

January 2015

Jihadists and the Syrian Tribes: Transient Hegemony and Chronic Dilemmas

Abdulnasser Al-Ayed*

This paper sheds light on Syria's tribes, their historic role within the country, their connection with the uprising against the Assad regime, and their complex relationships with the jihadist organisations operating in the country, particularly the Al-Nusra Front and Daesh. The paper then offers recommendations both short and long term for engaging with the tribes and their leaders and addressing the power that jihadist organisations currently wield over them.

Those interested in the Syrian crisis, both Syrians and external stakeholders, are struggling over how to confront the pervasive spread of extremist Islamist organisations in areas outside the regime's control, especially amongst citizens of tribal backgrounds. Some warn that the spread of jihadist doctrines might remain a permanent feature because of the tribes' openness to ideas. This, however fails to understand the historic position of Syria's tribes within the national framework and of their current relations with the various jihadist organisations. This lack of understanding could lead to hasty policies that attempt to use war, repression and scare tactics to prevent tribal communities from embracing or allying with the jihadists. While a plethora of studies pore over the minutest details relevant to the religious groups, tribal issues receive hardly any attention.

Background to the Syrian tribes

In the early 20th century, the majority of Syrian tribes settled in regions that provided good grazing grounds for their livestock. Researchers classified these tribes into two groups based on their way of life: the urban (or settled) tribes and the nomadic tribes. However, despite the existence of wide areas in which clear tribal ethnicity, culture and relationships prevail, we still cannot define tribal territories as having specific borders. There have been major migration movements towards the cities over the past decades, resulting in a considerable amount of intermingling between urban and tribal structures. Despite this migration and intermingling, citizens of tribal backgrounds in Syria remain linked to each other by networks of tribal relationships, despite the distances between them. The concept of kinship, which most tribe members are eager to preserve, is the backbone of their identity.

The inhabitants of Deir Ezzor, Al-Raqqqa, Al-Hasakah and Deraa Governorates are considered citizens of tribal backgrounds, par excellence, including the Kurds. They also make up the

* Abdulnasser Al-Ayed is a playwright, story-teller and writer. He regularly writes in Arabic language newspapers including Al Hayat, Al-‘Arab al-Dawliya and Al-Araby al-Jadeed.

majority in the countryside of Aleppo Governorate, and the rural areas east of the cities of Idlib, Hama, Homs and Quneitra. Although the citizens of As-Suwayda Governorate are of tribal origin as well, sectarian identity remains predominant in that region. The same could be said about the Alawites, which is why they are not included in this paper's statistics. All statistics are approximate due to the absence of official numbers for citizens of tribal backgrounds, as this kind of research has been banned since the Baath Party came to power in 1963.

Facts and figures

According to the Syria's Central Bureau of Statistics, 24.5 million Syrian citizens were registered in Civil Status registries before January 1, 2011, of which 1.7 million lived in Deir Ezzor, 1.0 million in Al-Raqqa, 1.6 million in Al-Hasakah, and 1.1 million in Deraa. We can estimate, that at least 90% of these inhabitants, a total of 4.9 million citizens, are tribal descendants. Added to these are 2 million citizens from the city and countryside of Aleppo, and at least 10% of the citizens of Idlib, Hama, Homa and Quneitra, who number, according to the same source, 2.1 million in Homs, 2.1 million in Hama, 2.1 million in Idlib and half a million in Quneitra, for a total of nearly 700 thousand people. This means that Syrian citizens of tribal backgrounds total nearly 7.6 million. If we ignore the small numbers in other governorates, citizens of tribal backgrounds would account for around 30% of Syria's population. These citizens live in areas that make up over 43% of Syria (185,180 km²), if we take into account only the governorates with absolute tribal majorities, specifically Deir Ezzor (33,060 km²), Al-Hasakeh (23,334 km²), Al-Raqqa (19,616 km²) and Deraa (3,730 km²).

The highest poverty and illiteracy rates

The 2005 UNDP report "Poverty in Syria 1996-2004" states that "The North-Eastern region (Idlib, Aleppo, Al-Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hasakeh), both rural and urban, have the greatest incidence, depth and severity of poverty..." The report goes on to say that "When using the lower poverty line, poverty rates reach their peak in the north-eastern regions (17.9%) followed by urban areas in the north-east (11.2%), where "35.8 per cent of the individuals are poor." The report also states that "Abject poverty rates in the north-eastern regions are four times higher than in the coastal regions."

The second report of the Millennium Development Goals in the Syrian Arab Republic, issued by the State Planning Commission in September 2005, says that "the proportion of literacy among the 15-25 age group was at its lowest in the governorates of Deir Ezzor and Al-Raqqa, in 2004, registering 78.3 and 78.1 respectively," compared to a national average of 92.5. Moreover, "the proportion of students reaching the 6th year of education in these areas (north-eastern region) is low, registering 76% in Aleppo, 82% in Al-Raqqa and 85% in Al-Hasakeh."

Major Syrian tribes and clans

A clan is a group of people descended from a single ancestor, while the tribe is a collection of clans that may or may not have the same forefathers. We should not be too adventurous trying to determine which are the largest tribes, given the lack of relevant statistics on the subject. We will rely instead on the only available indicator that has, in past decades, highlighted tribal tendencies: parliamentary elections. In these elections, a number of seats were allocated to candidates not affiliated with the National Progressive Front (the coalition led by the Ba'ath Party), and a feverish competition among leaders of the largest tribes was usually fought over them. The results show an absolute victory for members of the Al-'Aqidat and Al-Baqarah tribes in Deir Ezzor. These independent seats in Al-Hasakah went to members of the Al-Jbour, Shamrouti and Al-Bakkarah tribes. In Al-Raqqa, they went to members of the Al-Afadlah, Al-Waldah, Alboukhamis, Sabha and Albouassaf tribes. In Aleppo, members of the Haddadin, Alboubna, Alboumane' and Al-Bakkarah tribes took turns occupying these independent seats, while in Hama they went to members of the Al-Mawali and Al-Naeem tribes. In Homs, members of the Anzah and Al-Fad'ous tribes won these seats. In Idlib, it was usually members of the Haddadin tribe. In Quneitra, the Al-Fawa'rah was dominant, and in Deraa it was members of the Al-Mahameed, Al-Masalmah, Abazeid and Al-Zu'bi clans. There are also a number of Kurdish tribes in Syria's Al-Jazira region, the most important among which are the Al-Maliyyah, Al-Daqqouri, Al-Haferkan, Al-Kiki and Al-Marsiniya.

The tribes and the state in Syria

The tribes have been an important social component in Syria since the foundation of the state. In the first Syrian Congress of 1919, which declared the establishment of the Syrian state as a parliamentary monarchy, an election law was adopted allocating a special quota to the tribes. Article 13 of the Syrian Constitution of 1928 says, "A special administration will be in charge of Bedouin affairs, and its responsibilities will be delineated by a law that takes their special status into account." In February 1959, during the short-lived union of Egypt and Syria, President Jamal Abdel-Nasser annulled this law and, in doing so, incurred the enmity of the tribal chiefs, most of whom supported separation from Egypt in 1961.

Once in power, the Ba'ath Party banned all forms of tribal, cultural or legal manifestations, deeming them backwards and destructive; however, the Party's leaders secretly used tribalism as a control mechanism. Among the oldest relevant documents is a study written in 1963 by First Lieutenant Mohammad Talab Hilal, head of the political branch in Al-Hasakah, entitled "A Study of Al-Jazira Governorate from the Nationalist, Social and Political Perspectives." In the study, Hilal proposes distributing land to the Arab tribes to alter the demographic status quo in Kurdish areas. At a later stage, the Ba'ath Party pursued two separate strategies to bring the tribal areas under control. The first was to weaken the tribal infrastructure either by creating conflicts within each tribe by side-lining the traditional chieftains, bringing instead to the fore elements from the lower echelons of tribal society, supporting them and allowing them to compete against the old guard, or by alienating the larger tribes to prevent their members from playing any major political role.

At no time during the Assad family's rule did any individual from the larger tribes rise up through the state or the Party ranks. For example, Najji Jamil, Assad's coup partner, belongs to a very small clan that had recently come to Deir Ezzor from Salima. Said Hamadi, the prominent Ba'athist leader in the tribal areas during the presidency of Hafez Al-Assad, is the scion of an Iraqi family that lives in the city of Al-Mayadeen and has no tribal connections whatsoever. Under Bashar Al-Assad, the choice fell on Mohammad al-Hussein, who belongs to a small secondary tribe with few members. Likewise, the secessionist Prime Minister Riad Hijab was chosen from a family that came to Deir Ezzor from the region of Al-Sukhneh near Tadmor (Palmyra), and has therefore no significant links to any clan or tribe. However, the situation is different in Deraa where several tribal personalities were appointed to high positions in the regime, because Deraa's tribes are small and therefore unlikely to pose any threat in case of a rebellion, or one of their members not toeing the line.

The second strategy involves efforts to impoverish the tribes and keep them ignorant. Not a single university was established in the eastern governorates until 2006, almost half a century after other Syrian regions. State capitalism and systemic corruption pilfered the tribal region's agricultural products that accounted for around 60% of the country's total production. The oil industry in the region, which produces the country's entire output was barred to the local population. Oil jobs with its lucrative salaries went instead to citizens from the coastal regions, thanks to the security services.

The tribes and the revolution

The tribal concepts of honour and support played a considerable role in both igniting and maintaining the protest movement in Deraa Governorate. When the activism spread to the country's eastern regions, exhortation and inter-clan relationships played a pivotal role in launching the protest movement and the armed rebellion, which culminated in a relatively quick liberation of these areas from the grip of the regime. In this region, activism, especially armed activism, was characterised by the absence of tribal slogans, despite certain groups and activities initially taking the names of different tribes. They soon gave that up in favour of geographic, religious or historical names. The hidden motive behind the decision not to use tribal names lies perhaps in the conflict between the new leadership elites and traditional old guard, better known as the sheikhs. The position of sheikh is an inherited and widely recognised social position in which the sheikh represents his tribe at public events and on special occasions. It is a class to which most new young leaders do not belong, which is why they had no interest in appearing on a stage where prominence went to someone else. In doing so, they either forced the traditional sheikhs to retreat (this happened with Nawaf al-Bashir Sheikh of the - Al-Bakkarah tribe, who played a prominent role in the early stages of the revolution before his presence gradually waned and then ceased altogether). Or else they sided with the regime, which offered them huge advantages and received from them media publicity only, since they were unable to be present among their own tribe members.

In most cases, the tribes hid their identity behind geographic names such as the "free men of this or that village" or the "rebel brigade of this or that region". It still refers, however, to a specific affiliation since every tribe has a particular region or village in which it has lived for

a long time. The revolution's cadres also tried to use the tribes; they named the demonstrations of June 11, 2011 "the Tribes' Friday," and established a tribal council that included elements from the National Council, and, later on, from the Coalition, though the council's impact remained limited due to its weak capabilities.

The tribes and jihadism

The first foothold of the Salafist jihadists in Syria may have been in the tribal region. Activists say that Al-Nusra Front was founded in the town of Al-Shaheel, near Deir Ezzor, by members of the Al-'Aqidat tribe who had gone en masse to Iraq in the wake of the American invasion to join the jihadist organisations. The citizens of this town played a prominent role in establishing Al-Nusra Front, which pursued a non-confrontational policy vis-à-vis the tribes due to its leaders' knowledge of the risks involved. However, when the Front seceded from Al-Baghdadi, and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Daesh) absorbed most of the foreign fighters, Daesh launched a repressive campaign against the tribes in the areas under its control, especially in Al-Raqqa and Aleppo's countryside. In Al-Hasakah, Daesh took advantage of Arab-Kurdish divisions by taking members of Arab tribes under its wing, without any coercion.

The example that best illustrates the relationship between the jihadists and the tribes is the series of incidents that took place in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor in summer 2014. The region is inhabited by the Al-'Aqidat tribe, whose members number around 500,000 and played a big part in the armed rebellion. One of its clans, the Al-Thaher clan from the town of Al-Shaheel, adopted Al-Nusra Front since its inception, and most clan members become soldiers and leaders in the Front. Thanks to this significant support, Al-Nusra became the strongest group in the area, with control over a number of its oil fields. However, when the Front tried to get its hands on the other fields, clashes erupted between it and other tribes. It retreated, keeping only Al-Omar field, the largest in Syria, and the Conoco Gas factory, also the largest of its kind in the country.

However, the Al-Bakir tribe, a sister tribe to Al-Thaher, complained about being deprived of the revenues from the Al-Omar field and Conoco factory, both of which are located on its land. When its complaints were not answered, its fighters seized the Conoco factory, but were soon pushed back by Al-Nusra. Thus, when Daesh emerged on the scene, a large number of Al-Bakir tribe members joined its ranks. Chief among them was a fighter named 'Amer al-Rafdan, whom Al-Baghdadi appointed as governor of Deir Ezzor. Al-Rafdan launched a number of attacks against the oil fields but Al-Nusra was able to repel them successfully, advance towards his headquarters in his hometown of Jadid Al-'Aqidat, and destroy his home and the homes of some of his fellow tribe members.

After the victories of Daesh in northern Iraq in early June 2014, Al-Rafdan returned with a large force, entered the town of Al-Shaheel, Al-Nusra's headquarters, and kicked the Front out of the area. At the same time, another clan from the Al-'Aqidat tribe, Al-Sh'itat, who controlled a number of oil fields and was afraid to lose them if Daesh took control of the area, joined the fight alongside Al-Shaheel's inhabitants. When the latter capitulated, the Al-'Aqidat refused to follow suit, prompting Daesh to invade and occupy their villages, after

killing around one thousand of their men and youths. Once in control, Daesh tried to keep at bay the increasing sensibilities related to local tribal relations; it replaced the old tribal symbols, transferred ‘Amer al-Rafdani to the organisation’s headquarters as advisor to Al-Baghdadi, and placed the local administration in the hands foreign fighters.

The relationship today

The relationship between the tribes and the jihadist organisations today, Daesh in particular, is one of hegemony by the jihadists. It involves an attempt to obliterate tribal identities while maintaining the option of using their social networks, without allowing them to become impediments or constraints. It is clear today that while many large tribes have distanced themselves from the jihadists, others have forged very close relationships with them. Their appeal, however, has found only a few individual responses beyond the tribes to which its military and religious leaders belong. It is noteworthy that it is the small tribes, who are persecuted in their own environment that are likely to sympathise with the jihadists, and that the sheer number of disagreements among the tribes has driven some into the jihadists’ arms for strength and support.

Activists in the eastern region estimate that 70% of Daesh’s military cadre hail from the region. However, these same activists also say the number of those who deal with Daesh does not exceed 5% of the population and that most of whom do so for personal gain, including salaries, assistance and employment opportunities in the oil sector. It is estimated that around 30,000 families currently benefit from employment in this sector.

Risks and opportunities

Islam grew in a tribal environment in the Arabian Peninsula, and attempts have been ongoing since then to impose it as their primary tribal identity. Aya 97 of surat Al-Tawbah states that “The Bedouins are the worst in disbelief and hypocrisy, and more likely to be in ignorance of the limits which Allah has revealed to His Messenger. And Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.” This shows the extent to which the tribes were resistant to the call of Islam. Although the early Muslims successfully won the support of weaker tribe members, they failed to overcome the role of stronger ones, so much so that some of them condemned the advantages they received, prompting them to utter their famous statement “their masters in Jahiliya and their masters in Islam.” Upon the Prophet’s death, while the Aws and Khazraj tribes formed an alliance to appoint a successor from among their ranks, members of Quraish got together and appointed Abu-Bakr. One of the more light-hearted anecdotes about this relationship is Abdallah bin Khazem al-Silmi’s speech in Khurasan in which he said that Rabi’ah was still angry at God since he sent his prophet from Mudar!

In his study about the Al-Jazira Governorate in Syria, First Lieutenant Mohammad Al-Talab Hilal said that the mentality that prevails in that region involves “more than one religious belief and every belief is part and parcel of this mentality, which makes it difficult for them to understand anything, even religion, except through their tribal mind-set.” At the root of the conflict between the tribal and the religious is the fact that the former sanctifies blood ties

while the latter sanctifies religion as a belief. In other words, it is a rivalry that pits the material and profane against the abstract and metaphysical. This is the challenge that jihadist organisations are facing in the tribal regions today; loyalty to the tribe is a challenge to loyalty to these organisations' leaders, and the latter have no other way to overcome this tribal conundrum but obliterate it forcefully, which only exacerbates the relationship between the two and bring matters to a head.

In his statement regarding the establishment of the "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," Al-Baghdadi addressed himself to the Muslims and the tribes, exclusively. As an expert on the details of this contradiction, the distinction he drew was socio-political rather than religious, the dividing line at which tribalism could be separated from extremist organisations. We should be careful here however; Islam as a religion is an integral part of the tribes' identity. We are talking only about religious extremism being in competition with their primary identity; the tribes have long been deeply in tune with Sufi religiosity, known for its adherents' pure focus on the spiritual dimension.

Moreover, when religious organisations position themselves within a tribal framework and each organisation revolves around a single tribe, their expansion is automatically limited. Tribe members shirk from joining an organisation dominated by another tribe, and will instead seek other organisations in which they can play a predominant role. What took place in the Al-'Aqidat tribe is not an isolated case; in Al-Raqqa, the Al-Waldah tribe joined Al-Nusra early on, prompting the rival Al-Afadlah tribe to shy away from the Front. When Daesh emerged, its members joined en masse.

Tribe members believe that their firmly rooted blood-based identity cannot be hurt by political positions, which is why they never shirked from forging alliances with the ruling authority to advance their interests. This is why they are often accused of indecisiveness. As far as they are concerned, it is another form of booty that has been the economic backbone of the tribes throughout history. The advantages they gain from a certain authority do not obligate them in any way; they can renege on their responsibilities if it becomes an exploitative relationship or realise that there are more advantages to be reaped elsewhere. Their current alignment with the jihadists, motivated by personal interest, could be reversed if a stronger ally better able to ensure their interests emerges on the scene. It is worth remembering here that the Iraqi tribes' war against the jihadists in 2007, namely the Al-Sahwa (Awakening) phenomenon, came to an end when their \$200 million monthly allowance was terminated.

So, any support to the tribes that is not carefully crafted will inevitably strengthen them, increase their size and possibly compel them to use political extortion on the national level, based on the booty principle. This is a likely possibility in light of technological progress that helps small, local, private groups such as the tribes, raise their profile. Furthermore, neighbouring Arab regimes that are accustomed to tribalism could try to co-opt certain tribes and use them as political surrogates within the national framework.

Recommendations

Any attempt to address the power that jihadist organisations wield over the tribes, and their use of the tribes for their own ends, demands two political approaches that could appear contradictory in the short term, but complementary in the long term.

In the short term:

- The authorities responsible for the war on terror should support tribal communities to help them gain their independence and liberate themselves from the coercive bonds that tie them to the extremist movements. They should also strengthen their military wings and raise the profile of some of their members to allow them to represent their communities in the decision-making process.
- Bodies and movements that make up the Syrian opposition (the Coalition – National Council – Interim Government – and Chiefs of Staff of the Free Syrian Army) should not neglect the tribal regions' political, economic, media and military aspects, and should fill the power vacuum that allowed the jihadists to make advances in these areas.
- To institute some kind of initial social stability in the tribal areas, the above-mentioned authorities should attract and support the traditional elites and try to help reinstate respect for their status within their social milieu, paying particular attention to the older leaders. Tribalism is a paternalistic structure that relates hierarchically to those older in age and those who, in addition to age, are experienced in resolving local conflicts. The latter are also better able to adapt to the rules of general order than the young controversial leaders who are driven to politics by pure ambition with nothing to show for it save their military activism in the revolution.

In the long term:

- The first new authority to take power in Syria after the war, whether elected or de facto, will have no choice but to quickly redress the developmental imbalance in the tribal areas, and pursue effective national policies to raise the tribes from their environment of poverty and ignorance, the incubators of extremism and violence.
- Civil society institutions and newly formed political parties should, in the context of the new state, increase their efforts significantly among tribal communities. They should aim to raise the tribes' cultural and political awareness and prevent extremist religious groups from embedding themselves in their relationship networks.
- The new legislative institutions should establish checks and balances that prevent the rise of the kind of political tribalism that enshrines the tribes' isolation, and allows them to once again lag behind the rest of the country.

Conclusion

All totalitarian and authoritarian movements in Syria, whether religious, leftist or nationalist, have attacked and criminalised tribalism; since this was their chosen strategy, their attempts

met with nothing but failure. Today, jihadist organisations are trying to do the same again, forcing the tribes into a position of existential self-defence. Although threatened, the tribes can stand up forcefully to these organisations. It would be a grave mistake to deal with them opportunistically or simply reproduce the same old policies. To deal correctly with tribalism, it should be seen as a social phenomenon involving a number of risks that can be avoided, as well as a number of opportunities of which to take advantage. Tribal affiliation is a non-threatening culture as long as it does not turn into a pre- or supra-national loyalty.

About the author

Abdulnasser Al-Ayed obtained a BA in Military Sciences in 1998; he is a playwright and story-teller who has published several books and writes opinion columns in a number of Arab newspapers, including Al-Hayat, Al-‘Arab al-Dawliya and Al-Araby al-Jadeed.

About ARI

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab Think Tank founded on the principles of impartiality, social justice and diversity. Our mission is to promote an agenda for democratic change through policy analysis and research, while providing a platform for inspirational voices.

- We partner with institutes on original research, analysis and outreach-across the Arab countries as well as globally.
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions.
- We mobilise stakeholders to build coalitions for change .
- Our goal is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge in the Arab countries.

www.arab-reform.net

The Arab Reform Initiative does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Initiative, its staff or its board. Copyright of this publication is held by the Arab Reform Initiative. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the Arab Reform Initiative.

©Arab Reform Initiative January 2015

contact@arab-reform.net