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# No Homeland, No Future: Alawite Youth As the Backbone of the Assad Regime

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A young man holds a poster of the Syrian President Bashar Assad in a village in the countryside of Damascus, August 2018. © EPA-EFE/YOUSSEF BADAWI



The living conditions of the population in areas under the Assad regime control are constantly deteriorating, and their ability to secure daily necessities is becoming increasingly difficult. The regime's ability to secure energy resources has diminished, as well as its ability to limit the rise of the dollar and foreign exchange rates against the Syrian lira, whose value is falling despite the regime's "security" and economic measures to prevent its deterioration. With the US administration continuing its suffocation of the Syrian economy and the regime's economic activities through the Caesar Act, population groups within regime-controlled zones have effectively turned into disappointed and disillusioned communities that have lost all hope for a bright future and are now merely trying to survive.

In these disastrous conditions, young people are living complex tragedies. In this paper, we try to shed light on a sector of Syrian youth within areas under the regime's control, especially those coming from an Alawite background. We examine their reality and their political positions towards the regime – both in the near and more distant future – in the light of their confusion, their siege by the army, and the fighting that continues to kill them in vain, and the regime's failure to deliver on its promises to them. The paper is based on field research and investigation conducted by the author, as well as in-depth secret interviews with many young people from different regions of the coastal area and numerous meetings and discussions with those interested in public affairs. It also draws on relevant public studies, research, articles, and investigations as well as material circulated on social media. It is worth noting that the security blockade imposed by the regime on activists and political actors has been a major constraining factor throughout the preparation of this paper.

### **Youth and military conscription:**

The regime reduced compulsory military service from two years to nine months after the March 2011 popular protests in Syria. Shortly after, it discharged two batches of conscripts in August and October 2011 after just a few months of service. Eventually, the regime stopped discharging recruits and kept them in reserve status for several years, where the recruit, or reserve soldier, receives a volunteer's salary of about USD30. At the beginning of 2012, the regime initiated a major reserve forces call-up, which continued for some time and looked more like



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a general mobilization. At the end of 2018, the regime discharged the first batch of reserves, which was a very small percentage of the total number of young soldiers. Alawite families are among the most committed to military recruitment and reserve service compared to others, making them the most affected by the system's conscription and standby policies. In an approximate statistic, A.M., a political activist from the city of Latakia, says: *“The issue of the recruitment of young Alawites recruits to young Alawite civilians is one of the most important topics I have worked on, but I have not been able to reach accurate figures because of the loss of a large part of the military records of the regime and its reliance on old methods in this matter, as its military records have not been completely automated. However, I was able to get approximate ratios. The percentage of Alawi young people aged 18 to 30 who serve in the army (conscripts, reserves, volunteers) is now between 65% to 75%, and the percentage of Alawi young people aged 30 to 40 who serve in the army is 35% to 40%.”*

In addition to the long period spent by the young Alawis in the army – which may be over seven years for many of them – they face many difficulties with long psychological and physical effects. Indeed, most are on the frontlines of the fighting where they witness the killing and injury of their colleagues, or have themselves been injured, which may cause lasting effects or disabilities. A large segment of them has also witnessed and carried out arbitrary looting and killing of civilians, making them unfit to return to civil life or properly engage in its civil activities. Moreover, young people often suffer from complex psychological crises throughout their years in the army, so they also lose the best years of their lives – when they’re most energetic and optimistic – to a frustrating and often deadly military life.

Given all this suffering, what then keeps these young men in the army? And why do they not run away and start their lives instead of losing even more years? I will cite here the testimony of a soldier who fled the army three times and was arrested once at a checkpoint, and then sent back to the army after two presidential pardons. Now, he serves as a reserve soldier. He is 30 years old and spent seven years of his life as a soldier and deserter. Answering your question, he said: *“I hid in the coastal village. For two years, I could not leave this impoverished little village, hiding from death, from my neighbours, and the police. The years were slipping through my fingers ... What do you think a young man of my age would do if he were*



*confined in his house? My family's home turned into a prison, so I took a risk and left for Tartus to work, love, and live my life, and the result was that I got arrested. At least now I can breathe a sigh of relief during vacations, and I can also wait for news of my discharge.”*

*Nothing stops me from escaping in the next few months, in prison, torture, and ill-treatment. I do not care about winning the war, nor a homeland for the big “crisis” mongers, nor supporting anyone. I only wish for this nightmare to end.”*

## Economic and financial challenges await discharged soldiers

Owning property and finding a job are critical factors in young people's lives. In a country with a severe economic crisis, the economy's ability to provide jobs for discharged soldiers and officers cannot be predicted or relied upon. Even if employment opportunities *are* available, they are in fact unemployment in disguise: public and private workers are now paid below USD25 per month. In the private sector, employees have to work long hours for a wage of no more than USD20. With the relatively high cost of living, the average Syrian family needs at least USD150 a month to meet their daily needs. The crisis is now a matter of food insecurity, even for those who work. With the lack of jobs, the situation is dire for these discharged young people. Owning a property – a necessary step to start a family – remains a far-fetched dream for young people in the regions under the regime's control. Property prices have also risen along with the dollar, though at a slower rate, and have become very expensive. Any apartment in a suburban area would cost about USD10,000. Although the regime's banks are offering mortgage loans, they are still not nearly enough to buy a house, and their long-term premiums seem impossible to pay: a 5m Syrian Lira loan will cost the borrower an additional 90,000 Syrian Lira over 15 years, which seems impossible in a country with a per capita income of not more than 80,000 Lira for all workers in both private and public sectors.



A young man discharged from military service will, therefore, face difficulties in finding a job. If he manages to find one, he will face difficulties to meet the needs of a medium-sized family or secure a property. These are all factors that make the regime think twice before discharging young people, as it would effectively be releasing an army of frustrated people in its cities and villages.

## The phenomena imposed by the war on the youth

Militarization does not only ruin the lives of the youth enrolled in the military, but it also acts effectively as a death-trap for young generations, waiting for them to reach 27 years of age (for university students) or 18 (for non-diploma holders). Even after demobilization, the ghost of military service still haunts Syrian youth. Below are some of the most prominent phenomena imposed by militarization and the ongoing war on the young generation of Alawites.

### Migration

We're talking here about the migration of the Alawite youth, not mass immigration and forced displacement from which the Syrian people have suffered, and are still suffering, due to the ongoing war in the country. Alawite youth migrate from environments that probably have not been subjected to bombing or famines; they migrate from environments that are still safe from the direct negative impacts of the war. The phenomenon of the Alawite youth migration is mainly a result of two issues: first, the lack of practical and economic perspectives in the country, and second, the need to escape the compulsory military service that represents the greatest concern of the Alawite youth with no solutions in sight. To them, military service seems like an uncertain fate that could ruin their lives or waste long years, in which youth would otherwise spend on building a normal future for themselves.

### Drug addiction

The drug addiction has now taken hold among the military and the pro-regime militias fighting in the war as a result of the chaos spread amongst the fighters.



This led to the spread of weed consumption among the Alawite fighters and pushed them into the pit of drug abuse. Moreover, occasionally the consumption of pills known as Captagon has also spread among the fighters, and has sometimes been encouraged by security officials. Those pills help the fighters avoid feeling pain, as well as energize and empower them for two whole days, effectively boosting their efficiency on the frontlines. Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and pro-regime warlords have worked on growing weed and spreading its use amongst fighters, including Alawite youth. We conducted several confidential interviews with some of the drug users, and here we will cite the answer we got from (H.A) who is a former member of the National Defence Militia and fought with Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon and Qalamun. He said (in the Shite religious songs), *drink tea, and smoke weed every time they had a rest. They used to insist that we join them in that ritual, and they protected us in case we were arrested by some security officials or policemen for the possession of weed. They always said that we shouldn't worry because they would always be there for us and that no security or police officer could bother us if we consumed weed.*"

## The Alawite youth and the Assad regime

Hafez al-Assad managed to delude the Alawites into thinking that he dedicated the state's capabilities to serve them and that he worked tirelessly to raise their status. Before Hafez came to power, the Alawites suffered from neglect and at times, threats. Then, they became the beneficiaries of the regime and rose to the status of authority, particularly among the ranks of the army, police, and security forces. This enhanced the value of the al-Assad family among the Alawites and eventually, the name of Hafez al-Assad was generally revered all over the Alawite areas. That is why Bashar al-Assad, as a successor to his father, enjoys a special status among the Alawites. Moreover, Bashar al-Assad's position was further enhanced among Alawite youth following the relative economic prosperity experienced before the revolution, with Alawite youth rushing to defend the regime and what they gained during the forty years preceding the outbreak of the revolution. However, the course of events did not go as al-Assad had wished, as Alawite youth paid a heavy price for nine years, during which they gained nothing except death, injuries,



disorientation, and absolute poverty.

Activists estimate that the death toll of the Alawite youth is close to 100 thousand and 60 thousand injuries. They now face the renewed threats they have historically been subjected to as a minority and are losing trust in the role of the regime to protect them during the next stage. This is especially so after Alawite officers lost their prestige due to the interference of Iranian militias and the Russian forces. With the clear messages sent by the Russians to the Alawites and to the world of how Bashar Al-Assad has become their obedient servant, the Alawites have a strong feeling that the regime is now dependent on the Russians and that the countdown for the days when they enjoyed power and authority has started.

The younger generation of Alawites is trying to earn a living or is counting the days to be discharged from the military service. They do not care about the regime, Bashar al-Assad, or the future of the country, and also remain unconcerned about the next president as long as they maintain the status quo or improve it a little bit.

This is the case for a significant part of Alawite youth. The rest are sons of army officers, senior officials, and tycoons who are still dreaming of the revival of the regime and regaining power. They are an opportunist class who has become increasingly alienated from Alawite society and its general concern.

(F.M.) an anti-regime Alawite political activist and a former prisoner of conscience *“At the outbreak of the revolution, Alawite youth rushed to save and defend the Syrian regime. The barriers of self-organized vigilante groups spread at the crossroads of the villages, as large numbers of Alawites volunteered. Many of them had also served in the so-called qualitative reserve forces, where some went to recruitment divisions and handed over their civilian identification cards. According to Alawite communities, it was disgraceful for anyone to dodge conscription or calls to join the reserve forces. Indeed, some Ba'athists even took it upon themselves to draw up blacklists of residents in their neighbourhoods whose loyalty was questionable, so that Syrian Shabiha "militias" could beat them up and force them out of their homes and villages. However, now – and it is a strange paradox – it has become normal for someone in the Alawite community to say that he had made his son flee abroad to dodge conscription, and to have everyone agree with this decision. Moreover, people race to congratulate anyone who was discharged from military service or to cover up*



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*for an army deserter. A gradual shift in the viewpoint took place over the past nine years, and for many reasons.”*

*Whenever a deserter (D.K.F.) returns to his village and Alawite says, when one of them joined the army; friends cheered up and the villages and neighbourhoods were abuzz with joy and pride... mothers got jealous of other women's sons. As years passed, we now hear the hail of bullets upon the death of someone as a martyr. Some congratulate the martyr's family; others find pride in martyrdom. The bullets are joined with the waiting of women, the fears of mothers for their sons on the frontlines, and the worrying of fathers. Now when we escort the martyr to his final resting place, silence and grief loom large, and nothing can console the victim's family. Neither the homeland nor the future is ours – rather, we hear cursing pouring on army officers and Bashar al Assad. Whenever we hear the sound of bullets, we know that someone was discharged from the army: the mothers ululate in joy, their friends hold parties, and the rest dream of the same fate for their sons when they hear “wish you the same.”*

## Conclusion

A striking development has occurred among pro-regime Syrian youth, particularly Alawites, in their stand towards the regime and the al-Assad family. During the first days of the revolution, they rushed to feverishly defend the regime. Today, the voices of the youth who do not cling to the authority of al-Assad and do not see him as a solution for are increasing. Many young Alawites are prioritizing their living conditions and believe that the regime is corrupt, responsible for all the successive crises that have been affecting Syrians, including youth, and incapable of finding solutions to any of them.

However, it is hard to determine the prevalence of such discontent, due to their entrenched fear of the security apparatus. What is clear is that all the opposition forces must work on a comprehensive national project that puts Syrian youth from different backgrounds on track to employment and a viable life, as well as work to end a war that is severely affecting Syrian youth on both sides of the conflicting parties, as the youth always bear the bigger burden.





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