire cities are being destroyed, some opportunists are continuing to build illegally. Their opportunism is facilitated by a government which has little consideration for either the urban infrastructure or the role of the engineers' syndicate.

The Free Engineers have continued to hold demonstrations throughout the past two years, primarily to remind people of political detainees in general⁽⁶⁹⁾ but also to express solidarity with their

(68) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn4oCuyP9IU>

(69) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAlu1MyFsy8>

own detained colleagues.⁽⁷⁰⁾ These include Maher Mahmoud, Diaaa Salloum, Adnan Abdulmalek, and Aktham Abu El-Husun.⁽⁷¹⁾

Leadership of the Mountain and the beginning of external intervention

Few people in Sweida had heard of Muntaha al-Atrash before the Syrian revolution. Despite her lineage as the daughter of renowned Druze leader Sultan al-Atrash, she preferred to keep her distance from the traditional social circles in the province. Muntaha al-Atrash gave the following statement to Reuters news agency on 14 April 2011: *"Syrian authorities are fabricating stories about armed gangs every time a new region rises in protest and demands freedom and democracy."* She also observed: *"When people come out to ask for freedom and democracy, armed gangs and Shabiha fire at them and claim that Syria is undergoing a foreign conspiracy, whereas when people chant for Bashar's life, when they vow to kneel and kiss the ground he walks on, the Shabiha disappear as do the foreign 'armed gangs'."*

Muntaha al-Atrash graduated from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Cairo in 1967. She is a journalist and an official spokesperson for the Syrian Organization for Human Rights (Swasiya). In an interview with *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper on 12 April 2011, she stated: *"In Syria we are all brothers. There are no differences between the Druze, the Sunnis, the Alawites, or the Kurds. We are all Syrian. We live in the same neighbourhoods as one tour in Damascus and its suburbs can testify. What is happening now is very different however. The regime is using the policy of 'divide and rule,' it is actively frightening the Alawites of the possibility of Sunni rule."*⁽⁷²⁾

Al-Atrash, who is now in her mid-eighties, stated in an interview with the Kuwaiti *al-Ra'i* newspaper on 25 April 2011:⁽⁷³⁾ *"In my house I was raised with the values of freedom and democracy. The reality of Syria today makes me support the current movement. I stand by the weak, not the strong."* Such statements provided a strong boost for the protest movement in Sweida, and al-Atrash became somewhat of a revolutionary icon. Activists saw her as a consensual figure and, in deference to her political lineage, started referring to her as 'princess' Muntaha. But that political lineage did not prevent regime loyalists from attacking her with false accusations. Al-Atrash gave a further statement to *al-Ra'i* newspaper in July 2011: *"The Druze in Syria are few in numbers. There is a protest movement in the Mountain, but there is also a lot of fear. The regime is scaring the Druze, the Christians, and all the minorities by evoking the question of political Islam. The Mountain supports the protest movement despite the propaganda of the regime."*

Al-Atrash also accused the former Lebanese minister of the environment, Wi'am Wahhab, a Druze, of providing arms and money to the Syrian Druze in an attempt to encourage them to join the *Shabiha*. She called on Druze leader Walid Jumblat to *"put a limit to Wahhab,"* whom she refers to as a *"vile person."* Wi'am Wahhab responded to Muntaha al-Atrash through the quasi-official *Ad-Dunia* TV channel:⁽⁷⁴⁾ *"Many people from Sweida have come to visit me and asked for arms to protect themselves given the presence of arms in Dara'a, but I have told them that the people of Dara'a are family and that there is an army that protects everyone. President Assad has said: 'when I arm my children, I will arm the people of Sweida'."*

Wahhab also insulted Muntaha al-Atrash: *"You witch... the dignity of people is not yours to med-*

(70) [http://www.rozana.fm/ar/content/احتجاج مهندسي السويداء على اعتقال زميل لهم وبوادر اعتصام مفتوح](http://www.rozana.fm/ar/content/احتجاج%20مهندسي%20السويداء%20على%20اعتقال%20زميل%20لهم%20وبوادر%20اعتصام%20مفتوح)

(71) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO1qj2_282g

(72) <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=616869&issueno=11823#.Ua4jkNJHL9U>

(73) <http://www.alraimedia.com/Articles.aspx?id=258008>

(74) <http://ourcity-sy.com/va.php?id=3987>

dle with. The Druze of Syria are too honorable for you to involve them with your disputes. I have enough arms for them, but I do not think they are under threat."

These excerpts give an idea of the issues that were surfacing at this time and also mark the beginning of Lebanese intervention in the local affairs of Sweida (so-called 'Druze custody.')

Wahhab's prominent role in Syria was a result of the Syrian regime's support for his Druze party in Lebanon, the Arab Tawhid Party, in the wake of the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. Wahhab is a 'patron of the Druze of Sweida.' This is the first time, according to Thaer al-Ghandour in an article written for the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* in 2009, that such a role has been granted to a Lebanese politician in Syria.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Al-Ghandour adds: "*Wahhab refers to the Druze as a community, which in itself is an approach that was not tolerated in the allegedly secular state of Syria that rejected any talk of religious communities and their politics.*"

The Tawhid party was founded in 2006,⁽⁷⁶⁾ initially opening offices in Damascus and Sweida. When the Syrian revolution began, Wahhab positioned himself as the Druze 'mediator' who publicizes the regime's view of events. For instance, at a grand formal banquet held in the village of Rasas on 2 August 2011 to celebrate what is known as the Army's Day,⁽⁷⁷⁾ Wahhab announced: "*Yes, we the people of Ma'rrouf are biased in favour of Syria and its strength and unity, and its President Bashar al-Assad who stands alone today in the nation because of his support for the resistance in Iraq, Palestine, and in Lebanon, where the resistance under the leadership of the honorable man Hassan Nasrallah has defeated the Israeli aggressor.*"⁽⁷⁸⁾

(75) <http://www.tawhidarabi.org/?p=23684>

(76) The author insists here that Wahhab was rejected by the entire Atrash dynasty.

(77) <http://www.tawhidarabi.org/?p=14487>

(78) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5n6ikoTLrM>

During another festive event held in the village of al-Taybeh on 25 July 2011, Wahhab stated: "*We will remain on Syria's side; strong, proud, and anti-imperialist Syria, which we have contributed to its making, and to its pride and liberty. We will definitely not participate in its weakening, fragmentation, and we will not accept that any party attempts to play this role.*"

Nizar, a Lebanese Druze, explains: "*Such statements clarify the extent to which Wahhab wanted to build on his Lebanese sectarian leadership in order to establish himself as part of the traditional and non-politicized Syrian Druze landscape. This unexplored territory, as it were, required considerable work on his part. He needed to sound 'more Catholic than the Pope' thus combining an Arab nationalist anti-imperialist and anti-Israel rhetoric with narrow sectarian practices.*"

The small group affiliated with Wahhab in Sweida denied all accusations that they were arming people in the region. Nevertheless, the question continued to resound: "*Why arming? And against whom?*" *The exclusively Druze nature of the Tawhid rank and file, together with the party's loyalty to Hezbollah and the Syro-Iranian axis, made the armament accusations plausible. Moreover, the party had started providing support for impoverished Druze families. This, however, was dismissed by the opposition as merely a blatant attempt to buy loyalty.*

Attacks on Muntaha al-Atrash appeared again in an official statement released by the Tawhid Party⁽⁷⁹⁾ in January 2012: "*It seems that Ms. al-Atrash cannot find a role for herself except in accusing her own people of some alleged armament. We say this so that we do not enter into any further polemics with Ms. al-Atrash, who has no value except being the daughter of Sultan Basha al-Atrash.*"

This attack led to further tension and division with-

(79) <http://www.tawhidarabi.org/?p=13188>

in the Druze community. In response, al-Atrash reiterated her contempt for the Assad regime. In a newspaper interview, al-Atrash demanded: *“Resign Dr. Bashar, better for you and for Syria. Stop the bloodshed of your people.”*⁽⁸⁰⁾ This eighty-year old woman also paid tribute to martyrs from several suburbs of Damascus, from Douma to al-Kadam,⁽⁸¹⁾ and appeared to offer her condolences as both head of a human rights association, Swasiya, and as a daughter of the so-called Druze Mountain.

Walid Jumblatt, member of the Lebanese parliament and the Druze leader in Lebanon also became a protagonist in the intra-Druze tension⁽⁸²⁾ when, in late 2011, he apologized to Muntaha al-Atrash through his weekly column in *al-Diyar* newspaper: *“I salute the activist Muntaha al-Atrash as well as all the Syrian activists for their peaceful political struggle to get their legitimate national rights, and I apologize for my delay to catch up with the change, hoping for the Syrian crisis to end as soon as possible to reach to a new free democratic diverse Syria.”* He ended his column with a call to the Druze of Syria to refrain from cooperating with the military troops that are intimidating the Syrian people.

Sweida’s local coordination committee issued a statement on 7 January 2012 entitled ‘A statement from the free people of the Mountain concerning the Lebanese agent Assad Wi’am Wahhab.’ The statement declared: *“The honorable and free people of Jabal al-’Arab denounces the man called Wi’am Wahhab and his statements and deeds, and whoever he collaborates with. We promise that we will hold him accountable for*

what he said, and for his attempts to break the national bonds between us and our brethren in Syria.... from now on we tell Wahhab that the soil of Sweida is too clean for your feet to stand on, or for you to breathe. It is the soil of honour and freedom. If Assad is protecting you now, this will not last. Once we gain our freedom, you and the rest of Assad’s Shabiha will not be allowed here.”

Wahhab responded in a mocking tone⁽⁸³⁾ and the Tawhid Party issued another harsh statement⁽⁸⁴⁾ in which it addressed the *“free people of al-Arab Mountain: If you are truly the majority, and if you are truly free and democratic and supportive of change, why are you so afraid of the Tawhid Party and why do you seek to mobilize people against it. Doesn’t it have the right to play a social, economic and cultural role? We advise you to return to your senses. We are ready to help you psychologically, socially, and legally, and we will not threaten to kill you or expel you given that ‘killing the dead is forbidden’.”*

The struggle centred on who would succeed in consolidating a unified Druze position vis-à-vis the revolution. Wahhab proved to be unable to build support, and his influence remained limited to narrow circles of regime loyalists. Whereas his political rhetoric was already familiar in Lebanon, it seemed very provocative in Sweida. In a YouTube video⁽⁸⁵⁾ posted on 12 March 2012, masked young men positioned in front of independence flags read out a statement in the name of the *“free people of the Arab Mountain”*: *“Ever since the beginning of the revolution, the regime has attempted to stoke the fire of friction and sectarianism in our beloved country and to portray the revolution as a movement of religious fanaticism through its media machine and spokespersons. Thus, the regime has attempted to show the province of Sweida as a supporter of Assad’s*

(80) http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=616869&issueno=11823#.U4HpvhKSw_w

(81) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5m1LUY_3Gs; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZ2r5WGd78E>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqQFrHUSshM>

(82) http://www.srgcommission.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1050:2012-01-10-06-37-21&catid=48:2011-11-15-21-43-02&Itemid=104

(83) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OAzYpYalr0>

(84) <http://www.tawhidarabi.org/?p=13047>

(85) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdO26ZErlNk>

repressive and criminal operations, and to conceal the signs of Sweida's own protest movement. We, the free people of Sweida, would like to emphasize the following: first, Syrian blood is one and indivisible, we are one people, partners in this country, and revolting for freedom and dignity. Second, we denounce all attempts to mobilize people along sectarian lines and create friction among the sons of the same country. What certain individuals and groups have done does not represent the province of Sweida as the regime claims, is in fact nothing but part of the regime's typical character. Third, we affirm that we are pressing forward in our struggle to bring down the Shabiha of Assad, and to establish a civil state, a state of law, citizenship, and equality in rights and duties."

In July 2012, the Lebanese minister Wahhab claimed that an assassination attempt had been carried against out him,⁽⁸⁶⁾ stating: *"The plan was to open fire at my motorcade in the Syrian province of Sweida...The real objective was not to kill me necessarily but to scare me enough so that I stop coming here... this is not an intra-Druze feud. Our internal situation is stable, and if there are implicated individuals they should be punished, and if a political group is involved, I will punish it."* In response to Wahhab's allegations, al-Atrash remarked:⁽⁸⁷⁾ *"I know that he is disliked and unwanted. He comes and tries to impose himself with the support of the security forces. That's all I know."*

Following this attempted assassination, Wahhab's visits to Sweida ceased. Muhammad, an activist, believes that the regime had been unable to find a Syrian Druze leader who could boost support for the regime and had therefore sought someone from Lebanon. What the regime had not understood was that the Mountain is very sensitive

regarding foreign intervention, especially if the foreigner concerned is a Lebanese Druze. Wahhab had in fact undermined the position of regime loyalists more than he had helped them because Syrians were offended by the abrasive and patronizing tone he adopted in speeches criticizing their traditional leaders, even at a time when these were in political disagreement. Wahhab failed to gain the support of the Mountain and was unable to build up a popular base of support there. This failure, however, resulted in an increase in the size of the neutral bloc rather than a strengthening of the opposition.

In July 2013, according to the news website *Kuluna Shuraka'*, a legal case was brought against al-Atrash in the court responsible for dealing with anti-terrorism cases.⁽⁸⁸⁾ It was claimed that *"the head of the homeland security department, with the encouragement of Wi'am Wahhab, had asked the justice ministry to initiate proceedings against Muntaha al-Atrash, daughter of Sultan al-Atrash, as a supporter of terrorism."*

A final attempt to appeal to the spiritual leadership of the Druze community to issue a *fatwa* allowing the Druze to fight with the regime was made on 30 May 2013, through a Lebanese delegation headed by Samir Kuntar, a former prisoner in Israel. It was reported that Kuntar, a former communist and currently a member of Hezbollah, *"has secretly met with the sheikhs of the Druze community and asked them to pressure members of the popular committees and the army of national defence in order to go and fight in Dara'a with Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. His request was categorically denied, however, as was his request to issue a fatwa that encourages the Druze to fight with the regime. The sheikhs informed Kuntar that what he was asking for was the destruction of the Syrian social fabric. Plus, whoever takes part in the killing of Syrians will be considered a murderer and shall not be properly*

(86) <http://www.tawhidarabi.org/?p=12142>

(87) <http://www.sawtaljabal.com/صوت%20ال%20جبل/129043-وثام%20وهاب%20شخصية-129043>
مكروهة في السويداء منتهى الأطرش لموقعنا أبناء السويداء جزء من هذا الشعب يرفض الطائفية والتقسيم

(88) <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/88478>

prayed for and buried by the religious leaders of the community.'⁽⁸⁹⁾

Local coordination committees and non-violent protest

By the end of 2011, society in the province was utterly divided. Alignments had assumed their final form, and animosity among residents had reached an unprecedented peak. Since the death of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash in 1982, the Mountain had consistently failed to produce an organic political leadership of its own, while authoritarianism imposed its own rhythms that merely aggravated local divisions. There is now an urgent need for a new civil leadership.

Coordination committees are a Syrian invention par excellence. They were the first popular political formations to emerge in Syria since the late 1980s, organizing and exploiting the full potential of collective action through civilian, grass-roots initiatives and the media with a view to advancing the revolution by non-violent means. Coordination committees embody the spirit of the Syrian revolution in its attempt to bring politics back to the people. They are young and dynamic, and their number has boomed since mid-2011.

In mid-July 2011 it was announced that a local coordination committee was to be set up in Sweida. Although a municipal-based committee had already formed, the newly established provincial committee was to be the more effective body. In its first statement, Sweida provincial coordination committee declared its *"commitment to pacifist work with the rest of the coordination committees in order to push popular mobilization forward, and to arrive in Syria at the point of peaceful and calm transfer of power; the coordination committee asserts its commitment also to the main principles of the Syrian uprising, as represented by the civilian nature of the state and the peaceful nature*

of the protest movement. It holds the regime entirely responsible for every drop of Syrian blood that fell, and for all the consequences of the repressive approach the regime has taken and continues to uphold, whether through the rejection of the legitimate demands of the Syrian people, the killing of peaceful protestors, or the dissemination of lies and rumours. We demand that the regime stop the bloodbath in the country, withdraw all military presence from cities, release all political prisoners, allow peaceful demonstration as stated in the constitution. We also call on all Syrian parties to practise self-restraint and not give in to the illusions of violence and sectarianism; we call upon all not to allow the regime to weaken the solidarity of the Syrian people by subverting the peaceful nature of the uprising or stopping the silent segments from joining the movement."

The coordination committee refused to affiliate to any political party or organization, though its clear rhetoric indirectly betrayed the distance its members wished to maintain between themselves and the traditional opposition as well as newer political bodies such as the Syrian National Council and, later, the Coalition. Its members wanted to emphasize that the coordination committee is focused on fieldwork. Most of the individuals active on the committee, however, lived abroad. Tens of young former residents of Sweida who had sought to secure their futures by working in the Gulf or elsewhere came together via social media in order to track events on the ground, coordinate the efforts of people in Sweida, reconcile and consolidate opinion and deliver aid when necessary.

The committee joined a broader alliance known as the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) of Syria for a while, then decided to withdraw and work independently. Riad, a member of 'al-mohafathah committee, explains: *"People in our region are short-tempered, and they hate orders from other people - whoever those are. Some might*

(89) <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/newspecialar/دروز سوريا ردا على سمير القنطار لن نسمح لأبنائنا بالقتال>

see this as an inability to work with others and make decisions collectively. I think it is a form of independence.” Others did not share this opinion. They draw attention to the inability of the committee to unite all protest work in the province, and also its chronic divisions. There were three different committees in the province, and several fragmentation is always associated with little being achieved on the ground.

But Riad believes that *“the committee does not ‘create’ protest work; it organizes what is already there and gives it a political vision. It reflects the reality in the street, in the province. The committee has reached out to everyone, ensured good media coverage and carried out excellent relief work and peaceful protests.”* Riad also believes that *“the proof of the committee’s effectiveness is the amount of attacks it received every day, from other political bodies on one side and from the security apparatus on the other.”*

Riad also confirms that most work was done in the second half of 2012. *“At the time, the revolutionary spirit was on the rise in the province, and the committee kept pace with it. It carried great responsibilities. Today, protest work might appear too slow in the province, but nevertheless the committee continues to serve as a bridge between the Syrian revolution in general and the reality of the province.”*

The Facebook page of Sweida province⁽⁹⁰⁾ coordination committee is followed by approximately 30,000 people who are primarily interested in the day-to-day events of the revolution in general and its manifestations in the province in particular. It is a media page that also discusses the current political situation and suggests alternatives. It furthermore tracks the situation of political detainees and documents the sacrifices of certain martyrs. Sweida province has to other coordina-

tion committees, one in Shahba,⁽⁹¹⁾ which is still a member of the broader Local Coordination Committees,⁽⁹²⁾ and another in al-Karya.⁽⁹³⁾ There is also a coordination committee of students.⁽⁹⁴⁾

Other political parties and formations became active as well, some old and some new. The Gathering of National Forces,⁽⁹⁵⁾ formed in October 2011, is just one example of the local political response to the revolution. It is a political coalition that includes several leftist and nationalist groups in the province and defined itself in its founding statement⁽⁹⁶⁾ as comprising *“political, cultural, and social initiatives and several coordination committees in the province of Sweida.”* It further declared that it *“is part and parcel of the glorious Syrian revolution.”* Unlike the coordination committees, the Gathering was keen to join the Syrian National Council⁽⁹⁷⁾ and build bridges with the National Coalition of the forces of the Syrian opposition and revolution. This, according to many activists, is the *“old people’s method”* of doing politics. The older generation, they claimed, like to be part of something bigger. This reference to the age of the members of the Gathering was a typical comment: the revolution had created a clear distinction between young activists who joined the coordination committees and an older generation of opposition members who joined the Gathering.

The language the Gathering used in its political mission statement,⁽⁹⁸⁾ published in February 2012, is rooted in a political liberalism based on civil rights, this despite the fact that most members come from leftist and nationalist back-

(90) <https://www.facebook.com/LCCSWEIDA>

(91) <https://www.facebook.com/shahba.rev>

(92) <http://www.lccsyria.org/ar/>

(93) <https://www.facebook.com/Are.free.Algeria1>

(94) <https://www.facebook.com/Sweida.students>

(95) <https://www.facebook.com/pages/تجمع القوى الوطنية في السويداء/171981256220142>

(96) http://souriahouria.com/بيان_تجمع_القوى_الوطنية_في_السويداء_ال

(97) http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/السوري_الوطني_المجلس

(98) https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=171981256220142&story_fbid=423390811079184

grounds and are united solely in their opposition to the Ba'th Party. The Gathering, too, had its own set of problems. It precipitated a clash with the younger generation of activists when it claimed in that same statement that, since its foundation in October 2011, it had become *"the prime political forum in the province despite the difficulties it had faced."* While admitting some mistakes, it also claimed that it is the group that most people hoped would *"prepare for the post-Assad phase, a critical phase that requires everyone to measure up to their national responsibilities."*

Rabi', a 25-year-old activist, explains: *"This is the exclusionary language of the Ba'th movement. Even the opposition, despite its long and honourable struggle for democracy, has internalized some of the characteristics of despotism."* The Gathering specifies that its current aim is to achieve the goals of the revolution, i.e. the overthrow of the regime and the dismantling of the security apparatus. For the post-Assad period, the Gathering will strive for *"a state based on democratic institutions and principles, justice, equality, respect for social diversity, the rule of law and, finally, the protection of private and public freedoms."*⁽⁹⁹⁾

High point of revolutionary activity and the largest demonstrations

Demonstrations have not stopped over the past two-and-a-half years. Tens of fleeting, small and large demonstrations have been staged during that period, mainly in al-Karya, Shahba, and Sweida. The second half of 2012 witnessed a rise in such non-violent protests that almost tipped the balance in the province. On 16 June 2012, a demonstration took place near the al-Nijmah⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ roundabout. Demands for support for the besieged cities were interspersed with the repeated

chanting of the principal revolutionary slogans. The demonstration was followed by a series of arrests. On 27 June, a larger demonstration took place during the rush hour in the centre of Sweida.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ It seemed to be a turning point as no demonstrators were attacked or arrested.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Bassel, a young activist, offers his analysis: *"It is the critical mass of people. When a peaceful demonstration manages to attract a crowd of a certain size which is not fractured before starting, it achieves a certain level of internal power and dynamism, one that can enable self-defence. This was clear to the people in the demonstration that took place in the downtown area."*

On 1 July, several female activists organized a women's demonstration at the al-Torshan guest house. On 5 July, activists tried to start another demonstration in the downtown area, motivated by the success of the first. This time, however, security forces were waiting. They prohibited any gathering in the designated street between the bakery and the post office. The demonstration went ahead in defiance of the ban, but it was savagely repressed.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Khuzama, a 29-year-old woman, recalls: *"They did not let us gather and the situation was very tense. I saw one of my relatives, an employee at the post office in his sixties; he was running away from us. We were attacked several times, and after each time, the protestors would try to gather again. Then, one of the young men started running from the soldiers; they threw him on the ground and started beating him savagely. I could not move, no one interfered to help him. Several neutral passers-by saw us get physically assaulted and no one did anything."* To the disappointment and frustration of the protestors, tens of demonstrators were arrested that day.

(99) *ibid.*

(100) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duiegP1ASd0&list=UUZswbSED3-YSsBDdaAfFJRA&index=1&feature=plcp>

(101) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnNyXnn8SD4&feature=youtu.be>

(102) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igb37u0l_Vs&feature=youtu.be

(103) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xT44Z2hwg0&feature=youtu.be>

The next morning, a huge explosion rocked the city. A bomb exploded at one o'clock in the morning in the Khazanat neighbourhood, killing two men: Mu'een Radwan and Safwan Shukair. Hundreds of people gathered after the explosion and rumours circulated throughout the night. The explosion aroused the anxiety of the entire city. The bodies of the two men were completely charred. Each side accused the other of the crime. Whereas the protestors claimed that the regime had planted the bomb underneath a car in order to crush the rising revolutionary spirit in the province, regime loyalists accused the two men of being terrorists who had planned what had turned out to be an unsuccessful attack on the security headquarters.

The next day, a Friday referred to by the coordination committees as the 'Friday of the popular liberation war,' the people of Sweida had to confront the aftermath of the explosion. There were meetings, discussions, and a strong feeling of anger throughout the city. Thousands gathered at Samara Square in the early morning to attend the funeral of Mu'een Radwan. The regime attempted to defuse the public's anger. It staged no official or military presence at the funeral. Mu'een Radwan's body was carried from the Ayn al-Zaman shrine to Samara Square by a large procession of mourners waving independence flags and demanding the end of the regime. Prayers were held in anger, and another demonstration began.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Thousands of demonstrators marched for over an hour from Samara Square to the martyr's home in al-Tabbaliyah neighbourhood, singing traditional songs and chanting revolutionary slogans eulogizing heroism.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ At the martyr's home, the protestors fetched his father and carried him out on high into the street. Women trilled cries of joy and men wept.

(104) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lz11pKFAh_A&feature=youtu.be

(105) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veN4Q4DToxA&feature=youtu.be>

This funeral procession which spontaneously turned into a demonstration was an emotionally charged expression of local anger against two years of repression. Sorrow was mixed with happiness and, as expressed eloquently by one of the mourners, there was a tangible sense of *"sadness for the loss of Mu'een and joy for the ability to demonstrate."* In al-Karya, the home town of the other martyr, Safwan Shukair, events unfolded very differently. Here, too, thousands gathered, but the demonstration quickly turned violent when regime forces fired into the air and attacked the demonstrators with tear gas. Several people were arrested.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ These two demonstrations were the largest that the non-violent protest movement in Sweida was able to organize.

Victims and martyrs

The daily rituals of mourning and burial in Sweida have been symbolized for four decades by the loudspeaker. Elderly residents trace the use of the loudspeaker back to the draining of an old Roman lake, 'al-Suriyah,' and the subsequent construction on the same site of the 'Samarah,' a place to accept condolences and pray for the dead according to the Druze rite. Since the construction of the Samarah, Sweida has awoken every morning to an amplified voice repeating a mantra concerning someone's death and announcing the two most famous sites in the city: the shrine of Ayn al-Zaman, where the body would lie and women would gather to mourn, and the Samarah site itself, where men would gather to pray for the deceased. Every morning, a car equipped with a loudspeaker is driven around the city, stopping at every intersection to repeat the mantra.

Over the past two years, however, a new ritual has emerged for announcing death. Today, a car decorated with flags and pictures of army mar-

(106) https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=j3HhZyk-6wk;_https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxx39VM4adM&feature=youtu.be

tyrs, together with photos of the president, drives around the city to announce the death of soldiers. Local children then repeat what they have heard: that the funeral procession is to start from the national hospital at, say, eight o'clock in the morning.

There are no accurate statistics recording how many soldiers and security officers from Sweida have been killed. The number could exceed 500, which represents approximately 0.1 percent of the population. This number is significant in a small province like Sweida, certainly high enough for the city to be in a perpetual state of mourning. Most victims were conscripts, held a high school qualification and were between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. Most were single men who remained in the army even after their term of compulsory military service had ended. Many signed up for two further years of service, thus compensating for the loss to the military incurred by deserters.

These soldiers' funerals quickly transmuted into loyalist demonstrations. Rice was showered on those in the funeral procession, melancholy hymns were sung, and eulogies from military officers and Ba'th officials, together with the sound of car horns and gunfire, would echo throughout the city.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ However, in the eyes of many, the photos of these young men carrying their weapons with pride belied their heroism and many people found it very difficult to associate youth with death and heroism. To this day, the army continues to announce the ever lengthening list of the names of its martyrs. Its public ceremonies, however, have almost completely disappeared. Funeral processions are now smaller but better organized. They are now accompanied by tens of motorcycle escorts⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ carrying armed

men firing machine guns,⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ disrupting traffic, spreading chaos and fear, and generally reminding the city of the armed conflict in the country.

After two and a half years, funerals have lost their mass popular appeal in the city. They are now attended only by the family and friends of the deceased, a few officials, and possibly some curious observers. The anger on the faces of the deceased's loved ones betrays one fundamental question: When will this war, which has already claimed so many lives, come to an end?

In contrast to the pomp on display at the funerals of dead soldiers, the bodies of opposition Druze martyrs are neither returned to their families nor given a proper funeral service or burial. Druze revolutionaries are usually buried on the spot where they died - whether in Aleppo, Rastan, Dara'a, or the Damascus countryside. Martyrs' parents are intimidated and their homes are seized. Malicious rumours about them are spread around town.

Druze martyrs who were actively engaged in the opposition movement are not numerous, but for their communities they represent a kind of balancing factor in their stance vis-à-vis the Syrian revolution. Druze martyrs include film director Tamer Awwam, who died in Aleppo in September 2012 while filming a documentary about the revolution, and the activist Salah Sadek,⁽¹¹⁰⁾ who died in Aleppo in January 2013 while organizing a festival featuring children in war zones.

Druze martyrs' deaths convey a certain 'revolutionary' message, standing as a symbol of national unity and contrasting the voluntary nature of political opposition with the compulsory nature of service in the armed forces. Members of the local community differ in the way they describe those killed in action, and political allegiances are evident in those descriptions. Regime loyalists de-

(107) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HRQKRcxh7I>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JZeH_9NXRo&feature=youtu.be; https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=kPa-uQmGqW8

(108) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYgAlubmgsQ>

(109) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-j_b1VyGwO0

(110) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMOKnf_ts4g

scribe regime soldiers who are killed as martyrs but refer to murdered supporters of the opposition as 'dead animals.' Supporters of the revolution take the converse view. In both views, the killing of the sons of Sweida is perceived as an 'external act,' a daily killing that takes place outside the borders of the province. With the exception of the so-called battle of the Mountain in January 2013, Sweida province, despite its deeply divided society, has never been the site of a military confrontation

The Druze community in Sweida province today gives the impression of being a series of separate communities, neighbouring each other but without much interaction. Each develops its own tools to deal with the situation based on its own specific interests and ethics.

Army of National Defence

The Army of National Defence was a paramilitary force⁽¹¹¹⁾ that emerged in early 2013 as an umbrella organization for all *Shabiha* units and people's committees (*Iijan Sha'abiya*). The contractual arrangement on which it was based stated that the regime would provide financial compensation for volunteer members and that these would officially retain their civilian status.

The regime recognized a problem in the fact that many young men from the Mountain were evading military service. Um Khaled is a mother of four children, three sons and a daughter. Two of her sons were already working in the Gulf when the revolution started and she immediately saw herself forced to sell her jewellery to pay for sending her third son to Europe. She states: *"We raised our kids with the hope of seeing them beside us as we get old, but now I prefer not to have them beside me. The youngest is supposed to report*

for his military service, and his older brothers have been called up to serve with the reserve forces. I would rather not see them at all than have them die in this war." Um Khaled is just one example of thousands of Druze mothers who have found ways to send their children abroad. Abu Issam explains: *"I support the regime and swear by the life of Bashar al-Assad, but my children are the most precious thing in my life. I do not want to see everything I worked for in my life fall apart, so I encouraged them to leave."* Accurate numbers of those expected to report for active military service or the military reserve are not available, but information that has been informally circulated reports that, in the past, only a few hundred out of eight thousand prospective servicemen have actually engaged in active duty.⁽¹¹²⁾

Sweida provincial coordination committee stated on 25 January 2013 that *"the security forces and the Ba'th Party were conducting meetings with the people of Sweida to incite young men to be organized, armed, and trained to defend the regime on the basis of a deeply divisive, sectarian strategy."* The committee also reported that the Ba'th Party meeting in the town of Tha'la had been unsuccessful owing to *"the young men's adamant rejection of the very principle of carrying arms and their refusal to join the so-called militias of national defence or work under some of the retired and very corrupt officers of the Syrian army. They fiercely confronted members of the Ba'th delegation and held them responsible for all the bloodshed in the country and the miserable living conditions. The elders had to intervene to protect the Ba'th delegation which had to leave empty-handed."* Such incidents occurred repeatedly in other towns too, though the Army of National Defence ultimately became a formidable force that oversaw many checkpoints and conducted regular security patrols. For the residents of the Mountain, the most attractive aspect of serving in

(111) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiZbKKsESu4>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FXaoZnI1Ok; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Omrhhd66Vi8>

(112) <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=39075>

the Army of National Defence was that servicemen could remain within the borders of the province and were required to work only limited and regular hours.

Additional problems later emerged for the regime. It was in need of fighters from the province for its battles in Dara'a and also for controlling the highway between Sweida and Damascus. Several meetings⁽¹¹³⁾ brought together representatives of the regime and local secular and religious leaders, but no satisfactory result was achieved. The regime applied a lot of pressure to Druze leaders⁽¹¹⁴⁾ in an attempt to gain their collaboration in encouraging those who were supposed to report for military duty to do so. As a result, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hujari said to those evading military service: *"Continue whatever you started. You are not outlaws, but we cannot help you anymore."*

The regime founded the Army of National Defence to solve these and other problems, not least to cushion the impact of the economic crisis. It began recruiting fighters as government employees, arming and training them for regular salaries. One major problem remained, however, with regard to Sweida province. A Druze *fatwa* was issued stating that Druze civilians killed outside the Mountain - fighting - would not be entitled to a proper religious burial. Men started invoking the *fatwa* in order to avoid having to leave the province. It was therefore doubtful whether such government employees, who held civilian status, could ever be deployed to fight outside the province.

The "*fatwa* itself was shrouded in mystery. No one seemed to know for sure who issued it. Residents would vaguely mention that *"several men of religion from the Druze community of Sweida prohibited membership in the national defence army, on the basis that this army will create 'fitna' or friction*

with the people of Hauran and Dara'a, and among the people of Sweida themselves, between the loyalists and the opposition."⁽¹¹⁵⁾

Religious groups

In the shadows, as the new situation became clearer, several religious groups began preparing for the future. Sectarian solidarity has grown over time, and several smallish groups drew up plans to defend themselves and their community. Choosing names that were inspired by religious history, they expanded slowly and cautiously. Some have aligned themselves with the regime, others seek to obtain arms, and still others keep their distance from everyone. The regime observes them but avoids confrontation with them.

One such group is Ammar bin Yasser,⁽¹¹⁶⁾ which is the only group to have made its existence publicly known. In a mission statement issued in March 2013 it announced:⁽¹¹⁷⁾ *"We are a group of religious men in the province of Sweida, and behind us is a group of young men armed with their faith and piety. Our mission is to protect land and honour. We have agreed on three main points: first, the province of Sweida is a safe haven for whoever enters it from our Syrian brethren."*⁽¹¹⁸⁾ *Killing or fighting in it should be absolutely prohibited; second, we call on all sons of Sweida to leave the army and return to Sweida immediately, no matter what their rank is. For when these men joined the army they did so to defend the country, but today the army is protecting those who are killing the sons of the country, with no differentiation between fighter and civilian. This is not worthy of the 'people of Ma'rouf' [another term for Druze]. Finally, we issue a fatwa*

(115) <http://Sweidavoice.net/archives/368>

(116) <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/newspecialar/مشايخ دروز يفتون سرا بعدم الانضمام لمليشيات النظام السوري>

(117) One of the prophet's friends who is especially revered by the Druze.

(118) <http://dawdaa.com/issues/1/files/assets/basic-html/page7.html>

(113) http://www.metransparent.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=20992&lang=ar

(114) <http://Sweidavoice.net/archives/506>

that excommunicates whoever carries arms among us. Whoever does so should be completely boycotted by the community, in his money, family, and food. Whoever sows the seeds of friction should be excommunicated as well; likewise whoever spreads false rumours, or carries out acts of Shabiha, or works as a mercenary for someone.”

This statement broke the historic silence that the Druze religious establishment has traditionally observed during times of conflict among Muslims. The Druze have always distanced themselves from intra-Islamic conflicts, and have never once taken sides since their emirate was established in Lebanon at the beginning of the eleventh century. They brought this neutrality with them to the Mountains of Hauran, assuming their historic role as protectors of borders and restricting use of their military prowess to fighting foreign enemies. The tenability of this neutral role is now being tested: the longer the Syrian crisis lasts, the greater the pressure on the Druze community to adopt a more unequivocal stance will become. The position of the Ammar bin Yasser group appears to be that is not opposed to the regime as such but that it is against those within the Druze community who support the regime.

In an article published in the Lebanese *al-Akhbar* newspaper in 2008, Thaer al-Ghandour wrote: *“In 1982, a Druze group inspired by the eleventh-century preacher Ammar was founded, but remained unknown to the public. The ideas of Ammar revolve around the rejection of esotericism and the belief that the Druze faith is a fully-fledged religion, not an Islamic faction or denomination. In this way, He made a complete break with political as well as spiritual Islam.”*

Virtually nothing is known about the size of these Druze groups and the extent of their influence or power. Rumours about them abound, especially concerning their supposed on-going acquisition of arms, but nothing appears certain. One such

rumour took off when the police were reported to have found a weapons cache inside Sweida city. Some said it was large enough to protect Sweida for months. Others referred to it as just the tip of an iceberg. Uncertain, however, is whether or not the police actually found such a cache.

A major problem within the Druze community is the absence of any single paramount religious authority. Three sheikhs manage the spiritual and temporal affairs of the community, but their positions are hereditary and they and their forebears have traditionally supported the regime. This situation has recently resulted in the emergence of isolationist religious groups within a community that is already quite insular and more isolated than ever before and with little communication among its members. These groups remain shrouded in mystery, but it seems that they are becoming more and more like fraternities or religious orders.

The religious community within the broader Druze community is relatively small: at most, only 10% of all Druze are observant. A religious aristocracy exists whose members rarely act against family tradition. They live - and usually work - within their own exclusive circle and rarely interact with anyone outside that circle. In contrast, the rest of the community tends to be less pious, especially if compared with other Muslim denominations. 'al-Juhhal'⁽¹¹⁹⁾ - the Druze term for the non-religious - do not engage in any regular observation of faith. They tend to be well educated, and women within this segment of society tend to enjoy greater civil liberties. Most non-practising Druze invoke general religious traditions only at funerals.

The Free Syrian Army and the Mountain battle

Battalions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) including Druze fighters are reported to have fought in

(119) From Soura, in the north, to 'Anat in the south

neighbouring Dara'a and in the countryside around Damascus. The community in the Mountain does not support or tolerate the presence of such armed groups. Nevertheless, an alliance of various brigades of the 'Valley and the Mountain' and the Sultan Basha al-Atrash brigade, under the leadership of Lieutenant Khaldoun Zein El-Din,⁽¹²⁰⁾ finally brought the military confrontation with the regime to the Mountain. The alliance chose the agricultural area of Dahr al-Jabal to launch its operations. Lieutenant Khaldoun was an engineer before he joined the army. He was wounded by gunshot in one of the battles in Dara'a⁽¹²¹⁾ and has since been an icon of Sweida's young revolutionaries.

A military council operating under the supreme leadership of the Free Syrian Army and comprising several ex-officers who defected from the regular army nominally exists in Sweida but has no real presence there. It has a stronger presence in Dara'a, where it is currently active. Lieutenant Khaldoun's alliance had prior knowledge of this council when it launched itself with the following statement: *"We have fought today a battle of honour and liberation in Dahr al-Jabal and defeated the forces of the Assad regime, under the leadership of the hero Khaldoun Zein Eddine. The Assad forces have paid a heavy price in men and equipment; their casualties are now in Sweida hospital. This is the biggest blow to the regime in the province. We are present here, and we will reach the regime anywhere we want. Thank God, there are no losses or injuries among the ranks of the Free Syrian Army."*

This statement was in fact an exercise in wishful thinking. The situation on the ground subsequently revealed that this military operation was a complete failure. Many agree that the entire operation in Dahr al-Jabal was a huge mistake and

that it was attributable to misguided advice that Lieutenant Khaldoun had received from the Dara'a brigades insisting on the need for military operations in Sweida. The battle⁽¹²²⁾ started on 11 January 2013, when snow covered large swathes of the Mountain and concealed its hostility. Many conflicting reports surrounded the operation: Who started the firing? What was the objective? How did it all start?

The Media Centre, a pro-opposition source, states that *"the security forces are spreading rumours that the confrontation in Dahr al-Jabal is aimed at stopping armed Bedouins from entering the Mountain. We confirm the completely false nature of these reports. The groups that are present there are under the leadership of the Free Syrian Army and have among them men from Sweida who have defected from the Assad army. We hope that the people of the area will not believe the rumours which aim to put pressure on the FSA groups."*

The regime closed all main highways in the Mountain, and the snow took care of the secondary roads. The battle lasted for two days; the air force was deployed and the sound of large explosions was heard throughout the region. Rumours spread like wildfire: armed Bedouins were supposedly attacking the Druze; armed terrorists from Dara'a were heading for Sweida from the east; a military checkpoint in Dahr al-Jabal was under attack; displaced people living in the Mountain were giving refuge to fighters. The regime was confident that it could control the situation, despite the many casualties being treated at the national hospital.

The people of Sweida were now hearing the sound of very close bombing and fighting. Until then, such sounds had come from the west, from Dara'a, where danger was always present. Now, the fighting was taking place on the highest

(120) Official term in the Druze faith for the non-religious

(121) https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=w1VQ4cD7E0k

(122) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_H1RQiocV2k

peaks of the Mountain which had traditionally signified safety for the Druze. Reinforcements came from Dara'a, but the revolutionary brigades were ambushed by regime forces and lost many of their fighters.⁽¹²³⁾ The operation ended with the withdrawal of the al-Sahilwa al-Jabal brigades after suffering significant losses. Their withdrawal coincided with conflicting reports about the fate of Lieutenant Khaldoun.

Many supporters of Khaldoun claim that his brother, Fadel, buried him in the snow and that when Fadel later returned to retrieve the corpse, it was no longer there. This narrative elevated Khaldoun to icon status among supporters of the FSA. Rumours persist even today that Khaldoun will reappear one day in Dara'a. Meanwhile, regime loyalists insist that photographic evidence exists of "traitor" Khaldoun's corpse. The Mountain battle between regime loyalists and the opposition was a hard one with much bloodshed.

Humanitarian assistance

As battle continued to rage elsewhere, Sweida became a safe haven for those seeking refuge from bombing and other forms of devastation. The city took in several sizeable waves of displaced persons. The first large-scale influx - from Dara'a and the suburbs of Damascus - had occurred at the end of 2011; the largest, at the end of 2012, raised the number of displaced people living in the city to around 30,000. Very quickly, networks of volunteers and other private initiatives were collecting donations and securing assistance for the needy. But this support was initially poorly coordinated, poorly documented, and fragmented, failings that ultimately compromised the distribution of the aid available.

The situation improved when a province-wide humanitarian assistance fund was established.

According to activist Riad, this fund was a non-political initiative aimed at providing assistance in the name of the people of Sweida. It had become imperative for Syrians, Riad asserted, to support each other. It was also important to showcase Sweida as a province where humanitarian assistance was not only available but generous. Assistance from Sweida had continued to arrive in Dara'a despite the blockade imposed on that town since the beginning of the revolution.

Although the provincial fund, the Red Crescent and individual donors played a very important role in providing humanitarian assistance, the residents of Sweida likewise contributed valuable support by providing affordable housing, covering the rent for those unable to pay, offering a monthly food ration, providing medical services and offering various forms of support for children. This aid was featured in videos of Sweida's people helping people in Homs and Dara'a as a token of their awareness of the hardship being endured elsewhere in the country and Sweida's desire and willingness to assist.⁽¹²⁴⁾

Abduction

The nightmare of abduction started with security forces kidnapping activists and only announcing their abduction much later. It later assumed a regional and sectarian character, particularly in places such as Dara'a and Sweida where abductions had become more commonplace. This shift started in May 2012 when a bus taking policemen from Sweida to work in Dara'a was captured. The abduction provoked an angry response in Sweida province, and informal checkpoints were set up between the two provinces. Then, 46 people from Dara'a were taken hostage. Tens of people gathered for several days outside Government House in Sweida demanding arms to fight with the re-

(123) <http://anbaaonline.com/?p=73577>

(124) <http://arabi-press.com/?page=article&id=58812>

gime in Dara'a and release the captives. Meanwhile, communication channels between the traditional leaders of the two areas had remained open and the captives from both sides were released after three days.⁽¹²⁵⁾

This mutual abduction precipitated the direct intervention of Lebanese Druze politicians Walid Jumblat and Wi'am Wahhab, each on his own, to help to resolve the crisis. Wahhab visited the Druze religious leaders in person.⁽¹²⁶⁾ The release of the captives was followed by a festival in Busra, in the province of Dara'a,⁽¹²⁷⁾ in the presence of a delegation of dignitaries from the Mountain. Reconciliation between the Mountain and the Valley was celebrated and people chanted: *"The Syrian people are one; Sweida we are with you with our blood, people of Ma'rouf we are with you with our blood!"* This celebration was a true example of national unity. Nevertheless, it did not mark the end of abductions.

In December 2012, the Nusra Front carried out a military operation against the Mjaimar checkpoint near Sweida. On their return journey, the armed al-Nusra fighters were intercepted by a group from loyalist committees in Mjaimar. The clash resulted in two al-Nusra members being killed and their bodies taken by the loyalist group and handed over to the security forces.⁽¹²⁸⁾ In retaliation, al-Nusra kidnapped 17 people, most of whom were from al-Thu'la, a town near Dara'a, and refused to release them until the bodies of their two members were returned. The head of the FSA military council in Sweida denied informing *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper that the Nusra Front

was responsible for the abduction. He referred to the Nusra Front website, the 'White Lighthouse' (*al-Manara al-Bayda*), which denied all responsibility for the deaths.

The most prominent hostage⁽¹²⁹⁾ was Jamal Izz el-Din, head of the large al-Basha family. The kidnappers uploaded a YouTube video on 27 December 2012 showing the hostages,⁽¹³⁰⁾ with their leader, Jamal Izz el-Din, begging the religious and secular leaders of the Mountain to honour the demands of the kidnappers and secure the release of prisoners from Dara'a, especially women. The hostages were shown sitting on the floor of a room with a black Nusra Front banner. The video then featured a man with his face covered reading verses from the Qur'an and threatening the Druze with death in the name of the Nusra Front. The abduction crisis has still not been resolved. Tit-for-tat abductions and ransom demands continue to divide the social fabric of the region.

On 23 January 2013, Sweida awoke to news of a further horrendous crime. The body of a fifteen-year-old boy, Nasser Jammoul, had just been found in a cemetery outside the city. The teenager had been abducted the previous month on the road between Kanawat and the city centre. The security forces had been unable to find his abductors, who were demanding an astronomical ransom from the boy's family. Nasser Jammoul had died of hunger and thirst. This incident precipitated an outpouring of grief in the city of Sweida.⁽¹³¹⁾ Thousands of people dressed in black gathered in several public squares. Nasser was mourned and buried as a martyr.⁽¹³²⁾ Demonstrations denouncing the crime were organized

(125) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAmrk2DGZ5M>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTKt8r0pC1c>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOHsiqblL4Hk>

(126) <https://www.facebook.com/Syria.News.Net/posts/312485492168859>

(127) http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=679717&issueno=12238#.Uxg_ARaD6CR

(128) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vW13D_TAuFA&sns=fb

(129) http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=716608&issueno=12493#.Uxg_lhaD6CR

(130) <https://www.facebook.com/shahba.rev/posts/414513955298596>

(131) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnC24V8Q7J4>

(132) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d17KyNx-mj8>

by several schools in the city. On the day of Nasser's funeral, the streets of Sweida were full of students and women, and the funeral procession turned into a massive student-led demonstration.⁽¹³³⁾ Sweida was demonstrating solidarity with itself that day.⁽¹³⁴⁾

Conclusion

There are three main groups in Sweida today: the regime and its supporters, the revolution and its supporters and, between these, the neutral majority. Internal disagreement is rife within each of these groups.

Sweida today gives the impression of being an utterly different place from what it was before the uprising. A societal divide that entails the political, the quotidian and the sectarian has changed the city completely. People are tired of hearing the sound of shelling in nearby Dara'a, but they have learned to adjust to the new circumstances. Tens of thousands of displaced people now live in the

province while thousands of people originally from Sweida have left in order to avoid military service and in search of a better life.

The dire economic situation exacerbates the problems of day-to-day life. The purchasing power of the Syrian pound has fallen massively. Salaries are now paid out as bulky packs of notes worth only a third, or less, of their pre-crisis value. Altercations are common in the long queues outside bakeries and petrol stations. Poverty is rife in households that depend on government employment. The highway to Damascus, formerly a symbol of upward social mobility, is today a dangerous battlefield where buses are regularly attacked.

Sweida is weary of witnessing funerals of martyrs as their number quickly approaches one thousand. Although its residents continue to marry and hold parties, these celebrations are becoming more modest, shorter, and less festive. Sweida today is strange and sad.

(133) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hqErS0lj1M&feature=youtu.be>

(134) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTzHimiSwzo&feature=youtu.be>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCLJ4SQ17QE&feature=youtu.be>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WhNMArFTI>

5. Attitudes of Christians in the Capital (Damascus 2013)

Rand Sabbagh

The Christian view of the current situation in Syria is ambiguous for various reasons. Many observers classify Christians as absolutely loyal to the regime due to fears for their future. Others suggest it is more appropriate to place Christians within the silent or grey category of people who tend to have a rather negative attitude of the regime but are more passive than active in any move against it. Still others believe that the overall political situation in Syria warrants a closer look at Christian activists and politicians who are opposing the regime and are active within the civil protest movement.

Many classifications attempt to stereotype Christians and their attitudes, but obviously none is entirely accurate. The issue therefore remains an effective media weapon for promoting any notion to world public opinion, which is still considered by many Arabs to be the opinion of the Christian West. The recent stronger media interest is shedding more light on this specific minority, but that light is usually superficial and often reflects the standpoint of the media outlet concerned, depicting the Syrian regime as the defender of minorities, especially the Christians of Syria and sometimes of the Middle East.

When the Syrian revolution began, regime opponents challenged Christians to state their official view of the events then unfolding. Their statement was to come from religious leaders rather than individuals or others unauthorized to speak on the community's behalf. From that moment on, the attitude of the Christian leaders - assumed to be pro-regime - was considered to be the attitude of all Syrian Christians.

Focusing on the Christians of Damascus, this study aims to shed light on some deeper social ramifications that have scarcely been addressed hitherto or, at most, have been examined from an exclusively religious or otherwise prejudiced perspective. The study begins with a brief historical, cultural and political introduction to the situation of the Christians of Damascus and leads on to an analysis of their status quo.

Background: Syrian Christians in the 20th century

Christians were strongly represented in the pioneer movement to promote Arab culture throughout the region and particularly in Syria, where the presence of Christian missionaries offered them an opportunity to learn foreign languages and trade with European merchants, especially in the period between the late 18th century and the seizure of power by the Ba'th Party in 1963. They thus played an important role in laying the foundations for scientific scholarship and cultural advancement in Syria, including establishing and running universities.

A number of Christians were influential in intellectual, political and scientific circles, especially during the French Mandate.⁽¹³⁵⁾ Furthermore, major political parties were founded under the influence of some secular, leftist and liberal figures with a Christian background, such as Antoun Saadeh, founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party Michel Aflaq, founder of the Ba'th Party; Elias Murqus, a promoter of Arabism; Dr. Enjian, an Armenian from north-eastern Syria who founded the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party in 1925;

(135) Many attribute this to the opportunities offered by the Mandate state to Christians, especially those of western Christian denominations in major cities like Damascus and Aleppo, many of whom had mastered the French language. A more probable explanation is the general spread of educational provision. Syrian Christians were living in a golden era in stark contrast to the mass persecution and migration of previous centuries.

and Fares al-Khoury of Damascus, a politician who played a major role in the shaping of the Syrian state.

Statistics - though inaccurate - suggest that Christians accounted for 30% of the population in the early 20th century when two major genocides took place followed by two inflows of displaced people: the first was the Ottoman massacre of Armenians in 1915 which resulted in a large number of Christian refugees settling mainly in the area between Aleppo and north-eastern Syria; the second was the Seifo (sword) massacre of Assyrians, Syriacs and Chaldeans in south-eastern Anatolia between 1914 and 1920, which further added to the legacy of Christian displacement⁽¹³⁶⁾ that had reached its apogee with the massacre of Christians in Damascus way back in 1860. That massacre had caused a large number of Christians to flee from Damascus to Lebanon, Europe and the Americas.⁽¹³⁷⁾

The union of Syria and Egypt to form the short-lived United Arab Republic (Syria was a member of this political union from 1958-1961) triggered a further wave of Christian emigration from Syria. Large numbers of Christians again fled Syria after the Ba'th Party seized power in 1963. The regime change had been followed by a change in the intellectual and cultural climate. Anti-regime intellectuals and politicians were arrested or even assassinated and, like other elites, Christians started to withdraw from mainstream society and abandoned any aspiration to compete successfully for political power or intellectual distinction. Their living conditions deteriorated in the wake of a nationalization programme and various agricultural reforms, and their influence on political decision-making waned. Most Christians who fled Syria at that time settled in Lebanon.

(136) Displaced Christians settled in nearby regions in Syria where they founded the cities of Hassakeh and Qamishli.

(137) Many oriental Christians fled by sea to Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela and the USA.

The Lebanese civil war and the accompanying sectarian fighting then precipitated an influx of Lebanese Christians into Syria. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood induced the Syrian government to impose restrictions on migration. From then on Syriacs, Assyrians and Chaldeans started to flee to Sweden on the pretext of wanting to protect ethnic minorities from extinction. A few years later, America invaded Iraq and sectarian violence erupted there. Migration movements started anew, reviving the age-old fears of Syria's Christians.

But even before then, Christians in Syria had become more inclined to become merchants than doctors, lawyers or engineers. A life in commerce was better suited to their new situation as it promised greater affluence and allowed them to distance themselves from public affairs, be they cultural, intellectual or political. (This, of course, is a generalization, but a clear change had indeed taken place within the Christian community.)

The older generation of Christian intellectuals passed their lack of political and intellectual ambition on to the next generation, instilling in it directly or indirectly a sense of disillusionment. Young people were urged to avoid confrontation, be wary of change and the pursuit thereof, and to concentrate instead on the essentials, such as survival, starting a family and improving their own living conditions. As a result of this cumulative process, many of today's generation of young Christians have virtually no interests beyond their family and job.

The concept of elites has thus changed. Today, the term refers to persons who enjoy greater affluence and good connections with persons in authority (the latter are a prerequisite of the former in a dictatorship). Today's elites seek to maintain their status by shoring up a regime that uses them as a pretext for claiming a good record of peaceful inter-ethnic co-existence. They also fear

change as it might compromise their commercial and financial interests.

In geographical terms, Christians are to be found in all regions of Syria, though they are unevenly spread across the country. Their presence is strongest in Aleppo, north-eastern Syria, the coastal region, Homs, Hauran, Damascus and Hama. There is also a small Christian community in Idlib.⁽¹³⁸⁾ The close proximity of individual Christians and Christian communities has long been a familiar phenomenon in all regions of Syria, and bonds of friendship have existed between Christians and Muslims during most periods of history. In the context of the current Syrian revolution, however, the Christian community's ubiquitous presence across the country has had a negative impact on mainstream Syrian understanding of Christian attitudes towards the regime and the revolution which assumes that these are identical to the views voiced publicly by Christian leaders. Another confusing factor is that anti-regime demonstrations in a specific area of the country with a Christian presence do not necessarily signify the involvement of local Christians.⁽¹³⁹⁾

Christians in Damascus

In most Syrian cities, the Christian quarters are in the historic downtown area. The two quarters which together account for the main part of old town Damascus, Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi, house the headquarters of three Patriarchies of Antioch.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ Here, Christians live alongside both Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The Christian presence in Haret al-Yahoud (the Jewish quarter) has become stronger in recent years as more and more Jews have left the country. Christians have also

traditionally had a strong presence in al-Midan, another ancient quarter of Damascus, but fewer Christians live there now.⁽¹⁴¹⁾ Qassa' neighbourhood in Bab Tuma is the main Christian centre in Damascus today.⁽¹⁴²⁾ As Damascus expanded, the Christian presence spread into new areas of the city. No accurate statistics are available on the number of Christians currently living in Damascus, but most residents speak of about 400,000. This estimate, however, is likely to be an overstatement. As real estate prices in their traditional quarters have soared in recent years, many Christians, like other Syrians, have chosen to move to new residential developments elsewhere.⁽¹⁴³⁾ A large number of Christians who were formerly residents of Damascus now live in the nearby Qalamoun Mountains⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ and in Ghouta.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾

Christians in Damascus have traditionally conformed to a distinctive pattern of social association that is particularly typical of small communities: they prefer to live in a closely-knit community within a clearly defined area, a policy that facilitates intra-community social contacts and marriage and effectively discourages marriage outside the community. "*It is the instinct of survival,*" says Joseph, a 37-year-old doctor from Damascus. "*There is obvious insistence on the enrolling of children at Christian or church-affiliated schools.*"⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ He mentions a number of such schools, including the Al Manar, the Besançon, the Lord, the Annour, the Al Fajr, the Bible Society and the Al Assiyah in Bab Tuma, from which he graduated. Joseph adds: "*There is a considerable number of small-minded Christians,*

(138) In villages such as Ghassaniya, Yaacobiya and Qinya.

(139) As is the case in Sweida, the Druze capital in Syria, or in Salamiya, the Ismaili capital in Syria.

(140) The main Christian neighbourhoods here are Hanania, al-Azariah, al-Abbara, al-Massbak, al-Qassaba, Haret-Jaafar, ad-Dawamneh Souq al-Qeimariyeh and Haret al-Arman.

(141) Many moved to Bab Sharqi and Al Tayamneh after the Damascus massacre.

(142) Though most shops here have been taken over by Muslims.

(143) Such as Jobar and Ayn Tarma.

(144) Maaloula, Saidnaya, Yabrud, Nabk, Deir Atiyah, Qarah, etc.

(145) Darayya, Arbin, Harasta, etc.

(146) Admission to these schools is not restricted to Christian children; many Muslims of different denominations enrol their children at them for various reasons.

but this is normal in any society that classifies people religiously. You may meet a person who never goes out of his quarter or area because he feels safe here and distrusts others whom he classifies as strangers. This closes his horizons."

Aphrodite, a retired Christian who worked for a state-owned bank and whose children attended Christian schools, says she enrolled them there so that they would observe Christian customs and traditions and in order to ensure that they met other Christian children. Aphrodite explains: "We had to reduce the risk of an interfaith marriage."⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ Besides, these schools pay more attention to teaching foreign languages than their counterparts." Aphrodite also enrolled her children in a church-led scouts group.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾

Aphrodite studied law at Damascus University and subsequently became a bank employee; her husband was a civil engineer. Their children, however, prefer self-employment. "My oldest son," says Aphrodite, "preferred to open a car spare parts shop, then the youngest one started to help him. The girls studied at university and then got married. One of them works for a private bank." Joseph believes that most educated Christian families have now opted for self-employment, abandoning any commitment to or involvement in cultural or intellectual causes. They now work as goldsmiths, car traders, spare parts traders, tailors, hairdressers and the like, depending on their social class. Joseph claims: "Their interest in school achievement has declined, although they all seek to have at least a secondary school certificate, and some may continue to have a university degree or even a postgraduate degree. This, however, is taken as a matter of prestige. In brief, the Christian community has distorted along

(147) Marriage to a Muslim is a thorny issue for Christians in Syria. Christians cite the legal discrimination in favour of Muslims associated therewith, and also the risk to their existence and the size of their community.

(148) All churches in Damascus run at least one scout group.

with the distortion of the Syrian society, but according to its own characteristics."

Since retiring from her job at a bank, Aphrodite has attended church services regularly and become an active member of the congregation. In addition to attending Sunday mass, she supervises a number of activities. "Unfortunately," she says, "churches at Sunday Mass are almost empty, but I believe that this is because people are busy. On Saturday evenings, however, more people attend; yet even then the number is not commensurate with the number of Christians in the quarter. Most people, especially young ones, have moved far away from church. Youth's relationship with the church is limited to scouting activities, but even these are abandoned when a young person is older than 25."

Joseph used to be a boy scout. "I was seven years old when I joined the scouts, and remained in the movement until I was eighteen. This was a healthy experience. With the termination of the Syrian scout movement and restricting such activities to the Ba'th youth organization, it was good for us to find such a way which has, no doubt, helped me build my personality and depend on myself. The team I joined, though church-affiliated, was not of a deep religious nature; it focused more on social, cultural and scouting activities. This is de facto the case of most church activities except for Sunday Schools, which abide by religious education, but their attendance is declining because their entertaining and cognitive activities are limited."

Joseph stopped attending church regularly. "Now," he says, "I only go to church for weddings or funerals. Until recently, I would go on feasts to participate in social life and meet my friends, but now I am busy and I have neither time nor the mood." His attitude is representative of a large percentage of Damascene Christians of both his and the next generation. The Christian church, it seems, now has no direct control or influence over its believers, and a kind of detachment exists

between the two. The church today is a social institution rather than an authority with influence over its adherents.

Salem, a forty-year-old lawyer, states: *“A Christian’s relationship with a clergyman is a kind of courtesy; it is different from the relationship between other religions’ and sects’ followers and their clergymen and masters. Many people of educated and wealthy classes have no regard for clergymen, even though it seems the opposite from the outside. Most of these approach clergymen with a view to acquire a social status, such as getting a membership in the Communal Council and the like, while those wishing to have a senior government position approach patriarchs and bishops to have their nomination when the government asks them, through its intelligence men, to nominate someone from the parish for a certain post.”*

Salem criticizes Christian clergymen because most have strong ties with the regime, especially those living in Damascus and Aleppo. He adds: *“Intelligence services contribute to the appointment of Christian clergymen and maintain permanent contacts with them. In brief, most Christians view clergymen as semi-official intelligence men, which affects their spiritual value and credibility.”* Salem recalls a number of Damascene Christian members of parliament, such as George Shalhoub, Basseel Dahdouh⁽¹⁴⁹⁾ and Joseph Sweid.

“We did not vote for Christian candidates only,” Aphrodite stresses. *“I used to hear when I was a child that in one of the elections, Mustafa al-Siba’i, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Damascus, won the elections at the expense of Khalid Bakdash, founder of the Communist Party, thanks to the votes of Bab Tuma Christians.”*

(149) Dahdouh was an independent member of parliament, though a member of the originally illegal Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

Fear of revolution

It was easy for the regime to instil fear in Christians. Maria, an activist in her late twenties who lives in Bab Tuma and works for a telecommunications company says: *“The regime has been instilling fears into Christians for decades. It sought to wash their brains, exploiting the Muslim Brotherhood’s activities in the 1980s to convince them that any alternative would be Islamic extremists who would reject Christian existence and rights and eliminate the freedoms which they enjoy now under its patronage. And it has managed to persuade them that they had not enjoyed them before.”* Recalling the first days of the revolution, Maria adds: *“When I came home on 18 March 2011, I started to tell my parents and some relatives who were visiting us about the news, expecting that they would have the same reaction as mine. But to my great surprise, they were all against it. Some said it was a short-lived problem, while others assured me that Syria would not have the same experience as Egypt. The most shocking opinion was the one that condemned Dara’a people and children on the pretext that they knew the regime’s violence and yet decided to challenge it by such irresponsible deeds.”*

No general Christian perspective on the revolution emerged from this study. The perspectives documented here are exclusively personal, though they could have been influenced in some way by the Christian community. Some specific incidents, however, do seem to have affected the Christians’ collective consciousness and thus become criteria determining which side they would support.

The Good Friday demonstrations

The demonstrations held on 22 April 2011 were called the Good Friday demonstrations⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ not

(150) In 2011, Easter for both eastern and western Christian denominations was on the same date.

only because they took place on Good Friday but also because the activists wanted to emphasize that the revolution was for all and reflected no specific sectarian identity. *"Before Friday,"* says Maria, *"we met some activists to discuss the name with a view to use it in the service of that idea, though we were not the ones to determine the name. I, however, started to feel anxious about Christians' reaction and their various interpretations; yet, I had not expected what happened."* On that day, all demonstrations in the eastern part of Damascus were supposed to proceed towards Abbasid Square, from where streets lead to the main Christian quarters. Abbasid Square was chosen because it is the second most important and largest square in Damascus after Umayyad Square, and occupying it with a peaceful sit-in would score a point for the revolution.

Salem's car broke down some way far from his destination, so he left it and started walking towards Qassa'a. *"It was a rainy day. All shops were open and people were listening to Good Friday hymns."* Initially, he reported, he did not recognize the sound of gunfire because it was dulled by the heavy rain, but he noticed that shops started to close. Salem continues: *"Sounds of hymns started to fade away, and shops started to close one after the other. Suddenly, the atmosphere became terrible. I hid between two cars, while people entered their houses or entrances of buildings."*

Nearby, Maria was waiting for news from her friends who were heading for the Square as she planned to join them as they approached. Maria recalls: *"I was prepared to participate with a group of friends. Then, we heard our neighbours and natives saying 'The terrorists have arrived. They are coming to occupy Qassa'."*

Maria was shocked. She knew that the demonstrators were entirely peaceful and adds: *"The demonstrators were shouting 'The Syrian people are one.' I do not know why they did not want to*

believe them and preferred to believe the regime's rumours. They were afraid of change." Meanwhile, Salem managed to reach the nearby house of a friend in the al-Zablatani quarter. He recalls: *"He saw me through his window and shouted to me to come up quickly. He pulled me in, and there I found some friends hiding inside."* Salem looked out the window and saw a group of armed men. *"They were putting on the same cartridge pouches and clothes that we saw in the al-Beida video some days earlier."⁽¹⁵¹⁾ I thought that one of them had appeared in that video."*

Salem heard people shouting 'Shabiha forever!' and 'No one but Allah, Syria and Bashar!' He recalls: *"Their yells could be heard clearly... they were shooting into the air, but I did not see any demonstrators at all.... I do not know if I was dreaming, but I also heard some far roaring sound saying 'Freedom! Freedom!' and 'The Syrian people are one!' At that moment, I felt that I was not alone and that I was supported, not by those who were jumping under the window, but by those who were coming from afar."* Salem adds: *"One of them saw us staring through the window and made a sign with his gun for us to hide inside. His face was terrifying. I wanted to film that and show the world who was shooting, but it was impossible. Then he started shouting at anyone who dared show their head out of the window, ordering them to enter and close the window."*

Salem then moved to another window where he saw young men getting off two buses holding sticks and pictures of Bashar al-Assad, and also cars carrying a number of armed civilians. He explains: *"They wanted it to look as if a pro-regime march confronted a demonstration and a fight erupted without any intervention by security*

(151) A widely circulated video filmed in the village of Albeida in the countryside of Baniyas provoked a lot of media discussion. The regime claimed that, judging by the men's clothing, the video had been shot in Iraq. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT2PztbYabk>

forces.” A little later, Salem saw some young men trying to escape across the dry river bed, but security men spotted them. He recalls: *“They caught one of them, who was obviously no more than 17 years old, and started beating and cursing him. They put him in a car and drove away.”*

Maria decided not to hide. Many of her friends were in the demonstration, and she was waiting for a phone call to go and join them. *“I left home when I heard that the demonstrators had been shot at and that some of them had been killed. I walked to my friend’s house in al-Zablatani which is parallel to al-Hal souk, where the crime had been committed, to see if any of my friends had been shot. The road was empty. No one was there except a pro-regime march of around 10 people raising Bashar al Assad’s pictures and repeating his name. There were far gunshot sounds, and they were getting louder as I was getting closer to the Abbasid Square. In the square, there were a large number of security men as if they had been occupying it. In front of the Our Lady of Damascus Church - a Greek Catholic church in Abbasid Square - there were men with bulletproof vests. I reached my friend’s house and saw her parents talking about terrorism and what those people wanted to do. I actually did not recognize their words, and I did not care. My friend told me what she had seen. Just before the arrival of the demonstration, armed Shabiha stood at the entrance of al-Hal souk. Some of them went inside and started shooting to show people that shooting started from inside. It was a very dirty game. Thus it would seem that they shot because they had reasons - although they did not need any. When the demonstration arrived, they all entered the souk. On that day, around 200 martyrs fell in more than one location. It was a real massacre.”*

“It was Good Friday,” says Wi’am, “and I was getting ready to go to the mass with my children like every year. The mass was special this year

because the western and eastern Easters happened to fall on the same day. All churches were open. I heard in the news that they called that Friday the Good Friday. What do they want from such a commercial thing? They will not pass their conspiracies under such a designation. Their deeds are clear to all of us. It is a Western and Gulf conspiracy in favour of Zionism and Israel. We all know about their plans to empty the Middle East of Christians.”

Wi’am seems convinced of what she says, and adds: *“I felt that there was something similar to what happened in the 1980s when the Muslim Brotherhood attacked and Hafez al Assad saved us from them. Today, I am sure that Bashar al Assad will do the same with the Salafists.”* Wi’am continues: *“They started shooting and the locals were terrified. Why do they want to come to our quarter? What will they do here? They only wanted to spoil our feast, but thank God, security forces managed to defeat them.”*

Wi’am explained that a rumour quickly spread that day about plans to blow up the Church of the Holy Cross and an attack to be staged by armed men. Witnesses, however, reported that no one even approached the street except for those participating in the fake march. Nonetheless, Wi’am and many others believed what they had heard and decided to stay at home and close their windows. As the Church of the Holy Cross is one of the largest churches of the Greek Orthodox community - itself the largest Christian community in Syria - an attack on it seemed credible.

Rumours start

During Passion Week, similar rumours spread about terrorists intending to blow up churches and many locals believed them. Maria states: *“We had fears that the regime might do something to agitate the sectarian notions it was disseminating among people. It was something to secure minorities’ absolute support, even if it was*

because of fear, but it did not do it. Rumours, however, were spreading like wildfire."

The story, however, seems to be much older. Joseph explains: *"Toward the end of each summer, some rumours would spread in Christian quarters about the arrest of some Islamic extremists who were planning to invade those quarters to commit massacres there. The regime saved no efforts to keep Christians so anxious of others, and that feeling had deep roots in Christians' collective consciousness. Thus, it was not difficult to stir all those fears of the revolution, and many Christians could not understand why the demonstrations started from mosques and why they yelled Allahu Akbar" as well as Freedom."*

Joseph recalls the slogans that confused Christians. *"I heard that a demonstration in Jobar was yelling Christians to Beirut and Alawis to coffins." I asked many activists who participated in the demonstrations, and they assured me that it never happened, while all pro-regime supporters assured me that their relatives or friends had heard the slogan themselves. The rumour, however, did what the regime intended."*

Maria states: *"All our efforts failed. Our yells, leaflets and all other means used in the civil movement were in vain. No one wanted to listen to us. They only wanted to believe their fears."*

The first public statements

The leaders of the Christian churches in Syria, the patriarchs and bishops, were quick to announce their respective positions. Most were supportive of the regime. That they found arguments to support the regime was not surprising given the aforementioned links between the religious and the secular or political authorities in Syria, particularly in Damascus which is home to the headquarters of three major patriarchates: the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch; the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East;

and the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem. These Christian leaders linked their personal destinies and those of their respective communities to that of Al Assad's regime. They thereby raised the value of the Christian card held by the Syrian regime which the latter was using to convince global public opinion of the validity of its view of the revolutionary events in the country.

On 29 March 2011, the Council of Bishops in Damascus issued its first statement about the situation in Syria, describing it as *"a foreign conspiracy with domestic hands, agitated by biased media"* and stressing that *"the violence experienced by some regions of the country at the hands of some individuals is not of the Syrian people's nature."* The statement warned against using violence, called for the use of peaceful means to achieve change and emphasised the importance of *"national unity and not to slide into sectarian violence."* The bishops' statement was clear: it blessed the regime with the words: *"We congratulate our great people on the reforms started by President Dr. Bashar al Assad, our homeland protector, and hope that such reforms will be continued."*

This first public statement expressing support for the regime was published just before the first speech delivered by the Syrian president on the uprising and shortly after government officials had promised various reforms. The statement referred to *"sectarian violence"* before any such sectarian violence had taken place and echoed both the regime's accusations regarding the opposition and its terminology with references to a *"foreign conspiracy"* and *"biased media."*

On Thursday, 16 June 2011, the Council of Bishops in Damascus issued another statement, this time via the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate, stressing that *"each drop of blood bled from any Syrian citizen's body is bled from the whole Syrian body."* The statement also called for support for

prayers for peace to be held at the Church of the Holy Cross in Qassa'a on 23 June under the slogan 'Let's Pray for Peace in Syria.' The event was attended by a large number of Christian and Muslim clerics, as well as a number of dignitaries, and when the prayers were over, the worshippers, together with scouts in uniform, went on a march to demonstrate their support for Bashar al Assad and his regime.

Diana, a 27-year-old human rights activist who lives in Bab Tuma states: *"One day earlier, we met in a friend's house to discuss whether we could make any disturbance in the mass or prevent it from taking such a pro-regime direction... We were aware of the risk of making Christians, as a community, appear as if they had only had one political attitude, which would deprive them of their citizenship and freedom. We gathered before the mass to consider the possibility of staging a sit-in there, but security men were all over the area, and any action would mean a real risk, so we preferred to withdraw."*

Celebrations in Bab Tuma

Bab Tuma Square became the venue for celebrations each Friday - the usual day for demonstrating in Syria. On her way home on one such Friday, Diana called her fiancé who was on a demonstration with friends in al-Midan. She had heard that some demonstrators had been arrested and that shots had been fired, but was not sure whether the shots had resulted in injuries. Heading for Bab Tuma Square, she found that several roads had been closed off. She asked a policeman for help, but he ignored her question. As she approached the square she saw a celebration: *"A large number of people were dancing and singing. They had installed a platform with speakers and the names of businessmen sponsors were on signboards. I still remember one of them: 'Qabannadh'. It was more like a pro-regime march than a usual celebration, with glorifying shouts and songs."*

Most participants, Diana says, were strangers; only a few locals were present. *"It was a painful surrealism: in one part of the city, people were calling for freedom and getting shot by security men, while in another part, people were expressing their love of the ruler and his actions, dancing and cursing freedom under the protection of security forces."* These weekly celebrations continued for several weeks, raising important questions about how Christians could sing and dance while demonstrators were being killed elsewhere. They were accompanied by more demonstrations, often in the form of motorcades with Christians singing songs glorifying Bashar al-Assad and waving banners featuring his photo. The risk of sectarian violence was clear.

Church leaders continued to issue statements, the rhetoric varying depending on the circumstances. The message was pro-regime, though a few timid attempts were made to take an independent stand. Christian leaders started to appear on official TV channels and write articles for pro-regime newspapers. The most influential among them, in addition to the patriarchs, were Bishop Luka al-Khouri and Father Elias Zahlawi, who sent numerous open letters to the Pope and to clergymen and politicians of different backgrounds which were published in newspapers and on social media. The celebrations, however, became less ostentatious and ultimately stopped completely.

The church leaders also invoked the sensitive issue of faith, announcing a number of Marian apparitions and miracles such as the flow of oil or divine messages. Reports of such events were given widespread coverage with the assistance of official and semi-official media outlets. The conclusion drawn by church leaders from these phenomena was a need to pray for Syria.

The appointment of Dawoud Rajiha

On 8 August 2011, by which time the army's

involvement in Hama, Dara'a, Homs and many other places had become clear, Dawoud Rajiha, a Christian, was appointed minister of defence. The first Christian ever to have held this post, Dawoud Rajiha originally came from a rural area outside Damascus but had meanwhile settled in the city. His appointment provoked a lot of controversy among Christians in Damascus: while some interpreted the appointment as evidence that the regime was directly supporting the Christian community, others suggested that Rajiha was appointed simply because he was a competent and loyal politician.

A significant number of other Christians, however, tell a different story. Salem, for example, says: *"The appointment of a Christian minister of defence was not a simple or casual event as some may pretend. We all knew that Christians were not given major portfolios and that their existence in government was often tokenish. So, the appointment of a Christian as the minister of defence at this time was doubtful. It somehow aims at gaining Christians' loyalty and support in front of the people and world public opinion."*

Beginning of civil society action

The young people engaged in civil society organizations in Christian neighbourhoods were not inactive vis-à-vis the uprising, but they were more cautious. They usually worked in partnership with like-minded activists from across the city and their radius of action was not restricted to any specific zone. Diana and Maria met their friends to organize campaigns. One such campaign was to put an end to the celebrations in Bab Tuma. Maria recalls: *"We asked our friends to disseminate leaflets with a view to raising people's awareness of the danger of such celebrations on Syrian society and its unity. We had worked in a group throughout Damascus and distributed some leaflets in these quarters. This time, we decided to launch a campaign in Christian neighbourhoods in cooperation with the group."*

On 22 July 2011 activists handed out what they called *"fish leaflets"* throughout Christian areas. The flyers stated: *"Every Friday, many civilians, security men and soldiers are martyred, does their blood deserve all these celebrations by us? We will not accept dancing on the blood of those who have sacrificed their lives."*

"A few days earlier," Diana recalls, "we participated in a campaign that we called 'Freedom Tsunami.' At dawn on Sunday, 17 July, my friend and I disseminated a large number of leaflets in our area. The campaign covered all the capital and the flyers held slogans such as 'The People Wants to Overthrow the Regime,' 'Syria Wants Freedom' and 'My Way is your Way, but the Tank Closes the Way.' I do not remember the rest. We threw these leaflets in churches as well. We finished at 7:00 a.m., but ten minutes later security men cordoned off the place, then garbage collectors entered to collect the leaflets. They only managed to collect less than half of them since we had hidden lots of them in the entrances of houses."

Maria continues: *"On the night of August 1, which happened to be the first day of Ramadan, Army Day and the date of the invasion of Hama, we were in an activist's house in Qassa'a, planning a number of activities. With the assistance of some friends, we started a campaign to distribute leaflets reading as follows, 'Guardians of Homeland, Peace Be upon You' ⁽¹⁵²⁾ the People Wants to Overthrow the Regime.' The campaign was to cover all quarters of Damascus at the same time, but before starting in the early morning, we learned that our friend Yara, who was disseminating in Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi, had been arrested. The inhabitants themselves captured her and one of them kept her in his house for one hour until security men came in to take her. She remained in jail for around 20 days. We, with others, publicized this in the quarter and asked*

(152) The first line of the Syrian national anthem.

many clergymen to intervene. Our friend and her family were harassed and threatened at their home in Qassa'a, so she had to travel abroad." Another case in point involved a group of Christian opposition supporters who objected to church intervention in political affairs and therefore visited churches in order to deliver a clear message to church leaders.

"It was impossible to keep silent about what the church leaders were saying," says Kamal, a 60-year-old writer. Given my age and profession and as an intellectual, I felt that it was my responsibility to do anything to stop that farce. A religious authority, especially one that represents a minority, that takes a political stance at a critical time like this could destroy the whole community. What they did on the pretext of survival was short-sighted and out of fear of the regime's devastating violence, and it was facilitated by its media machine."

Kamal, along with an ad-hoc group, therefore started paying visits to church leaders who had known him well for a long time. He hoped that this approach might facilitate a dialogue and make them listen. *"Their reaction was not expected,"* he recalls. *"I do not want to be unfair, but most of them acted like Shabiha by the end of our discussion and started levelling accusations. A bishop banished me from his meeting room in the church, saying that I and my group were only a tiny minority that could not represent Christians and that he knew their interests better than we did. He even threatened to inform the intelligence service about me, and I actually did receive a cautionary phone call from a prominent leader in the intelligence services who asked the whole group to stop, describing our activity as unacceptable."*

The campaigning by opposition groups in Christian neighbourhoods failed to spawn enough simultaneous demonstrations to be genuinely effective. Al-Qaymeriye, an area located between Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi, was the scene of a

demonstration by various activist groups in the summer of 2011. Many demonstrators were arrested. Imad, a university student living on al-Tahrir Square states: *"I participated in the demonstration. We started to chant 'Freedom, Freedom' and in few seconds security men and Shabiha attacked us, as expected. We were standing against the Orthodox Patriarchate - the Mariamite Cathedral. Surprisingly, shopkeepers and passers-by participated in the arresting and attacking of demonstrators. Two girls were arrested after running away from the scene because some young men of the neighbourhood led policemen to them."*

An alternative to demonstrating in the Christian neighbourhoods was to join in the demonstrations and peaceful protests taking place in other areas of Damascus and its surroundings. Diana and Maria would regularly join protests not only in Christian neighbourhoods but also in Qaboun, Douma, Harasta, Jobar and Barzeh, revolutionary areas close to their homes. *"We went many times to these areas,"* says Maria, *"because they were safer for the revolutionary movement and important social incubators. We were a group of civil activists living in Damascus from different races, sects and religions. Over time, it became necessary to mention me and my friends' Christian background and to mention our religious and racial identities. But we were warmly welcomed and celebrated."*

"Once," Diana recalls, *"we participated in a women's sit-in in Douma. Then we went to a big demonstration at the Great Mosque, then to a solace gathering commemorating the town's martyrs. The sheikh welcomed us and the Qassa'a people in his speech, referring to our brotherhood. Some women gave us the revolution's flags with these words written on them: 'From the Free Women of Douma to the Free Women of Qassa'a.' That day was the beginning of a relationship, partnership and friendship that we still have with those who remained of them."*

Christian activists have seized every opportunity to show that Christians from Damascus are indeed supporting the revolution. During the Christmas period, a group of Christian activists and some friends launched a campaign in Damascus and the surrounding areas entitled 'Christmas of Freedom.'

Maria explains: *"Under this campaign, we organized demonstrations in many revolutionary areas of rural Damascus such as Douma, Zamalka, Arbin, Yabrud, Kafarsousseh and Barzeh. Activists from other governorates joined us as well. We divided the group into smaller ones to participate in as many demonstrations as possible being held on the same day. We dressed up as Santa Claus and distributed gifts to the children of those areas amidst celebratory atmospheres and with big support from local communities whether by signboards, slogans, logistics or protection. Our campaign in Christian areas, however, was restricted to the dissemination of flyers as well as socks full of candies, leaflets and some CDs of revolutionary songs, in cooperation with the Freedom Days Gathering. We also organized a simultaneous campaign using video and print media reports, and we published everything on social media pages."*

Beginnings of mobilization

Christians with no enthusiasm for the revolution were agitated and tense. Joseph explains: *"It was not easy to push Christians to violence - at least systemically and openly. True, a significant number of them are far from the church, but the church cannot easily take a pro-violence stance since no biblical text whatsoever supports that. Thus, it was necessary to convince them instinctively rather than biblically and to stir their tribal feeling that their survival was threatened and that their homeland was endangered. There was also a need to manipulate their feelings of oppression and inequality and recall old memories of massacres and oppression. In spite of that, it re-*

mained a difficult task since most Christians in Damascus were educated and they constituted a tiny community whose survival largely depended on keeping away from any struggle."

Jamal, a 30-year-old man who works in a goldsmith's workshop and lives in the old town recalls: *"When saboteurs wanted to start a demonstration from the Umayyad Mosque, the security service called some young men, including me, and told us that the Muslim Brotherhood would demonstrate there and then move towards Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi to enter Christian quarters. We had to surround the mosque and help security forces prevent them. On that day, we brought some knives; they were the only arms we were allowed to hold. We cordoned off the mosque waiting for them to come out, but those who came out looked like regular worshippers. They seemed afraid. I did not see any one try or intend to break through. I was surprised at their fear. When I looked around, I realized that we along with the security men were the source of their fear."* Jamal describes his previous relationship with the security service and explains why it specifically chose him and his friends: *"We were local young men who got involved in every dispute. The security service knew us and knew about our strength and enthusiasm to step in."*

Sa'eed, 32, serves in the Army of National Defence; prior to that he was a member of a neighbourhood vigilante group and was known throughout Bab Tuma as a local strongman who used to move from one casual job to another to earn a living. When the revolution started he immediately adopted a pro-regime stance but lacked the fanaticism typical of many of his colleagues.

After the Good Friday killings, a priest summoned Sa'eed and many other young men to a secret meeting held in a local church. Sa'eed recalls: *"At first I did not know why the priest had called me since I was not a regular churchgoer or one of his close men. I however responded to his request*

without hesitation. When I arrived, I saw some friends and inhabitants of the quarter. There was only one man whom I did not recognize. He was wearing an official suit without a tie and he seemed to be a confident and influential person. The priest started to talk about the conspiracy the country was experiencing, repeating his confidence in our consciousness and courage and mentioning that we were always among the notable young men of BabTuma. Then he talked about the current situation and the probable sectarian violence that would hit the Christians, threatening their existence as a whole. Then he added that many people from adjacent Muslim quarters would try to displace us."

Then, the mysterious man stood up and introduced himself as a high-ranking Christian officer in the air intelligence service, in charge of what he called the "security of religions." His request was more than clear. Sa'eed continues: *"He simply told us that we had to protect our area from any terrorist attack and provide detailed information about what was happening around us in order to identify revolutionaries. Then, we were surprised when he gave each one of us a licensed gun and a security pass. Afterwards, he gave us his personal phone number and ordered us to come back every two weeks, promising to provide us with arms if necessary."*

Such pressure became more common during the course of 2011 within a context of surveillance by the regime, religious authorities and society as a whole. More and more young men were issued with security passes that enabled them to move around freely and gave them, for the first time in their lives, a sense of power and influence - something they had always craved. Checkpoints and neighbourhood vigilante groups began to appear, initially apparently unarmed or at most carrying wooden truncheons. The men at the checkpoints would inspect vehicles and report any suspicious travellers, but reports of such were very rare at that time.

Sa'eed was officially deployed to a checkpoint in Jaramana, charged with protecting it from attack by people from the Al Mleiha area. One day, a demonstration approached. A security officer ordered the three men manning the checkpoint to fire on the demonstrators but, when they hesitated, the security officer shot one of them in the back. Sa'eed says: *"I had no choice, so I fired into the air. I ran towards the demonstration, pretending that I was attacking it, but I was actually trying to hide."* Refusing to admit what had happened and preferring to stick to his convictions despite having gone into hiding for a long time after the shooting, he adds: *"It was not what it seemed; the demonstrators were armed, and I believe that the security man simply hit the wrong target."*

The explosion at Al-Tahrir Square

Two massive explosions in Damascus in December 2011 and January 2012 were followed by a tense period of relative calm with no large-scale clashes, including in the Christian areas. During that time, the regime announced a new draft constitution which caused much controversy among Christians, especially regime supporters, as its second article stated that the Syrian president must be a Muslim. The regime launched campaigns to persuade Christians to back the new draft constitution despite the fact that it frustrated their ambitions. It is worth mentioning that previous constitutions had contained the same provision and no one had objected. Soon thereafter, the draft constitution was approved by referendum. Although the draft was controversial among Christians, most of those who cast their vote voted in favour, many influenced by persuasive direct personal contacts or the extensive propaganda campaign run by the regime through official and social media.

Just under one month later, at 7:30 a.m. on 17 March 2012, the first bomb to be planted in a Christian area exploded in al-Tahrir Square,

where a major security department and the air intelligence department are located, the latter facing the emergency entrance to St. Louis Hospital at the end of Qassa'a Street. Roger, whose home is adjacent to the site of the explosion, says: *"The explosion was terrible. Smoke and panic reigned. At the beginning, we did not understand what had happened. I was asleep, and then suddenly the window glass fell over me. I had some slight wounds; my sister had deeper but not serious ones. The explosion resounded throughout a wide area of Damascus."* The explosion claimed the lives of a number of security staff employed by the air intelligence department and some passers-by; none of them was a local. It also caused injuries and material damage.

Roger adds: *"Rumours started everywhere about targeting Christians since the explosion came only a short period following the referendum on the Constitution since most Christians voted for it even though they criticized the regime for stating the president's religion in it to deprive us of such right and keep us as second-class citizens. Thus, many moderate pro-regime people started to turn into neutrals and stopped talking about the regime as the protector of Christians and of their survival, but the explosion made many other Christians shift once again towards the regime's side."*

Following the explosion, the streets into the neighbourhood were closed off and checkpoints were set up. This strong security presence was there to stay.

Imad states: *"It became impossible for us to carry out any activity within the area. The distribution of security men became terribly intensive, as if in occupation, I dare say. Many inhabitants agreed on their existence in the beginning, but soon, they started to express their annoyance to each other rather than publicly. Our movement almost stopped."*

A martyr from Qassa'a

Bassel Shehadeh, a film director from Qassa'a, was killed on 28 May 2012 while shooting a film in Homs as the regime bombed the city. He was the first Christian martyr of the revolution from the Damascus area, and his death provoked strong reactions in both the community and the media. Shehadeh was also a well-known activist in the peace movement, especially in Damascus; he had been arrested the previous summer during a demonstration staged by intellectuals.

Diana, one of Bassel's friends, recalls: *"Bassel was an activist who did his best for the revolution and to communicate its real image to Christians, hoping that they would support it rather than oppose it. Bassel was not at home when the air intelligence building was blown up so I called him to say he should come home and check on his parents. There, a local met him and said: 'Congratulations! I hope you are happy with the deed of your opposition.' This kind of sarcasm and hostility was familiar to us as locally known opposition activists."*

Diana continues: *"On 29 May, we started our efforts to bring Bassel's body to Damascus, but that seemed impossible. We asked the UN monitors, the UN and the Red Crescent to help us, but all efforts failed. Those who wanted to pray for him had to travel to Homs the next day.... At night, a large number of friends and people offering condolences gathered in front of his house in Qassa'a. Suddenly, security men led by a high-ranking officer came and started shouting and asking about the reason behind our gathering. When he was told that a friend of us had died and we were there to offer condolences, he said someone may put a bomb among us, so we should go away, but he was not aggressive. We discussed what to do at the mass the next day in St. Cyril's Church, which was very near Bassel's house. Some wanted to demonstrate after the mass, but the priest directly threatened us and*

even Bassel's parents. So, we decided to let things be and see what would happen."

The same night, appeals were posted on the social media to mobilize all activists in Damascus, and Arabic-language and international media organizations reported on the incident. The regime and its supporters promptly launched a campaign to damage Bassel's reputation in an attempt to turn public opinion within the Christian community against him, accusing him of spying for the USA, fabricating video footage and supplying the media with false information. Imad states: *"Bassel was my neighbour for a long time and I knew him very well. It was not easy for local people to hate him or to believe the stories about him, but the degree of collective agitation was astonishing. We thought that the best thing we could do for him was to gather all civil activists in order to peacefully march in his funeral procession while shouting for Syria and the one Syrian people, hoping that the silent, the fearful and the pro-regime supporters would see the real image of the revolution for once at least. Staging such a demonstration would have been important at the grass-roots, sectarian and national level, and even at the logistical level as Qassa'a is an extension of Abbasid Square - the everlasting dream of the revolutionaries."*

Events, however, did not unfold as Bassel's supporters wished. That this would be the case was obvious to Diana: *"I did not expect the campaign to succeed. The media campaign that preceded the funeral proved to be harmful since it gave the regime a chance to mobilize its supporters and disseminate whatever it wanted of sectarian rumours."*

In the morning of the day scheduled for Bassel's funeral, another funeral was held in a parallel street: that of a Christian soldier who had been killed in northern Syria. The soldier's coffin, covered with the Syrian flag, was carried in a solemn procession, people fired shots into the air, and a

sense of sympathy was all-pervasive. Meanwhile, men from all security agencies were stationed on all routes leading into Qassa'a and in front of St. Cyril's Church where the mass for Bassel was to be held. Imad recalls: *"When we went for Bassel's funeral we found that the church doors were closed and the prayer service had been cancelled - an unprecedented incident in Syria. Everyone felt anxious; security men and Shabiha started to arrest young people randomly at checkpoints - often people from outside Damascus, especially if they were from a pro-revolution area. There was a state of panic, but many young people gathered in front of the church and started singing, facing the security men and Shabiha who then used all means of provocation until they all arrived at Bassel's house, where they repeated slogans such as 'We are hungry Shabiha and we want to eat traitors'."*

Maria, who was there with her friends, recalls: *"The previous night, we saw the official death notice. Instead of stating that Bassel was a martyr, it said who died in a 'painful accident' - the printing of death notices requires security permission. A friend of ours then designed and printed another death notice. We hung them up in many places in both Christian and non-Christian areas of Damascus. The notice contained the words 'Allahu Akbar' in the middle of a big crucifix with a verse from the Bible. It also stated the real cause of death: he was a martyr who died in the bombing. By early morning, many of these death notices had been torn down, but the notice was widely circulated on social media."*

Diana states: *"The neighbours tore down the white ribbons usually hung during the funeral of a young person, slammed their doors in our faces and even adopted the security service view that Bassel was a spy and that we were traitors. Many of those who came for the prayers were elderly or from rather silent groups. An old relative of mine saw Shabiha in the neighbourhood running after veiled girls. She took the girls by the hand to hide*

them, but another lady started to shout that she was protecting spies and traitors. Many of us were subjected to interrogation because of our direct relationship with Bassel or for other reasons, including spying and treason. On the first Sunday after the funeral, we went to all churches of the area in order to disseminate flyers and write on donation money that we would pray for Bassel in spite of everyone. Then, some friends went to Father Paolo Dall'Oglio at the Monastery of Saint Moses the Abyssinian some way outside Damascus and prayed secretly for Bassel's soul to rest in peace."

Salem states: "I did not know Bassel personally, but I managed to warn some of his enthusiastic young friends. The previous day I had heard, by chance, some men talking about their preparations with the security service to provoke a disturbance and beat up and arrest activists. There were also rumours about deploying sniper rifles. The instructions, according to my information, came directly from the air intelligence service."

All those who were arrested at Bassel's funeral were ultimately released. Ayham, who spent two months in prison, states: "I was accused of being a friend of the criminal Bassel Shehadeh, as they wrote in their files. Being his friend and attending his funeral were sufficient reasons to arrest and torture me."

Beginnings of the 2012 battle of Damascus: explosion at the national security headquarters

The explosion at the national security headquarters in July 2012, which killed Dawoud Rajiha, Syrian minister of defence and a Christian, together with numerous crisis unit officers, marked the beginning of a period of heightened public anger and fear. It also marked the beginning of a new phase in the so-called "Battle of Damascus" as regime forces started bombing areas both inside and outside the city.

The situation had become clearer. The regime's policy of denial had been unmasked as the fighting was now there for everyone to see and hear. Large numbers of people from Qaboun, Barzeh and other neighbourhoods started to flee to nearby Christian neighbourhoods, using the parks there as shelter. Civil society and other activists started tackling this additional humanitarian problem. Rula, a 40-year-old woman from al-Tijara neighbourhood, states: *"I went with a relative of mine to the park and talked to displaced families. A group of young men had told us that they had managed to open many schools, so I told these families to go to the opened schools. The next day, I went to the school nearest to my house in al-Tijara, where I saw many young activists and Red Crescent volunteers working to organize the place."*

Sara, then a student at a local college states: *"The community's response on that day was unexpectedly positive. We were somehow afraid of the local residents' reaction towards the displaced, but they actually rushed to help people. I saw many instances of humanitarian assistance in Attijara School. It was the first time people had communicated this way since the beginning of the revolution."*

Rula concurs with Sara's views: *"I met many women and sympathized with them. What was going on was not their or their children's fault. We communicated easily."* Rula is not totally supportive of the regime: *"I am not with one side against the other and sometimes I see it as a Sunni-Alawite struggle, unfortunately. I try to keep unaligned but, at the same time, some issues attract my attention, for instance when I saw the displaced people, especially the women and children."*

Sara says that the situation has since changed: *"I was at college and could clearly hear the sound of bombing and gunshot. In the early morning, I was surprised by an order to evacuate the college"*

on the pretext that young men from the displaced families were demonstrating at the adjacent mosque, though I was there and all those young men were present in the college. Security men were at the gate and asked for ID cards more than once.” Sara claims that this was a fabricated threat intended to drive the refugees away and thus prevent their coming into contact with locals: “They did not want the residents here to know what was really going on. For that it was better to drive the migrants away.”

Return of the arms issue

The controversy about the arming of Christians and the support for such a policy by the Christian churches surfaced again on 29 July 2012 when the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus issued a statement clarifying its position: *“We, the clergymen of the Mariamite Cathedral, assure that the rumours circulated about the armament of Christians inside and outside Bab Tuma by the Patriarchate or about its request from the competent agencies to arm its parish are incorrect because we, as Christians, believe in the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ.”*

The statement continues: *“We repay no one evil for evil, but good for evil, and we ask our beloved parish and whoever hears our voice to refrain from holding arms against anyone for any reason.”*

The facts on the ground, however, paint a different picture. Rumours spread rapidly about an intended invasion by the armed opposition (by *“terrorists and gangs”* in the terminology of regime supporters). Jamal, who was convinced that Wahhabis were coming to burn their houses and churches and rape their women states: *“We were afraid of an invasion by people from Mleiha to occupy Bab Sharqi and Qassa’a and by people from Jobar people to occupy the rest.”*

“One day Jamal recalls, “we met with friends in

Bab Sharqi. We knew that Shiites of the nearby Joura quarter had been armed to fight terrorism and that they had formed organized neighbourhood watches, so we decided to raise our voices and demand arms to defend ourselves.” Salem comments: “Those voices were suspicious, but they fell on welcoming ears.... We made a lot of efforts to combat them and to raise awareness, even among pro-regime supporters, of the ineffectiveness of arms and the need to avoid provoking any side and giving it a reason to attack us. But the situation deteriorated and it became impossible to retreat. Although the church declared, through priests and in many prayers, its rejection of arming Christians, the decision was no longer in its hands. The regime was pushing it in that direction and sectarian violence was flaring up throughout the country.”

The first weapon Jamal received was a Kalashnikov, together with three full rounds of ammunition. Weapons were issued only after submission of some proof of residence or, more specifically, proof of being a Christian. Jamal recalls: *“Each group has a leader who suggested some names. In the early days we received no training, but then, some received training in Iran or Lebanon, while others were trained in local camps. The training lasted one to three months.”* Most newly armed people had previously been jobless and had a criminal record. People working or with contacts in the security services encouraged their relatives and friends to obtain weapons with a view to intimidating and silencing anti-regime Christians or at least deterring displaced people from settling in their area.

Syria in 2013

The situation in Syria was highly volatile in 2013, and each unfolding event had its own specific impact on the Christians of Damascus. The main areas of Christian settlement in Damascus are located in the downtown district and are thus political hotspots. Additionally, events in Saidnaya

and Ma'loula, two Christian villages a few miles from Damascus, had a direct impact on the views of the many people originally from these villages who have since settled in Damascus. The end of the summer brought an escalation of mortar attacks on Christian areas of Damascus and also numerous explosions in nearby Jaramana. Then came the first attack on Ma'loula, which was given extensive media coverage and caused panic among Christians in general. It took place shortly after chemical weapons had been used in the suburbs of Damascus and amid reports about possible American air strikes. For the regime, the attack on Ma'loula was a welcome boost to its propaganda campaign about the oppression of Christians.

Elias, who was born and lives in Ma'loula states: *"I believe that invading Ma'loula at that time was a stupid move by the armed opposition. I even view it as an expression of a desire to humiliate Christians, and thus, it mobilized Christians completely behind the regime which, using all means of propaganda, managed to market the event to world public opinion, making an international cause of it. It also coincided with the global prayers for peace in Syria called for by the Vatican."* Meanwhile, mortars were being fired regularly on the eastern neighbourhoods of Damascus, causing extensive loss of life. Residents asked the ministry of education to close the local schools temporarily in order to protect their children. There was widespread anger within the Christian community when the regime denied the request.

Joseph recalls: *"My house was among the ones hit by a mortar. Fortunately, it did not explode. The shells claimed a large number of lives in the area, mainly young people and children, which increased the overall state of tension. For the opposition, reports on the Christians' suffering were considered to be exaggerated and a regime endeavour to promote itself as the defender of minorities, while another part of the opposition*

said that Christians were only paying a small price compared with Sunni quarters and villages." At the same time, the official media reports on these events led some regime supporters, especially Alawites and other non-Christians, to claim that the regime did not care as much about them as it cared about Christians. The regime's efforts to secure the release of the nuns kidnapped from Ma'loula further reinforced this view.

By the end of 2013, the heightened tension among Christians in Damascus had caused the community to adopt an unprecedentedly explicit sectarian perspective. Diana believes that Christians in her area are both aware of and embarrassed by their ambiguous position. She states: *"Most of my relatives are pro-regime supporters, but now they perceive that the regime has used them in its war, entangled them in this situation which has created hatred against them from everyone, and used this card to influence world public opinion. Many of them know that it is a criminal regime and remember its deeds against the Lebanese Christians during the civil war, but they perceive it as the best of many evils."*

Aphrodite states: *"If we have to support a party, should we support a takfiri party that wants to kill everyone who does not follow its faith and aims, and wants, therefore, to displace the Christians? Or should we support a party whose evils are known to us, but does not want to kill and displace us on sectarian grounds? I have many criticisms of the regime, and they are not new ones. And I am aware of its suppressive structure, but we lived and adapted ourselves to this situation. If the opposition movement had taken a real civil, cultural and intellectual nature, we would all have followed it and would have not supported the regime."* Many agree with Aphrodite; others hold different opinions and hope that the revolution will be successful, in which case, they believe, Christians will neither suffer more than other Syrians nor be punished on sectarian grounds.

"Many says Salem, "believe that the shelling of Christian neighbourhoods in eastern Damascus is motivated by sectarianism. However, others point out that the shells have not targeted churches, but security installations; if they had been sectarian, they would have targeted churches. These views, however, are unpalatable for the regime, its supporters and its media. Of course, whatever the case, the death of many children and young men has deeply affected Christians, aroused their worries about their future, and increased their sense of of sectarian belonging."

Conclusion

No one knows what the future holds for Damascus and its Christian community. Many young Christians from Damascus have already left Syria, and the future may bring further waves of emigration or perhaps other scenarios that seem inconceivable today.

Whatever the future holds, this study suggests that the Christians living in Damascus today cannot be stereotyped. Whereas many silent and

uncertain Christians were won over by the opposition in 2011 and much of 2012, the regime and its security apparatus has subsequently managed to tighten its grip on society and regain the support of that formerly undecided demographic. Although the Christian church, through the majority of its leaders, continues to declare its loyalty to the regime, many Christians of Damascus are critical of both the regime and their church and would welcome reforms. However, the recent rise to prominence and power of fanatic organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the al-Nusra Front, together with the increasingly sectarian narrative being propagated by both the Syrian regime and the armed opposition, are now supplying credible reasons for many formerly hesitant Christians to openly support the Syrian regime.

Damascus remains a worried city. Its Christians are fully aware that any battle for the city would take place close to their homes and that their community could, at any moment, become a flashpoint for changes in policy and loyalty in any direction.

6. Tension in the Christian Valley (Wadi al-Nasara 2013)

Samer Masouh

Located in the district of Talkalakh, to the west of Homs, the only area in Syria where Christians are a majority, Wadi al-Nasara is a group of villages historically referred to as the “Valley of the Christians”. Largely unscathed in the early days of the revolution, Wadi al-Nasara nevertheless experienced sporadic incidents of armed confrontation that resulted in shifts in political allegiance, sectarian division and stronger support for the *Shabiha*. This study examines the Wadi, its history, population, the changing political climate there and the views expressed by local residents during 84 interviews conducted in the Wadi between mid-2012 and mid-2013. The interviews show that despite the relative peace and economic prosperity there, the revolution has indeed had an impact on the community’s tranquillity and sense of cohesion.

Focusing on the Christians of Wadi al-Nasara, this study attempts to illustrate the impact of the revolution on the thinking of one specific community of Syrian Christians at a time when revolution had already swept through the country. It relies primarily on a series of interviews with a diverse group of local people of various ages, educational attainment levels and political views.

Characteristics of Wadi al-Nasara

Wadi al-Nasara is not an administrative unit but rather a group of thirty-one villages located in the eastern and western parts of the Rawel valley in Talkalakh district to the west of Homs. These villages fall within two separate administrative districts - Annasra and al-Hwash - and together

they form Wadi al-Nasara or the Valley of the Christians.”

Hanna, a history teacher from the village of al-Hwash explains: *“The name emerged circa 800 AD and survived until 1958, when Syria and Egypt formed together the United Arab Republic. On the 12th of March 1959, the minister of interior at the time issued decree number 295 which changed the name of the valley into ‘Wadi Annadara’ as part of a series of changes that aimed to replace sectarian names with others that are more neutral-sounding. The Druze Mountains were hereby known as Jabal al-Arab (Mountain of the Arabs) and the Alawite mountains as Jibal al-Lathikiya (the Latakia Mountains). Many people in Wadi al-Nasara thought the decision was directed against them and stemmed from what they considered to be Jamal Abdul Nasser’s hostility to Christians. I am not sure, however, whether Nasser knew of the existence of Wadi al-Nasara or not.”*

As the Wadi is not an independent administrative unit, no official records exist concerning the size of its population. Nevertheless, civil records kept in each village until 2010 suggest that the population was approximately 138,000 at that time. The history of Wadi al-Nasara is largely inseparable from the history of the broader area in which it is located, especially that of Homs. The rulers of Homs controlled the Wadi until 1725, when Homs and Hama became part of the Ottoman Vilayet of Damascus and the Wadi fell under the rule of Tripoli. In 1920, Wadi al-Nasara became part of an Alawite state with its capital in Latakia. Thirty-four years later, in 1954, the Wadi reverted to being administrated by the province of Homs. At the time, Tartous was not yet the capital of what would later become Tartous province but instead part of the province of Latakia.

Unlike other rural areas in Syria, Wadi al-Nasara never had a strong agricultural sector. It has many olive groves, but crop cultivation is limited and the number of people who depend on farm-

ing as a principal source of income has plummeted over the last fifty years.

Elias, an economics graduate and owner of a hostel in the village of Mishtaya, states: *"The high level of literacy in Wadi al-Nasara since the mid-twentieth century has pushed its residents to abandon agriculture and seek other sources of income, like state employment, especially in teaching, or tourism. The latter has contributed greatly to the relatively high standard of living in the Wadi. People of the Wadi have played a key role in promoting it as a key tourist destination. Other areas have a more beautiful landscape, but became less famous because their people did not promote them the way we have. We did not attempt to attract Muslim tourists, but we were able to attract the Christians of the entire country, especially those who prefer to spend their time in a purely Christian environment."*⁽¹⁵³⁾ *We have two main tourist attractions: the convent of Mar Jirjis al-Humaira in al-Mishtaya and the famous Krak des Chevaliers fortress in al-Husn, and several hotels and restaurants. Tourism has not only benefited owners of hotels and restaurants but also people involved in real estate. Over the past ten years, because the Christians of Homs have been very keen to own land in the area, prices of real estate have multiplied several times, and all businesses related to construction and retail have flourished. In the past, owning a car was a dream, whereas now most people in the Wadi have their own cars."*

Mtanius, a retired general from the village of Mashta Azar, agrees, adding that: *"The rising living standards in the Wadi have made people less interested in joining the army, since it was primarily poverty that made me and many others of my generation seek a career in the military. Now, however, there are no poor people in the*

(153) Wadi al-Nasara adopted a pro-Christian slant in its attitude to tourism. This explains why the percentage of Muslim tourists is low - they are treated better elsewhere - and, by the same token, why it is popular with Christian tourists.

Wadi, and those who have inherited land from their parents, no matter how small, can sell it or develop it into rental apartments or commercial shops and live off the rent." Remittances from former residents of Wadi al-Nasara now working elsewhere have also led to better basic services and a further increase in living standards. Young people from all villages in the Wadi have found work abroad - to the extent that the village of Umar al-Husn seems almost deserted during the winter season.

When the revolution started in March 2011, Wadi al-Nasara's economy boomed as a result of a large influx of Syrian Christians, mainly from the city of Homs. This demographic shift led to more investment money flowing into Marmarita, Hwash, Mishtaya and even Kafra, a small village that benefited from its proximity to the main regional highway. Wadi al-Nasara was largely spared from the shortages of basic supplies which the war and road blockades meant for most major Syrian cities. Michel, who owns a local shopping mall, explains: *"The proximity of the Wadi to the coastal areas and to Lebanon has made it possible for it to compensate for shortages. The only remaining problem is the devaluation that the Syrian pound has seen which is sometimes affecting the net profit we make at certain times, but this is a general problem in the country, not just in the Wadi."*

Wadi al-Nasara is renowned for its high levels of literacy and educational attainment. Joseph, a retired specialist in education, states: *"The people of Wadi al-Nasara have been known for their eagerness to acquire school and university degrees. At the beginning of the last century, when there were no schools in the area, people used to send their kids to study in Homs, and unlike other rural areas in the country, people valued each other based on their education rather than wealth or pedigree. The other distinguishing fact is the high number of teachers compared to most rural areas in the country. Indeed, we can't talk about*

the dissemination of school learning in the country without mentioning the Wadi and the town of Marmarita especially, which had three different high schools in the 1950s, when entire provinces did not have this number, and the town became a destination for students from Homs, Tartous, and even from Sweida."

Samir, a physician from Marmarita elaborates: *"You don't need much effort to recognize the arrogance with which the people of Marmarita look at their neighbours in the Wadi. This feeling of superiority stems primarily from higher accomplishments in education, and the feudal origins of certain families, most notably al-Yazajis. Today, there are books that talk just about the families of Marmarita and their history, as if the town has a separate history from its surrounding area; or as if their families have royal blood. The people of the town also believe that the town buried their last illiterate man in 1954, but this is plainly false."*

Another distinctive feature of Wadi al-Nasara is its sense of religious solidarity. People in the Wadi take particular pride in *Asabiya*⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ and consider this to be a desirable character trait. Jamil, a sociologist from the town of Ayn al-Barida, says: *"Confessional solidarity in al-Wadi is part of our sense of historical authenticity and continuity. Trying to preserve the demographic identity of our region, i.e. its Christian character, is a positive sign. It spares our area from repulsive Islamic signs such as the veil and the mosque. Yes, I am a fanatic and I don't accept to sell or even rent any property to Muslims. If others do it, I'd boycott them and consider them traitors and everyone else should do the same, so that we preserve our area and spare it the fate of Mashta al-Hilou, where greed has pushed local residents to sell to Muslims and, as a result, the town has lost its Christian character."*

(154) Intolerance of and dealing aggressively with Muslims; here particularly with respect to the purchase of property in Wadi al-Nasara

It is interesting that the majority of Christians in Wadi al-Nasara are Greek Orthodox, followed by a minority of Greek Catholics. However, no visible differences exist between the two sects and, since the revolution, Easter holidays have adhered to the Greek Orthodox calendar and are celebrated by Catholics and Orthodox alike.

Sectarianism is clearly visible in Wadi al-Nasara as a religious community, but not among its people as individuals. This was true before the revolution and remains the case today. Interfaith marriages and the agreement on the dating of Easter are clear indications of a willingness to compromise in this respect. Most local churches elsewhere in the country have been unable to agree on such matters.

Political parties in Wadi al-Nasara

The political views of the residents of Wadi al-Nasara are largely a function of their party allegiances. As Christians, the people of Wadi al-Nasara have traditionally been attracted to three secular parties: the Communist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Ba'th Party. Political affiliation and party membership were relatively early phenomena in the Wadi because of its proximity to Lebanon, where many political movements originated. The educated class that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s was influenced by the rising popularity of ideological parties and keen to match the rising levels of party membership among the educated elite elsewhere in the country. Selim, a seventy-year-old physician from Marmarita recalls: *"We used to read Karl Marx and Antoun Saadeh and discuss them on a daily basis."*

Nazih is a retired lawyer who was arrested for his membership in the Communist Party. He states: *"Marxist thought appeared in the Wadi around the 1930s, through the workers in Lebanon. It evolved into membership in the Communist Party among the workers, students, and intellectuals of*

the village of Hab Numra. When the party split in 1972 the majority chose the faction of Riad al-Turk since most appreciated al-Turk's moderate views on Arabism and religion and his refusal to yield to the regime; unlike the Syrian Communist Party under the leadership of Khaled Bakdash which was completely co-opted by Hafez al-Assad. In the late 1970s, Assad began a campaign against members of al-Turk's faction, which started by sacking them of their state jobs and culminated in the early 1980s with mass arrests that lasted in certain cases for years. In Hab Numra alone, around 150 people were arrested, sometimes for days and sometimes for years. After we were released, we suspended our political activities until the revolution broke out in 2011. Hope returned and many of our young members participated in the demonstrations in Homs. We even considered organizing a demonstration in the village, but feared the destructive response of the regime."

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) has been widely popular in the Wadi, especially in Marmarita after Juliette al-Mir, the wife of party founder Antoun Saadeh, visited the town in 1952. After the assassination of Adnan al-Maliki and the resulting campaign against the SSNP, many members of the party fled or were imprisoned, and party membership plummeted. In the 1980s, a process of rapprochement between the SSNP and Hafez al-Assad began, culminating in a decision by the party leadership to join the Ba'th-led National Progressive Front. In essence, this meant that the party was hijacked by the regime. When the revolution broke out, the SSNP, including its members in the Wadi, sided with the regime. Nidal, one of the party's leaders in the village of Mashta Azarsays states: *"We met in the party's headquarters in al-Hosn and decided to stand firmly behind the regime. At that time, we were against arming our members, but after a while we noticed that Rami Makhlouf the president's wealthy maternal cousin founded another 'Syrian Social Nationalist Party,' placed it under*

the leadership of Issam Mahayri, and armed its members." Currently, both factions have armed members but are distinguishable from the *"Shabiha* by their black uniform with a hurricane logo. In Syria's last elections, Elias Shaheen, a lawyer from al-Hwash village, was elected as SSNP representative for the Wadi.

Like elsewhere in Syria, Wadi al-Nasara has a large number of Ba'th Party members. Many young people put under pressure to join while still at school. Khalil, an elderly Ba'thist who was jailed under Hafez al-Assad for being a member of the Iraqi Ba'th faction, says: *"Since Hafez al-Assad came to power, he has attempted to turn the Ba'th party into a toothless institution that would co-opt as many people as possible. As for the Wadi, those known here as Ba'th activists are nothing but regime figures who write reports about their neighbours in return for state positions with access to networks of corruption and nepotism, like head of municipality. During the pre-revolution years of Bashar's rule, they did not have an important role to play; but afterwards he employed them again to mobilize people and to spread propaganda about the events in Syria and arrange pro-regime marches."*

The village of Hab Numra today is an exception in that it is the only village in the entire area that displays no pictures of the Syrian President or banners citing his pronouncements. Jirjis, a 75-year-old local says: *"People in Hab Numra oppose the regime loudly, whereas those who support it do so bashfully. It is not because of the popularity of the Communist party (Riad al-Turk's faction) but a result of the many attacks the village suffered from Alawite gangs and bandits."⁽¹⁵⁵⁾ The Alawites are in general associated with the regime and hostility to them means hostility to the regime as well."* Jirjis also believes that the people of Hab Numra are defiant by nature and

(155) There is no Alawite minority in Hab Numra; there are neighbouring Alawite villages to the west.

deplore all forms of oppression. Thus, when the Syrian Social Nationalist Party joined the Progressive National Front, a consortium of Syrian political parties that was hijacked by the regime, more than 160 members of the party in Hab Numra resigned and condemned the act as a form of submission to the regime.

Wadi al-Nasara and the Shabiha

The early days of the revolution brought the establishment of so-called 'people's committees.' These were particularly common in Homs city and the surrounding region. Acting on a concept that the regime had promoted since the beginning of the revolution, small groups of young men would take it upon themselves to erect makeshift checkpoints and search all unfamiliar vehicles under the pretence of keeping the neighbourhood safe from thugs. The 'people's committees' subsequently became the *Shabiha*.

Although Wadi al-Nasara remained largely untouched by the revolution, 'people's committees' and then *Shabiha* were present there from the outset. The most notable *Shabih* in the Wadi is Bishr Fouad al-Yaziji, a young man from Marmarita who has close contacts⁽¹⁵⁶⁾ in the security apparatus, particularly the air force intelligence service which manages *Shabiha* operations throughout the country. In March and April 2012, al-Yaziji and three Alawite *Shabiha* attacked protestors in a Sunni area near the village of Talkalakh. al-Yaziji has also overseen the setting up of several checkpoints in Marmarita over Christian holidays under the pretext of protecting the area from terrorist attack. His popularity has increased over time in line with a general shift in the public perception of the *Shabiha*.

(156) Bishr had strong connections with the regime. Residents of Marmarita and the Wadi in general used to go to him if they needed a favour from the intelligence services. Bishr owns a resort complex called Marmarita Palace, the entrance to which is decorated with a photo of Bishr and Bashar al-Assad taken during one of the latter's visits to the resort.

Ghassan, a sixty-year old engineer from Marmarita, describes this shift as follows: *"At the beginning, Bishr Yaziji was faced with great opposition in the town and the Wadi in general, since most people thought he was getting them involved in unnecessary problems. This is why he had to create some kind of threat so that people would realize that they need him. He would open fire in the air outside the village to scare people and make them believe that there was an imminent threat to their lives. Nevertheless, he remained largely unpopular, especially among the educated class until the events of Hosn took place. At that point, people stopped perceiving the Shabiha as a group of hooligans and started thinking of them rather as heroes protecting the Wadi from threats from Hosn or any of the other Sunni villages nearby. As for those who continued to oppose the Shabiha, they became less able and willing to voice their opposition due to the shift in the general mood and the question about what could be done in the eventuality of a terrorist attack."* Mark, a university student, adds: *"There are also other reasons for this shift in perception, primarily what happened to the Christians of Homs, who had to leave their neighbourhood as a result of the entry of the armed opposition in 2012. People in the Wadi thought that if the Christians of Homs had been armed, then the armed opposition would not have entered their neighbourhood. At the same time, the rising scale of violence in the entire country made the idea of internal protection wise. The people of the Wadi did not want Alawite Shabiha to set up checkpoints in their areas, so they approved of the idea that their own sons would serve as protectors of the region."*

In addition, once young men started being drafted into the army, becoming a local *Shabih* was a preferable and less risky option than fighting with the Syrian army in places like Aleppo. Nabeel, a young man from the village of Nassra, received his army conscription papers but decided to join the *Shabiha* instead. He says:

"Had it not been for Bishr, I would have been among the dead right now. When I was asked to join the army, I presented my papers to the Army of National Defence [the official name of the Shabiha and Bishr accepted them. Instead of going to Aleppo to die, I simply served a six-hour shift at our checkpoint every three days, and I continue to live with my family and friends. I did not like the idea of Shabiha at the beginning, but now I owe them my life."

As many men join the *Shabiha* as an alternative to military conscription, many of the newer, younger members do not share the original ideological bond that brought and held the early members together. Many joined for purely personal and opportunistic reasons, a case in point being Aouni from Marmarita. Aouni's father shot one of the residents of the village but escaped from both the authorities and the victim's relatives who were threatening revenge. Aouni joined the *Shabiha* in order to protect himself and his brother, for any attack on him would be construed as an attack on the *Shabiha* as a whole. Thus, although the *Shabiha* were not universally accepted in the Wadi at the beginning of the revolution, the subsequent escalation of violence - combined with sometimes very parochial reasons - has made them become a more palatable presence today.

In mid-2011, a few months into the revolution, Bishr al-Yaziji became the official representative of government authority in the Wadi when responsibility for the safety and welfare of the residents was transferred to the *Shabiha*. The role of the police force, meanwhile, had been downgraded to one of carrying out administrative tasks such as distributing fuel or supervising final exams in schools. The extent of the *Shabiha*'s authority became apparent when the mayor of Marmarita, having ordered an illegal building to be demolished, was accompanied to the site by a group of *Shabiha* rather than police officers. In addition, requests and petitions were now being submitted to Bishr al-Yaziji. Fawas, a resident from the

village of Ayn Raheb, states: *"I am very happy that the authority of the police has virtually vanished and is now replaced by the Shabiha. The police force is a group of corrupt crooks who only provide services based on the bribes you pay, whereas the Shabiha provide their services willingly and without any expectation of money in return. At the end of the day, they are treating us like family and friends, not like the police, who saw everything through the lens of their own private interests."* The poor relationship between the police and the people of Wadi al-Nasara thus helped local residents to reconcile themselves to the reality that the *Shabiha* had become the de facto authority in the area.

Relationship between the Shabiha and the people of Wadi al-Nasara

Lara, a university student from the village of Misthaya, states: *"They [the Shabiha] treat us as if we are stupid and could really believe their lies. They repeat the lie that there are 1,500 armed Afghans in the village of Hosn, just to make us appreciate their role in protecting us from what is in fact an illusory threat. Unfortunately, however, there are many who believe their lies and spread them. The Shabiha are willing to keep us all living in terror as long as that guarantees their presence and adds to their importance in the area."* Many others echo Lara's views, arguing that the *Shabiha* exaggerate the threats to the Wadi. However, people rarely voice complaints about the treatment they receive from their protectors, though this is not always the case among those who have recently moved to the area. Jameel, a recently displaced man forced to move to Marmarita, explains: *"The Shabiha discriminate against people like me; for instance, they forced me to remove the tinted windows from my car because it is illegal, but many people in Marmarita were allowed to keep the tinted windows of their cars. I don't know why they try to appease the original inhabitants yet treat us with arrogance."*

With regard to the way the *Shabiha* treat those in the Wadi known to be against the regime, Dani, a *Shabiha* in the village of Kafra, says: *“We work to have the best possible relationship with the people of Wadi al-Nasara, even those among them who oppose the regime, as long as their opposition is not blatant or harmful. We are willing to ignore certain acts as long as they don’t embarrass us in front of our leaders; otherwise we will have to intervene.”* Youssef, a renowned opposition figure in the village of Ayn Ghara, agrees with this and adds: *“It is not in the Shabiha’s best interests to antagonize us, since they know that if any one of them is kidnapped or if the power balance in the country shifts, it is us who would have the ability to intervene to protect their lives. Thus, they treat us relatively well in their best interests. If the regime regains absolute control over the country, this would most probably change.”*

Finally, it is worth noting that, for a while, the *Shabiha* force serving in the Wadi included some women.⁽¹⁵⁷⁾ Many women volunteered to join and women soon had their own training centres. They carried out checkpoint duties and helped to organize the grand processions and gatherings that take place in the Wadi to celebrate important occasions. In May 2014, two months after the regime forces took over al-Hosn castle, the *Shabiha* force in Wadi al-Nasara was disbanded and its checkpoints were handed over to SSNP gunmen and Ba’th troops.

Al-Hosn

Al-Hosn, a village with a population of some 17,000, its own police station and the mediaeval castle known as Krak des Chevaliers (Qala’at al-Hosn) lies in the heart of Wadi al-Nasara and is the only village in the area with a predominantly Muslim population. Al-Hosn is part of al-Nasira

administrative district and shares borders with several villages which are part of Wadi al-Nasara. The village has four neighbourhoods: Ain al-Rihaniya, al-Midan, al-Turkman and al-Sarya. Its Christian inhabitants live in al-Sarya neighbourhood.

So why is al-Hosn often, including here, considered to be part of Wadi al-Nasara, the ‘Valley of Christians,’ especially as its population is primarily Muslim? Butrus, a Christian cleric believes there are three reasons. The first is geographical: As al-Hosn is located at the centre of the Wadi and many of its farms overlap with those in other Wadi villages such as al-Mishtaya, al-Nasira, al-Hwash, and al-Tallah, it is difficult in any practical sense to see al-Hosn as distinct from the rest of the Wadi. The second is historical: One hundred years ago, the population of al-Hosn, like that of the surrounding villages, was predominantly Christian. Emigration and a low birth rate, however, have resulted in the Christian population ceding its former majority status to the Muslim population. The third is the presence of the Krak des Chevaliers, a historic monument that the people of Wadi al-Nasara are keen to keep as an integral part of their local identity and the local economy.

No political activism was evident in al-Hosn in the early days of the revolution and the village at that time took in refugees from more volatile areas such as Talkalakh and Homs. Villagers from al-Hosn who were keen to protest travelled elsewhere, especially to Talkalakh and the Khalidiya neighbourhood of Homs where many former residents of al-Hosn now live. Al-Hosn maintained its neutrality until early February 2012, when armed opposition fighters⁽¹⁵⁸⁾ stormed the local police

(157) Female *Shabiha* served from late 2012 to August 2013. Most female *Shabiha* were Alawites. 25 young women from the Wadi held paid positions in the *Shabiha*.

(158) This was a group of Free Syrian Army fighters, all from Talkalakh, led by Abdel Rahman Wello. The group carried out the attack on the police station with the aid of some young men from al-Hosn. The attack resulted in the formation of the Ahrar al-Hosn brigade led by Raad al-Shaar, which controlled al-Hosn until 2013 when Jund al-Sham, a group pursuing an ideology similar to that of al-Qa’ida, took over with a predominantly Lebanese contingent of fighters.

station, killed three Alawite police officers and dragged their bodies out into the street. The opposition fighters filmed this operation and posted it online. Their footage was later aired on Syrian television as an example to illustrate the opposition's brutality. This event and its aftermath ultimately induced many Christians to flee the village.

A few days after the attack on the police station, on Wednesday, 8 February 2012, Alawites believed to be relatives of one of the murdered police officers abducted Walid Bitar, a resident of al-Hosn who worked as a butcher in Marmarita and had allegedly boasted about having been involved in the police station attack and the mutilation of the murdered officers' bodies. Tension mounted because regime opponents in al-Hosn believed that the *Shabiha* in Marmarita had helped the Alawite abductors to locate Bitar's workplace and thus been complicit in his abduction. The same day, the *Shabiha* set up temporary checkpoints on main roads linking towns within the Wadi and, at one such checkpoint, opened fire on a car, killing Rula Ibrahim, a Christian woman. Desperate to prevent the already tense situation escalating into open sectarian violence, the leaders of the Wadi, including Christian and Muslim clerics, agreed to gather for a meeting at the home of one of the leading figures in al-Hosn on 9 February 2012.

George, one of the people present at the meeting recalls: *"We realized from the outset that Walid Bitar was going to be killed. Therefore we decided to circumvent the negative consequences of the act by meeting with the notables of al-Hosn before the announcement of his death. The clerics stressed the bonds of friendship and coexistence between the communities and the need to preserve the solid ties that had brought us together. We agreed to form a joint committee to solve any possible feud. At the end of the meeting, some young men from al-Hosn talked about the existence of several pages on the inter-*

net posted by Christians of the Wadi that insult the people of Hosn and describe them in racist language. Our answer was that there is no way to verify such statements and these pages could be run from outside the Wadi and are primarily meant to create problems amongst us. We then signed a statement that underlines peace and coexistence between us. The next day, the burnt body of Walid Bitar was found near the Alawite village of Ain al-Rihaniya. The body was delivered to Walid's family and buried on the same day. We went to pay our condolences but on our way back, the Shabiha of Bishr al-Yaziji fired at our motorcade without aiming at us directly. They meant to deliver the message that the Shabiha are the ones in control, not us, and that they are the ones protecting the Wadi. As a result, that was our last visit to al-Hosn. We started to fear for our lives, not from the people of al-Hosn but from our own Shabiha."

A brief period of calm followed, but tension flared up once again with the appearance in al-Hosn of Sheikh Majed followed by a number of incidents of looting and abductions in the Wadi. Mahmoud, a fighter in the Free Syrian Army from al-Hosn recalls: *"A group of young men headed by someone called Sheikh Majed came to us and presented themselves as revolutionaries. We welcomed them at first but after a while they started blocking roads and stealing; they started abducting people from the Wadi and asking for ransom, saying that the money will go to the Free Syrian Army. The people of al-Hosn did not accept these acts, which strained their relationship with the Christians of the Wadi, and they became impatient after they started suffering from them as well. After two members of the Free Syrian Army were killed, we inquired about this person called Sheikh Majed and we discovered that he is a Lebanese citizen called Walid Bustani and that he works for the Syrian regime. He came to al-Hosn to plant the seeds of sectarian tension between the Sunnis of al-Hosn and their Christian neighbours. We caught him and, after consulting with Lebanese clerics, we executed him."*

Mahmoud was later injured and sent to Lebanon for treatment. Although the people of al-Hosn frequently stressed that the actions of Sheikh Majed did not represent the will of the people there and were meant to sow the seeds of hatred between Sunnis and Christians in the Wadi, the tensions that he created in the area have persisted. This was particularly evident when revolutionaries from al-Hosn attacked a Syrian army checkpoint at the entrance to the Wadi. The army forces requested and received support from the local *Shabiha*. Four Christian *Shabiha* were killed in the ensuing clash. The people of the Wadi continue to hold the people of al-Hosn responsible for this incident and want revenge.

Ahmad, a citizen journalist from al-Hosn explains: *"We are very aware of the differences between the people of the Wadi, with whom we have always had a common history and neighbourly bonds, and the Shabiha who have decided to support the unjust regime. We are aware also that the presence of the Shabiha is beyond the control of the people, but what offends us is that al-Hosn is now being blamed for any harm inflicted on the Wadi in general. For instance, when missiles landed on the houses of al-Hwash village in December 2012, killing three people, all the Wadi internet pages blamed the revolutionaries of al-Hosn. But they knew that these missiles were launched by the Shabiha, who targeted al-Hosn but hit al-Hwash by mistake. The people of the Wadi know these very people, but don't have the courage to say the truth."* Others in al-Hosn likewise stressed the historic ties between the two communities and the goodwill held towards the Christians.

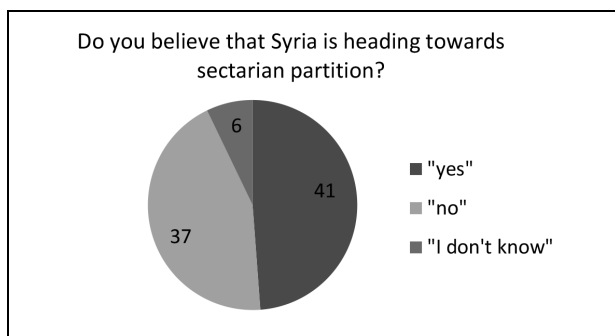
Ra'd al-Shaar, the leader of the Free Syrian Army in al-Hosn remarks: *"We have confronted the Salafis because they attacked the Christians of the Wadi; what many don't know is that we have sleeping cells inside the Wadi supporting the revolution; we have armed them but asked them*

not to do anything at the moment. We want the Christians to join the revolution, because Christians are civilized people and civilization does not tolerate the injustice that we have seen from the regime. We have issued a statement that did not ask the people of Hosn to actively help us, but just to not help the regime in its barbaric attack on al-Hosn. We are ready to face the regime alone, and whether we surrender or negotiate, we will continue to resist even if we don't win."

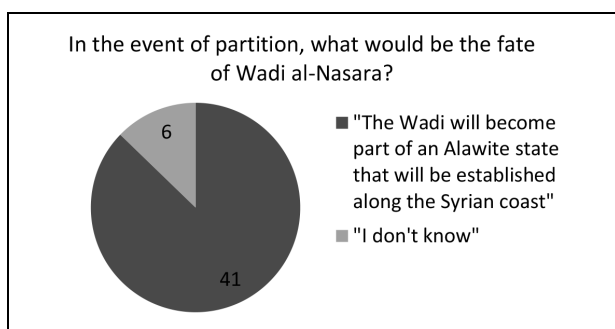
Everyone in the Wadi is aware that the regime has the ability to regain control there, but their views differ on why it has not done so. Regime loyalists believe that this has to do with the regime's priorities as it is being more severely challenged elsewhere. Opposition supporters, such as Talal from Hab Numra, hold a different view: *"The regime re-took areas like al-Qusair and al-Khali-diya and is able to regain al-Hosn, but the regime is using al-Hosn to scare the Christians of al-Wadi; it allows radicals and Salafists to enter the village and through them pushes the Christian community to carry arms in the same way the Alawites have. For had it not been for al-Hosn, there would be no reason for the Shabiha of the Wadi to be present at all."* The community thus remains loyal to the Assad regime and continues to seek its protection.

The notion of sectarian partition and the future of the Wadi

From the early days of the revolution, the notion of partition along sectarian lines has been openly discussed in everyday conversation everywhere, especially by people living in the Wadi, irrespective of their political or religious background. This study therefore included a survey to record the views of 84 local residents of various ages, classes and political affiliations on the idea of sectarian partition. Some knew that they were being questioned as part of a survey; others did not.

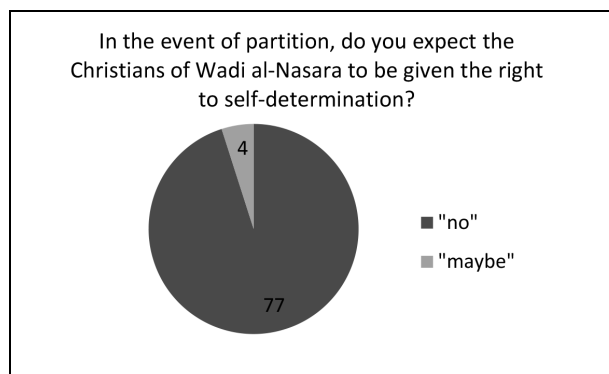


Imad, a forty-year-old schoolteacher from the village of Blat, stated: *"No one wants partition, but it is the only solution to end violence and lessen the degree of tension. After all this violence and blood and hatred between Sunnis and Alawites, I don't think it is possible for them to continue living in one country and under one flag."* Most people who said that partition won't take place believed that the regime will win and won't allow the country to be divided.

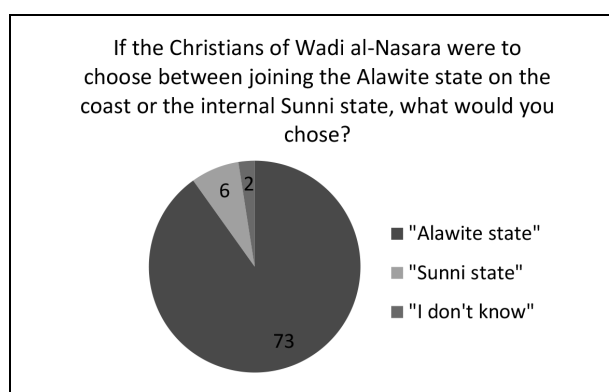


Fadi, a schoolteacher from Kafra says: *"In case partition does take place, we will definitely be part of the Alawite state. This is what history dictates since the Wadi was part of the province of Latakia which served as a centre for the state of Alawites under the French mandate. Geographically we are also closer to the coast. That the Wadi will become a part of the Alawite state is beyond a doubt."*

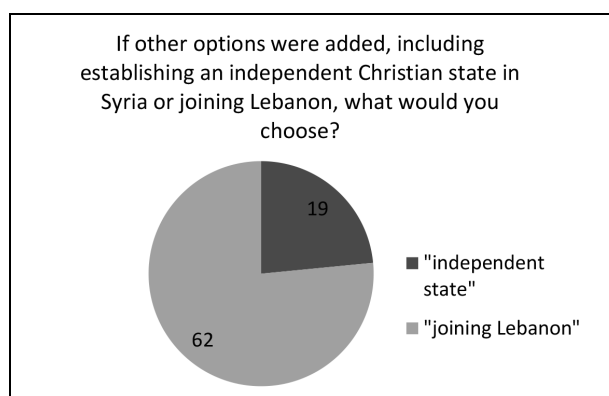
Although most people would like the right to self-determination, most believe that they will not be granted it. Lamis, an engineer from the village of Juwaniyat says: *"History teaches us that people have worked hard and struggled to acquire the right of self-determination, but what did the Chris-*



tians in Wadi al-Nasara or any other area in Syria do to deserve this right?"



Farid, who owns a grocery shop in the village of Mashta Azar, explains why he would choose the Alawite coastal state: *"Both groups are difficult to live with, but the recent incidents have proved that while the Alawite can be bought with money, the Sunni is more difficult to figure out. He is ready to kill you just because you are Christian. Therefore, I would choose the lesser evil."*



Wael, a Christian and a government employee

from the village of Mzayneh says: *"How could we vote to have an independent state when we don't have any of the economic or even geographical requirements? I believe everyone should choose to join the Lebanese, not only because it is better for us, but also because it increases the numbers of Christians in Lebanon, who have recently been outnumbered by Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiite."*

Salim, who believes it would be better to have an independent state, says: *"I do not prefer for our region to become part of Lebanon, since as Syrian Christians we have no political leaders to represent us whereas the Lebanese have several like Aoun, Ja'ja or Franjieh. Therefore, we won't have a strong presence and we will be treated like second-class citizens."*

The responses to this survey suggest the following conclusions. First, the people of Wadi al-Nasara see themselves less as a distinct political community than as an appendix to the neighbouring Alawite communities. Most do not believe they would be able to decide their own fate in the event of partition, assuming that they would form a community with other minorities, specifically Alawites.

Second, the survey indicates that religious allegiance is more important than national allegiance. As Lebanon is still perceived by many in Syria as a Christian country, Lebanon seems to be a viable alternative possibility for purely religious reasons. Georgette, a social researcher from Marmarita, states: *"If this survey had been conducted several years ago, the results would have been different. Our sense of allegiance to Syria would have come before anything else. The events that have taken place in the country over the past two-and-a-half years, however, and the emergence of the Sunni-Alawite conflict inside the country, and the Sunni-Shiite one regionally, made us as Christians rediscover our religious identity. People would choose to join Lebanon even though they*

feel somewhat inferior to the Lebanese. The Lebanese perceive Syrians as inferior even if they are Christian. Nevertheless, the current events have made us feel closer to the Christian Lebanese than to the Muslim Lebanese, whether Sunni or Alawite."

Third, the survey confirms that although Syrian Christians feel very strongly about their religious identity, they do not make distinctions within their community on the basis of religious denomination. The majority of Christians in Wadi al-Nasara are Greek Orthodox, but they would still feel comfortable becoming part of the Lebanese Maronite denomination - even though when Lebanon was founded, the Maronite Patriarch Houweyk refused to include Wadi al-Nasara in the new polity in order to maintain a high percentage of Maronites among his Christians.

Conclusion

The characteristic which distinguishes the Christians of Wadi al-Nasara from Christians living elsewhere in Syria is their relative confidence regarding the future of their home region. Most believe that the regime will not fall, and that if it does, Syria will be partitioned and the Wadi will become part of an Alawite state. Surrounded both now and in a potential future by communities strongly supportive of the Assad regime, the Christians of Wadi al-Nasara assume that they need not fear being held accountable for failing to support the Syrian revolution.

How would Christians benefit from the fall of the Assad regime? Would they then rule the country? Of course not. Rami, a young man from al-Mzayneh village, states: *"At least this regime allows us to practise our religion, we celebrate Christmas and Easter without any harassment, and we drink alcohol and eat pork and throw parties, our women can dress as they wish, so why would we ask for more than that? Yes, we know it's a dictatorial and corrupt regime but nothing guaran-*

tees us that the alternative is going to be better, and even if it were democratically chosen, the ballot can result in a radical Islamic regime that imposes a lot of restrictions, and treats us as dhimmis like Sharia says and not as citizens, so we would live in a closed atmosphere that would make us wish for the current regime to come back.... We prefer this regime with all its disadvantages to going through a dark tunnel with an unknown end."

The absence of political ambition among Christians in Wadi al-Nasara has made them focus exclusively on improving their own lives and social status. Despite being aware that the regime is corrupt and despotic, their specific perspective of the future persuades them to support it nonetheless. The majority of Syrian Christians, especially those in Wadi al-Nasara, perceive the regime as Alawite and thus almost kindred - not only because both sects are minorities but also because they have certain social views in common, such as allowing alcohol consumption and not wearing the hijab. This perception of quasi-kinship was a further factor in their disinclination to support the

revolution. Moreover, most believe that replacing the current regime would mean the establishment of a Sunni substitute rather than replacing a dictatorship with a democracy.

The Christians' loss of confidence in the international community has further entrenched these views. 'Razan', a lawyer from the village of Hawash, is clear: *"The Christian who believes Europe and America's leaders when they say they are seeking to establish a democratic government in Syria is crazy, they only seek to implement their own interests, and if the Syrian regime fell then our fate will not be better than that of Iraq's Christians after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime where the terrorist gangs spread all over the country and they we forced to immigrate and live as servants for Europeans and the Americans; this is what happened in Iraq after the application of American democracy."* While being fully aware that the current regime is bad, Christians in Syria sympathize with it simply because they fear that any alternative regime would be worse.

7. Ismailis: a Minority-Majority in Syria (Salamiya 2014)

Abdallah Amin al-Hallaq

Salamiya is located in central Syria some 33 km to the east of Hama. According to official statistics for 2010, the city has a population of 105,000; local residents estimate the population of the larger metropolitan area around Salamiya at approximately 150,000. Salamiya is has one of the largest Ismaili communities in Syria; other such communities exist in Mesyaf, al-Qadmus and in some rural areas along the Khawabi river in Tartous. Local residents estimate that Ismailis account for 70% of the total population of Salamiya, alongside a small percentage of Sunnis and a smaller percentage of Alawites. No official statistics exist on the distribution of these communities within the city.

The Ismaili community accounts for approximately 2% of the Syrian population. Ismailism is a religious branch of Shia Islam named after Ismail ibn Jafar. On the death of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, some adherents claimed that Ismail, his oldest son, should be appointed his spiritual successor (Imam); others, however, namely Shiites in Iran and Lebanon, believed that the Imamate should pass to Ismail's younger brother Musa. The explanation for this difference of opinion was that whereas the former claimed that Ismail outlived his father, the latter claimed that he predeceased him. It is worth mentioning that Ismailis, Shiites and Sunnis all believe that Jafar al-Sadiq - Musa's and Ismail's father - was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad for he was the son of Muhammad Ben Zein al-Abidin, son of al-Hussein Ben Ali Ben Abi-Taleb, and Ali Ben Abi-Taleb was the husband of Fatima, Muhammad's daughter.

This study is an interpretation, a narration and an

analysis of the complex sectarian, ethnic, military and political developments that took place in Salamiya between the outbreak of the revolution against the Syrian regime in March 2011 and today, 2014. The study is based on the experiences of the author as an eye-witness and also includes comments, testimonials, political analysis, and accounts narrated by local residents.

Long before the outbreak of the revolution, Salamiya was known for its strong opposition to the regime. This was true of both its citizens as individuals and its political parties, which included the Communist Labour Party, the Arab Democratic Ba'th Party, and the Syrian Communist Party. Like cities throughout Syria, Salamiya became politicized in the period preceding the rise to power of the Ba'th Party on 8 March 1963. Various people from Salamiya who were active in creating a vibrant cultural, intellectual and literary scene in the city and throughout the country undoubtedly played a prominent role in this process.

The besieged city

In the period preceeding March 2011, anti-regime political and cultural activists in Salamiyahh who had joined political parties in the 1980s and 1990s and been active in the Damascus Spring movement in 2000 and 2001 were keenly awaiting an event that would spark an uprising against the Syrian regime such as they had witnessed in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya.

On 18 March 2011, when Syrians in Dara'a rose up against the regime, it was clear to all that something dramatic was happening. The first protest in Salamiya took place on 25 March 2011 and was relatively successful despite the small number of protesters. They gathered near the Imam Ismail Mosque for a short period of time calling and cheering for freedom. At that time there was no explicit intention to overthrow the regime.

One of the activists present at that first protest recalls: *"The protest was shy and comprised only a small number of protesters, yet it was suicidal and had a great impact given that only a few activists were able to move under the difficult and strict security measures and the security alert that started with the Arab uprisings. Nevertheless, we were planning on enlarging the scope of the protests."*

This modest beginning was the prelude to a series of much larger protests in the city that began on Friday, 1 April 2011.

It was astonishing that this was happening in Salamiya, a city inhabited by minorities, at the beginning of what both this city and others with minority or majority populations alike hoped - as their slogans suggested - would lead to realization of the Syrian dream of freedom and salvation from tyranny. But let us first take a closer look at sectarian and social issues before moving on to political issues.

It is difficult to form a clear opinion on the sectarian issue in Syria and even more difficult to assess the political situation given the turmoil both before and since the revolution. Both issues appear to owe their existence as such more to the regime than to any difference in religious doctrine or rite.

In 1960, a secret Military Committee was set up in Syria. It is a confidential Committee formed by Syrian Ba'thist officers who were serving in the night aviation squadron in Egypt during the Syrian - Egyptian Union, and who noticed that the Union was not achieving their Party's goals. Their aim was to rebuild the Ba'th Party which had been dissolved in 1958, to see it rise to power, and then to think through the Arab Union issue."⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ The committee initially comprised:

- Two captains: Hafez al-Assad and Abdel Karim

(159) <http://syrianleaders.com/persons/125/127/>

al-Jundi (originally from Salamiya; it was said that he committed suicide in mysterious circumstances; however, a more probable explanation advanced by well informed persons is that he was assassinated by his colleagues; one of his colleagues was Hafez al-Assad);

- Two majors: Salah Jadid and Ahmad al-Mir;
- Lieutenant-colonel Muhammad Umran, and others.

Salim Hatoum later joined the Committee to represent the Druze community. His appointment meant that the three key minority communities (Alawites, Druze and Ismailis) now held supreme decision-making power. That power ultimately passed to a small group of individuals within one minority, namely Alawites. Hafez al-Assad had been able to accomplish this concentration of power by appointing Alawites to high-ranking positions in the army and intelligence services and removing anyone, even Alawites, who threatened his agenda. Hafez al-Assad was preparing to seize power for himself and his scions.

The 'Corrective Movement' (*al-Haraka al-Tas'hihiya*), as it was called by Hafez al-Assad's allies and supporters, was nothing more than a façade to absolve the regime from its responsibility for the national interest and replace it with the interest of a small community. Salah Jadid, Mustafa Roustom and Nouredin al-Atassi, all senior leaders of the Ba'th Party, were arrested; Nouredin al-Atassi had been the President of Syria before his arrest. Mustafa Roustom, a former member of the National Leadership (*al-Qiyada al-Qutriya*) from Salamiya who was imprisoned for 23 years, recalls:

"When Hafez al-Assad assumed power, he designated himself as 'the leadership' (al-Qiyada), and the first resolution passed by the leadership consisted in naming him 'Leader of the March.' By doing so, the 'Leadership' had abdicated responsibility for being the actual leadership of the Party, and the name of the Party was the only thing left

from it, becoming hence a Party under one man's leadership. Before that, in 1963, the Party committed a grievous mistake by accepting an autocratic party while it had not yet acquired the popularity or the appropriate managerial staff; therefore, it had become a victim of the military in its struggle with them in Syria."

With the Sunni component effectively excluded from the Ba'th Party and most influential positions in the Syrian army and intelligence services held by Alawites, the Syrian regime had acquired a sectarian identity. This was later confirmed by the clash with the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in February 1982, which highlighted the dilemma for Syrian society of being ruled by a regime founded on sectarianism. It was followed by a clampdown on all the regime's opponents, especially two left-wing political organizations: the Communist Labour Party and the Syrian Communist Party. Many party leaders and members were imprisoned and, in some cases, executed. Many of those imprisoned, usually for ten years, on charges of belonging to dissident parties were originally from Salamiya. Some, along with local writers and poets, have since transformed Salamiya into a centre of Syrian culture and literature.

The protests and the social situation

It is interesting to note that opposition-led, non-violent protests in Salamiya were not merely confrontations between the protesters and the regime via security service agents, Ba'th organization officials and members of various syndicates. They acquired a civil society dimension. Although no weapons were used and there was no bloodshed, they were not entirely peaceful either.

In cities with a more homogenous ethnic and sectarian composition and a clear religious or tribal leader, protests clearly involve two distinct protagonists: the regime forces and the demonstrators who have taken to the streets. In Salamiya, in contrast, the absence of local figures of

authority caused sharp divisions within society in two respects:

- within the Ismaili community itself
- opponents of the Ismaili community and secular people not affiliated to any community or religion on the one hand and the Ismaili, the "*Shabiha*" (predominantly Alawite pro-regime paramilitias) and, to a much lesser extent, local Sunnis on the other.

One could interpret the conflict in Salamiya as a miniature model of what is happening in Syria as a whole - with slight differences. During the second protest in the city, which took place on Friday, 1 April 2011, very few security, police and public order officers were present. However, the leader of the Salamiya branch of the Ba'th Party (who was actually a schoolteacher or a supervisor in a secondary school) was spotted carrying truncheons as he led youngsters toward the demonstration in order to assault protesters. The regime's policy in Salamiya in the first few months of the revolution was to attack and detain protesters, but if five protesters were detained in Salamiya on any given Friday, on the same day a hundred martyrs⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ would fall at the hands of the security forces in neighbouring Hama. This is a crucial point; it shows that the regime dealt with the situation across the country in a selective manner with a view to gaining the support of the minorities.

For example, a dissident officer in the police department stated that he was instructed by a higher-ranking security officer in the Governorate of Hama to avoid, under any circumstances, injuring or otherwise harming any protestor in Salamiya. The dissident officer also said that he heard the same higher-ranking officer ordering another officer on his walkie-talkie to kill protesters in

(160) Martyr (*Shaheed*) is a term widely used in the Arabic-speaking world to denote a person who has sacrificed his or her life for a cause.

Hama on the same day - a Friday, the day usually chosen in Syria for holding protests.

Salamiya was spared the worst of the regime's gunfire and killing sprees. That said, the city suffered more than other minority cities and many of its citizens were killed, mainly tortured to death in the prisons of the security forces. The heaviest firing, however, ranging from sniper attacks to barrel bombs, was reserved for Sunni-majority cities.

Eye-witnesses suggest two reasons to explain this selective approach. First, a policy of marginalizing towns located in rural areas (as opposed to cities elsewhere that serve as national economic and political power hubs), had created so-called poverty belts, especially in the rural areas around Damascus, which played a role in sparking the revolution. Rural Sunni areas had the least to lose and the most to gain from the revolution. The uprisings in Syria indeed present a mixed picture, each a specific response to the local situation.

Second, the regime was attempting to neutralize support for the revolution among religious and sectarian minorities by spreading fear of extremist attack and persecuting minority-community anti-regime protesters in all areas of the country much less severely than majority-community anti-regime protesters. Anti-regime Sunnis, who were hardest hit by the death and destruction of repression, therefore became much more inclined than non-Sunni protesters to carry weapons and engage in confrontation with regime forces. The regime's policy deliberately divided Syrian society into two groups: pro-regime minority communities on the one hand and an anti-regime majority community on the other. The more natural split would have been between people supporting the regime and the status quo on the one hand and people wanting change and democracy on the other. The latter split would have been a possibility in the early days of the revolution, when the protests were still peaceful and the slogans patriotic; it

was no longer a possibility once the revolution had become militarized and been decried as an Islamist plot.

In an analysis of the sectarian issue and the rise of sectarianism in Syrian society, Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh wrote: *"The policy of the regime has always relied on turning groups of people against each other, exploiting inherited differences and manipulating them in order to create clashes between different groups of the population. (...) Disabling the political movement, even without using sectarian instruments, may provoke and stimulate the sectarian relations and politicize them. Imagine what would happen if sectarian instruments were actually used in the 'freezing' and if regime officials were to tell Druze or Christians in an explicit manner: We are protecting you from the assaults of the fanatic Sunnis!"*⁽¹⁶¹⁾

Explicitly telling Druze and Christians that the regime is protecting them from attack by Sunni fanatics has indeed been the main message of Syrian officialdom since the beginning of the revolution. As the military and sectarian situation became both more complex and more acute, that official line was repeatedly echoed and amplified in the media, creating the impression that any Syrian Sunni is a potential enemy unless proved otherwise and that any non-Sunni Syrian is less to be feared. Simultaneously, print and audiovisual reports in opposition media stressed that the revolution is a patriotic cause in which sectarianism has no place, sometimes citing the movement in Salamiya as an example worth following for its patriotism as opposed to Sunni-inspired revolutionary motivations found elsewhere. The regime had two options: either to suppress the movement in Salamiya as harshly as it had suppressed such movements elsewhere, particularly in Sunni areas, or to deal with it in a less violent manner.

(161) Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "On the social and cultural roots of Syrian fascism", *Kalamon* magazine, No. 7.

At the same time, the regime was addressing two other issues. First, it needed to prove that it was fighting Salafists, blasphemists, jihadists and all agents of foreign powers who were intent on hijacking peaceful demonstrations in Syria for their own purposes. As minority communities were unlikely to support these individuals and their causes, the regime thus had a pretext for largely excluding minority areas, including those where anti-regime protest was rife, from the bombing campaigns it carried out elsewhere. Second, the regime needed to maintain its lines of communication with the country's minorities, including the Ismailis in Salamiya, in order to spread and strengthen its claim to be the protector of minority communities against extremist attack and thereby gain those communities' support.

The first large-scale clampdown took place in Hama in May 2011, when national security and military security forces arrested activists there in two round-ups. The activists were detained for 48 hours and then released. The author of this study was among those arrested in the second round-up; he was subsequently held in custody there by the military security authorities. He noted that no one from Salamiya was badly treated, though they were insulted and accused of being "disoriented and manipulated by others." He states: *"While they were investigating me - in one of many investigation sessions as I was a political activist and protester - the investigator told me that the regime is dealing with the crisis with wisdom; he also added that none of the Salamiya detainees were badly treated in the military security detention centre, and that this was proof that security officers are different from what people think. He made this claim while the screams of some detainees from other areas, maybe from Hama, were piercing my ears, the silence of the night and the words of the investigator, because of the torture they were enduring... I was later able to confirm that assumption of torture when I spent the night*

in the same cell with a detainee from Kafarnabou-da village - near Hama - who was accused of protesting and whose body was covered with signs of severe torture."

In terms of day-to-day social interaction, the regime was turning people against each other by regularly spreading false claims and rumours about the intentions of people and groups who kept away from politics, benefited from the patronage of the regime, volunteered their services to the authorities or were simply fearful of change. Their passivity and manipulability proved to be fertile ground for igniting civil tension and conflict.

The protests in Salamiya increased in both number and strength. Seventeen thousand demonstrators gathered for a Friday demonstration in July 2011. Briefly, it seemed that the city's opposition had established itself, with its political and civil society organizations and causes, as a serious rival to the regime's armed forces and militias. However, an unprecedented number of arrests carried out in the city in August 2011 dampened the local residents' enthusiasm for protest. Their reluctance to demonstrate was also due to security restrictions that made it difficult to gather for protests and to an influx of displaced persons from Hama and Homs and their suburbs that had begun in July 2011 in the run-up to the regime's military attack on Hama.

Policy disputes began to arise between the leaders of the opposition movement in Salamiya and individual activists. Extremist opinions demanding the use of force to thwart the violence of the regime's militias and partisans clashed with a more moderate policy aiming to prevent violence in the city. Meanwhile, armed opposition groups proliferated in the suburbs and beyond, some affiliated to the Free Syrian Army and others operating independently and opportunistically to advance their own agendas, usually a matter of obtaining special privileges. They were intent on fighting regime opponents, regime supporters

and regime officials alike, and thereby further contributed to promoting strife and division within families, the opposition and society as a whole.

An example illustrating the existence of such extremist opinions is the case of Mazhar Hamdo, a senior official in the Ba'th Party in Hama but originally from Salamiya. He was kidnapped by an armed opposition group in summer 2012 and subsequently released after a substantial ransom was paid. Some regime opponents in Salamiya continued to condone and defend the kidnapping even though it had clearly been carried out not for political reasons but because Hamdo's position meant that the kidnappers had a reasonable expectation that the ransom would be paid.

Some within the opposition movement condoned many similar incidents, including acts of religious extremism, which were equally irrelevant to the revolutionary cause and all that it stood for. As the security and military situation in the city became more acute, however, these regime opponents effectively cut themselves off from the mainstream opposition.

Escalating violence and sectarian incidents in Salamiya

While military aircraft were bombing the rural areas to the east of Salamiya in an assault on forces affiliated to the Free Syrian Army, pro-regime forces and supporters paraded through the streets of the city almost daily, carrying Kalashnikovs and hunting rifles and firing into the air. Parading weaponry and firing shots in the late evening became a daily ritual for the *Shabiha* and security forces. This demonstration of power was gratuitous as the city had not experienced any armed confrontation and the only armed groups within it were those armed by the regime itself. The *Shabiha* began erecting barriers on roads entering the city in order to keep out transport vehicles from the rural areas to the east. As the

violence continued to escalate, fear spread even among citizens who had thus far kept their distance from the revolution and the tension in the city became close to breaking point.

A number of local residents were kidnapped; most were held hostage in nearby Bedouin villages and subsequently released in return for substantial ransoms. One example is Khaled Baddour, a pharmacist and regime opponent from Salamiya who was kidnapped in mid-2012 by people later identified by a well-informed opposition group as belonging to another opposition group known for kidnapping for money rather than any political gain. Baddour was shot and wounded by his captors, who demanded a large ransom in return for his release. The kidnappers made off with both the ransom that Baddour's family had managed to raise and Baddour's car before setting him free.

In summer 2012 an armed group burst into a private home in Salamiya in an attempt to kidnap a young man. The man and his family screamed loudly enough to wake local residents who quickly came to their rescue. During the ensuing confrontation, one of the intruders was shot dead just as his armed colleagues were shouting: "*Don't shoot, we are the security forces.*" The next day, it transpired that the deceased was Mazen al-Ahmad, a man known for his close association with the generally loathed air force security service.

This 'militia-like' or criminal behaviour was being carried out simultaneously by both the regime and, in the case of the suburbs and surrounding areas, the armed opposition. Local people were vulnerable to assault, kidnap and robbery perpetrated by both protagonists in the conflict.

From the outset of the revolution, the people of Salamiya maintained frequent contact with the people of Hama. Large numbers of people from

Hama had moved to Salamiya prior to and after the invasion of their city on 1 August 2011. In 2012, a rumour spread throughout Salamiya claiming that Sunnis, with the help of recent settlers from Hama, intended to tear down the portrait of the 49th Imam of the Ismailis, Prince Karim Aga Khan, which hung in one of the main streets of Salamiya. Ismailis believe that the Aga Khan, who is revered as the Imam of Ismailis around the world, is a descendent of Prophet Muhammad and Ali Ben Abi Taleb. Counter-rumours claimed that it was regime opponents who planned to tear the portrait down.

Under pressure from the people of Salamiya and because the portrait has a symbolic significance for all Ismailis, regime supporters and opponents alike, Salamiya Ismaili High Council ruled that the portrait was to be removed in order to pre-empt any sectarian strife. Its decision was later overruled by the Syrian regime's security and party apparatus, not least as a result of pressure from the then Ba'th Party leader. The portrait was finally removed and re-hung in one of the chambers of the Salamiya Ismaili High Council building with the cooperation and support of prominent figures in social, civic and political circles.

Both sides, regime opponents and regime supporters, remain on alert in Salamiya. A number of factors traditionally associated with the city's identity, specifically its heritage of inter-communal co-existence and tolerance, are still, to some extent, having a deterrent effect that has thus far prevented the city from sliding into large-scale inter-communal and sectarian warfare. However, it is unlikely that the current seemingly stable situation can continue. A Syria without sectarianism and civil conflict was a conceivable ideal at the beginning of the revolution but the events that have since unfolded have changed the facts on the ground. The inhabitants of Salamiya, who have always maintained contact with people in other cities and provided refuge for those fleeing from Homs, Hama and elsewhere, are not im-

mune to the fears that have become reality in those places and “- as explained below - could become reality in Salamiya too.

Militarization of the city

So-called security centres, originally premises housing intelligence service operations but now also accommodating other security operations of the regime, have proliferated since the outbreak of the revolution. A large part of the Dahr al Magher district of Salamiya, for example, has been turned into a military barracks controlled by the Salameh family, an Alawite family whose most prominent member is major-general Adib Salameh, a senior figure in the air force intelligence service.

On 21 January 2013, a car bomb blew up the carpet factory in Salamiya, which doubled up as the headquarters of the local *Shabiha*, officially known as people's committees “(*al Lijan al-Shaabia*). The blast demolished the carpet factory and caused numerous neighbouring buildings, including the Ba'th Party building, to collapse. The death toll included not only dozens of *Shabiha* but also several unarmed regime opponents who lived or worked near the factory and numerous other civilians who were not involved in any way in the conflict. Rawad al-Mir was one such victim. He was a well-known, unarmed young regime opponent and peace activist who owned a shop located directly opposite the carpet factory. Moreover, his family lived in an apartment building that collapsed after the explosion, killing three al-Mir children. The blast also claimed the lives of many newborn babies in the neonatal ward of the national hospital located nearby.

The car bomb blast at the carpet factory in January 2013 was unprecedented in Salamiya in terms of its scale and the human and material losses it incurred. It had been preceded five months earlier by a car bomb explosion near the offices of the military security service. That blast had

caused only material damage; none of the officers present in the building had been killed or injured. At the time, it was rumoured that the regime had been responsible for the explosion and then blamed it on 'armed groups in Rural Salamiya.' Later, the Nusra Front (*Jabhet al-Nusra*) issued a statement claiming responsibility for the carpet factory blast.

On the evening of 11 August 2013, three bombs exploded in the centre of Salamiya, killing thirteen civilians and injuring many others. About an hour later, ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) issued a statement in a web-based news bulletin of the Coordinating Committee of Ezz al-Din village claiming responsibility for the attack. Activists across Syria immediately initiated a massive Facebook and Twitter campaign condemning the attack. Shortly thereafter, the Committee removed the statement. The next day, it was reported that Emad Ahmad, a man with Palestinian citizenship who was a high-ranking regional military leader in ISIS and commander of the division that had carried out the shelling of Salamiya, had been executed. The report contained no information on who had ordered his execution.

Despite the portentous events taking place in Salamiya, the Syrian public in general remained largely unaware of them because of a selective press policy that extends to total news blackouts. For example, the government-run Syrian media channels were the first to broadcast footage of the carpet factory blast - they were quicker to do so than any Syrian opposition media or any Arabic-language satellite TV station reporting on current affairs in Syria. But interestingly, local activists claim that one well-known Arabic-language broadcasting organization refused to broadcast video footage of one of the revolutionary campaigns in Salamiya because it included no images of flags bearing the *Shahada* (testimony to Islam symbol). Moreover, they claimed, some broadcasting organizations in Arab countries, mainly in the Gulf, were willing to screen

footage of revolutionary activities in Syria only if it contained Islamic speeches and slogans; they had no interest in footage that illustrated efforts to promote Syrian national unity or the Syrian people's rejection of extremism and Islamism.

Both the regime and the opposition are pursuing a fundamentally sectarian policy

Sectarianism and sectarian violence came in the wake of the revolution. Many have questioned whether sectarianism had in fact existed beneath the surface for decades, or whether it developed as a result of recent events.

A few months after the outbreak of the revolution, and specifically as the revolution became militarized Syrian society seemed to become torn between two identities, one sectarian and the other national. This dichotomy concerns all parties involved in the conflict: the regime and its supporters, the armed opposition, and also unarmed regime supporters and opponents. Anti-regime activists sought to emphasize the 'one-nation' aspiration and non-sectarian nature of the revolution as opposed to the regime's divisive and sectarian policies, and also criticized regime for its dependence on Iran. At the same time, the regime's message was 'we are patriotic, our opponents are traitors and their revolution is a sectarian movement.' The approach adopted by both sides was thus the same, and the accusation of sectarianism was levelled by and at both sides. As the situation became more complex and military victory for either side ever more unlikely, the national identity was compromised in favour of both sides' sectarian identity.

A statement issued by the National Coalition of the Opposition concerning the Salamiya carpet factory blast avoided condemning the Nusra Front and laid the blame, directly and indirectly, on the regime. In it, the blast was described as an atrocious crime with the regime's signature, com-

mitted for the sole purpose of spreading sedition between the sons of the Nation.”

A statement issued by the Syrian National Council on 8 February 2013 concerning a suicide bomb blast at the so-called defence factories in which many civilian employees were killed, read as follows:

“A distressing, alarming and suspicious event took place: there was a blast in the city of Salamiya, one of the most patriotic cities in Syria and one that symbolizes communal harmony; this attractive characteristic had previously led to the settlement there of large numbers of Syrians of all communal components. The explosion, which took place outside one of the Defense Factories Labs, hit civilians working to feed their families and women and children passing by; all in all, it resulted in an alarming death toll of more than a hundred martyrs including Syrian Revolution activists and civil society activists. Blasts represent a great concern to the Syrian society; blasts with the signature of the criminal al-Assad regime indicate that the latter has entered a new stage, the most dangerous stage, in its quest to damage the Syrian social structure and to strike the Syrian National symbols, of which the city of Salamiya is a good example. Harming civilians deliberately using blasts that hit randomly especially in civilian areas, and disrespecting Syrians’ lives are acts that must be confronted seriously, and will be sued before judicial institutions once the transitional justice system is established. We console the families of the innocent victims of the blast. The criminal regime bears full responsibility for their death either directly or indirectly by creating the atmosphere that led to their martyrdom. We confirm that the Syrian revolution will continue until it overthrows the al-Assad regime. Deliverance from the regime is the main condition for building a free and safe Syria for all its citizens.”

Much documentation and scholarly research exists on the relationship between the Syrian regime

and the Nusra Front, specifically on the regime’s apparent support of the latter as suggested by its releasing a number of Salafi jihadists from Sednaya prison who subsequently became leading figures in the Nusra Front and ISIL. Although this analysis may be correct, the above statements issued by the National Coalition and the National Council do not seem to acknowledge it. Instead, they imply that there is no potential for extremism within the ranks of the anti-regime forces - in stark contrast to the regime which, they claim, is fundamentally extremist in both its structure and its policies.

With the passage of time, sectarianism seems to have prevailed, displacing the one-nation spirit which the regime opponents tried so hard to instil into the revolution. The Syrian opposition leaders’ response to the blasts in Salamiya was condemned by many opposition supporters and caused some to turn their backs on the opposition in general. Others opted to remain silent in future and still others, especially after Salamiya was hit by missiles in August 2013, felt compelled to volunteer for the *Shabiha*. On the other hand, the regime’s policies motivated some people to join the opposition. One young man from the Nasra family (a large, prominent family living in the neighbourhood of Salamiya where most protests take place) used to have a photo of Bashar al-Assad prominently displayed in the front window of his shop. After his cousin, Mansour Nasra, was killed in an explosion under mysterious circumstances, he was heard making statements clearly opposing the Syrian regime.

There are other interesting cases of people who were initially regime opponents or even anti-regime activists becoming regime supporters, openly carrying weapons and fighting alongside the regime forces. One well-read young intellectual from Salamiya was known for speaking out against the regime; a distinguished lute player, he is active in the local arts and culture scene. When the uprising spread, he changed his position and

declared his support for the regime. He later took up arms and started fighting alongside the Hezbollah in Syria. Another young man from the city was once a member of a secular anti-regime movement that had been created at the beginning of the revolution. He later fought alongside the regime forces in Salamiya, justifying his action by saying: *"If I have to choose between the regime and the Islamists, I would choose the regime."*

These two examples concern young people with a distinct cultural and political grounding. However, switching sides is not uncommon among people with no background of politicization, some of whom protested against the regime at the beginning of the revolution and later chose to remain silent - a fairly common occurrence - or even speak out in favour of or fight alongside the regime. The only difference between those with and without a politicized background in this respect is that the stance taken by the less educated seems much more reality-based and logical in terms of their way of thinking, their lifestyles and the influence that regime propaganda has on them, i.e. the regime's narrative that the uprising is in fact an Islamic and sectarian uprising. For most uneducated individuals, ISIS is a salient example of what the Syrian uprising really stands for, and the proximity of ISIS fighters makes the comparison all the more realistic. The same reasoning cannot be applied in the case of intellectuals who have switched sides and now stand, peacefully or in combat, alongside the regime, for they are supposedly better able to analyse and understand the facts.

It is important to mention that for some, the real reason for choosing to defect and stand alongside the regime against 'the sectarian majority' has much to do with what the regime has in its gift: financial rewards and positions of power. This factor undoubtedly explains many cases of defection to the regime side. Clearly, in a city where attitudes and affiliations can and do change in

line with unfolding events, it is difficult to categorize people as opponents or supporters of the regime.

Another factor not to be ignored is the combined effect of sectarianism and construed or intentional political double-speak. A case in point relates specifically to the Ismaili community. Any speech by the Ismaili Imam can be interpreted by regime opponents as encouraging them to actively support the revolution and by regime supporters as exactly the opposite. This notwithstanding, the Imam concerned is known to have refrained, both prior to and since the outbreak of the revolution, from making any political statement on the situation in Syria in general or the situation in Syria with specific reference to Syrian Ismailis. The few political statements he has made have referred to Arab democracy and the Arab Spring in general.

That sectarian division exists in Salamiya was seemingly confirmed when Alawite militias in the Daher al-Magher district started provoking sectarian strife. The Alawites of Salamiya have traditionally lived in Daher al-Magher, a district that has recently been transformed into a sectarian canton patrolled by pro-regime armed *Shabiha* - apparently a further confirmation of sectarian division within the city.

In March 2014, a demonstration was held to protest against the actions of the Alawite militias in Salamiya. The demonstration attracted marchers from a wide range of Salamiya's inhabitants, supporters and opponents of the regime alike. The militias responded by chanting sectarian slogans claiming Alawite superiority over other Syrians.

The Alawite and Ismaili communities share a sectarian heritage that is still evident on social media sites and sometimes on the streets of Salamiya. It dates back to the 1920s when disagreement and finally fighting broke out between the two communities. Alawite forces under the command of Sheikh Saleh al-Ali drove a large number of Ismailis out of their homes in the Syrian

coastal mountains, from where many fled to Salamiya and al-Qadmus.

Anxiety has grown within minority groups in Syria, including the Ismailis, who fear for their future and even their survival. The fears of minority groups differ from one faith community to another and also within the same community depending on the level of its members' politicization and education. Sectarianism has divided the two main groups in Syrian society: the Sunni majority, whose main residential centres have been subject to repeated regime attack, and minority communities that have lived in relative safety. City districts inhabited mainly by Alawites, one of the minority communities in Syria, have been transformed into special cantons distinct from other districts and areas within the same city. In Homs, one street separating the Sunni district from the Alawite district is more than sufficient to show the astonishing difference between the two. Whereas the Sunni district presents a picture of havoc, demolished buildings and general devastation, the Alawite district is well organized, well maintained, full of car showrooms, and decorated with flowers. This is emblematic of what the regime has achieved during the revolution.

After four years of political, economic and demographic change, Syria is now seeing its faith communities change their stance regarding the Syrian crisis on the one hand and other faith communities on the other. Those that are best able to maintain their stability and their stance regarding the events taking place in Syria are those that seem to be immune to the devastation being wreaked there. In a sense, these groups are becoming a separate 'country,' living in immediate proximity to another 'country' that is being destroyed and within which people of many different beliefs co-exist. The author offers no judgment on the sectarian reality in Syria but seeks merely to describe it. The Syrian regime,

through its policy of sectarianism, is fully responsible for the schism that has taken place within Syrian society and cast it back into a state of pre-nationhood and pre-statehood.⁽¹⁶²⁾

The stronger a given minority group's active (armed or unarmed) involvement in the Syrian uprising, the narrower the gap between the two above-mentioned 'countries' becomes and the more this minority becomes associated with and part of the chaos and devastation. A very active minority thus distances itself ever further from the apparent intactness that still characterizes some minority neighbourhoods in the midst of otherwise entirely devastated cities.

Minorities and nationalism

One tends to be influenced by the narrative that Syrian society is a 'booby-trapped sectarian society.' This description contrasts with the common perception of a society and country that is ruled by a 'secular' regime. Secularism, a product of modernization, particularly in Europe, is supposed to provide a solution for the issue of religious minorities and diversity. National minorities continue to be a problem in modern countries which are still fanatically nationalistic. Of course we are not in Europe; we are in "Syria al-Assad," as people often call it since the country has been ruled by the al-Assad family for decades. Al-Assad is the leader of the Ba'th Party, running a supposedly secular regime. Sectarian and nationalist issues have become more complicated under the rule of Hafez and then Bashar al-Assad. The granting of Syrian nationality to Kurds in March 2011 was an attempt by the regime to gain support from this ethnic minority immediately after the outbreak of the revolution. This attempt not only appeared to fail but also led to various incidents intended to spark sectarian and civil

(162) To further explore this idea, see Ahmad Baydoun's article on "Identity, Religious Doctrine, Citizenship" / al-Nahar Supplement, 29 December 2013.

violence between Syrian minorities and the Syrian Sunni majority.

In Arab theocracies, minorities are usually viewed with suspicion. In the different case of Syria, however, especially since the revolution, the opposite has been true: it is the majority community upon which suspicion is cast. At the same time, some leaders of the revolution and the armed opposition, which includes some Islamic extremists, are suspicious of minorities, whether Ismaili, Druze, Christian or Alawite. Given that the ruling al-Assad regime is Alawite, this minority is viewed with the greatest suspicion and tends to be chosen more often as the target for acts of revenge.

The Syrian revolution today is different from what it was originally. Initially, it was a clarion call to all Syrians for a new polity. Today, that aspiration could at most be fulfilled in areas of life that have not become embroiled in the conflict. The degree of violence used by the regime in its efforts to suppress the revolution has led to the further entrapment of Syrian society, and the violence itself has caused society not only to become a ticking time bomb ready to explode in the face of the regime but also to explode from within into its multiple sectarian parts.

The Alawites and others belonging to minorities in Syria today - and they are many - believe that their fate is linked to that of the regime: the survival of the regime means their survival, and its end would mean at best little less than a large-scale mas-

sacre. Indeed, the regime is portrayed by its own media as the 'protector of minorities,' and some of the groups involved in the revolution, specifically the so-called 'radicals,' are proof that this is the case. (Of course, this comment is not intended to back the claim.)

Today, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant surrounds Salamiya on three sides, a reality which is apparently not a reason for concern for the regime. The peaceful phase of the revolution has ended with no prospect of return, and the militarization of the opposition movement with a view to protecting the revolution from the regime has created a battlefield for heavily armed warlords whom the opposition cannot hold accountable for want of military and political authority.

Syrian society was entrapped by al-Ba'th and the regime of al-Assad which exploited diversity using the iron fist of the security forces. Now that the grip of the security forces has been broken by the revolution, Syrian society is exploding from within. The future holds further loss of human life and material destruction through the agency of the barrel bomb, a symbol of the devastation visible throughout Syria. Barrel bombs used as sectarian weapons may yet transform the already dire situation in Syria into a full-scale war whose ending will not be primarily in the hands of Syrians, whether from the minority or the majority and irrespective of whether or not they participated in the revolution. This makes the situation in Syria very different from any other sectarian or civil war.

About the Authors

Mazen Ezzi holds a B.A. in Mechanical Engineering from Damascus University. He currently lives in Beirut, where works as a journalist, editor and writer at electronic daily newspaper “*Almodon*.”

Abdallah Amin al-Hallaq writes as a columnist in several arab and Lebanese newspapers. He works at the Samir Kassir Foundation in Beirut, Lebanon.

Kheder Khaddour is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, Lebanon. His research focuses on issues of identity and society in Syria.

Samer Masouh holds a B.A. in Law from the University of Damascus. He worked as a lawyer, free-lancejournalist and researcher in Syria. He currently lives in Istanbul, Turkey.

Rand Sabbagh holds a B.A. in Journalism and Media from the Open University Damascus. She worked as a journalist and a freelance researcher in Syria and Lebanon and lives now in Berlin, Germany.

Friederike Stolleis holds an M.A. in Social Anthropology and a PhD in Near and Middle Eastern Studies. From 2012 to 2014 she was responsible for the Syria Project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation.

