

November 2015

## Social conditions in southern Syria: a source of strength for change

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This paper discusses the social conditions in southern Syria - and in particular Deraa, Quneitra, and the region of Hauran - in an attempt to predict the fate of the region in the face of ongoing conflict. Can the region withstand the onslaught, buttressed by social and demographic factors that support the revolution against Bashar al-Assad's regime and allies, or will the regime succeed in breaching the region's defences by taking advantage of weaknesses engendered by corruption and urbanisation? While familial and tribal networks in southern Syria have been a source of strength and solidarity, traditional structures are an insufficient political solution for the region. Facing numerous challenges, southern Syria risks the permanent alteration of its social fabric.

### Southern Syria's interwoven relationships and networks as a source of stability

Southern Syria is today the target of a systematic attack with specific objectives, led by the so-called "deterrence forces" in the region.<sup>1</sup> While some aim to establish a belt around the Arab Gulf region and isolate Syria from its neighbours on the Jordanian side, others aim to create contact points between Iran and Israel to strengthen the former's hand in regional negotiations. While recent studies have focussed on the military situation and actual combat in the region, the social conditions that are drivers of conflict and stability in Syria's "southern front" are rarely the subject of research.

The familial and tribal structures present in southern Syria, along with the sectarian and ethnic diversity and its distinctive transnational character, provide important sources of stability for the region by not only fomenting internal solidarity but also providing avenues of external support. Two types of social formation can be distinguished in southern Syria: the family structure that prevails in Deraa and its countryside, and the tribal formation that dominates in certain areas of Quneitra.<sup>2</sup> These social structures are marked by similar dynamics, where the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally published in Arabic. The annexes have not been translated into English but are available on the Arabic site.

<sup>2</sup> Documented studies on the country's tribes and sects are inaccessible in Syrian libraries due to political reasons. Facing regime interdiction on such studies, researchers have mostly relied on investigations of oral accounts to assess the size and locations of these groups.

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authority of elders in the resolution of local problems promotes solidarity and facilitates the provision of assistance to those in need.

Generally, researchers and activists describe the Deraa region of southern Syria as more familial than tribal, given that the concept of “tribe” denotes large numbers of people whereas families in this area rarely exceed a few hundred, and given that family trees are not connected to larger tribal networks. While larger families live in the eastern regions and city centres, smaller family groups live mostly in the western countryside of Deraa. The rural and agricultural environment, moreover, obliterates many aspects of tribal life, although families who live on the plain have tribal connections abroad.

In the adjacent countryside of Quneitra, the presence of tribes is more noticeable, especially in areas under Israeli occupation. Arab tribes are spread between Palestine, the Golan, and Jordan, sharing vast networks of family connections and similar value systems, customs, and mores. It is worth noting, however, that the majority of the Golan tribes living under occupation and are considered naziheen (internally displaced people), a condition that helped dismantle the tribal lifestyle as a result of increased access to city life.

Southern Syria has also historically possessed a diverse sectarian and ethnic makeup. Sunni Arabs account for the majority of Deraa’s population, living in all regions of the governorate and with the majority hailing from Arab tribes that once lived all over Greater Syria. Though precise statistics do not exist, estimates put them at over 90% of the population. Christians, the next largest group, descend from the al-Ghasasinah tribes that have historically lived in the region; their numbers, however, have greatly decreased due to low fertility rates, compared to other inhabitants, and high migration rates to Damascus or abroad. Shiite citizens are also present in certain villages of Deraa Governorate, most of who have only recently revealed their long-concealed beliefs. Reports indicate, moreover, that conversions to Iranian Shiism in this governorate have been ongoing for over a decade, with the Iranian Cultural Bureau in Damascus playing a major role in this respect, using financial inducements and taking advantage of the authorities turning a blind eye.<sup>3</sup>

In Quneitra Governorate, though Sunni Arabs constitute the majority, the population is more diverse in sectarian and ethnic terms in both the city and its countryside. The several Druze villages in the liberated and occupied parts of the Golan form part of a series of Druze settlements lying at the foothills of Mount Herson and spanning Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria.<sup>4</sup> The Quneitra region was also historically home to Syria’s Turkmen population, estimated at 40,000, most of who left their villages after the 1967 war to resettle in Damascus and, to a lesser extent, in Homs and Aleppo.<sup>5</sup> The Circassians of Quneitra, originally from the

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<sup>3</sup> Conversions to Shiism in Deraa. (Arabic). *Al-Bainah*. Available at: <<http://www.albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=14097>> [Accessed 13 October 2015].

<sup>4</sup> Ferial abu Fakhr. Abu Asali... Abu Fakhr... Abu Assaf... from where did the singular noun Abu come to the families of Jabal al-Arab? (Arabic). *Al-Azminah Magazine*, 14 March 2010

<sup>5</sup> Mohammad Kheir ‘Eid. *The Eyes of Time for the Turkmen inhabitants of the Golan*. (Arabic), Damascus: Turkmani Press, 2004, pp. 101-137.

Caucasus in Russia, are Muslims and speak fluent Arabic,<sup>6</sup> though they maintain their traditions and language. Since the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution, however, most Circassians living in Quneitra's villages have moved closer to Damascus. Although the International Circassian Association is trying to resettle some in Russia, many of the 150,000 refuse to leave Syria.<sup>7</sup> Alawites in Quneitra, for their part, migrated from northern Syria during the Ottoman period and established three villages that are still under occupation; their inhabitants now live in Damascus.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of these social structures and demographic diversity may prove critical to southern Syria's trajectory in the war. The tribes are spread all over the country, and their members have kin in neighbouring countries, especially in Iraq and Jordan and even in some cases in Saudi Arabia. Likewise, many inhabitants of Mount Lebanon have roots in southern Syria and maintain close contacts with them. The interwoven relationships and networks of the tribes help forge relations of mutual dependence and reliance, including *fazaa* (solidarity and support to one's own tribe members) in times of crisis, and stronger ties between cross-border groups and within countries. Similarly, the region's sectarian minorities maintain important relations outside of Syria, and namely in Jordan. The majority of Jordan's Christians hail from Hauran and still have kith and kin living in villages on the Plains of Hauran. The Circassians and Turkmen have similar relationship networks and family ties in Jordan, and the Druze of the Al-Azraq region and in the city of Zarqa in Jordan are part of tribes based in southern Syria.<sup>9</sup>

### **Economic and urbanisation trends – threats to the southern Syria?**

Although the social structures described above act as sources of internal solidarity and strength for southern Syria, the transformation of the region's economy and the effects of urbanisation are potential sources of threat in the face of systematic attacks by "deterrence forces." In particular, the rise of corruption and its effect on socio-economic structures has led to increased social tensions and confrontations between the region's poor and the central authority, while urbanisation has reconfigured the traditional value system and family environment according to a new logic of consumerism and faltering modernity. Both have called into question the internal fabric of social life in southern Syria, which could potentially act as a source of weakness for the region in the context of the war.

With regards to the region's economic situation, the 1958 Agrarian Reform Law and the Land Redistribution Project deserve attention if we are to better understand the socio-economic make-up of southern Syria, as they represent an important junction and a key variable that

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<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Badran. Quneitra City, Flower of the Golan. (Arabic). *Al-Jawlan*. Available at < [http://www.jawlan.org/openions/read\\_article.asp?catigory=81&source=5&link=1939](http://www.jawlan.org/openions/read_article.asp?catigory=81&source=5&link=1939) > [Accessed 13 October 2015].

<sup>7</sup> Yasser al-Atrash. Is It the Season of the Circassians' Emigration to the North? (Arabic). *Orient News*. Available at < [http://orient-news.net/index.php?page=news\\_show&id=1636](http://orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=1636) > [Accessed 13 October 2015].

<sup>8</sup> Ayman abu Jabal. Ghajar is a Forgotten Occupied Syrian Village. (Arabic). *Al-Jawlan*. Available at < [http://www.jawlan.org/openions/read\\_article.asp?catigory=2&source=8&link=189](http://www.jawlan.org/openions/read_article.asp?catigory=2&source=8&link=189) > [Accessed 13 October 2015].

<sup>9</sup> Relatives of Jordanian Families and Tribes. *Ihbab Al-Ordon*. Available at < <http://www.jo1jo.net/vb/jo1jo4140.html> > [Accessed 13 October 2015].

affect the relationships of power and control, due to the ensuing redistribution of resources and reconfiguration of the entire social structure.

Prior to the nationalisation drive, Hauran and Quneitra's production sector was mostly feudal in nature, relying on the talzeem tax farming system in which the local authorities would grant elites the authority to collect taxes on behalf of the villages under their charge. The system exhausted farmers of their production, redirecting agricultural outputs to the central authority and hosen notables. And since Syria's economy historically relied almost exclusively on agriculture, it was impossible to generate income outside that sector. In a poor environment with no surplus beyond immediate daily needs, it was not possible for professions to emerge outside the agricultural sector.

The redistribution of land among the farmers in the 1950s and 1960s was a watershed in the lives of southern Syrians. A portion of the lands monopolised by feudal lords living in the city and operated by their rural agents was wrested away and redistributed in reasonable amounts among farmers, starting with a minimum of 50 shares (those affiliated with the Baath Party received slightly larger shares).<sup>10</sup> Economic and living conditions as well as services in the region were also improved thanks to the construction of a series of dams on the Yarmouk River and Wadi al-Raqqd, and the construction of a network of roads linking peripheral areas to the centre. Living conditions were further improved by the introduction of electricity and running water to the region after 1967. Various facilities and privileges were also granted to the local inhabitants, due primarily to an official decision to populate this border region when signs of migration began to appear among the inhabitants of the occupied Golan. The relative largesse of the region was also owed to the presence of Baath Party cadres, the largest concentration in Syria.

Today, two types of economy coexist in southern Syria: one that relies on remittances from Syrian immigrants abroad and one that relies on agriculture and associated activities. Geographically, Deraa's highway marks the dividing line between these two economies. In the eastern regions of Hauran, despite the relatively large landholdings compared to other areas, successive years of scarce rainfall meant that agriculture was barely sufficient for local needs. Many agricultural workers have thus migrated to the Gulf states since the 1960s, especially to Kuwait, where some have become well integrated thanks to their links to Gulf tribes. This helped forge contacts between them and the local authorities and led to employment opportunities in the public sphere, though these remained limited in number given the presence of local alternatives. This migration also had an impact on development in the region where signs of prosperity have become apparent, as have signs of a Gulf lifestyle in terms of dress, food, accent, and even type of Islamic religiosity. In the western region where land is more fertile thanks to the many riverbeds and the Yarmouk River, and in Quneitra, the agriculture-based economy fared better. Nonetheless, given the region's smaller landholdings and high number of heirs, the local population gravitated in larger numbers towards public sector jobs. This was spurred by a significant drive towards education in a region that boasts the highest ratio of educated citizens in Syria.

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<sup>10</sup> Issam Khafagi. *Difficult Births: Crossing into Prosperity in Europe and the Mashrek*. (Arabic), Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Qaomil lil-Tarjama, 2012, pp.501-523.

In recent years, however, a new and wealthier social class emerged as a result of the endemic corruption afflicting state institutions, which also spread to southern Syria. The city of Deraa was the epicentre, involved in bribery and the smuggling of contraband (khawat) past border posts. The beneficiaries of the system used their wealth to occupy centre stage in society and even reconfigured the social system by purchasing land and leading lavish lifestyles. The impact of this corruption on social life in southern Syria was a root cause of social tension, and one of the factors that led to the region's confrontation with authorities, who sided with the new rentier class at the expense of the poor.

In addition to the tensions caused by disruptions to traditional economic models, urbanisation distorted existing relationships while city life impeded the ability of citizens to adapt. Urban lifestyles invaded the rural areas of southern Syria with force, leaving nothing to denote village life in the south except the size of the village itself. This process has, in addition, unfolded in the region with record speed, over no more than two decades.

The phenomenon of urbanisation in southern Syria has given rise to a host of problems at various levels. It has led to the destruction of several traditions, clearly impacted family relationships, and destabilised the traditional value system. The trend towards modernisation implicitly linked in urbanisation has involved primarily superficial issues, confined to increases in consumerism and the imitation of city life, without concomitant cultural or scientific progress. Although the region has high rates of education and a high ratio of university graduates, these have been largely limited to fields that do not require advanced skill sets. Rapid urbanisation has also severely impacted the relationship between farmers and land, leading to significantly less work in the fields, reduced productivity, and a shortage of manpower. This happened at a time when economic alternatives and new patterns of production did not exist; the rural south had no industry due to its distance from the main markets and to a shortage of skilled and professional manpower. Investments from the region shifted towards the service sector, such as transportation and retail commerce. The weak economic system and its shift towards consumerism and poor productivity have thus further entrenched the negative effects of urbanisation.

This very fast pace of change was reinforced by the rise of corruption. The extreme new consumerism was partially shrouded by the traditional mentality of showing off one's wealth, prosperity, position, and power. At the same time, the value system faltered, torn between the old system that requires the preservation of one's honour, mostly reduced to the protection of women's chastity and the exercise of ostentatious generosity, and the new system that allowed larger numbers of women to work in the fields or state institutions. In this context, an opposing pattern of extreme religiosity hitherto unfamiliar to the region emerged and spread among the youth of southern Syria. This even impacted the construction of homes, which began being copied on the secluded style more common in the cities, and on the organisation of events once jointly attended by both men and women.

In brief, urbanisation in this region has lacked both the right preconditions and right social vehicle, especially since those who once held progressive vision have since left for the capital, severing ties in a manner that barely conceals their contempt. The task of reconfiguring the value system has been left to less forward-looking people who have moved from the old ways

to new distorted ways, lost between superficiality and selective modernity, and seclusion in the face of systematic development.

### **Tribal loyalty as an instrument for and against the State**

Although, the changes that impacted southern Syrian society, including increasing population, urbanisation, inflated bureaucracy, improved access to technology, openness towards the outside world, technological advances, consumerist tendencies, and a relative shift towards individuality, weakened the outward cohesion of family and tribal structures, they did not eradicate the core cohesiveness embodied by loyalty to the tribe or family. Likewise, while tribal leaders have been compelled to rely on rival institutions deemed economically essential, including the government, army, and workplace, tribal loyalty has been weakened though not entirely obliterated. Tribal loyalty reflects a legitimate historical condition involving major social and political responsibilities, such as providing safety, security and identity, and has deeply permeated all social avenues. Given this, Syrian tribes have played a pivotal role since the establishment of the state and in the development of the country's political sphere, and have largely directed the role played by southern Syria in the revolution. Nonetheless, this has not parlayed into new political structures entirely.

Since independence, the tribal structure of the Syrian south have been a pillar of political stability on which the regime could rely in times of internal political crises. Rural and Bedouin tribes remained a source of security for the political regime, particularly on sensitive institutions such as the army, security services, and Baath Party, which acted as a communication channel between southern society and the Assad regime.<sup>11</sup> Parliament, as an intermediary institution, helped both cement the relationship between the tribes and the central authority and reconfigure the tribal identity, whereby mutual tribal interests helped crystallise a common identity formula among tribe members. Therefore, any setback for the tribe as far as stature, power, and social respect are concerned is considered a setback for every member, while any success is a triumph for every member. Legislative elections have shown repeatedly that they reproduce the same tribal relationships, and that these relationships are the determining factor in whether a candidate reaches parliament or not.

Political parties, for their part, also found activism and affiliation with southern Syrian families. Nationalist parties found fertile ground in Hauran and Quneitra, with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party boasting many members and supporters in the south, as with the Nasserite Socialist Union that became widespread in the region. After reaching power in 1963, the Baath Party also managed to become widespread in the region for a variety of reasons, including the local inhabitants' embrace of the nationalist ideology and its tenets, especially in light of their proximity to Palestine, as well as their self-interest in terms of services and employment. According to internal party statistics, the number of active Baathist cadres in Deraa and its countryside was around 90,000 on the eve of the 2011 revolution - quite a high number, especially if those described as supporters and friends are also included.

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<sup>11</sup> 'Izz and Mohammad Abdel-Qader al-Naji. Who Governs Syria the Alawite Sect or Assad Family? (Arabic). *Civilized Dialogue*. Available at <<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=318410> > [Accessed 13 October 2015].

Since 2011, the tribe/family has been a key element in the revolution. Tribal networks clearly threw support behind the initial activism in Deraa, motivated by blood ties and the tradition of fazaa; the situation, however, got out of hand very early. The uprising originally broke out in defence of tribe/family values and as a reaction to the reckless behaviour of regime employees who mismanaged the crisis and jailed children for simply writing anti-regime slogans. This is when 'Atef Najib, the man in charge of political security in Deraa, and maternal cousin to President Bashar al-Assad, committed the grave sins that unleashed the revolution's momentum, cracking down violently and leading to a series of events that hurt the tribes' dignity and jolted them out of their traditional behaviour patterns (tawr).<sup>12</sup>

As soon as news spread throughout Hauran, families rose up in various towns and villages to come to each other's aid. The notion of tribal belonging took on new meaning, signifying tribal loyalty, spiritual appreciation of the support it provides, the ability to mobilise members, tribal networking, and affiliation to the network of relationships. Because the attack on Deraa was quick and overwhelming in an effort to quell the revolution before it spread further afield, Deraa families mounted a similar calibre response to the challenge. Unfortunately for the regime, one of the ironies was that Deraa's larger and more influential families lit the flame of revolution and were able to mobilise the necessary manpower and potential behind it, activating their alliances and kinship ties in the region.

The regime has tried since the early days of the revolution to control this phenomenon and prevent it from spreading to more families. It sowed discord among the tribes, trying to enlist their support by using the corrupt elements amongst them – a tactic that may have succeeded had it not been for the strength of the revolution and sheer number of people taking part in it, which led to dissenting voices being side-lined or subjugated by other means. To counter this, the revolutionaries followed a systematic strategy aimed at dismantling the security bureaus and their agents throughout Hauran. The regime had built over the years a vast network of supporters using Baath Party offices and security bureaus, mobilising thousands of people throughout Hauran; dismantling this network was intensive and costly in terms of human lives.

Yet although the prevalence of tribal loyalties has been an instrument both for and against the state, this has not translated into organised tribal political structures to manage the revolution, or local administration in areas that had been liberated from the regime and were under rebel control. The sheer number of refugees, the instability, and the constant shelling dismembered local society and dispersed its members either internally to the liberated villages, or externally to Jordan. Southern society today is totally shattered, with large population centres almost devoid of their inhabitants. The same applies to Quneitra's countryside, where entire villages have been depopulated. What exacerbated the situation even further is the total cessation of basic services such as electricity, water, and medical care. The only avenue in which the impact of the tribes is still felt is the provision of relief, assistance, and shelter services, especially to remote areas far from the regime's control. Likewise, military formations in southern Syria are not organised along tribal lines but rather along larger affiliations that have

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<sup>12</sup> Abdallah Rizan and Dr. Abdel-Nasser Ta'ta'. The Tribes' Role in the Syrian Revolution. (Arabic), *Umayyah Centre for Strategic Research and Studies*, Available at < <http://www.umayya.org/articles/1184> > [Accessed 13 October 2015].

nothing to do with narrow family affiliations. Although the majority of these formations perform local duties and certain families participate in greater numbers than others, this is entirely separate from issues involving allocations and preferential treatment. If the tribe has any role at all, it is in helping control relationships within these formations and preventing them from sliding into rivalry and conflict.

### **The impossibility of salvation through traditional social structures alone**

Reconfirmations of tribal or clan loyalty are happening in most regions of Syria, and traditional structures are the framework reference for this loyalty in the absence of a state of laws, institutions, democracy, civil society, and human rights. This absence interacts dialectically with traditional loyalties. While at times it propels tribal loyalty to the fore under the pretext that traditional structures are a better guarantee in time of chaos, at other times, loyalty linked to the condition of the state, civil society, human rights, and interwoven collective action among various social groups acts as a repellent to traditional loyalty, seen as a promoter of dismemberment and chaos.

Despite the important social roles that these loyalties play in the current state of affairs in Syria, given the state's absence and prevailing chaos, they remain opposed to social development and an impediment to modernity in all its aspects. These loyalties, their intellectual values, and their connection with certain norms of living and thought, resist all avenues of cultural and technological progress, obstruct the potential for any cultural progress, and destroy cohesiveness.

The state of chaos in the country, often taking the form of a foreign attack due to the participation of outside elements under various sectarian and tribal pretexts, is fertile ground for the reproduction of narrow loyalties in a traditional environment like southern Syria. Thus, although the majority are convinced that any return of the old regime or its acceptance under different terms is impossible, no alternative model has been found for the management of relations and control of social conflicts. Although it is true that traditional societies have their own conventions that act as alternative laws, under no circumstances are they a substitute for constitutional and political institutions.

There is no sign in the south that tribes/families will assume control and be able to take the situation in hand because of their similar size and influence. Such a prospect is particularly farfetched given the institutionalised nature of southern society and its association with state institutions for over half a century. The parallel tribal customs and mores were never more than symbolic practices that families resorted to in order to promote their lineage and cement their social status - a form of symbolic social capital. In the south today, the focus of local societies is, above anything else, on overcoming the disaster and bringing the family together again. These societies view the frameworks put forward by the opposition as possible and acceptable alternatives.

## **Challenges facing southern society**

For geographical and political reasons, southern Syria is deeply affected by the militaristic conditions that are now the order of the day. In light of the current conditions, there are a number of threats today capable of impacting social conditions in this region:

- The potential for sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and Druze living in proximity to one other. There are signs that such a conflict could happen and, if it does, would undoubtedly lead to further social dislocation and catastrophe.
- The potential for conflict among the dozens of fighting factions. Since these faction members are also members of local families, conflicts such as these will cause further social dislocation in the region.
- Extreme Islamist factions could assume control of the region, with al-Nusra Front coming in from the west and Daesh from the east (i.e. from Sueida). The likelihood of this possibility will increase if the crisis persists, and will cause the disintegration of moderate factions still capable of controlling the conflict, keeping tight rein on the region, and resisting extremism. If the extremist factions succeed in taking control, larger numbers of local inhabitants will migrate to Jordan, since southern society will find it impossible to adapt to the brand of Islamism that these factions espouse.
- Iran and Hezbollah could annex the region to areas under Hezbollah's control. This threat is unique, given Quneitra's proximity to Hezbollah's areas in Lebanon. Moreover, the Quneitra region is rich in water, which could make it an appealing area to resettle tens of thousands of Afghani Shiite refugees currently in Iran, which could be used as a trump card in pressuring next door Israel.
- The Israelis allude to the possibility of establishing a security zone on the border as a preventive measure in the face of developments in the Syrian crisis. This effectively means creating a zone of instability and confrontation with further potential for dislocation in the region.

The fact that the Syrian crisis remains without solution means that the region will continue to be under siege and a magnet for violent actors and weapons. This could lead to the eventual depopulation of the region and permanent alteration of its social make-up.

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