

## Syria's society upended: societal rifts pose a massive challenge to pursuit of a political solution

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## Syria's Society Upended

Societal Rifts Pose a Massive Challenge to Pursuit of a Political Solution

*Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

The Syrian civil war has profoundly altered established business structures, a delicate balance of religious values, and long-standing ties between urban and rural areas. New networks, identities, and social hierarchies have emerged in connection with the war economy, the militarization of the public sphere, and signs of ethnic cleansing. Any formal end to the conflict is unlikely to halt the violent societal transformation. Co-existence will remain a major challenge due to the nature of the cleavages. However, an inclusive political system that ends the marginalization of the Sunni majority, accepts diversity, and protects minorities is a prerequisite for reducing the levels of profound mistrust between the different societal groups.

Virtually all Middle East regimes used divide-and-rule tactics to manage their societies prior to the “Arab Spring” revolts. Day-to-day, they employed *tarheeb wa targheeb* (terrorization and inducement) – their version of the carrot-and-stick approach. Rulers of republics coming from a religious minority, such as was the case in Syria and Iraq, tended to use a more brutal version because they needed to domesticize the majority sect of the population, in whose eyes they had little legitimacy – neither democratic, “traditional,” nor religious.

The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the demise of Sunni minority rule in Baghdad did little to change the strategy of the Alawite regime in Damascus. The Assad clan seized upon chunks of the economy and awarded enormous privileges to other elites associated with it. Underpinning the

system – apart from the security apparatus – were partnerships between the top Alawite tier and Sunni merchants, mainly in Damascus and Aleppo. The regime subjugated the largely Sunni tribes, which, as a result, disintegrated over the decades. At the same time, it gave them a role in communal management. Peasants were subsidized before the partial liberalization of the economy in the mid-2000s, and the lifting of subsidies contributed to socio-economic havoc. The Kurdish community was maltreated and disenfranchised, except for on-and-off regime backing of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

As the first wave of the Arab Spring hit North Africa in late 2010, Bashar al-Assad tried to preempt the Syrian revolt by making rhetorical commitments to improve the lot of the regime's non-Alawite base, but

societal and economic rifts had grown too deep to be contained by the system that had fostered them. For instance, the regime no longer could manage the young jihadis and other Islamist actors who it had, in part, nourished in order to present Assad as the only alternative to chaos and to pressure the West into ending periods of limited isolation on the regime from 2005 to 2008.

### **Social Impacts of the War Economy**

The dynamics of the civil war, which followed the crackdown on the 2011 revolt, produced massive social fragmentation. It broke down social, economic, and generational hierarchies, and it fueled new military-economic networks. The power balance between religious and ethnic groups was altered. Social mobility no longer depended on having links to the regime; as a result, the Assad clan's control over a governing system that fused cronyism and sectarian rule abated sharply.

### **New Markets for Junior Actors**

The progressive loss of central authority diluted the concentration of economic spoils among the regime's top tier. New or bigger markets opened to previously junior actors, typically in their 30s, in regime areas and in rebel territory.

Among the loyalist ranks, loot and a slice of the black market were the main incentives for thousands recruited into the regime's militias. Relatively low-ranking personnel in the intelligence apparatus who had lived off relatively petty bribes enriched themselves by charging for information of detained persons in the regime's jails and *al-mukhabarat* (intelligence) dungeons. It has been common for families to sell all their assets for cash just to learn whether their sons are dead or alive. Others rose to the top of the extortion rackets of the besieged areas. Fuel supplies to regime territory and energy dealings with areas under the control of the so-called Islamic State (also derogatorily called Da'ish)

became big business. The new profiteers sought to enhance their social stature. Backed by their own private militias, they bullied former pillars of the business community in order to take over their positions, as a more outwardly violent mode of doing business developed after 2011.

A main figure and typical representative of this new business elite is Samer al-Foz. A previously unknown young figure in Latakia, Foz apparently bought assets in 2017 belonging to Imad Ghreiwati – one of a generation of businessmen known as “friends of Bashar” before the revolt – with cash from war profiteering. Among Foz's new reported assets is the Orient Club, which is a fixture of the old Damascus elite. The purchase of the club signals Foz's success in entering the bourgeois hierarchy in the capital.

Former junior actors came to the fore as well in opposition areas. In the suburbs of Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, a long siege fueled a tunnel trade that resulted in traditional merchants giving way to a younger generation. The “new capitalists” made their fortunes during sieges by sourcing basic supplies and goods and transporting them through tunnels. They partnered with the rebels, and in many cases with the regime, and needed clerics for legitimacy. Many of the clerics maneuvered between the changing social strata, earning figurehead membership in various religious consultation and adjudication councils tied to rebel brigades. These councils legitimized the brigades' involvement in the war economy and warfare against other rebels, which in many cases involved competition over resources as well as religious ideology.

The tunnels ran from Eastern Ghouta to rebel territory near the Damascus district of al-Qaboun. However, under a surrender deal in the first half of 2017, the rebels were bussed out of the district to opposition areas away from the capital. Most tunnels closed after the rebels lost Qaboun, giving a former small trader called Mohieddine Manfoush a virtual monopoly of supplying

Eastern Ghouta. Manfoush had built solid relations with – and a network of – intermediaries with the regime as well as the rebels, enabling him to move goods openly overland.

The new hierarchies could be challenged by political developments. Eastern Ghouta, a main target of a nerve gas attack that killed hundreds of civilians in 2013, is supposed to be included in the planned “de-escalation zones.” The zones were proposed in May 2017 by the three guarantors (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) of the Astana peace talks, which have been held in Kazakhstan since early 2017. With Moscow acting as the zones’ most ardent proponent, it is unlikely that the zones will result in a West Berlin-style scenario, that is, an island surrounded by “enemy” territory, but with relatively free access to the outside world. Delineation and levels of access to the zones would likely again reshape local societal dynamics.

### **Revenge of the Rural Poor**

The militarization of the revolt since the second half of 2011 placed marginalized Sunnis at the center of the armed resistance to Assad. They comprised inhabitants of the countryside and those of rural origins who lived in poorer districts of cities and nearby. The military role provided them with the power to redress the socio-economic imbalance in relation to the richer segments of society allied with the Alawite elite. After Assad’s grip lessened, social mobility for many rural Sunnis became dependent on local parameters and communal dynamics rather than links to regime elites. Grievances emerged, and many of the Sunni poor began calling themselves *al-mustad’afoun* (the oppressed), a term mentioned in the Koran. The same term has been used to derive legitimacy for the political and social ascendancy of the Shi’ites in Iraq and Lebanon in the last 10 to 20 years.

The Syrian regime viewed the rural Sunnis, especially those who had rebelled against it in the 1980s in Hama and Idlib governorates, as “untrustworthy elements.”

In contrast to the countryside and the slums, the military and the regime’s security tended to be more entrenched in the more well-off sectors in cities. The rebel capture of territory, mostly on the periphery, reinforced social demarcation lines, not only between the countryside and the cities but between richer and poorer districts in the cities themselves. These lines had developed in large part because of the regime’s neglect of the rural poor and the development of patterns of legal and illegal dwellings tied to corruption, zoning, and social engineering.

### **Old Rural Nobility Hit New Low**

The economic changes that accompanied the war have further diminished what is left of the old rural nobility, which had survived waves of nationalization and socialist agrarian policies in the past. One such example is the town of Qalaat al-Madiq, in Hama governorate. Here, rural social tensions have simmered since agrarian reform in the 1950s. It pitted former tenant farmers who were awarded land against the old nobility who had managed to retain some of their original lands. During the civil war, Qalaat al-Madiq, which is situated near the Roman ruins of Apamea on the edge of the Ghab Plain, lost its agricultural holdings. The loss was mostly due to regime shelling intended to prevent cultivation in rebel areas. The former tenant farmers in the town joined rebel brigades, in particular Ahrar al-Sham, which is a large Salafist group that controls a main crossing with Turkey. Geography and the link to Ahrar al-Sham helped transform Qalaat al-Madiq into a main conduit of Turkish goods and fuel to rebel areas starting in 2012. The new trading and smuggling rings displaced the old landowning nobility at the top of the social pyramid. The growing commercial activity in the town helped compensate the region for the lack of access to the provincial capital of Hama, which the regime overran with tanks in August 2011.

### **Hinterlands Become Centers**

Along with changes of economic structures due to the regime's control of traditional centers of commerce, societies in the hinterlands changed as a result of the large numbers and diversity of refugees who fled there.

With rebel-held Idlib governorate cut off from Aleppo, the small town of Sarmada turned into a hub for foreign currency and money transfers, and services replaced agriculture as the town's economic mainstay. Across Idlib, young entrepreneurs competed vigorously among each other to provide services. They set up local communication towers that enabled residents of rebel areas to buy internet usage and communicate through voice and messaging applications.

The swelling of the population across Idlib as a result of refugees made it more difficult for various jihadist and hardline Salafist brigades that had captured most of Idlib to enforce their religious codes, such as the wearing of the *niqab* (full-face cover) or bans on smoking, although the *niqab* was fairly common in Syria's Sunni countryside before the revolt. In some instances, social mores were adapted to suit businesses. For example, the town of al-Dana in Idlib was able to attract business by adopting a less strict social attitude toward the masses of displaced persons. The original inhabitants of Dana, who numbered around 30,000 before the revolt, were influenced by the 70,000 more socially relaxed refugees from other parts of Syria who had made Dana their new home. The social leeway in Dana enticed displaced families and even women living alone to rent property in the town. One woman who fled Aleppo and who did not wear the full-face veil rented a house and lived by herself in Dana for months. No questions were asked.

### **Class Clashes in Aleppo**

One of the main figures who conveyed the cause of rural Sunnis into an instrument of power after 2011 was Abdul Qader Saleh, a merchant turned rebel commander from the town of Marea in the Aleppo country-

side. Known as Hajji Marea, Saleh led the Islamist Tawhid brigades. He represented a layer of lower-class or socially obscure Sunnis, who tended to be more conservative and lacked the links urban businessmen had with the regime. Their base distrusted the Sunni bourgeois.

Before a regime strike killed Saleh in Aleppo in 2013, Tawhid led a rebel capture of the eastern sector of the city. Compared to the more affluent western Aleppo, its inhabitants mostly comprised fairly recent migrants from the countryside of Aleppo and Idlib governorates and from more arid regions in eastern Syria. Residents of al-Sakhour, one of Aleppo's bigger neighborhoods, made livings as underpaid industrial workers or in quarries and cotton mills. Dwellings in eastern Aleppo were known as *ashwaeiyat* (random), because they were built without permits and had no titles or recognition in official records. More than half of all urban dwellings in Syria before 2011 were estimated to fall into the *ashwaeiyat* category. In contrast, properties were officially registered and delineated in the western neighborhoods of Aleppo, which brought them roads and services. The housing market and property registrations have been the main tools in the regime's cooptation arsenal. Still today in Aleppo and other regime areas, home ownership is largely dependent on so-called housing associations, comprised of groups of would-be owners who qualify for loans from state banks to build residential buildings according to their loyalties to the regime. Once the building is completed, several apartments are reserved for free for officials or intelligence operatives to sell, live in, or give to their cronies or as bribes, including to judges and other officials who facilitate their business.

In an outpouring of resentment against Aleppo's elite, the looting of factories had marked the fall of the eastern sector to the rebels. Their owners were seen as regime lackeys. However, the relationship was more nuanced. Many among the well-off in western Aleppo had seen little choice other than

to work with the system or leave Syria. They blamed the regime for the demise of Aleppo as a cosmopolitan hub, the flight of its minority populations, and for the stifling of free enterprise. On the other hand, some touted their connections with the regime. One industrialist opened a factory in Jordan after his factory in Aleppo, which employed 700 workers and relied on export business, was looted. Speaking next to a framed photo of Assad at his office in Amman, he complained that costs in Jordan were too high because, unlike Syria, he could not bribe his way out of paying workers' insurance.

### **Sufis versus Salafists**

Almost no one dared complain publicly about the sectarian cronyism practiced by the regime in the pre-2011 era, but it was a main source of underlying Sunni resentment. Dissidents, who included Alawites, regarded the system as unsustainable and championed democratic transformation as the alternative to any sectarian retribution.

Among Syria's Sunnis, different strands linked to Salafism and Sufism competed quietly for influence while an equilibrium that had been developed over centuries kept tensions in check. Most Sunnis tended to be socially conservative, falling somewhere between Salafism and Sufism. Neither made inroads in Syria on a mass scale as an ideology per se.

However, from the early 2000s onward, the regime began to mess with this fragile balance to suit its political purposes, arbitrarily enhancing the Sunni ideological gap by giving certain groups freedom to proselytize while denying it to others. Two examples on the Sufi side stand out. The first is the Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaru Foundation, whose top management the authorities allowed to establish contact with Western embassies as representatives of a moderate face of regime-backed Islam in Syria. The second is the al-Qubaisiyat, a women-only group that flourished, mostly in Damascus, around 2006, to the indignation of conservative Sunnis, who saw the Qubaisiyat as a cult.

Taking the stakes a significant notch higher, the regime facilitated recruitment of jihadists to undermine the US presence in Iraq from 2003 onwards, contributing to the spread of Salafism, mainly in rural regions and poor urban outskirts. Confident in its ability to choreograph even the jihadists, in 2006 the regime brought radicalized slum dwellers to the center of the capital. It allowed thousands into the diplomatic district of Damascus to demonstrate against the publishing of Danish cartoons that depicted the prophet. The protesters – fired up by regime-appointed clerical outfits – torched the Danish and Norwegian embassies. European diplomats stationed in Damascus saw the episode as the product of the “invisible hand” of the regime. At the time, it was a thinly veiled warning that the regime could let the genie of radical Islam it had nurtured out of the bottle unless the West ended the isolation imposed on the Syrian government after the 2005 assassination of Lebanese statesman Rafik al-Hariri.

The societal divides – ethnic and religious – carried little political significance at the start of the protests in 2011. Several high-profile Alawites, such as actors and filmmakers, supported the revolt. The pro-democracy demonstrations broadly engulfed the countryside and the cities, as well as urban districts with different income levels and religious leanings. In the ensuing war, besieged rebel regions embraced religion more strongly, partly as a way to deal with the suffering from the indiscriminate regime and Russian bombings. Salafism outpaced moderating Sufi influences, and ideological polarization enhanced the levels of bitterness toward the cities, which were enjoying relative safety, and the suspicions that their Sunni inhabitants had “sold out” to the regime. Damascus, in particular, became increasingly seen as lacking religious credentials because the capital had been influenced by Sufism, whose adherents are considered apostates by more doctrinaire Islamists.

By mid-2017 the regime had captured through siege warfare most districts it had

lost to rebels in the capital and on the outskirts, except for Eastern Ghouta. Salafism had roots in the area, which were rekindled before the revolt by the regime's tacit support for jihadists. Eastern Ghouta merchants tended to view themselves as "close to the people," as opposed to the more aloof Damascenes associated with Sufism, and generally backed the revolt. One Eastern Ghouta merchant went as far back as to blame the Damascenes for the death of Ibn Taimiyyah, a Levantine theologian who inspired modern Salafist movements and died while imprisoned at the Damascus citadel during Mamluk rule in 1328.

Damascus residents, however, have had little room to show or act on any sympathies with their Sunni co-religionists because of the abundance of security in Assad's seat of power. A 2012 strike organized by Damascene merchants to protest the massacre of more than 100 Sunni civilians in Homs governorate was swiftly quelled. After the rise of jihadists, a sentiment might have prevailed among those merchants who had not fled the country that Syria, under Assad, was still preferable to the Islamic State or Taliban-style rule. Among those who remained, many stayed – not out of support for the regime but because they feared that if they left, the various pro-regime Shi'ite militia recruited from inside and outside Syria would take over their properties. Although the militias' presence is reportedly visible in the Old City, home to some of the busiest markets, the regime sought to keep the conservative shopkeepers in Damascus as a façade of "normal" economic activity during the war.

### **New Tribal Landscape**

In relative terms, the most powerful among the traditional Sunni components of the regime have been the Arab tribes. Their knowledge and rooting in the large landscape they inhabit east of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs to the Iraqi border made them indispensable to the different powers that captured the region after 2011.

The effects of the war varied according to the outside powers present in the respective area. Tribes that had remained on the side of the regime tended to gain influence and expanded their social networks. For instance, Bani Izza, a branch of the Mawali tribe north of Hama, was one of the pro-regime formations that emerged with enhanced status. Ahmad Mubarak Darwish, head of Bani Izza, was similar to other tribal figures before the revolt. He was awarded for his loyalty with a seat in the rubber stamp parliament elected in 2003 and claimed more prestige by adjudicating local disputes. The regime ignored the smuggling in the area, which turned during the war into a conduit between the regime, the Islamic State, and rebel territory. Darwish carved out a middleman role between all three. Sunni merchants who had fled Hama to Turkey would contact him to send Turkish goods to their old networks in the city. Fuel from Islamic State areas would pass through him to various regions.

Outside regime areas, particularly in eastern Syria, a struggle for resources produced tribal rifts, widening divisions in local societies that were fragmented by the regime's divide-and-rule policy in the previous decades. In the eastern governorates of Raqqqa, Deir al-Zor, and Hasakah to the east, various tribes fought among themselves for oil and gas until the Islamic State took control of much of the region in 2013. Senior tribesmen who had enjoyed relative independence were placed on a short leash, with the local emirs from the Islamic State reigning supreme.

### **Kurds Rise As Societal Actors**

The Islamic State's capture of the east increased support among Syrian Kurds for the US-backed People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, a subsidiary of the PKK. The YPG's advances against the Islamic State, starting in late 2014, altered again the societal landscape in the region and empowered YPG diehards, who became the new powerbrokers.

The YPG has cooperated with Assad since the beginning of the revolt, violently suppressing anti-Assad protests and acting as a supply conduit to the regime's military. With the consent of the regime, the YPG area expanded to comprise both Kurdish and Arab regions. It has been divided since 2014 into three so-called cantons: al-Jazeera in the eastern Hasakah governorate, Afrin near Aleppo, and Kobanê, which is situated between the other two. After the YPG consolidated its power, middlemen linked to the YPG emerged to sell wheat crops to the regime, such as in the Ras al-Ain region on the border with Turkey, and to handle oil produced in Hasakah's Rumeilan, one of Syria's largest oil fields. Local figures in Kurdish cities and towns yielded to armed YPG cadres, who violently suppressed dissent. The YPG not only demanded loyalty from the local Kurdish community figures. They had to be "Apogis," or ideologically fervent believers, in the personality cult of Abdullah Öcalan to win any favor with the YPG. Many among the educated Kurds subsequently left their hometowns, resulting in a reported shortage of qualified workers across the Kurdish areas of Syria. Others left merely to escape conscription into the YPG.

The fragmentation among the Arab tribes played into the hands of the YPG as it captured traditional Arab areas from the Islamic State. The YPG set up units such as military councils and local administrations, in which Arab tribal figures would receive positions with lofty titles. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the YPG's political division, has also been an actor that has created a myriad of councils and organized the buy-in of certain local Arab tribes. However, any significant decision-making has remained implicitly with the YPG militia actors. Under them, the social contract appears similar to previous Assad regime structures, under which the de facto viceroy was often the Alawite security agent behind the scenes, not the "popular democracy" structures erected to give the appearance of offering a say to the local populations.

### **Shi'ite Militias in Charge**

From 2012 to 2013 onward, ethnic cleansing has become a weapon of the war – directed most prominently against the Sunni population in rebel areas – and been used by different military actors. In these rebel areas, various Shi'ite militia, backed by Iran, have become the new masters of many of the communities, whose members were largely uprooted and have fled to neighboring countries or to Europe in large numbers.

The population transfers have centered on Damascus and its surroundings, and the adjacent governorate of Homs – areas comprised mostly of Sunnis that had acted as the main centers for skilled labor for Syria and beyond. Two loyalist towns inhabited by Shi'ites in northern Syria were also largely emptied of their inhabitants in 2017 as part of a deal negotiated by Qatar. The deal involved the emptying of two other Sunni towns near Damascus and was met with little international objection.

Fragmentation and internal contradictions among the various Shi'ite militia, however, have reflected on the functioning of societies in the areas of Syria the militias had captured, even after they drove out the Sunnis. Among them, Hezbollah remains the most powerful and has the slickest propaganda operation. However, its authority has been undermined by working in Syria with less disciplined allies comprised of Shi'ite militia from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as local Alawite militia more focused on loot than ideology.

Syrian Shi'ites, who had played second fiddle as a small pro-regime social group, were elevated militarily and financially by support from Iran. By mid-2017 strategic parts of Syria along the Lebanese border from al-Qusair to al-Zabadani had fallen to Hezbollah and a variety of Iranian-backed militia from Syria and elsewhere. United in subduing the Sunni populations that had risen against Assad, they apparently have not managed to set up a coherent administration. One resident of the al-Qalamoun region described that approvals issued by Hezbollah to move around or its orders to



release detainees were not necessarily honored by the other Iranian-backed warlords in the area.

### Long-term Transformation

The social change unleashed during the conflict is set to play out, regardless of whether the regime consolidates, remains weak, or – however unlikely at this current stage – falls. Among the millions who fled Syria to neighboring countries and to Europe, the upending of social strata is likely to be even more profound and diverse.

The Assad regime has sought to present itself as the only civil war player that could put the society back together. However, it has lost control of the forces it has unleashed, throwing society into new levels of cultural, ideological, and economic disarray. Not least, the regime faces societal challenges from its own ranks. Its approach before the revolt in dealing with elements that grew too powerful was to dispose of them or cut them down to size. The threat of violence was key to the takeover by Assad's immediate relatives – mainly his brother and cousins – of a large proportion of the economy and illicit activities, as well as government procurement. They will have to contend with the new war rich to maintain their dominance. Newly empowered actors are unlikely to accept a return to the status quo ante once the common foe disappears. In an indication of brewing tensions, several incidents of gang-style violence have been reported since 2012 between Assad family members and other Alawites.

If the international maneuvering results in a deal that facelifts the current regime and allows it to try to again broaden its cooptation strategies, the regime could still find it difficult to pacify the rural Sunnis. The YPG, which has taken rural Sunni areas east of Aleppo from the Islamic State, could face the same problem. Although the YPG has adopted a governing model similar to that of the regime, land and other disputes still mar the ties between the Kurds and

Arabs. The YPG's strength might prove to be ultimately dependent on US support. Without it, the Arab inhabitants of rural and tribal Syria are likely to look with less deference at the YPG and the “democratic” structures it has set up.

In rebel areas more in the interior of Syria, rural Sunnis have, in some cases, tasted social mobility without dependence on the social arrangements related to the regime. They developed their own *mustad'afoun* (the oppressed) narrative with the help of the various religious ideologues from inside and outside Syria who began operating freely for the first time in the country as large parts of the countryside fell to the rebels. The narrative could be a main tool for continuous social mobilization, which, similar to the suffering of the Shi'ites of Iraq under Saddam, would remain latent even if the Syrian revolt is annihilated. The rural population, however, has seen many of the various rebel factions control their towns and villages and act as warlords. A proportion might prefer to return to the regime, especially if the regime gathers enough resources to bring back huge crop and fuel subsidies it had cut before the revolt.

The upheavals dealt to the societal structures since the revolt and the amount of trust lost between the different and fragmented components of society highlight the need for an inclusive and democratic solution to the civil war. Such an approach is in many cases anathema to the outside powers that are busy with finding geopolitical arrangements they believe would end the conflict to their interests. It is likely to take decades to heal the wounds within Syrian society – from the civil war as well as the social engineering and sectarian rule since the Assad clan took power in 1970 – and rebuild levels of trust between social groups that will allow for co-existence. But without addressing issues of justice, governance, judicial reform, pervasive corruption, and an enforceable anti-trust system, existing cleavages would deepen and new ones would appear.

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