

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of dots in various shades of gray and red, arranged in a pattern that resembles a stylized map or abstract shape.

The Coast in Conflict

Migration, Sectarianism, and Decentralization in Syria's Latakia and Tartus Governorates

KHEDER KHADDOUR

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- The protracted Syrian conflict has created a steady flow of displaced Sunnis to the primarily Alawite coastal region. Rather than viewing these migrants as an undistinguished bloc of Sunnis, local communities treat them differently based on their regional and class identities.
- To address both the need for more military manpower and the effects of increasing numbers of battle casualties on coastal communities, local charities aimed at supporting conflict-affected families and recruitment centers for pro-regime militias have sprung up in the Latakia and Tartus governorates. This has furthered the mutual dependence between the Assad regime and the coastal communities and extended the regime deeper into society, beyond the framework of formal state institutions.
- The coast has been affected by the conflict, touched by dynamics of localization of power relations and de-institutionalization seen in other parts of the country. Hence, is not an island outside of the broader conflict.



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1. Introduction

In the ongoing conflict, Syria's northwest coastal region has thus far been insulated from the extensive destruction and unrelenting violence occurring elsewhere in the country. This has prevented the mass population exodus seen in other contested areas and kept the region's residents better off, relatively speaking, than Syrians from other parts of the country. Far-reaching, conflict-induced developments have nevertheless significantly altered the living circumstances of the coastal population, the majority of which is of the Alawite faith.

This study looks at the adaptation and survival strategies of local communities in the coastal Latakia and Tartus governorates during the conflict and, more specifically, at their responses to three new phenomena brought about by the ongoing fighting. After a review of the methodology in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 looks at the coastal communities' responses to the arrival of a massive number of largely Sunni individuals escaping the violence unfolding in the surrounding governorates, and discusses the extent to which they have changed, or left unaltered, the pre-existing social relations—both between the coast's Sunnis and Alawites and between its Alawites and the Assad regime. Cross-sectarian relationships along the coast were jolted by the conflict, and Chapter 4 explores their evolution by examining the trajectories of local economies in the two port cities of Latakia and Baniyas. Chapter 5 examines the charities and militia recruitment centers that proliferated on the coast as the regime was forced to create new channels of interaction, co-optation, and containment of the Alawite community's dissent.

Taking the coastal region as a case study, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how the protracted conflict affects not only socio-economic relations between Syria's sects, but also the Assad regime's traditional mechanisms of governance, coercion, and control.

2. Methodology

This report is based on qualitative and quantitative data collected in the course of fieldwork undertaken between July and October 2015 in the Latakia and Tartus governorates. Three research assistants conducted 25 structured interviews with samples of individuals from

different localities throughout the coastal region and of different sectarian backgrounds, in order to provide a systematic picture of the new social institutions emerging in the area and the inflow of displaced people to the coast's localities. The author has also conducted 20 semi-structured interviews via telephone and Skype with local residents from different coastal cities and different sectarian backgrounds. Two interview strategies were thus employed throughout the fieldwork: one relied on closed-ended questions to establish where displaced people were moving in the coastal region and to map the emerging institutions; the other used open-ended interviews to elucidate the mechanisms by which individuals from the coast and emerging institutions interact with the newcomers.

3. Local Communities versus Sects

The »local community«, which is defined as a village or a neighborhood in a city, is the study's unit of analysis. The focus on local communities, as opposed to sectarian communities (e.g., »the Alawite community«) allows us to investigate the network of cross-sectarian relationships that constitute themselves on the local level, and the conditions under which individuals sharing a sectarian identity act in solidarity or fail to do so.

For instance, Alawites on the coast differ in their material resources, place of residence, and linkage to the state. This variation in material and social circumstances causes communities to act differently depending on the situation, despite the fact that they share a sectarian Alawite identity. For example, some Alawites have expressed discontent with the regime as their communities confront a prolonged conflict, a rising death toll among its members fighting on the regime side, and the regime's dependence on regional allies.¹ Throughout the Assad family's rule over Syria, opposition figures of Alawite descent have stood up against the regime,² and since the start of the uprising in 2011, Alawites have begun to act more independently, establishing mechanisms of local governance parallel to the state in the coastal region.

1. See, for example, Syrian Protests over Assad Cousin Signal Growing Discontent with the Regime, in: *The Telegraph* (9.8.2015); Four Reasons Syrian Alawite Resentment towards Iranian Intervention, in: *The Syrian Observer* (9.5.2016).

2. Some very famous anti-regime figures—such as Louay Hussein, Aref Dalila, Monzer Makhous, Samar Yazbek, Fuad Homaira—are Alawite and have stood on the side of the uprising since the start of the conflict.

Nonetheless, the study acknowledges that Syria's Alawites are a relatively cohesive sect that has a disproportionately large presence within the state apparatus. Given the strong linkages between their sect and the Assad regime—and particularly its military and security branches—many Alawites fear being categorized based on their sectarian identity and persecuted for communal complicity in the event of the regime's collapse. In many circumstances, sectarian fear and insecurity overwhelm all other considerations and make members of the coastal region act in solidarity as »Alawites«. Nonetheless, this solidarity is conditional and only produced by major changes in society wrought by the conflict. Investigating local communities sharing a sectarian identity and varying on many other characteristics suggests that it is more fruitful to think about »Alawite communities«, in plural, on the coast.

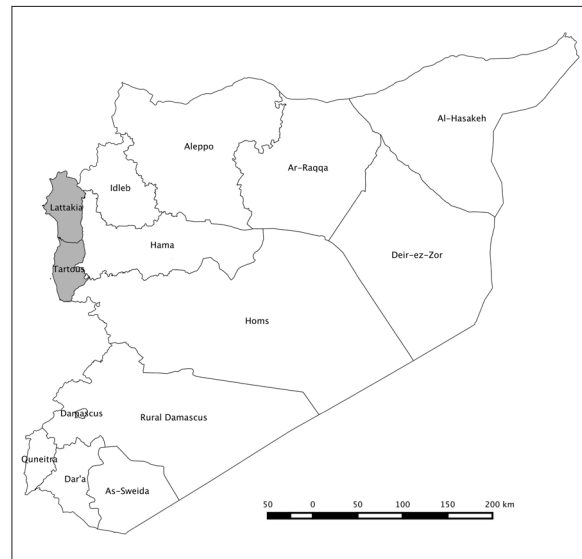
3.1 What is the Coast?

The Syrian coastal region consists of the governorates (*muhafazat*) of Tartus and Latakia, with the former bordering Lebanon to the south and the latter bordering Turkey in the north. The coastal region spans from the Mediterranean Sea in the east to the Coastal Mountain Range (*silsilat al-jibal as-sahiliyah*, and also known as *jibal al-'alawiyin*, or the Alawite Mountains) in the west. Its climate and fertile soil make it a very productive agricultural area, generating produce that is exported throughout Syria and abroad through its many ports on the Mediterranean. Figure 1 depicts the location of the coastal region in relation to the rest of Syria.

The majority of the population belongs to the Alawite faith, with a substantial minority of Sunnis and other religious groups, including Christians.³ Alawites are a heterodox Islamic sect, which was historically confined to the villages and hamlets of the Syrian Coastal Mountain Range. Alawite communities were brought out of the mountains in the 19th century by urban landlords to farm the plains and valleys to the east of the Coastal Mountain Range, in the present-day Hama and Homs gover-

3. Much of the northern part of the Latakia governorate, on the border with Turkey, is populated by ethnic Turkmen and Sunni Arabs (especially the Kasab, Rabea'a and Kansaba and Salafna sub-districts). Because these areas are historically—and in the uprising—linked more closely to the towns of the adjacent Idlib governorate, they are not covered in this study.

Figure 1: The Coastal Region of Syria



norates.⁴ The political regime that has ruled the country is disproportionately Alawite, since Hafez al-Assad—an Alawite from the mountain town of Qardaha—captured power in 1970 through a military coup.

Figure 2 depicts the population distribution and ethnic background of the region's administrative sub-districts (*nawahi*, each of which comprises between 10 and 20 towns). The data in panel B reflect the ethnic identity of the majority of the sub-districts' populations, as well as the presence of any substantial ethnic minority populations.

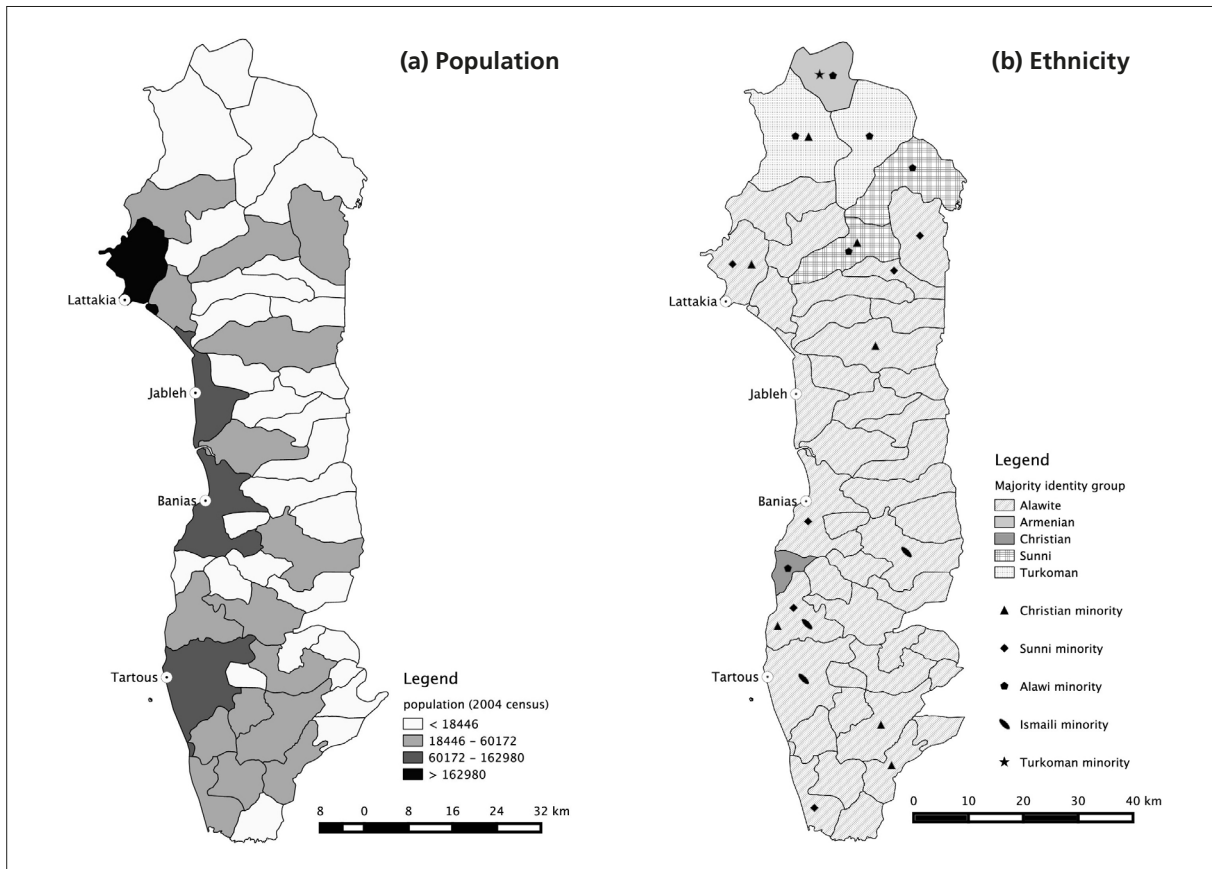
Before the founding of the modern Syrian state in 1946, the coastal cities—including Latakia, Tartus, Baniyas, and Jableh—were largely home to Sunnis and some Christians engaged in commerce, linking the agricultural hinterlands to markets abroad through sea-borne trade, while the mountainous periphery was populated overwhelmingly by Alawites primarily engaged in agriculture.⁵ Historical reasons help to explain this demographic distribution: up until the French Mandate Alawites were prohibited from living in the city of Latakia, except as servants.⁶ Today, the cities of Latakia and Tartus are the region's largest, with

4. See Hanna Batatu (1999): *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 12 f.

5. *Ibid.*, 19 f.

6. Fabrice Balanche (2013): *Cartographie de la crise Syrienne*; available at <http://www.gremmo.mom.fr/recherche/cartographie-de-la-crise-syrienne> (last accessed on 23.6.2016).

Figure 2: Population Density and Ethnic Composition



Note: Each sub-regional unit here corresponds to Syrian Census Bureau sub-district (*nahiya*) units. The color/pattern of each unit on the map represents the identity of the majority of the sub-district's residents; if a sub-district has substantial populations of other ethnic backgrounds, those are represented by a dot in the sub-district. Source: Data collected by author via interviews with residents of each sub-district.

Latakia estimated in the 2004 census to have a population of some 425,000 and Tartus 165,000. In 2004, the governorates were estimated to have overall populations of 1.89 million and 1.55 million, respectively.⁷

The combination of economic modernization and the domination of the political regime by Alawite figures since the 1970s—including former President Hafez al-Assad and his son, the current President Bashar al-Assad—led many Alawites to leave their villages in the mountains for the coastal cities and towns.⁸ In particular, public sector growth and the expansion of state employment drew many Alawites to the cities, where they took

7. Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014 census; available at <http://cbssyr.sy/people%20statistics/popmoh.pdf> (last accessed on 27.4.2016).

8. See Azmi Bishara (2013): *Suriya, Darb al-Alam nahwa al-Huriya: Mu-hawala fil-Tarikh al-Rahn* [Syria, a Path to Freedom from Suffering: An Attempt in Contemporary History]. Beirut: al-Markaz al-Arabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat: 98f.

up residence on the outskirts of the traditional »down-town« cores. Gradually, these settlements became a part of the overall urban fabric, while the historic city centers remained mostly Sunni.

3.2 Newcomers and the Coast

Since 2011, the coastal region has remained relatively insulated from violence compared with the rest of the country. Yet, a massive number of Syrians moved away from areas affected by violence and settled in the relative calm of the coast. This has created new patterns of interaction between local communities on the coast and the newcomers, profoundly changing both sides.

The protest movements that began in other regions of the country in spring 2011 also emerged in certain areas of the coastal region—especially those where Alawites

and Sunnis live alongside one another. Baniyas, Latakia city, and several villages in the Latakia countryside (north of Latakia and in the Haffe areas) witnessed demonstrations starting in April 2011.⁹ By 2013, however, regime forces were able to repress these scattered expressions of popular discontent on the coast. The fact that protests were happening in areas geographically disconnected from each other made it easier to contain and forcefully repress them. The north of the Latakia governorate is the only exception, because the border with Turkey and its ethnic composition made it possible to connect this pocket of anti-regime rebels with the rest of the armed opposition movement in northern Syria.

Because protests were both limited and quickly contained, the coastal areas remained relatively calm compared to the rest of the country. At the same time, however, the area received an enormous influx of people¹⁰—predominantly Sunnis—who were leaving opposition-held areas and relocating to the coast. There is reason to believe that the regime has intentionally provoked these population movements, targeting urban centers and highly populated neighborhoods in order to compel inhabitants to move out and search for safe havens where the regime has the most support.¹¹ In fact, the outcome of these internal migration flows directly played in the regime's favor: it depopulated rebel-held areas, increased the number of Syrians living under the regime, upheld regime propaganda over the increasing popular support for Assad, and justified its indiscriminate bombings in opposition areas.¹² For instance, the regime's widespread bombings in the cities of Syria's northern interior—such as Aleppo, Idlib, and Jisr al-Shughour—forced residents to flee their homes and take refuge in Turkey and the regime-held coastal areas,

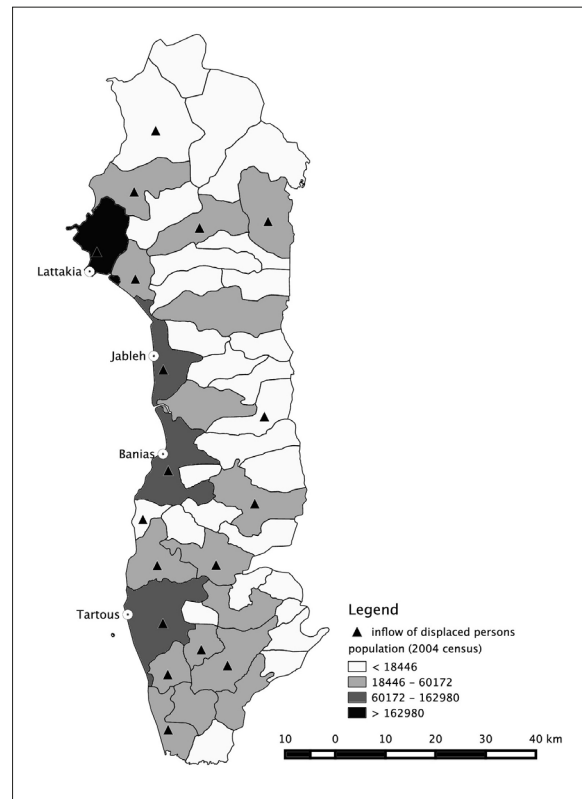
9. See, for example, Liam Stack and Katherine Zoepf, Syria Presses Crackdown on Two Cities on Coast, in: *The New York Times*, (12.4.2011); available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/13/world/middleeast/13syria.html> (last accessed on 23.6.2016); see also BBC, *Syria unrest: Twelve killed in Latakia protest* (27.4.2011); available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12873053> (last accessed on 23.6.2016).

10. The coast has received around 750,000 internally displaced people (IDP). As of October 2014, Tartus governorate had received an estimated 450,000 IDPs and Latakia governorate 300,000. See Shannon Doocy, Emily Lyles, Tefera D. Delbiso, and Courtland W. Robinson (2015). Internal Displacement and the Syrian Crisis: An Analysis of Trends from 2011–2014, in: *Conflict and Health* 9: 33 f.

11. Kheder Khaddour (2015): The Assad Regime's Hold on the Syrian State, Carnegie Middle East Center Paper (8.7.2015); available at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/07/08/assad-regime-s-hold-on-syrian-state/id3k> (last accessed on 23.6.2016).

12. For an example of this regime narrative, see BBC Exclusive Interview with President Bashar al-Assad, BBC News, 10 February 2015; available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31311895> (last accessed on 23.6.2016).

Figure 3: Migration of Displaced People by Sub-district



Source: Data collected by author via interviews with residents of each sub-district.

which were the safest areas close to their homes. Figure 3 highlights the sub-districts of the coastal region that have received displaced people.¹³

Just as the populations of the coastal cities are socioeconomically diverse, so are the populations of displaced Syrians temporarily settling in these cities. The massive influx of Sunnis¹⁴ into the coastal region produced different outcomes depending on the profile of the newcomers, the factors impelling their displacement and relocation, and the local communities' perceptions vis-à-vis the different profiles of newcomers. In some cases, shared class identities were strong enough to smooth in-

13. The data for this figure were gathered by research assistants interviewing individuals from the administrative sub-districts (*nawahi*) shown on the map.

14. Syrians of all religious backgrounds and regional provenances have come to the coast, but the great majority of the newcomers have been of Sunni Arab background and from the Idlib and Aleppo provinces that border the coastal region. Therefore, this section focuses on divisions among members of this sociogeographic category, of Sunnis from Aleppo and Idlib provinces.

teractions between newcomers and locals. However, an influx of poor Sunni newcomers to Latakia's lower-class Sunni areas made class divisions—present among local communities but hardly visible before the conflict—an amplifier of sectarian tensions.

Three broad categories of people have arrived to the city and chosen to settle in various areas.¹⁵ One group, comprised of members of the middle class, comes primarily from the cities of Aleppo and Idlib.¹⁶ This middle class tends not to refer to itself as—and wishes to distinguish itself from—those who were forced to the coast by destruction of their hometowns, and are referred to as »displaced«, *naziheen*. In fact, rather than fleeing destruction, middle-class families left their home cities in order to continue their professional and business activities elsewhere. In most cases, they have not had their properties destroyed in the conflict, because their homes are in affluent, central urban areas that regime bombings did not target. Although most of them are Sunnis and had few familial or business links to the coastal region before the uprising, they had the financial means to relocate to middle-class Alawite neighborhoods in Latakia and open small businesses there, including restaurants, stores, and small-scale manufacturing operations.

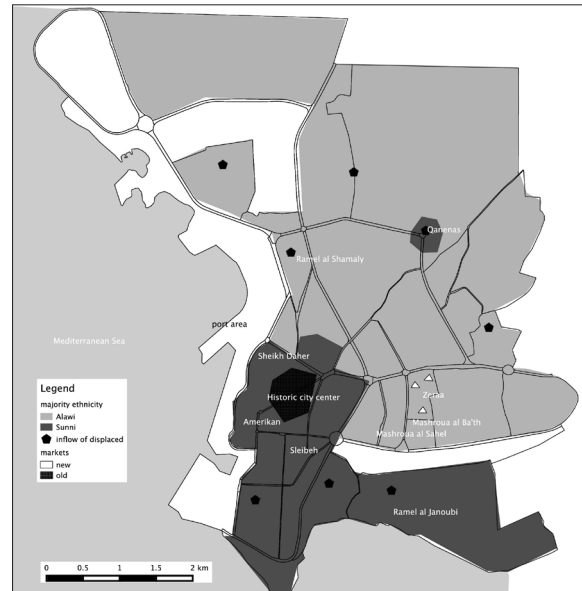
This Sunni middle class shares many of the practices of the middle class of the coastal region, even though the latter is largely of a different sect, either Alawite or Christian. These newcomers have settled in neighborhoods such as al-Zeraa and Mashrou al-Ba'th (see figure 4). These neighborhoods are relatively new, planned developments outside the historic core of the city, but not in the sprawling, spontaneous developments on the city's outskirts.¹⁷ The Sunni newcomers have local businesses, apartments, and even furniture similar to what would typically be found in middle-class neighborhoods of Western Aleppo, from which many of them hail.

15. This section draws on both the semi-structured interviews conducted by research assistants and in-depth interviews conducted by the author.

16. This study defines the term »middle class«, for Syria at least, as the group of families with a stable annual income that puts them well above the poverty line, social insurance, and property ownership (e.g., real estate or cars). It excludes people with vast personal wealth, like owners of major enterprises or investors in regime-related holding companies (e.g., Sham al-Qabeda, see Azmi Bishara (2013): *Suriya, Darb al-Alam nahwa al-Huriya: Muhawala fil-Tarikh al-Rahn [Syria, a Path to Freedom from Suffering: An Attempt in Contemporary History]*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-Arabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat.

17. Figure 4 shows the location of these neighborhoods in the city.

Figure 4: Latakia – ethnic composition, flow of displaced people and opening of new markets



Source: Data collected by author via interviews with Latakia residents.

Despite having different sectarian identities, these newcomers have interests that concur with those of the local Alawite middle-class population—prioritizing stability in order to ensure the success of their businesses and professional careers. This also makes them more likely to lean towards the regime, which professes both a desire and the ability to ensure this stability, and to smooth their public image—even in front of those Alawites with a lower-class profile, who are predominantly open supporters of the regime for reasons other than business interests.

A second group of displaced people—also Sunnis—comes from smaller towns and more modest economic circumstances and arrives with network ties to people already living in the coastal cities. They have generally arrived in search of immediate help because their homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. Unlike the middle class, which is largely from urban centers, these individuals are from the rural and suburban areas that saw strong anti-regime protests in and around Jisr al-Shughour and Idlib. Many of these newcomers of more modest origins rejoined relatives already living on the coast who have been employed as manual laborers to advance Latakia's urban expansion since the 1980s. They settled with their families in Latakia's new popular (*sha'bi*) neighborhoods, which are largely isolated from Latakia's traditional Sunni urban core and the Alawite community that has lived in the city for generations.

The arrival of these individuals exacerbated local and sectarian divisions between the city's Sunni and Alawite populations. Sectarian divisions intersected with and compounded the class dimensions of the conflict. As the new wave of migration began, these Sunnis relocated to popular areas where their relatives had already settled 30 years before, such as Ramel al-Janoubi and Qanenas. Family ties, sect identity, and socioeconomic conditions tied these newcomers and previous settlers together.¹⁸ Reconnecting with their origins through their relatives, these local communities cemented their identity against the regime and to their Alawite surroundings—despite not taking part in armed opposition activities. Ramel al-Janoubi, in particular, saw demonstrations against the regime from the beginning of the uprising.¹⁹ Sectarian-motivated crimes by pro-regime forces, such as the summary executions of Sunni civilians in Baniyas and al-Bayda in May 2013,²⁰ further inflamed these communities' sectarian resentment.

Latakia's urban population—especially the middle-class elements—has looked with disdain to these suburban neighborhoods, which they hardly ever visit anyway. The arrival of newcomers filled with political resentment against the regime has exaggerated this tendency. This was compounded by the increasing sectarian rhetoric of the regime stigmatizing all Sunni Islamist groups as terrorists, as well as the rise of militant *takfiri* groups—such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS)—denouncing Alawites as apostates. As a result, these neighborhoods are strictly controlled by regime security officials and cordoned off by security checkpoints.²¹ For instance, a resident of Ramel al Janoubi hoping to reach Latakia's city center would have to pass through at least seven checkpoints. Both Ramel al Janoubi and Qanenas have two checkpoints at their entrance to get in and out.²² Regime security has also infiltrated the neighborhoods, selecting a number of informers in order to monitor the two neighborhoods and its population.²³

18. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015.

19. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZWM1hFII2Q> (last accessed on 23.6.2016).

20. See No One's Left: Summary Execution by the Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas, in: Human Rights Watch (13.9.2013); available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/13/no-ones-left/summary-executions-syrian-forces-al-bayda-and-baniyas> (last accessed on 23.6.2016).

21. Interview with Syrian Red Cross staff working in Latakia, Beirut, December 2015.

22. Ibid.

23. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015.

A third category of newcomers includes individuals similar to the second category described above—of Sunni background, low economic status, and displaced due to heavy fighting—but who had few or no links with residents in Latakia before relocating there. Paradoxically, it is precisely because they had moved away from areas farther from Latakia than Jisr al-Shughour—with no family connections to the coast—which makes their integration smoother than those in the second category. Newcomers from Aleppo's popular neighborhoods tended to relocate to areas where Alawites of similar class background live, such as Ramel al-Shimaly.

To most residents in Latakia, members of this third category appear to be victims of the uprising and the conflict that followed it, rather than its perpetrators. In the eyes of the security forces and many coastal Alawites, Aleppo's general opposition to the demonstrations early on in the uprising has helped to dispel suspicions about members of this group merely because they are Sunni.²⁴ Small business owners who have settled in the area have generally been warmly welcomed and are often allowed to shift their business and employees to new sites in the market, with the government easing their transfer by hastening bureaucratic processes.²⁵

Middle-class newcomers have otherwise adapted to the new environment and adopted new practices since moving to Latakia. An owner of several beach houses, for example, recalled hosting an Aleppine Sunni family of four at the end of 2012. Both adults were conservative Sunnis: the wife wore the traditional veil (*hijab*) and the husband would not drink alcohol. They were employed as service workers—cleaning and cooking—in their new place of residence. After half a year, the wife got rid of her veil, and soon after the owner of the house would invite her husband to drink *araq*, a local anise-flavored alcoholic drink. Moreover, their eldest son, who was twelve when he arrived, now speaks with a typical

24. See, for example, the reference to «Aleppo, a key conservative bastion» in Anthony Shadid (2011): Syrian Elites to Fight Protests to «the End», in: *The New York Times* (10.5.2011). Local residents of Aleppo even organized pro-regime parades. For more information, see Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide, in: *Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°109*, (13.7.2011), 5f. Consequently, among Aleppo residents, those who chose to flee to regime-controlled areas and settled in primarily Alawite neighborhoods usually showed little sympathy for rebels associated with shelling of their home town.

25. Telephone interview with local NGO working in Latakia, January 2016.

coastal accent.²⁶ This example demonstrates that both parties—the Latakia landlord and the Aleppine migrants—had a basic degree of trust in one another that could form the basis for the latter’s integration, however conditionally and temporarily, into coastal society. The regional background of the migrants, coming from a city understood to be relatively wealthy and loyal to the regime, made this trusting relationship possible for the Latakia landlord.

As the emergence of different migrant categories and their reception by locals show, five years of conflict have not fundamentally altered the historically evolved patterns of social relations between sects on Syria’s coast, but amplified them in various ways. While the conflict has deepened Alawite-Sunni tensions, it has also provided new pathways of intersectarian economic cooperation and solidarity. Rather than revolutionizing the structure of sectarian relations on the coast, the protracted conflict has cemented it—not only strengthening previously established trade and class relations between certain segments of both sects, but also exacerbating already simmering sectarian and political cleavages between others.

4. New Economies, Old Conflicts

The impact of conflict on the coastal economy has unveiled tensions that existed before the uprising, rather than creating new dynamics. The divergent trajectories of conflict in two of the region’s major cities, Latakia and Baniyas, show that despite economic development, the constraints of war largely consolidated roles and relationships that were already established before the conflict. The overall climate of increased sectarian tensions has generally played in favor of the Alawite consumers and businessmen, allowing them to have a greater role in the local economy by relocating key nodes of trade from Sunni into Alawite neighborhoods.

4.1 Latakia

In spite of the mass movement of people during the conflict, the patterns of economic interaction in Latakia have not seen major rearrangements. The center of gravity for commerce in Latakia remains the Sunni traders who

are the generational residents of the city’s center, and its primary consumers are the Alawites who live outside that city center.

Before the conflict, Latakia’s economy was dominated by its port and complemented by the tourism sector during the summer. Most activities were linked to import-export, insurance, and legal services, and dominated by Sunnis and Christians.²⁷ Unlike other coastal cities, Latakia serves as a trade hub for a network of cities within Syria, and not just the immediate hinterland.²⁸ Latakia’s general market of Soukr Sheikh Daher is located in the city’s central district, between the Amerikan, Sheikh Daher, and Sleybeh neighborhoods. Mostly owned by Sunnis from central Latakia, its shops used to offer a wide range of products to everyone in Latakia without distinction. Affluent customers would find luxury goods in Baghdad and Henano Streets, while lower-class Alawites would go east, around Ugarit square. In the north, around Sheikh Daher Square, businesses dedicated to rural needs welcomed Syrians from the surroundings of the city coming in by minibuses.²⁹

What has changed, however, are the geographical nodes of economic exchange. By mid-2011, as the protests in Latakia began and sectarian tensions peaked, Alawites stopped visiting Sunni areas—such as Souk Sheikh Daher and Sleybeh—to conduct business and buy goods.³⁰ This dramatically shifted business activities. To sustain their business operations, the Sunni traders of Latakia’s city center began setting up branches of their stores in the Alawite neighborhood of al-Zeraa. For example, a famous restaurant operating in the Sunni neighborhood of Suleiba since the 1950s, Abu Sueis, opened a branch in the Alawite neighborhood of al-Zeraa.³¹

Notwithstanding the change in demography and trust among sects, the economy and trade appear to be above sectarian divide. Yet, the conflict has played out in the Alawites’ favor. While prior to the uprising the Sunni trading classes and Sunni populated areas used to be the cornerstone of business activities in Latakia, Alawite

26. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015.

27. Fabrice Balanche (2000): Les Alaouites, l’espace et le pouvoir dans la région côtière syrienne: une intégration nationale ambiguë, in: *Géographie. Université François Rabelais – Tours*: 546f.

28. *Ibid.*, 547f.

29. *Ibid.*, 544f.

30. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015.

31. Telephone interview with a Latakia resident, November 2015.

areas have now become the center of business activities. This has inverted the role between Sunni trading classes and Alawite consumers and provided the latter—the property owners and residents of these areas—with growing economic clout vis-à-vis the former. Despite remaining the most important trading class, Sunni merchants for the first time have to deal with the Alawite residents of these neighborhoods in *their* neighborhoods in order to conduct business.³² This spatial shift has translated into tangible shifts in social power relations; at least ten new second hand shops (*baleh*) have opened in the al-Zeraa neighborhood. These shops are owned by Latakia Sunnis, but they are primarily staffed by displaced Aleppines, who are trusted by their Sunni employers and Alawite customers.³³

The Alawites' emergence as actors in the private sector is only a relative shift in influence, rather than a major change in their economic status and role. Before 2011, coastal residents with Alawite backgrounds could leverage their position as state employees or their connections to regime figures heading state-owned enterprises to benefit from the economic dynamism in the coastal region. Today, however, they must rely on direct connections to regime figures—unmediated by public bureaucracy or state-owned enterprises—to access public resources, as regime figures' networks have become increasingly in charge of decision-making within both the public and private sectors. Rather than encompassing a transformation in networks of social power, this shift merely represents their emergence into the open, as regime figures leverage their networks to operate as »facilitators« for any private investor willing to set up a business.

4.2 Baniyas

In contrast to Latakia, where business and trade have secured linkages between sects during the uprising, the smaller coastal city of Baniyas has seen economic activities exacerbate the friction between local Alawites and Sunnis, which was already considerable before the uprising.

Even before the uprising started in 2011, sectarian tensions had been latent in Baniyas. Between the mostly Alawite northern neighborhoods and the southern Sunni areas, socioeconomic exchanges have been scarce. Alawites and Sunnis developed their own businesses separately, each one on their side of the city.³⁴ The 2001 killing of an Alawite teenager in a street fight with a Sunni had already put the two communities at odds. Alawite-Sunni clashes escalated throughout the city at the time and required the intervention of high-level regime figures from both communities to defuse it.³⁵ The office of Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam—a Sunni native of Baniyas—is said to have intervened with Sunni notables, while members of the security service dealt with the Alawite community. Violent incidents of this sort had lasting implications throughout the uprising. In March and April 2011, residents in the nearby Sunni town of al-Baida held protests and attacked a bus carrying army personnel.³⁶ The response from regime security forces and pro-government thugs (*shabiha*) was swift and severe. They laid siege to the area, destroying several buildings and evicting many residents.³⁷

The breakdown of relations between the Sunni and Alawite communities in Baniyas had wide-ranging implications for local economic activity. Baniyas traditionally depended heavily on agriculture and the farmers from the areas surrounding the city are almost exclusively Alawites. Before the uprising, they used to sell and export their products in Baniyas's central vegetable market, thanks to their collaborative relationships with Sunni urban traders from the city center. In 2011, the regime security siege of al-Baida inflamed already simmering sectarian tensions, deterring Alawite farmers from selling their products in the central vegetable market and eventually leading to its closure. Since then, a purely intracommunitarian wholesale business has developed. Alawites began selling their products on the side of Mafraq Der El Bashel, a highway connecting Baniyas to other coastal cities, and established there a new vegetable market, known as al-Souq al-Fouqani (Upper Market). Despite the original central market of Baniyas reopening, the Souq al-Fouqani continued to thrive in 2014 due to

32. Fabrice Balanche (2000): Les Alaouites, l'espace et le pouvoir dans la région côtière syrienne]. The fact that Christians also played a role in trade is of little importance for understanding sectarian relations, because Christians remain a minority with whom Alawites generally have an unchanged relationship on the coast.

33. Telephone interview with Latakia resident, January 2016.

34. Balanche: Les Alaouites, 606 f.

35. From the author's interview with residents of Baniyas, January 2016.

36. Bishara: Syria, a Path to Freedom from Suffering, 321 f.

37. See http://www.creativememory.org/?page_id=104873.

the lingering lack of trust between Alawite farmers and Sunni traders.³⁸

Several of the Alawite merchants who had businesses in the original city center market have tried to keep them functioning, but fear going into the city center market, just as Baniyas's Sunnis fear going to the Upper Market, which is primarily Alawite.³⁹ To work around these mutual suspicions, several of the Alawite merchants have hired displaced Sunnis from areas perceived to be loyal to the regime, such as Aleppo, to be their agents in the lower market and work in their businesses for them.⁴⁰ This phenomenon is not limited to the Alawites. The fact that both Baniyas's Alawites and Sunnis rely on outsider Sunnis as intermediaries for their business interactions is actually symptomatic of the fact that sectarian mistrust, rather than spanning across the entire sect, is present primarily at the local level, among individuals of different sects from the local coastal area.

5. Regime and Coastal Alawites: A New Interdependence

The conflict has cemented the coastal Alawite communities' interdependence with the regime in a new and unprecedented way. Conflict has isolated the coastal region and many of the Alawite local communities from the rest of the country, which has allowed them to develop mechanisms of local governance on the one hand, but on the other hand has made them more dependent on the networks of regime figures in order to sustain this autonomy.

Several years of fighting have taken their toll on the Syrian Army and, by extension, the local communities that furnish much of its manpower, such as the Alawite communities of the coast. To address both the need for more manpower and the effects of battle casualties on local society, numerous local charity organizations⁴¹ aimed at supporting the communities that have lost many of their

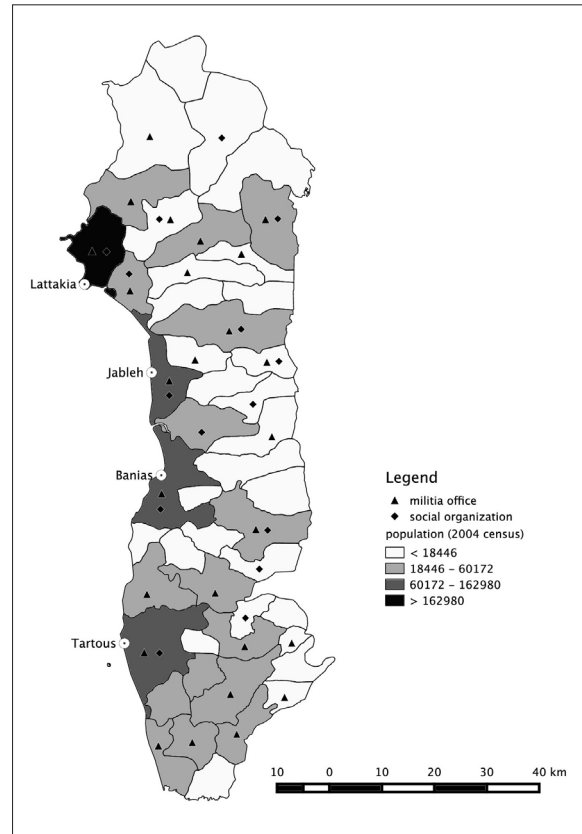
38. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015.

39. Ibid.

40. From the author's interview with an Aleppine businessman in Beirut, December 2015.

41. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015 found that 19 NGOs explicitly related to the regime and involved in the conflict had been created in the coastal governorates. A separate study cataloguing all newly established NGOs—including religious foundations with no connection to the regime or the conflict—found that 43 new NGOs had been created (see <https://citizensforsyria.org/syriamap/>).

Figure 5: Establishment of new militia recruitment centers and social organizations, by sub-district



Source: Data collected by author via interviews with each sub-district.

young men, and 25 new recruitment centers for militias have sprung up along the coast (see figure 5). These new institutions do more than just provide fresh military manpower to the regime and aid to families affected by conflict. Their proliferation across the coast deepened the network of connections between the regime and the coastal society—including sects other than the Alawites—and consolidated the regime's social base among the Alawite communities.

While decreasing their dependence on the public sector, where they were previously employed in great numbers, Alawites from the coast have increased their reliance on a network of figures linked to the regime and its personnel. This has made coastal Alawites and the regime mutually dependent on one another for survival. As much as it provides greater connections and resources to those individuals with strong ties to the regime, it also offers the regime a larger span of human and financial resources to survive.

5.1 Charities

All across Syria, as well as on the coast, conflict has forced each region to develop new forms of local governance. This occurred in order to compensate for the deficiencies of the central state institutions in serving the entire country, as well as the increasing physical disconnection between areas of the country now under the control of different armed groups.

On the coast—as elsewhere—the regime has adapted to this development and generated new ways to penetrate the local communities. Newly established charities are primarily aimed at addressing the immediate needs of their towns that would have been addressed by the state prior to the uprising. While state institutions were previously an important channel for the regime to intertwine with the coastal communities, these charity organizations have begun to replace the state in some of its functions now that it is in decline. Charity organizations function as a new intermediary through which the regime can connect with the coast. They provide a way for the regime to extend its networks of organization and control into a local population that is adapting to the changing context the war entails.

Charity organizations began to appear in 2011 and were mostly initiatives of individuals related to the state bureaucracy and the regime through employment, familial, and network ties. They effectively mobilized the community at the very local level, addressing the needs of citizens hailing from the area, but in a way that central state institutions could not do. For instance, one of the consequences of large numbers of military-age males from the coast participating in the current conflict—as part of either the regular army or pro-regime militia groups—is a correspondingly high contingent of war casualties. In response, various types of social organizations and charities have formed to help local communities take care of the families and relatives of those lost to war, especially women and children.

As these charities have increasingly become the new channel to reach and penetrate local society, the regime has smoothed the procedures for their registration. Before the uprising, even regime loyalists in the region would need approval from the security services (*mukhabarat*) and support from networks within the regime to start any organization outside the purview of

the state. Thus, anyone seeking to set up an organization would not only have to undergo a formal and extremely codified registration process to get permission from governmental agencies, but also secure informal approvals of individual regime figures; it would have been impossible to set up any organization without following this intricate bureaucratic procedure. Now only the larger organizations that are headquartered in the region's big cities bother to register, which is made easier with the right connections. Meanwhile, the regime turns a blind eye to the informal organizations proliferating across the coast.

Some of these charity organizations are legally registered and on the Foreign Ministry's list of Syrian NGOs; thus, they can open an official bank account, receive financial support from inside and outside Syria, as well as cooperate with international NGOs (INGOs). The inclusion on the Foreign Ministry's list—which can only happen through connections with top-level regime figures—is crucial in order to access funds from domestic sources and from UN agencies. In spite of relying on regime connections to facilitate their activities, these organizations chiefly address the needs of families coming from both regime and rebel-controlled areas, with no distinction of sect. For example, the organization Mosaic was created in 2014 to deliver aid and foster development in the coastal area to 3,600 families from their headquarters in Latakia. They are working together with INGOs and target beneficiaries from both National Defense Forces (NDF) families and internally displaced persons.⁴²

The interface with the regime remains crucial for the organization to survive. Mosaic has appointed Sheikh Mazen Ghazzal, an Alawite sheikh from a prominent Latakia family, as an intermediary between the organization and the regime.⁴³ The presence of NDF and army families (mostly Alawite) among the beneficiaries is a requirement for these charities and NGOs to remain on the Foreign Ministry's list. The experience of a charity in Tartus⁴⁴ is a case in point. The charity was first es-

42. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015. See also Mosaic Facebook page; available at: https://www.facebook.com/Mosaic.organization/info/?tab=page_info (last accessed on 4.5.2016).

43. Author's Skype interview with a Syrian NGO employee, December 2015.

44. The name of the charity has been withheld for the safety of its employees and beneficiaries.

established before the uprising to address the needs of families with disabled children. After the uprising, the organization began working with families of internally displaced persons, but refused to register some local Tartus NDF families, who were pushing themselves onto the list only to receive additional benefits. As a result of this refusal, the organization was suddenly deleted from the Foreign Ministry's list of registered NGOs.⁴⁵ This abrupt decision not only suggests a direct connection between the Tartus NDF and central authorities, but also illustrates the restrictive, controlled environment in which these purportedly »non-governmental« organizations operate.

Yet, most charities are small-scale, village-based, and not necessarily legally registered or on the Foreign Ministry's list. These small charities function due to their connection to, or the tacit approval of, regime figures.⁴⁶ The regime network that previously facilitated their operations across state institutions has now redeployed to facilitate the establishment of—or even establish their own—local charity organizations. In general, people who founded these charities have close links to the regime through the Ba'ath Party or the intelligence services, though they do not officially represent either institution.

In 2014, for example, a local resident with ties to the NDF and security services founded the Association for Loyalty to the Martyrs (*mo'asset al wafa' lilshahid*) in the town of Qadmous in Tartus governorate.⁴⁷ It is officially registered, yet not listed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and thus does not cooperate with INGOs. Like all charities without access to external funding, it is based in and coordinated entirely by the local community, securing donations through its leaders' personal connections. It does not receive money from the government or outside donors to disperse, but focuses on addressing the needs of specific community members and coordinating social events. For example, an organization like the Association for Loyalty to the Martyrs might take up a collection for a specific family that has lost a breadwinner to the fighting, or call on connections at local hospitals to get medical supplies for injured or sick commu-

nity members who cannot pay for them. They support students in need and organize four to five events for families each month—such as painting with children, sporting competitions, or special activities on holidays like Mother's Day.⁴⁸

The regime in Damascus is aware of the need to make the Alawite communities dependent on it to ensure their support, with charities playing an important role in maintaining social cohesion within the regime's sectarian base. Nevertheless, Alawite identity is not the only factor that makes the area hold together behind the regime. Rather, it is primarily the fact that local communities depend on the regime for their livelihoods, which makes them take autonomous action to defend it.⁴⁹ The charities' local dimension is also key in terms of cementing the regime's sectarian base among the Alawites, whose communities are much more embedded in localized considerations and detached from national politics or movements. Charities provide a channel for the regime to meet Alawites' needs at the very local level, and show them support by addressing their demands—such as support to martyrs' families—in a way that the state had previously done. They function to contain the Alawite communities' grievances over the high toll of human losses in a fight that is often the regime's, rather than their own. Local Alawite communities also confront a lack of alternatives: either they rely on these new governance entities—and consequently on the regime—or they remain vulnerable.

All in all, Alawites on the coast remain embedded in the regime system. The emerging forms of local governance, such as the charities, are established through and operate with the active collaboration of the regime's networks. Their political culture is characterized by interpersonal mistrust, which reflects the political culture prevalent in state institutions—such as the army or the state bureaucracy—prior to the conflict. In other words, through the charities the regime has not only been able to redeploy a human network, but also to perpetuate its political culture in and domination over coastal Alawite communities.

45. Author's Skype interview with a Syrian NGO employee, December 2015.

46. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015.

47. Ibid.

48. See the association's Facebook page; available at: https://www.facebook.com/association-of-fidelity-for-martyrs-608247422592442/home?ref=page_internal (last accessed on 4.5.16).

49. Kheder Khaddour (2016): Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience, in: Carnegie Middle East Center (14.3.2016); available at: <http://http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience/uz7> (last accessed on 23.6.2016).

5.2 Militia Recruitment Centers

Facing a shortage of ground forces to pursue its military campaigns—and unable to enlist them through the formal mechanism of military conscription—the Assad regime began establishing militia recruitment centers in countless villages on the coast.⁵⁰ The shift from army to militias was essential to ensure the regime’s ability to mobilize young Alawites, and to redeploy and capitalize on the social networks of Alawite army officers. Unlike a national conscript army, which relies on soldiers from all regions and social backgrounds, militias are local units linked to the territory whose defense constitutes their reason for being.

Militia recruitment centers have flourished throughout the coastal region under the patronage of four main militias: the NDF, Suqur al-Sahara, Kaetaeb al-Ba’th, and al-Bostan. These militias are primarily headed by former and current Alawite army officers and specifically recruit Alawites tasked with defending a regime that is increasingly depending on and reproducing a sectarian narrative. Former officers are an effective means of ensuring the reenlistment of badly needed military manpower and expertise on the regime side, while at the same time acting as ambassadors of the regime in local communities. They ensure cohesion both within the paramilitary forces drawn from the Alawite communities, and between these forces and the overarching regime agenda. Unlike the Syrian Arab Army, which draws recruits indiscriminately from across the country, militia recruitment centers are local bodies with recruits often having close personal connections to the officers in charge.⁵¹ This dramatically increases the effectiveness of background security checks on new recruits and helps ensure the loyalty of those who are enrolled.

The process of recruitment is somewhat different between rural and urban areas. Whereas in the former recruitment has the character of a popular movement rising from within the community, in the latter, it is clearly an institutional extension of a central authority (i.e., the Assad regime). In Latakia, most fighters are recruited at the neighborhood level. For example, Al-Zeraa—a heavily Alawite-populated area—has long had an NDF

recruitment center, and a new center for the Coastal Shield militia was recently established. Both an al-Bustan and an NDF recruitment center operate in al-Ramel al-Shamaly, another Alawite neighborhood in northern Latakia.

Groups other than the regime have also been operating to mobilize and recruit Alawites. The Lebanese Hezbollah, for example, has offices in eastern Latakia’s Alawite neighborhood of Mashroue el Ba’th, which facilitates the deployment of local militias for operations outside the city.⁵² Through its recruitment center, the Lebanese group either enrolls residents to fight by their side directly, or establishes contact with small militia groups that might cooperate with Hezbollah battalions deployed on the battlefronts along the mountainous governorate borders. Yet there is little to no evidence that Hezbollah seeks to develop its influence beyond transient military cooperation.

The story of Hassan Abu Nimr,⁵³ an Alawite militia recruiter, is a case in point. When his militia started cooperating with Hezbollah, people reported a change in his behavior. He began to emphasize his piety and fulfillment of Islamic duties, referring to himself as *al-Haj Hassan*, and, following an Iranian Revolutionary Guard tradition, showed his dedication to Hussein and Zeinab with stickers on his car. Yet when he shifted his cooperation to work for Mohammed Jaber, leader of Suqur al-Sahara, he switched his allegiance to Assad’s family and exchanged the Hussein and Zeinab names on his car for portraits of Bashar al-Assad, his father Hafez, and other regime figures.

Many superficial changes to relations between Alawites and the regime have occurred, but the structure largely remains as it was before the uprising. Coastal inhabitants’ efforts to adapt to the new circumstances have indirectly had the effect of entrenching the regime’s networks in these local initiatives. The coast and the regime have thus become even more interdependent, although in a different way than before the uprising. The local community increasingly relies on regime networks in order to ensure its survival, and the regime draws a considerable part of its military and financial resources from the coastal areas.

50. Ibid.

51. Data collected through fieldwork July–October 2015.

52. Ibid.

53. Author’s Skype interview with an NDF member, January 2016.

6. Conclusion: Syria's Forced Decentralization

The situation in the coastal areas suggests a resilience of local communities whose relationships and roles even five years of conflict have not mutated drastically. Sectarian divisions, while they exist, are deployed at the local level, without necessarily entailing an overall, primordial opposition between two sects. In other words, local relationships—between Sunnis and Alawites, and between Alawites and the regime—have proved stronger than the conflict, and the armed factions' sectarian narratives have cemented previous divisions rather than creating new ones.

It is precisely the implications of local communities' resilience and adaptation to the conflict environment that is already shaping the future of Syria on the ground. The coast shows that the Syrian conflict, even if not directly affecting a given area or its population, has inexorably cemented a previous set of relationships at the horizontal level, between sects living alongside one another. It is also, progressively, localizing the relationship between the coast's communities and the central authorities (i. e., the state institutions and the regime). If previously, coastal Alawites' relationship with the Damascus-based state institutions and security services manifested itself vertically as a relationship between the periphery and the center, today this relationship is increasingly manifesting itself at the very local level, between local communities and the agents of the regime's networks.

This is an adaptation of both the local community, which perceives a need to provide for itself and develop mechanisms of local governance and defense, and of the Assad regime, which is now reaching out to its social base through more informal channels—such as charities and militias—rather than operating exclusively through the state. In the coastal region as elsewhere, this represents an evolution of the role of the central state in Syria's provinces. The public sector continues to exist in its formal framework, but both the regime and local communities reinvest their human capital in the informal mechanisms of local governance that are parallel to the

state, and more efficient than it in the current context of protracted conflict. The resources located on the coast, in terms of human capital and physical infrastructure, are the most intact of any in the country and will play a central role in rebuilding state institutions and in development efforts after the conflict.

In a sense, the conflict is gradually forcing the Syrian state towards decentralization. Its political actors—both the regime on the coast and opposition groups elsewhere—derive their strength from their ability to seize the local communities' set of relationships and deploy local skills that were previously invested in the central state, in informal mechanisms of governance and defense. However, the localization of politics creates obstacles to consolidating authority and political stability. As the example of the coast has shown, localization cemented simmering Sunni-Alawite divisions and consolidated Alawite dependence on the regime, de facto paving the way for regime networks to operate at the very local, neighborhood level where Alawites live.

Given these developments, among the most pressing challenges in a post-conflict Syria will be to devise a decentralization framework in continuity with the path already paved by the conflict. Crucially, however, this framework must resist the current trend towards closing up local communities on themselves, and instead reopen channels of economic interaction and social relationships between different local communities and regions. In other words, a successful decentralization strategy will rebuild channels between local communities that have been severed by the conflict, rather than serve as a framework for these local communities to hermetically seal themselves off from their surroundings.

The role of Sunnis and Alawites in the region and their relationship will, in any case, sit in continuity with the past. The cross-sectarian linkages that made the economies function before the uprising have continued to do so throughout the conflict, although in different ways. The sectarian divides that have emerged during the conflict are not newly made or discovered, but rooted in local struggles that have often invoked these same sectarian boundaries.



About the author

Kheder Khaddour is a nonresident Scholar at Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. His research focuses on Syrian society identities, the evolution of Syria's state institutions and their relationship with the regime. His most recent publications include »Strength in Weakness: the Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience« and »Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal«.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Dep. for Middle East and North Africa
Hiroshimastr. 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Responsible:
Dr Ralf Hexel, Head, Middle East and North Africa

Phone: ++49-30-269-35-7420 | Fax: ++49-30-269-35-9233
<http://www.fes.de/nahost>

Orders/Contact:
info.nahost@fes.de

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