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Local Actors in the Syrian Coastal Area: Characteristics and Prospects

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Tartous seaside, 2015 © Ali Kattoub



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For nearly fifty years, the Assad regime has monopolized all forms of political, economic, and social activity and precluded the emergence of local leaders that do not come out through its channels that have prevailed all aspects of Syrian daily life. Positions and ranks bestowed by the regime have, therefore, become the emblem that gives political meaning to authority: any individual would lose their immediate influence by losing their position or rank. For years, the regime has similarly monopolized economic activity. It has seized the big industries and trading centers in the country and trapped local capital and set up formulas that would guarantee sovereignty and survival for the regime and the business community – a guarantee that resulted in a coalition between Aleppo and Damascus economic elites, on the one hand, and the regime, on the other, tightening, therefore, the grip on society. Thus, the ruling family seized the largest capital and the most vital and strategic investments, including oil and its derivatives, as well as communications services.

Moreover, businesspeople in various parts in Syria, especially in Tartous, worked to get closer to the security services, pledging allegiance to them to ensure the good functioning of their investments or get permission to invest. Any economic activity is contingent on the security services' consent and that of influential Baath Party members at the governorate. At the slight notice of a departure of any economic activity from the regime's defined priorities, the security services would level trumped-up charges against the business owners and confiscate their assets.

With the start of the uprising in Syria, signs of societal leadership started to emerge but was quickly destroyed by the regime through a full-scale war on the Syrian people. Later, Russian intervention came with long-term agendas needing new local leaders to replace the regime's old cadre which had massively lost credibility among the public. The Russians were keen to attract leaders with real political influence that are capable of garnering public support and ensure that these elites are loyal to them in order to secure parallel activity to their presence in Syrian coast.

This paper studies various elites in the Syrian coast to answer a few questions about their current and future effectiveness and their influence on the reality on the ground in Syrian coast.



1. Economic activities

Trade constitutes one of the most important sectors that gives rise to businesspeople in the Syrian governorate of Tartous. Large private industrial corporations do not exist (except for those of Joud and Kamal al-Assad, see below), and the regime still holds large and medium size production enterprises there. Agricultural companies are also absent from the economic activities in the governorate due to the absence of large agricultural properties. Agricultural land is distributed amongst many small landholders in the governorate, and ranges between 2.5 to 6 acres. In Tartous for instance, most of the population owns agricultural land that cultivate on to provide for their daily livelihood. Due to the low agriculture production, the population of rural areas resorted to other means of production, such as less demanding state jobs and simple handicrafts to be able to secure an adequate income.

No sooner did the tourism sector start to grow, with the private sector getting a good share than the Syrian revolution started, which put this nascent sector in a difficult situation, leading to almost total bankruptcy of other sectors, such as the exchange sector which stopped working entirely.

Through the ownership of the two communication companies working in Syria by Rami Makhoul, a direct cousin of Bashar Al Assad, the Assad regime has total monopoly over the services sector as well as the communication sector.

The trade is still a sector in which some influential activities emerged at the level of the Syrian coastal line due to the old nature of commerce in the area and the inability of the regime to fully control domestic trade. It is, therefore, mostly likely that trade elites would play a larger role in the next stage.

1. Pre-revolution Alawite businesspeople:

Muhran Khondais considered one of the key business leaders in Syria who is also



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known for his long-standing friendship with Ali Duba, a key intelligence officer during Hafez Al Assad's era. Some claim both men have a partnership trading in Syrian antiques. Khonda owns one of Syria's largest land transport companies, Al Kadmous, as well as commercial vessels and investments in Egypt, India, and other countries around the world. His son, Kareem, is likely to inherit his financial empire as most transport companies have been registered under his name. Khonda is also known for his strong ties with Bashar Al Assad and enormous influence in the Assad regime as branches of his company occupy property that belongs to the public sector in the heart of several Syrian cities.

Ayman al-Jaber is a member of the Arab Union of Iron and Steel and President of the Iron and Steel Council in Syria. He owns the largest iron rolling company in Syria, covering an area of 21 acres in the coastal city of Jibla. He set up "Desert Falconers" and "Commanders of the Sea" militias to help the regime's military operations. He set up, together with Saber Hamisho, Al-Duna TV and the Sama Satellite Channel, both supportive of the Assad regime. Ayman al-Jaber also indirectly led oil deal negotiations for the regime and brought from the world black market oil vessels to the regime at the height of its oil crisis. In addition, the "Desert Falconers" militias were in charge of protecting areas with oil installations and many think that Ayman Al-Jaber will enter the world of oil undertakings when the opportunity presents itself. This is believed to be the reason behind problems he had with Maher al-Assad, the brother of Bashar al-Assad, in mid-May 2018, as the Fourth Division troops broke into some of his property in the city of Latakia to harass him. He also keeps vital relations with Russian officers at the Hameimim military base in Latakia.

Samir Hassan is the exclusive agent of mobile phone companies in Syria, the agent of Nikon cameras and Fuji films, the agent of medical food companies and imported pharmaceutical products, the chairman of the Syrian-Irish Business Council and the owner of Alimco Food Industries. He is also the godfather of many Syrian-Russian joint economic deals and enjoys extensive relations with Russian businesspeople.

Aktham Ali Doba is active in car trade (all makes) and is the exclusive agent of most car manufacturing companies in Syria. He is also active in the media sector that is supportive of the Assad regime, especially in sports, where he has



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monopoly over sponsorship and coverage of sports events in Syria.

Majd Bhagat Suleiman is seen, with his partner, Bashar Kiwan (a businessman based in Kuwait with Damascus origins), as the media arm of the Assad regime in various Arab countries. He is also active in the national Syrian media through *Baladna* newspaper and *Layalin* magazine. It is noteworthy that his son is an intelligence officer close to the Assad family, and the mastermind of the regime's media policies since Assad took power in the 1970s.

Ammar Al Hajj controls the illegal arms and drug markets and owns several shops and popular marketplaces, such as the Garaj al-Qadim (Old Station) and Garaj al-Jadid (New Station). He is believed to operate opaque networks that recruit hundreds of young men to serve and defend his interests well before the uprisings, with the number of his recruits doubling afterwards with his militias forming the biggest bloc of the National Defense Forces in Tartous city.

Kamal Al Assad is one of the Assad family who is close to Bashar al-Assad. He invests in public sector contracting, food industry and maritime businesses. The regime left him free to manage commercial affairs and collect royalties from all merchants and businesspeople in Latakia. He sets himself apart by dealing in "legitimate" economic activities, as opposed to the rest of the Assad family members, who are active in smuggling, drugs and prostitution and have accumulated small and medium wealth collectively.

Ali Wahib Morae, son of Wahied Morae, is heir to his father's empire (The Wahib Economic Group for the Import and Manufacturing of Iron (Majmouet Wahib Al Iqtisadiya Li Istirad Al Hadid Wa Tasni'u). He owns massive tourism projects, land and maritime transport companies, and monopolizes Tartous vegetables and fruits markets.

Ali Yousef Niddeh is a parliament member, a property developer and the owner of Tartous biggest shopping mall. He is known for his public announcement about reducing unemployment and alleviating the population's suffering. Prime Minister Al Halki recently inaugurated one of Niddeh's biggest projects in Tartous.

Khidr Hussein Al Saadi is also a member of parliament and the owner of the official Toyota dealership in Syria. His wealth is small compared to that of other



businesspeople in Tartous, but he gained great popularity in the city for his activities in providing loans and aids to the city's population.

2. Alawite businesspeople that appeared during the revolution:

Ali Muhannais is seen as the economic “facade” of the leader of the so-called “The Tiger’s Unit”, Souhail Al Hasan. Throughout the revolution, he accumulated an enormous wealth that is considered one of the largest capital inflows in Tartous. He bought hotels, restaurants, and tourist resorts, invested in the alcohol and medicine industry and launched an artistic production company. He also owns expensive real estates in Tartous. As the leader of militias loyalist to Russia, Muhanna meets regularly with Russian officers and provides facilities and services to Russian forces in the city.

3. Powerful Sunni Businessmen in the Syria Coast before the:

Farouq Joudis is Chairman of the Syrian-Italian Business Council and Director General of the Syrian British Society Ltd. and active in trade and industry. His Latakia's domestic appliances factories employ about 5,000 workers, mostly Sunnis. He is also popular in Latakia for his ongoing charitable contributions to Latakia inhabitants and workers at these companies.

Ahmad Al Fahli is the owner of the biggest maritime transport company in Syria. His wealth includes several real estates in Tartous governorate. He also has a few commercially active investments abroad.

Khaled Al Kishawi works in maritime trade and owns vessels that transport goods to and from Syria and is commercially active with other countries.

Unlike Alawite businesspeople, no Sunni businessmen, or from other



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denominations, emerged in the Syrian coast during the revolution. On the contrary, their number shrank because of their inability to provide the militias with people from their localities. They also faced several incidents of trade harassments, such as the disruption of commercial shipments Ahmed Al Fahl suffered at different intervals and the travel ban against Al Kishawi. These businessmen were relieved after the arrival of Russian forces as Russians were keen to ensure a degree of safety for economic activities because of the deteriorating living conditions of the population and fears things would escalate out of control. It is worth noting that most Sunni businesspeople of Tartous are involved in trade and, so, that they play an important role in preserving the economic cycle and shelter the governorate's economy from collapse.

The above businesspeople are the most important in the Syrian coast; they are very close to the Assad regime and very good at adapting to its political climate. They financed groups of "shabiha" called "the Tartous businessmen groups". During the period of Iranian influence in Syria, these businessmen coordinated with the Iranians to support Shia-reverting movements, as was the case in the Al Azam University in Latakia and the office of Lebanese Hezbollah for relief, aid distribution, and recruitment. During the period of Russian influence, these businessmen dissolved their militias and coordinated with the Russians to enhance economic stability and ensure the supply of food and medicine. They also actively coordinate with the Russians regarding tourism projects that have started to thrive in the governorate.

Russians are aware of Assad's old ways of dealing with businessmen, where loyalty in exchange for tax concessions and investment opportunities was the rule. The Russians did not deviate from this. Businessmen started to establish financial empires that control all forms of economic activity under direct Russian supervision, and have, therefore, become a fierce defender of the continuity of the current regime and an ardent supporter of any changes the Russians might do in the future.

The fluctuations in loyalty and the market openness to large scale businesses increase the will of small business to grow and to become more loyal and obedient. Therefore, the business community in the Syrian coast is not expected to work outside the Russian will to effect any form of change.

2. Cultural and political activities

1. Cultural activities

The current security situation precludes any cultural activities outside the framework of the ruling Baath Party, which has completely confiscated all aspects of intellectual life. The Baath party's inability to promote intellectual societal activities opened the way to the rise of all sorts of activities, with religious expression becoming the most dominant in the coastal region. This is clear in public religious rituals, such as feasts, Fridays, and funeral gatherings, which constitute the only forms of social gatherings in suburban areas and smaller towns.

It is, therefore, difficult to talk about cultural activities in the governorate nor about cultural celebrities or public opinion leaders. Such activities could appear in the upcoming years if two main conditions are met:

- The development of a positive climate of public freedoms that would encourage the emancipation of cultural and artistic expression away from the taboos of religion, sex, and politics. These prevent cultural actors from address topics with real meaning for people's daily lives and turn them into neutral players in public social sphere.
- The need to increase in financial support and relax conditions artistic production. There is a noticeable lack of interest of cultural and artistic actors in state's bodies and platforms and an inclination to invest and produce in private sectors. This remains at present a nascent trend, with few attempts by some theatre professionals and musicians to attract financial support from the private sector. Such a trend sets the foundation of an artistic and cultural production sponsored by the private sector and businesspeople linked to state bodies through permission clearance to perform, which in turn paves the way for the emergence of private cultural production companies, such as those in charge of music and theatre festivals.



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It is clear that the features of a cultural and intellectual movement are starting to appear in the Syrian coast, outside the framework of the Baath Party, but still under its direct and indirect supervision via its security and trade union clearances. Despite this, such activities enjoy enough independence to make them appear somehow neutral from the Baathist discourse. Such activities are represented by musical and theatre events in the centre of the governorate and other large cities. Some of the most important examples are:

The Mizo Music Festival: this is a bi-annual music festival organized by the Mizo Institute for Music Education and is widely popular in Tartous. It hosts classical music evenings. The management staff of the institute are known for their non-involvement with the regime.

The Arab House Music Festival: it holds its activities in Latakia and its countryside, as well as in the regular music festivals in Latakia. In addition, it is active in music teaching and educating in Tartous city.

The Arjouan Chorus: this is the first chorus of its kind in Tartous. Supervised by trumpet musician and member of the Syrian Orchestra, Bishr Eisa, the chorus includes 100 regime supporters. It hosts Syrian musicians and organizes large performances. It also has a children's Arjouan Chorus that performs in concerts and conducts music induction sessions.

The Adiyat Society: it has branches in Tartous and Jebela and hosts weekly poetry and literary evenings, and lectures on heritage and other non-political themes. It also organizes group trips for the society's members and friends.

The National Theatre: it hosts performances on a regular basis, with well-known playwrights and actors. The key condition for the performance at the National Theatre is support of the regime's narrative. The theatre management does not allow the performance of plays that even neutral about public affairs, let alone critical of them.

In addition, the Baath Party cultural centre hosts events and festivals as part of the regime media propaganda machine.

The above cultural activities are often followed and attended by a small segment



of society that is of middle-class and art background and consists of a few hundred. This number increases during music festivals but decreases at cultural events, such as poetry evenings or cultural and intellectual lectures. The rise in the number of cultural activities outside state structures has led to an increase in the number of the audience of such activities after the outbreak of the revolution.

2. Political Activity

The Assad regime has banned all political parties and associations since the 1980s, which paralyzed political life until Bashar Al Assad assumed power. He allowed the establishment of some political forums and turned a blind eye to traditional parties to regroup and restart their work. This space of relative freedom soon vanished with the ban of all political forums and arrest of the leaders of the Damascus Spring (the opposing group that made a statement calling upon Bashar Al Assad to start a peaceful transition of power into political pluralism). Traditional political parties were put under scrutiny, with some of their leaders on wanted lists and others under constant pressures by the security services. This was compounded by travel bans that included most of these leaders. Consequently, these political parties failed to regroup and get involved in political grassroots activities, and very few of them continue to organize political activities.

Some of those who signed the Damascus Spring manifesto were activists from the Syrian coast. Most signed in the name of their parties such as the Communist Labour Party and the Syrian Communist Party. Others signed as independent activists. Most political prisoners and prisoners of conscience during Hafez al-Assad rule who were then from the Tartous Governorate or the Alawite denomination had already broken away from all political organizations and shunned public affairs.

After the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, these political parties tried to reconstruct their partisan structures. Some opposition civil groupings also emerged, such as the Ma'an Movement in both Tartous and Latakia, the Sayyid Rasas Group, and the Communist Labour Party. All of them became members in the Coordinating Body as moderate opposition that believes in a peaceful solution and dialogue with the regime and has reservations on armed revolutionary action.



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This, however, did not exempt these parties from prosecution and arrest at a later point, as the regime detained tens of activists over their political party activities and later released them after varied periods of detention. Such practices curtailed the activities of these organizations, estimated to have around 100 political activists in Tartous alone.

In addition, secret revolutionary organizations such as the Nahl Al Sahil Movement and the Tartous Revolutionary Coordination Committee worked to expose the regime's lies through the distribution of leaflets. These organizations faced frequent setbacks that led to the exposure of some of their members, many of whom died under torture in the regime's custody. One of them is Anas Al Shaghri, a leftist youth who led demonstrations in Tartous and organized grassroots efforts to deal with the regime and the security forces and later joined the Nahl Al Sahil organization. Others survived by fleeing abroad before they were exposed and arrested. However, secret revolutionary action in Tartous was limited to a small minority.

At present, all forms of political organization have disappeared, while some signs of individual opposition remained but is unable to express itself outside social media platforms, putting it completely under the scrutiny of security forces. This situation makes it exceedingly difficult for these organizations to influence public opinion.

On the other hand, the actors and activities representing the regime remained strong and influential and are distributed between the Governorate Council and the branch office of the ruling Baath Party. The regime is also keen to distribute these activities at the regional level as well as along religious and tribal line with a view to representing the governorate along non-national lines:

- The Tartous Governorate Council is composed of Governor Safwan Abousaadi and nine members.¹
- The leadership of the Baath Party branch in Tartous is made of 10 members.²
- Latakia Governorate Council consists of Governor Ibrahim Khader Al Salem and 18 members.³
- The branch of the Baath Party in Latakia consists of the secretary of the



branch Mohammed Shrith and eight members.⁴

3. Religious Activities

Religious activities were given a major importance by the regime. The Al al-Sayyid family have dominated the Sunni representation in the Tartous Dar Al Ifta. Some of them were able to reach important positions in other sectors based on their religious influence in the governorate. The Tartous Sunnis have not seen other representatives since Hafez al-Assad era. The Al al-Sayyid family maintained their allegiance to the regime after the breakout of the revolution. The Tartous uprising did not take a religious form, except in the city of Banyas, which witnessed huge waves of protest, although these were not led by individual religious figures but rather by civil society activists of diverse religious and political leanings. Protests were quickly besieged: security forces broke into the neighborhoods that launched the demonstrations, and all forms of protest ceased at an early stage before any leadership of such movements could emerge. There is no record of any armed opposition group in Tartous.

As to the Alawite, who make most of the governorate, the regime has worked on dismantling their religious reference figures since the arrival of Hafez al-Assad to power, thus making the Assad family the only reference there. Hafez al-Assad curtailed all existing references (there were some clan-based references for the Alawite), prevented the emergence of new ones, imposed limits on the authority of Alawite men of religion in local environments, and expanded the power of Baathists and the regime's influential military officers. As a result, no Alawite figures who represent the denomination religiously were left.

In the city of Latakia, the Alawites are a split between the Haidari and the Murshid sects. The Haidari sect differs slightly from the Alawites (al-Kalaziyyin) and many Alawites and Haidarites considered these differences secondary. However, the regime favoured the Alawites over the Haidarites in government positions and army ranks. This has made the Haidarites unable to form a religious reference to represent them or defend their rights. They distinguish themselves from the Alawites by their weak allegiance to the Assad regime. Many refer to these



differences when explaining the killing in June 2016 of a Haidari officer in the middle of Latakia by Suleiman al-Assad, the founder of the National Defence militia, for crossing the road. This caused widespread anger in Besnada, near Latakia, and the hometown of the officer and demonstrations demanding justice, which pushed the regime to imprison Suleiman al-Assad in order to contain the crisis. Sheikh Ghazal Ghazal, who is close to Bashar al-Assad, now speaks on the behalf the Haidarites, although some accuse him of Shia propaganda and encouraging shiatization amongst his sect because of his speeches on various occasions in the mosque of the Great Prophet in Latakia, built by the Iranians to support the Shia movement, However, Haidarites have not followed any shiatization movement.

As to the Al-Marashda, they have lost the religious reference since the assassination of al-Moujib, son of Suleiman Al-Murshid, the founder of the sect in the 1950s. For fear of reprisal, they have not taken any actions that could show their opposition to the regime's policy. Al-Marashda are trying to hand over the authority to one of their members to represent them politically and socially. They offered this position to popular singer Wafik Habib, who declined it, according to local activists. There are claims the regime is opposing any formal representation of this sect, or that a representative already exists but in secret.

Christians makes a smaller minority in the governorate and spreads over a few denominations. Christian clergy in the governorate do not interfere in public affairs and do not aspire to any future political role.

As a result, the Assad regime succeeded in completely neutralizing religious activities to the extent it has become impossible to find any religious figure with influence (or popularity) to form a partner in any dialogue that the opposition seeks to establish in areas the regime considers as human reservoir that is willing to fend its survival.

Conclusion

The Assad regime has a tight grip on all aspects of life in Syrian coast. If we consider that reservation or neutrality over the regime's policies as a living phenomenon under this totalitarian, oppressive regime, then such a position did



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not come from the business community, as an effective power on the ground with real potential for change. Reservation or neutrality over Assad's policies is seen in opposition activists who are awaiting an opportunity to regroup as well as in some cultural and art activities that preferred to stand on neutral grounds despite the risk of such a position.

What can be drawn from the above social reality in the Syrian coast is that the importance of following up on these events and activities and betting on them to break the compulsory path that all actors on the ground are trying to promote. These activities and actors could during a moment of regression of the regime turn into local forces capable of carrying an inclusive national project.



Endnotes

1. Mohammed Khaled Zein, Bassam Adnan Jbaili, Fadi Mohammed Deeb, Essam Ali Mohamed, Ghassan Mohammed Bilal, Ghassan Mahmoud Yousef, Mohamed Samir Abdel Rahman Haddad, Sarab Hamdan Khaddour,
2. Muhanna Abbas Muhanna, Haitham Abbas Assi, Nadim Ali Hussein, Jamil Mahmoud Gabri, Hassan Mahmoud Yaghi, Nazih Hanna Bashour, Nada Mohammed Ali and Gamal Ghazil Ghazil as well as the Governor and the President of Tartous University who also belong to the party branch.
3. Ammar Ghanem, Essam Khalil, Os Osman, Mohamed Ghazal, Ali Hassan, Fatir Mia, Iskandar Noman, Abdullah Marwa, Thaer Abbas, Malik Shaboul, Louay Mazig, Zuhair Mohamed Nizam, Jamil Shaheen, Rafiq Nofal, Hassan Salloum, Nabil Ali, Nizar Ramadan, Mohammed al-Juhani.
4. Makhlof Suleiman Ahmed, Ghada Mohamed El Assad, Hassan Ali Habib, Necdet Zreika, Anak Zeina, Abdelkrim Ajan, Adamon Deba, as well as the Governor and the President of Latakia University who belong to the party branch by virtue of their duties.



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