

March 2016

De-Urbanising the Syrian Revolt

*Isam al Khafaji

The Syrian revolt, which has disintegrated into a bloody attrition war, has been largely viewed as that of a majority Sunni population trying to depose a regime belonging to the minority Alawite sect. While this view may present a partially true explanation, it fails to explain why the involvement of different Sunni regions in the revolt varied to a large extent and the rising gap between the anti-Assad urbanites on the one hand and the armed militants on the other. It further fails to account for the wide diversity within the rebellion camp and the hostilities among the mushrooming opposition groups.

The present paper looks at the different social and regional constellations within Syrian society: urban dwellers, provincial inhabitants, tribes, and most notably the immigrants from the countryside to the slums on the outskirts of major cities. It argues that militarising the revolt, which began as a reaction to the heavy handed oppression of the regime, has brought the rifts between these various groups into the open and set the Syrian revolt into a class of its own compared to the other revolts in the Arab world. More important, militarising the revolt has enabled the marginalised immigrants to take the lead in the fight against the regime. The leading role of the marginals has already left a huge impact on the course of events and will play a major role in shaping the socio-political scene of post-Assad Syria.

Introduction

Since its outset, the Syrian revolt against the Ba’thist regime was distinct from the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Although it can be dated to the early demonstrations that erupted in Damascus in March 2011, the revolt did not gather momentum until the insurrection in Der’a following the death under torture of two of its youth. The rest of Syria (with the exception of the three governorates of Suwaida, Tartous and al-Riqqa) rose against the regime, though no huge shows of protest were to be seen either in Syria’s most populous city of Aleppo nor in the core of Damascus. This phenomenon stands in stark contrast with the rest of the Arab world’s revolt where the capital cities, or the second most important city in the case of Libya, took the lead and sealed the fates of their respective ruling regimes. In fact, the Egyptian revolution could be described as a revolt of Lower Egypt given that Upper Egypt, as well as the country’s eastern part, took a peculiarly passive stance.

Much has been written on the resentment of the predominantly Sunni majority population in Syria of the hegemony of the minority Alawites within the country’s power structure since the mid-1960s. And indeed, this aspect of the conflict is, undoubtedly, of paramount importance. However, the present paper argues that there is another no less important factor which, although not unique to Syria, opened the militarisation of the revolt, namely the social disparities between cities, shanty towns, provinces, and tribal regions.

The manner in which various regions have interacted with the revolt reflects their social structures in the large sense of the term and will play a crucial role in shaping the socio-political scene in post-conflict Syria. I propose to look at three patterns of negotiating the ongoing war: the first is tribal, the second is urban, and the third, which is the most active, consists of the new migrants who had flocked to the outskirts of major cities, erecting their shanty towns and slums. Each of these groups has its own dynamics and perception of the crisis and each has its distinct goals. The frictions and conflicts that these divergent dynamics have engendered are already leaving their impact on the course of events.

The Geography of Misery

A comprehensive survey on poverty and inequality in Syria for the period 1997- 2007 carried by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provides invaluable material for understanding the background of the Syrian revolt (Abu- Ismail et.al, 2011).The study divided Syria into four regions: the south, comprising Damascus, Rural Damascus, Der’a, Suwaida, and al-Quanaitra; the northeast, comprising Idlib, Aleppo, al-Riqaa, Deir al-Zor and al-Hasaka; the central region, comprising Homs and Hama; and the coastal region, comprising Latakia and Tartous¹.

¹ Unfortunately, Damascus was not singled out. That would have provided precious insights on the situation in the two impoverished governorates of Der’a and Rural Damascus. Likewise, the northeast saw Aleppo and Syria’s poorest governorates grouped under the same category.

The study found that the consumption expenditure in the urban regions of the Alawite coastal provinces was 130% above the national average for urban Syria and the expenditure by the rural parts of that region was 150% above the national average for rural Syria². By contrast, the rural expenditure in the northeast was around 60% of the national average while the urban expenditure was slightly lower than the Syrian average.

The survey sheds light on the state of poverty in Syria. It found that whereas poverty levels decreased between 1997 and 2004, it increased again in the period 2004- 2007. In the latter year, more than one-third of the population was at the poverty line (6.7 million out of a total population of 23 million). Of these, 2.4 million were in extreme poverty. Unsurprisingly, the northeast was the poorest region while the coastal region was the least poor. More than one-third (37%) of the population of the former region lived in poverty, 15.4% of whom were in extreme poverty. It is noteworthy that the levels of extreme poverty in the urban south doubled between 2004 and 2007. Since Damascus is by far the most urbanised city in this region, it is safe to take that percentage as indicative of the poverty levels in the latter. The south in general slid from having the lowest poverty levels in 2004 to the second poorest in 2007.

The findings most pertinent to the present study include:

1. Poverty in 2004 was generally more prevalent in rural than in urban areas of Syria (62% in rural areas). The north-eastern region (Idlib, Aleppo, al-Riqqa, Deir al-Zor and Hassakeh) had the greatest incidence, depth, and severity of poverty. The 2005 UNDP report “Poverty in Syria 1996-2004” states 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% of the individuals are poor. Abject poverty rates in the north-eastern regions were four times higher than in the coastal regions.
2. Poverty decreased between 1996-1997 and 2003-2004 for Syria as a whole, but regional patterns were different. The incidence of poverty declined rapidly in the central and southern regions, especially in rural areas. The decline was moderate in urban areas of the north-eastern and coastal regions, and poverty actually rose in the rural parts of these regions.
3. At the national level, growth was not pro-poor. Non-poor individuals (above the third decile in the expenditure distribution) benefited proportionally more than the poor from economic growth. Between the years 1997-2004, inequality in Syria as a whole rose. In 2000-2004, the bottom 20% of the population consumed only 7% of all expenditure in Syria while the richest 20% consumed 45%. However, given the opacity of Syria’s politico-economic system, we have to assume that the consumption, i.e. the income of this coterie, is much higher than this because the rich have more ample means to hide their real wealth. This huge and widening gap between the rich and poor had been acknowledged by the Syrian authorities themselves. In the spring of 2008, Syrian

² The survey covered the consumption expenditure of households. In countries where individuals and businesses can withhold information about their real incomes because there are no rigorous legal means to monitor them, household consumption expenditure is a more accurate indicator of income, wealth, and poverty.

Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah al-Dardari declared that the situation of the poor was worsening, the rich were getting richer, and the phenomenon of the class divide had become more evident (Strategic Center, 2011).

The three years separating the publication of that grim report from the outbreak of the revolt witnessed yet more deterioration in overall poverty as well as a demographic change in Syria. From 2007 on, drought caused significant hardship in rural areas of Syria. In the north-east of the country, a reported 160 villages have been entirely abandoned and their inhabitants have moved to urban areas. (Brown and Crawford, 2009:26). In eastern Syria, the Inezi tribe saw some 85% of its livestock killed between 2005 and 2010 because of prolonged drought. In 2010 the United Nations estimated that more than a million people had left the north-east of the country, "with farmers simply not cultivating enough food or earning enough money to sustain them." (De Chatel, 2014:521-535)³

It must be stressed, however, that natural disasters by themselves do not foment public outrage or rebellion. After all, the entire region, including much poorer countries like Jordan, faced the severest draught recorded in centuries. The reckless policy of the Syrian regime which had been carried under the rubric of "food security" depleted Syria's meagre water resources despite warnings from many respected authorities since the second half of the 1980s. The impoverished new immigrants to the outskirts of major cities were left to their fate. The ruling elite turned its back without providing the minimum necessities to assist them in coping with their misery. Added to that, the poor masses - who had heard of the opulence of the rulers and their protégés before emigrating - were now eyewitnesses to the mushrooming of exclusive clubs and five star hotels, and the sprawling villas and luxury cars, of the privileged. Even the lip service paid by official ideology to "standing for the poor" was gone.

Many historians who study revolutionary processes in different parts of the world have demonstrated that, more often than not, people do not revolt when the majority feels that a rise or decline in the overall economic conditions of their nation is shared by the rich and the poor together. Poverty by itself has not been a motivator for revolts. People are more likely to revolt when the economy is growing and there is a wide perception among the poor that the gap between them and the rich is growing, or that their standards of living are stagnating or deteriorating (Marek, 1966; Overholt, 1977; Rustin 2002).⁴

This was exactly the case in Syria on the eve of the 2011 revolt. Syria's GDP per capita was declining during the 1980s and stagnating in the 1990s. This trend, however, was reversed in the 2000s with impressive annual growth rates between 4.5% and 7% on year to year basis between 2004 and 2009 and slowing down to 3.2% in 2010⁵. The flagrant disparities, however, could not

³See also: Abigail Fielding-Smith, "Uprising Exposes Syria's Economic Weaknesses", *Financial Times*, 12 December 2011; Brad Plummer, "Drought Helped Cause Syria's War. Will Climate Change Bring More Like It?" *Washington Post*, 10 September 2013.

⁴In fact, mass upheavals during periods of stagnation or deterioration in standards of living are more likely to produce "counterrevolutions." The rise and triumph of Nazism is a case in point (Schonderbaum, 1980; Mann, 2005).

⁵ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/syria/gdp-growth-annual>

be starker as this impressive growth had been achieved while unemployment was hiking from 24.6% in 2004 to 39.4% in 2011.⁶

In sum, Syria was getting richer, the poor were getting poorer. Added to this volatile situation was the wealth of the Alawite region - a situation that had the potential to transform popular grievances into sectarian-driven hostilities as many, if not most, protesters did not perceive the injustice purely in terms of class division but as class division couched in sectarian terms.

In addition, Syria underwent a profound change in its demographic map during the five years preceding the uprising. Rising levels of poverty drew waves of immigrants to the outskirts of major cities, notably Damascus and Aleppo, inflating the number of slum dwellers, while the swollen population of Deir al-Zor strengthened the power of tribes. Whereas Syria's population increased by 24.5% during the period 2000-2010, the increase in the population of the governorate of Rif Damascus was 34.1%, the population of Deir al-Zor increased by 32.4%, and the increase in the population of Der'a was 29.9% (Central Bureau, 2012: Table 2-1). When the Syrians rose against the Assad regime, it was but natural that the revolt of each of the oppressed groups would take different patterns according to the social configuration that prevailed in its region. And in the absence of a nationally organised body to coordinate the acts of revolt, one can talk of parallel upheavals.

Hence the term "revolt" in the strict sense of the word may apply to the densely populated west extending from Idlib in the north to Der'a in the south, while the east and north-east of Syria; i.e. Der al-Zor, al-Hasaka and al-Riqaa, found themselves in an entirely different type of upheaval. Even the armed groups engaged in fighting the regime in each of these regions seemed disconnected. Leaving aside the Kurds who made it clear from the outset that their fight was not directed against the regime but was carried out with the aim of establishing autonomy irrespective of the ensuing political settlement, the Arab tribes did not seem interested in pushing their fight to Damascus. Sadly enough, it was only when Jabhat al-Nusra and later ISIS controlled the region that the east and north-east were integrated within the pan-Syrian war. But by then, what began as a revolt had metamorphosed into bloodshed.

A closer look at the composition of the rebels in each region and the motives for revolts may shed some light on the above hypotheses.

Revolt in the Hinterland

Why was it from Der'a that the revolt spread to other parts of Syria? Der'a wasn't the most impoverished region. According the UNDP report cited above, Der'a, which was included within the southern region, was the least poor region in 2004 yet slid to the second poorest in 2007, while the north-east region suffered from the highest levels of poverty in both periods. The severe drought and mass migrations took their toll on Deir al-Zor in the east rather than in Der'a. Moreover, al-Riqqa governorate within the poverty stricken north-east kept conspicuously aloof from the revolt throughout its course. Neither can the tribal structure explain Der'a's prominent

⁶ <http://www.cbssyr.sy/peoplestatistics>

role in sparking the revolt. The tribal structures in Deir al-Zor, al-Hasaka and al-Riqqa are much more entrenched than in Der'a. The one difference is that the latter is dominated by small clans (Dehman, 2015:3).

How can we explain the ferocious response of the citizens of Der'a that set the igniting fire of the revolution? Outrageous acts of killing innocents under torture were not unheard of episodes in Ba'thist Syria and they would have probably been met with muted anger under other circumstances. One reason lies in the fact that the living conditions had deteriorated rapidly within just three years while the north-east had always been the poorest region. Instead, it is perhaps the peculiar relationship between Der'a and the Ba'thist state that can provide some additional clues.

Der'a was the hotbed for the Arab Socialist Party, founded and headed by Akram al-Horany, himself from Der'a, until that party merged with the Ba'th to form the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party in 1951. According to Batatu (1999:180- 181), active membership of the Ba'th Party from Der'a constituted 5.4% of the total number in 1979, and 5.3% in 1992. To put these figures into perspective, one should compare them to those of Damascus, the political hub of the nation whose population is more than three times that of Der'a. Astonishingly, the capital city's share of full members stagnated at 6.3% throughout that period⁷. More important is the number of regional command members (*Qiyada Qutriyya*) who hailed from Der'a between the period 1970 and 1997. Of a total of 48, six came from Der'a, the same number as those who hailed from Damascus, Latakia, and Homs each. It is noteworthy that no member of the regional command hailed from al-Hasaka or al-Riqqa, the two governorates that played a minimal role in the uprising (Batatu, 1999:248).

Not only is Der'a's population highly politicised, but many of Der'a families raised their social and economic standing thanks to favouritism and cronyism, including extending protection to those engaged in the lucrative smuggling activities that form the backbone of Der'a's economy⁸. Although many figures from Der'a still hold senior posts in the government, the town saw its lot dwindle under Bashar al-Assad. The all-powerful General Rustum Ghazala who acted as Syrian proconsul in Lebanon was ousted after the assassination of the late Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Five years before that, the prime minister Mahmoud al-Zu'bi was dismissed and accused of corruption. Soon afterwards an official statement announced that he had committed suicide. Two senior Ba'th leaders, Suleiman Qaddah and Muhammad Tahir Bajbouj, were removed from the party's regional command. Those who held senior posts on the eve of the revolt were either born and raised in Damascus (like vice president Farouk al-Shar')⁹ or do not belong to one of the big clans (undersecretary for foreign affairs Feisal al-Muqdad). It is no wonder that the first demonstrations were organised by the al-Zu'bi and the Masalmeh clans (Durkham, 2014:8). It was unavoidable that the population

⁷ Dehman's claim that an internal party report had put the number of full members of the Ba'th Party in Der'a at 90,000 on the eve of the revolt seems far-fetched given that the number was 11,700 in 1992 (Dehman, 2015:6).

⁸ Durkham writes that the Amman-Damascus highway that transects the region was well known for smuggling before the Syrian civil war and served a similar function following the outbreak of the rebellion. Al-Ayed describes Der'a as a centre for corruption, smuggling, and extortion even before the revolt. He ascribes the reasons for the appointment of several of its clannish personalities to high positions in the regime to the fact that its tribes are small and unlikely to pose any threat to the regime (2015:6).

⁹ A few months into the revolt, al-Shar' was put under house arrest ostensibly for opposing the regime's brutal handling of the protests.

of Der'a would associate their economic decline with the degradation in their political status within the regime.

Predatory Tribes

The two predominantly tribal areas, Deir al-Zor, al-Hasaka and al-Riqqa in the north-east and Der'a in the south played diametrically opposed roles in the revolt.

Although the town centres of al-Hasaka and Deir al-Zor and Albu Kamal were among the first to respond to the call for a “day of rage” in early February 2011, the tribes around these towns did not join the protests. Had they joined, Syria’s entire east and north-east region would have been the first to come out of the regime’s control. While the population of that region comprises less than 20% of Syria’s total, it stretches along a large swath of territory that covers more than half of the country’s area and controls Syria’s borders with Iraq and Turkey. Perhaps more important is the fact that this region, the poorest in Syria, produces all of the country’s oil and around two-thirds of its cotton and wheat.

The relative passiveness of the tribes was the consequence of decades of Assad’s policy of exploiting and exacerbating inter-tribal rivalries and, in the case of the tribes of al-Hasaka, encouraging them as a counterweight against the Kurds who constitute the majority in the important town of al-Qamishly.¹⁰ The Arab tribes were allowed to possess personal arms and to carry them in public. Durkham presents a detailed map of tribes that remained loyal to the regime and their rivals who opposed it, and the changing tribal alignments emphasising the fact that practically all of the tribal sheikhs in al-Hasaka and al-Riqqa were initially opposed to the rebellion in contrast to the towns of these governorates (Durkhan, 2014:1-17). In fact, some of the sheikhs, including those who are willing to take arms against ISIS today, admit to standing against the revolt.¹¹

As the regime’s forces and security apparatus were forced to withdraw from the east and north-east, however, the rivalry between the various tribes or between factions of each tribe took another form. Competition among them to carve as much of the spoils of the ongoing war as possible arose. The various tribes switched their allegiance between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, depending on which would better offer protection and provide better material gains. According to al-Ayed, “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 (*sic*).” Thanks to the support from the Al’qidat, which is largest tribe in Deir al-Zor, Jabhat al-Nusra became the strongest group in the area as most of the tribe’s members joined the mujahedeen, thereby enabling it to control a number of governorate’s oil fields. However, “when the Front [Jabhat al-Nusra] tried to get its hands on the other fields, clashes erupted between it and other

¹⁰ Between 1990 and 1993, the author made several visits to al-Qamishly and the villages extending to the Iraqi border. In two occasions, the author was received by the all-powerful general Muhammad Mansoura, Hafez al-Assad’s cousin and head of the intelligence office in charge of monitoring the border crossings with Iraq and Turkey. He acknowledged that he had not and would not hire a single Kurd. “All my men are from the Arab tribes of the region. Shammar’s sheikh Mohammad al-Faris is my most trusted man.” The Kurds in al-Hasaka were forbidden from speaking their language and the Kurdish names of all the villages were Arabised (Interviews with the author, 7 September 1990 and 12 February 1992).

¹¹ The historic rifts between the Arab tribes and the Kurds is a major cause for the US’ conundrum as it is trying to mobilise the Arab tribes of the region to join forces with the Kurds in order to launch an offensive against ISIS.

tribes” (al-Ayed 2015:5-6). Still another tribe complained that it had not taken its share, which prompted a large number of its members to join ISIS. In addition to these fights over spoils, there was another incentive for the smaller clans to join the jihadists, namely to find protection from the larger tribes and to benefit from employment opportunities. In a study on Syria’s war economies, Samer Abboud concludes, “in the tribal areas, much of the rebel anti- or pro-Assad activity was based on interests: smuggling, controlling borders, oil ...etc.”¹²

From Cities to the Slums

Conventional wisdom states that the Syrian uprising began in Der’a on 11 March 2011. But this does not do justice to the Syrian people, nor would it help us understand the dynamics of their revolt. The preceding month was a very tense one in Damascus. Vigil stands by tens in support of the Egyptian and Libyan revolts evolved into a mass demonstration on 17 February 2011, with an estimated 1500 participants in Souk al-Hamidiyya¹³.

Although it is almost impossible to analyse the social backgrounds of the protesters or those who supported the overthrow of the Assad regime, it is safe to speculate that a considerable section of the middle classes in the major cities and in provincial towns played an active role in fomenting the uprising. Witness to this is the sheer number of intellectuals, artists, men and women of letters, civil society activists and professionals who took to the streets and issued declarations, statements, and petitions since day one. Unlike in 1982 when the people of Hama revolted under explicit Muslim Brotherhood slogans, the Damascenes took to the streets under two mottos: *hurriya* and *silmiyya* (freedom, peaceful). And with the exception of Der’a where people demonstrated calling for revenge in the death of two boys under torture, the demonstrations and sit-ins that followed in Baniyas, Latakia, Homs and later Aleppo shared the same two mottos. Men of religion were largely absent from the demonstrations, with the exception of a few individuals.¹⁴

The issue that should be addressed then is not why the revolt began in the backwater town of Der’a but why the events in Damascus did not resonate with the rest of the country. It is in this sense that we can look at the Syrian revolt as belonging to a class of its own when compared to its Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, and Yemeni counterparts: not because it began in Der’a, but because the Der’a events ignited the spark that the capital city could not. It is also a class of its own when we consider that the flame that was sparked by Der’a spread to other provincial towns before reaching Damascus one week later. But this time only hundreds marched in protest and it would take a full month before Aleppo would witness its first mass demonstration.

Why is it, in the age of social media, that political upheavals were not carried simultaneously in a country where there is evidence that the majority of the population were looking for the change of the incumbent regime? True, the tragic fate of the two boys in Der’a and the subsequent

¹²Samer Abboud, Disrupting War Economies. *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 19 May 2015. <http://carnegie-mec.org/experts/?fa=809>

¹³ For the sequence of major events during the first year of the revolt, see: “Syria timeline: how the conflict has escalated”, *The Guardian*, 28 February 2012.

www.theguardian.com › World news › Syria

¹⁴ The chronicling of the 2011-mid 2012 events leading to the armed conflict draws upon “Syria Timeline: How the Conflict Has Escalated”, *The Guardian*, 28 February 2012. When there were obvious inaccuracies I consulted other sources.

uprising drew a sea of sympathy and heightened the outrage towards the regime, but the provincial towns in other tribal areas like al-Hasaka and Deir al-Zor seemed more motivated to join the protests. The disconnect between provincial Syria and urban Syria was different from the passiveness of rural Upper Egypt towards the revolution, but militarising the Syrian revolt brought to the open these deep fissures and has impacted the course of its revolution, and will certainly play a crucial role in deciding the shape and outcome of the conflict.

It must be reiterated that having recourse to military means was not a choice but a necessity in Syria. Damascus was not Cairo or Tunisia. There was no professional or depoliticised army that would stand by the people who strived to preserve the peacefulness of the uprising. A highly indoctrinated, coercive force is an indispensable component of any totalitarian regime. And as the course of events led to the militarisation of the revolt, a radically new logic began to unfold, one that discloses the worst in any society whose political culture had been impoverished by decades of monolithic rule (al-Khafaji, 2000).

As the regular armed forces did not intervene as a unified corps, more and more army officers, mostly of lower ranks, as well as NCOs and soldiers began to desert, eventually forming the Free Syrian Army (FSA).¹⁵ The inevitable consequence of this development was a radical change in the nature of the revolt as those from major cities were sidelined and the dominant players - those who lived in the outskirts of major cities, the masses that had been marginalised and immigrants from the countryside - were no longer marching in the streets or attacking government headquarters but increasingly relying on armed confrontations. The armed militias now could draw on a huge pool of the unemployed youth clustering around major cities.

Military experts can answer as to why activists did not respond to the brutality of the regime by launching urban guerilla warfare, or and whether this was even feasible, or if it would have been more effective to carry guerilla warfare in tandem with the traditional war. Regardless, the recourse to a strategy of traditional warfare to the exclusion of all other military activities within the cities had significant implications, as it was an early alarm to the fact that the urban role in the fight against Assad had been eclipsed, even doomed. Dissident army units, whose initial goal was to protect the peaceful protests, found it impossible to confront the overwhelming war machine of the regime and turned instead to liberating towns outside the major cities, thus leaving the demonstrators in the sprawling suburbs of al-Midan and Douma to their fate. With this development, the Syrian revolt became synonymous with the battles on the ground and not with the mass protests or other forms of nonviolent acts.

The uprising which began in Damascus was swiftly provincialised with the Der'a revolt, but now a third phase had begun. Warfare brought new leaders to occupy the centre stage, each raising his own banner and stemming from the socially and economically marginalised people from petty towns and city slums. Militarising the revolution has had a huge impact on the subsequent course of event as it exposed the deep schism between cities, provincial towns, and slum dwellers, and it may have dealt a fatal blow to the initial calls for establishing a democratic and pluralist system of governance.

¹⁵ The only episode of army units deserting en masse was the mutiny by the soldiers in Jisr al-Shighour on 7 June 2011.

In order to grasp the specific traits of each of these phases, it is necessary to distinguish between these three categories of population: provincial dweller, slum dwellers and urban dwellers especially the poor in urban areas. I define a peripheral or provincial town as one where the majority of the working population engages in agricultural activities or livestock breeding or in services closely linked to them, and depends on major cities for finance and marketing to the outside world.

Lumping the urban poor, natives of provincial towns, inhabitants of the outskirts of major cities, and immigrants who crowd in shanty towns under the rubric “poor” is misleading. Those who do so rely on crude observations, such as their common poverty and/or adherence to some variant of conservative Islam. If the socio-political and economic transformation of the Mashreq sixty years ago is any indicator, then the urban poor who live on the outskirts of cities may share more common values with non-poor urbans than with the poor hailing from provincial towns. Poverty alone is not a sufficient condition for forging a sense of solidarity. The urban poor belong to the working classes in the strict sense of the word or are artisans, petty clerks and inferior state employees, school teachers and so on; their fields of activity are closely linked to the city. In their daily life they interact with people of diverse ethnic origins who hold different religious beliefs. Their Islam may not be different from that practiced by the majority of other urban dwellers. Their means of expressing their protests, then, are not aimed at destroying the entire social fabric.

By contrast, immigrants and provincial town dwellers share very little values with their urban counterparts. In terms of ethnicity, religious, and sectarian upbringing, levels of educational attainment and life patterns, immigrants are almost homogenous. Their perception of who oppresses them emphasises ethnic and religious otherness. As such, their ideologies and modes of expressing their opposition tend to be disruptive of the existing norms (Al-Khafaji, 2004:171-183). Kilcullen and Rosenblatt make the following pertinent observation: “Fueled by economic necessity and a persistent drought, these villagers created vast, insulated neighborhoods of urban poor. Economic growth... has also forced these once-rural communities to come in near-direct contact with the wealth of the city itself. Long separated from cosmopolitan city life, these urban poor now see the rich beneficiaries of a new economic policy that has tripled Syria’s GDP in the past ten year.”(2014:35). Their observation, however, risks losing its analytical value when they designate the marginalised as urban by adding: “The Rif not only describes village farmers but those urban poor living in the slums sprouting up around Syria’s cities.” In order to make their point, Kilcullen and Rosenblatt gloss over several important facts relating to the course of the Syrian revolt.

First, as all observers know, the heavy involvement of the marginalised gained momentum only after the eruption of mass protests in the backwater towns of Der’a and Deir al-Zor. As for the Aleppo, including its impoverished eastern part, the bloody clashes between government forces and the population began months later. Second and perhaps more important, some of the first insurrections in Damascus began in poor suburbs and not in “the slums sprouting around it.” No matter how one defines “rural villages” or “slums” it would be preposterous to describe al-Midan, Barza, or Qaboun as such. Hundreds of thousands of urban dwellers, many of who are second or even third generation migrants, inhabit these suburbs that are not included within the administrative boundaries of the governorate of Rif Damascus but are constituent suburbs of

Damascus. The first bloody assault carried by Assad's troops against any suburb in Damascus was against al-Midan to the north, which besides being hundreds of years old has not witnessed significant demographic change for decades. The same goes to a lesser extent with the southern suburbs of Barza, Barza al-Balad, and al Qaboun, which witnessed some of the bloodiest battles for around three years.

Taking these two observations into account would render the concept of "new forms of revolt" absurd because the revolts that the Middle East had witnessed during the second half of the twentieth century were anything but that. In my analysis of the roots of the 1950s and 1960s revolutions/ coups d'etat in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, and even the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, I showed that these were triggered and supported by descendants from provincial towns who had been marginalised by the ancient regimes and had felt that the then existing social regimes had blocked their upward mobility (al-Khafaji, 2004:171-205).

Militarisation: Unleashing the Genie

The deep schism between urbans and provincials became apparent even in the early stages of militarising the uprising and probably before urban civilians felt the heavy hand of the marginalised fighters on their way of life. The schism manifested itself in the frictions between the fighters themselves.

Although many officers of the FSA hailed from the countryside and many had harbored hostile feelings towards the privileged positions occupied by their Alawite counterparts, settling and functioning in the cities may have brought them closer to the urban way of life. Hence the rift between the FSA and the Islamist militias reflected these divergent ways of viewing the revolution, of defining the enemy, and determining the goals that each was striving to achieve. Less than two years into the uprising, a Wall Street Journal reporter captured these diametrically opposed modes of thought and living between the two factions when he described the rivalry between Mr. Salama, a top commander of the Tawhid Division, and a Col. Ugaidy of the FSA who "operates out of a sprawling villa in the north-west of Aleppo." The colonel was a former officer in Assad's military and "enjoys the backing of Aleppo's urban elite. He is dismissive of the rural commanders." The reporter was witness to a stormy meeting between the two in which the colonel shouted at the Tawhid commander, "Do you even know how to write your name three times in Arabic without making a mistake?" Colonel Ughaidy, without addressing details of the meeting, said of the rural commanders, "They have their way of thinking, and we have our way of thinking."¹⁶

The clash between the two components of the armed opposition was inevitable and the outcome was almost predetermined. The FSA splintered as it had either to adapt its strategies to conform to the values of the marginalised fighters who, by definition, outnumbered the urban-oriented FSA by far, or risk the loss of its foot soldiers who hailed from these same marginalised

¹⁶ Charles Levinson "Leadership Rifts Hobble Syrian Rebels", *Wall Street Journal*, 10 September 2012.

provinces and slums.¹⁷ This schism may partially explain why many urban dwellers were not welcoming to the fighters who managed to enter their cities or towns - a stance that led some observers to the erroneous conclusion that they had aligned themselves with the regime. A sarcastic tone was at times voiced in describing the non-welcoming, even hostile, attitude towards the fighters. A *Globe and Mail* reporter writes, "Syria's rich fear the revolutionaries more than they do Assad's cronies. For them, this is an uprising of the poor, a revolt of the countryside. The secular, French-speaking, espresso-drinking urbanites have not taken part and are increasingly being confronted with the real effects of revolution."¹⁸

Undoubtedly, class positions play a crucial role in defining and redefining perception of where people stand during pivotal events like revolutions. The rebels' liberation of the largely poor working class eastern, southern and northern parts of Aleppo was welcomed by the residents. But their advance almost halted once they approached the more affluent and religiously mixed western part of the city. The *Los Angeles Times* described those rebels as "ancient city's bedraggled warriors: plowmen and labourers, mechanics and carpenters who came from the countryside this summer to "liberate" this formerly freewheeling town attuned to the rhythms of commerce." Here, it was class identity rather than Sunni identity that put the two worlds apart. "These rebels who entered Aleppo from semirural, tradition-bound suburbs and agricultural areas found no spontaneous outpouring of support, no waves of sleeper cells yearning to join the revolution. Many shopkeepers in the historic Old City seem to avoid eye contact with the scruffy legions."¹⁹ The paper even quotes a reporter who escorted the rebels "who couldn't escape the sensation of accompanying an occupying force."

Class-based dynamics have also shaped negative perceptions of the opposition among the many Sunnis who remained loyal to Assad's regime. The perception of the opposition as a rural-based movement led by religiously conservative, poor, and unsophisticated villagers has alienated wide segments of urban Sunnis, who have little in common socially with their co-religionists.²⁰ Many urbanites viewed the militant rebels with skepticism, albeit not with hostility. As early as the beginning of 2012, Joshua Landis noted that the "urbans increasingly view the encroachment as a war against them as much as it is against Assad, aligning them reluctantly with the regime."²¹

But class reductionist analysis is too simplistic when trying to understand the social implications of such events. Long before the uprising, sections of the Syrian bourgeoisie were hostile to the regime because cronyism and corruption suffocated their businesses, while others who forged alliances with the influential families and leaders were wholeheartedly supportive of the regime (al-Khafaji, 2004:272-296). The excerpt quoted from the *Wall Street Journal* above shows that FSA leader Col. Ugaidy "enjoys the backing of Aleppo's urban elite." The lame duck or even the hostile attitude of some Aleppo bourgeoisie towards those who liberated the east part of their city

¹⁷ It is not the purpose of this paper to dwell on the political bickering and power struggles among the various opposition parties and among the loosely organized FSA, which had a major impact on the subsequent course of the revolution.

¹⁸ Stephen Starr, "Syria's war, once a rural revolt, now threatens urban elites," *The Globe and Mail*, 7 February 2013.

¹⁹ Los Angeles Editorial Staff, "In Syria, small-town rebels are stuck in big-city Aleppo," *The Los Angeles Times*, 5 November 2012. articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/05/world/la-fg-syria-aleppo

²⁰ Chris Zambelis, "Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience", *Combating Terrorism Center*, 8 May 2015.

²¹ Joshua Landis, *The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Assad Regime Is Likely to Survive to 2013*, *Middle East Policy Council*, Spring 2012, Volume XIX, Number 1.

www.mepc.org/.../syrian-uprising-2011-why-asad-regime-likely-survive

should not be taken as support for Assad's regime: it was the rise of the provincial armed militias that tempered their views.

Yet it was not only the urban dwellers who mistrusted the armed militants. The latter themselves mistrusted the urbanites, including the urban poor who welcomed them wholeheartedly as they broke into the eastern parts of Aleppo. Explaining the reasons why they had to advance to the eastern part of Aleppo rather than betting on an insurrection from within, Reuters quotes a leader of one of the rebel groups, stating, "We waited and waited for Aleppo to rise, and it didn't. We couldn't rely on them to do it themselves so we had to bring the revolution to them."²² This remark underscores the fact that even when welcoming the liberators, the urban poor did not necessarily identify with the armed militants.

The problematic relationship between the urban poor and the armed militants then cannot be subsumed in terms of shared poverty. Analysts and reporters who contrast cities with their outskirts or with the urban poor implicitly convey the message that the slums and outskirts are where the working classes live while the city is the bastion of the bourgeoisie. In the numerous quotes that I have used in this paper, there is a recurrent explanation for the control of certain villages, small towns, or city outskirts by the armed opposition: the fact that these places are home to working classes, giving the impression that the fighters and the urban working classes are one and the same. However, it is necessary to firmly distinguish between these two categories. The armed militants are drawn from the huge pool of the marginalised that perhaps constitute the largest single group in Syrian society. These are the unemployed (whose percentage to the work-age population ranged between 25%-35% on the eve of the uprising), the uprooted villagers that flooded the major cities, the casual workers, etc....

By contrast, the "established" or "institutionalised" working classes are the urban poor who make a steady but meagre income. These include taxi drivers, small shopkeepers, non-commissioned officers, petty clerks and civil servants, workers in state factories, teachers etc.... The livelihood of most of these urban poor depends on the state. According to official figures, 1.4 million people were on the government payroll in 2010. (Central Bureau 2011: Table 4-3). Assuming that a household is made up of four to five people, this means that no less than five million derive their income from working for the state, which may partially explain why there had been no strikes or sit-ins by workers or employees in the state sector.

It is quite logical that the "established" or "institutionalised" working classes harbor ambivalent attitudes towards the armed opposition. Both belong to the poorer sections of society and both oppose the regime. But the "established" working classes diverge from the armed opposition in that their views and world outlook have much more in common with the urbans than with them. This point is overlooked by the many observers and analysts who view the cities as cosmopolitan and irreligious.

There is no evidence that these working classes who rose against the regime and welcomed the fighters in their neighbourhoods or towns engaged en masse in the armed activities themselves. Hanadi al-Khatib described a wider pattern of mutual suspicion between the urbans' view of the

²² Erika Solomon, "Rural Fighters Pour into Syria's Aleppo for Battle," 29 July 2012. <http://rueters.rs/1dwTIVT>

revolutions and that of the rural population which, according to her, varied in intensity from one governorate to another “the urbans began to view the rurals as ‘saboteurs’ to the revolution because they only joined the revolt recently, while the city was seen by the countryside as a ‘depot’ of the Shabbiha [Assad’s civilian defense committees] and the regime’s mercenaries.”²³

In fact, we know of no urban suburb or small town on the outskirts of a major city whose inhabitants organised themselves into military groups with the aim of toppling the regime through warfare. The armed opposition forces that took control were almost always people who came from other localities. This stands in stark contrast with the tribal areas in al-Hasaka and Deir al-Zor where the tribes organised themselves as fighting units.²⁴ One of the few journalists who stayed in Damascus throughout the first year of the uprising noted, “The rebels who started the last wave of attacks are not from these areas. They are using the districts as bases to launch attacks against security force.”²⁵ It would thus be misleading to draw direct causal relations between the intensity of opposition among the poor with welcoming the armed groups in their towns or slums. Many towns which had been active in the stage of peaceful protests distanced themselves when the revolt became militarised. The military opposition forces looked with suspicion to the peaceful protesters who were mostly urban-based. This can be gauged from the many incidents of kidnapping and assassination of some of the well-known activists.

On the other hand, many towns inhabited by low income Syrians in the outskirts of Damascus either did not play an active role in the protests or were not open to the armed militants. The statistics provided by a civil organisation which documents the fallen victims of the military confrontations are quite revealing.²⁶ Whereas the number of those killed in Douma has been 6,000 and Mu’dhamiyya 1,500, several other towns on the outskirts of Damascus have suffered less than ten deaths: Adra al-Balad, Ya’four, Arabin, and Sultana.

Conclusion: The Day After

Without indulging in military or political analysis and with a stretch of imagination, let’s assume that a political settlement will be reached tomorrow. How would the societal constellation look?

Obviously, a settlement is implausible without involving at least the major “moderate” Islamist armed groups and giving them a share in the decision-making bodies and in running the country. This is not only a consecration of the prevailing military-political power relations between Assad’s regime and the opposition; it is a consecration of the new power relations between urbans, provincials and the marginalised. Or, to put it differently, the ensuing balance of power reflects the deep societal changes that had been underway before the 2011 uprising and which found their political expression during the past five years.

²³ Hanadi al-Khatib “Tajawuzat wa infilat amni fi Idlib ... wa tadhahurat tudeen fasad al fasai’l (Excesses and Loss of Security in Idlib... and Demonstrations Denouncing the Corruption of the Factions), *Al Hayat*, 17 July 2015.

²⁴ This was not the case in regions where the inhabitants did not organize with the explicit objective of overthrowing Assad’s regime. The Kurds in al-Hasaka and Aleppo and the Druze in Suweida each formed their armed groups.

²⁵ Zeina Khodr, Syria’s growing urban-rural rift, *al-Jazeera Blogs*, 8 July 2012.

²⁶ *Syriansshuhada.com* has documented around 140,000 victims until 30 September 2015. The documentation details those victims according to town, governorate, and several other categories.

The new power holders epitomise the rise of the marginalised and their eventual success in integrating within the fabric of urban society, which means that the major Syrian cities before the war will undergo a process of sweeping ruralisation, and that the middle and lower classes of Damascus, Aleppo and the other major cities will find themselves sidelined.

The prospects may look different for the conservative Sunni business class who had managed to navigate through decades of Alawite rule and even to prosper thanks to their skills in forging partnerships with the influential personalities and families within the Ba’thist power structure. It would be but natural that this pattern of business alliances would thrive with the *nouveaux riches* of a system whose legitimacy would eventually rest on Sunni Islam.

The newcomers’ interpretation of Sunni Islam may be more puritanical than that of mainstream urban Syrians. But with the exception of a coterie of middle and upper class urbanites, Syrian society had in any case been veering away from secular values and norms decades before the uprising. Therefore, the friction between the new political elite and the urbans would not be caused by ideology, i.e. a clash between Islamists and seculars, despite the glossy images that the Western and many local media convey of the urban Syrians as cosmopolitan and Westernised.

The clash between the Islamist power sharers and the majority of urban dwellers would be a clash of two worldviews, as this paper has tried to show. It is a clash between the marginalised and the “institutionalised,” including the institutionalised poor, but with varying intensity. The urban poor may share common interests with the marginalised as they are both poor and excluded. Some Sunni urbans who tend to perceive their animosity with the Assad regime in sectarian terms may also share their anti-Alawite sentiments. But the course of the Syrian revolt/war has demonstrated beyond any doubt that none of these commonalities can overshadow the deep societal cleavages between and among urbans/ provincials/ tribals/ rurals/ marginalised, though these identities are never mutually exclusive.

What began as a civil urban protest/uprising against despotism and corruption unfolded into a revolt by the marginalised not only against the incumbent political system but also against the existing social order. The unemployed, excluded, destitute, despised and poverty-ridden youth who grew up in a Syria that gave them no sense of belonging are now armed to their teeth and feel that the time has come to redress the world in a way that conforms to their aspirations. With the specter of the jihadists looming in the air and with the armed confrontations aggravating the city/ provincial town divide, ordinary urbanites no longer find themselves standing by Assad’s regime or siding with the armed opposition. They simply feel cornered between multitudes of warring parties. The dream of a pluralistic and democratic post-Ba’th era has simply vanished.

Bibliography

- Abu-Ismaïl, Khaled, Abdel GaderAli and El Laithy, Heba (2011) Poverty and Inequality in Syria (1997- 2007), Background Paper 2011/15, UNDP, Cairo and New York.
- Al-Ayed (2015) Jihadists and the Syrian Tribes: Transient Hegemony and Chronic Dilemmas, Arab Reform Initiative, Paris.
- Alvarez-Ossorio, Ignacio and Gutierrez de Teran, Ignacio (2012) The Syrian Ruling Elite and the Failure of the Repressive Trend, Brichs, Ferran Izrquierdo ed. Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power
- Batatu, Hanna (2002) Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- Brown, Oli and Crawford, Alec (2009) Rising Temperatures, Rising Tensions: Climate change and the risk of violent conflict in the Middle East, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.
- Caldor, Mary (2001) New and Old Wars, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Central Bureau of Statistics (2010 and 2011), Syria's Annual Abstract of Statistics, Damascus.
- Central Bureau of Statistics (2012) Nata'j al Mash al Ijtima'i wal Iqtisadi Li Muhafadhat al Hasaka (Results of the Social and Economic Survey of al Hasaka Governorate), Damascus.
- Davies, James C. (1962) Toward a Theory of Revolution, American Sociological Review 27(1): 5–19.
- De Chatel, Francesca (2014) The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution," Middle Eastern Studies Volume 50.
- Durkhan, Haian (2014) Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Revolution, Journal of Syrian Studies, Vol. 6, no.2
<http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/897/746>
- Goldsmith, Leon .T (2014) Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace Hurst Publishers, London.
- Harling, Peter Harling and Birke, Sarah Birke (2012) Beyond the Fall of the Syrian Regime, Middle East Report
- Kerr, Michael and Larkin, Craig eds. (2014) The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant, Hurst Publishers, London.
- Al Khafaji, Isam (1994) Beyond the Ultra-Nationalist State, Middle East Repot, no. 187-188: 34-40.
- Al Khafaji, Isam (2000) War as a Vehicle for the Rise and Demise of a State-Controlled Society, in Heydemann, Steven (ed.) War, Institutions and Social Change in the Middle East, University of California Press, Berkeley, London: 258-292.
- Al Khafaji, Isam (2002) Roots of Revolution: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Dynamics for Change in the Middle East, pp. 3-51, in International Workshop Proceedings, no.4, Institute of Developing Economies, Tokyo.
- Al Khafaji, Isam (2004) Tormented Births: Passages to Modernity in Europe and the Middle East, I.B. Tauris, London and McMillan, New York.
- Al Khafaji, Isam (2010) Prospects for Political Parties Assistance Project in the Middle East and North Africa, A desk study requested by the board of the Institute for Multi-Party Democracy (Unpublished, The Hague).
- Khalifa, Mustafa (2013) The impossible partition of Syria, Arab Reform Initiative, Paris.
- Kheder Khaddour (2014) Tartus in the Present Crisis: A mirror of the Syrian Regime, Jadaliyya, Georgetown.

Kilcullen, Davis and Rosenblatt, Nate (2014) "The Rise of Syria's Urban Poor: Why the War for Syria's Future Will Be Fought Over The Country's New Urban Villages," PRISM, National Defense University, Center for Complex Operations, Vol. 4, Syria Supplemental, pp. 33-41.

Malia, Alia (2006) History's Locomotives: Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World, York University Press, New Haven and London.

Mann, Michael (2005) The Dark Side of Democracy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Marek, Franz (1966) Philosophy of World Revolution: A contribution to an anthology of theories of revolution, International Publishers, New York.

O'Learly, Carole A. and Heras, Nicholas "Syrian Tribal Networks and their Implications for the Syrian Uprising," Terrorism Monitor, Volume X, Issue 11, June, 2012.

Overholt, Williams .H (1977) An Organizational Conflict Theory of Revolution, American Behavioral Scientist vol. 20.

Rustin, Michael (2002) Empire: A Postmodern Theory of Revolution New Political Economy, Vol.7, Issue 3.

Schonderbaum, David (1980) Hitler's Social Revolution, W.W Norton & Company, New York and London.

State Planning Commission in Cooperation with the United Nations Development Program in Syria (2008) Poverty and Distributive Justice in Syria, Damascus.

Strategic Research and Communication Centre (2011) The Gap Separating Rich from Poor in Syria: Policy Analysis (no place of publication)

Tilly, Charles (1993), European Revolutions 1492- 1992, Blackwell, Oxford.

Van Dam, Nicolaos (1979) The Struggle for Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party, I.B. Tauris, London and New York.

Wege, Carl (2015) Urban and Rural Militia Organizations in Syria's Less Governed Spaces, Journal of Terrorism Research, Vol.6, no. 3: 35-61, The Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (PDF Version).

Zakaria, Ahmed Wasfi (1982, Originally vol. 1, 1945, Vol. 2, 1948) 'Asha'ir al Sham (The Tribes of Grand Syria)', Dar al Fikr al Mu'asir, Beirut and Dar al Fikr, Damascus.

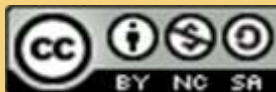
About the author

Isam al Khafaji holds a PhD Social Sciences and a PhD in Economics. A scholar and writer, he has taught at the University of Amsterdam, New York University, and Yale University. He has also advised the UNDP on Syria and the UN on Iraq. An adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, and contributing editor of Middle East Report, Washington DC, al Khafaji is the author of five books in English and Arabic and numerous papers, articles and chapters in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other languages.

About ARI

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading 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.



©Arab Reform Initiative 2016

© 2016 by the Arab Reform Initiative. This publication is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>. Permissions beyond the scope of this license are administered by the Arab Reform Initiative.

contact@arab-reform.net