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Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016-2020)

Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier

**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**

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Executive Summary

While the 2011 uprising deeply challenged the authoritarian regime in several regions, analysis of the parliamentary election in wartime is crucial to understanding how the regime attempted to renew its social base, which is assumed to have shrunk during the first years of the conflict.

The last poll to elect the 250 MPs of the People's Council took place in April 2016 in a country deeply divided, at a time when regime forces were still weak and controlled less than 40% of the territory. Despite the profound upheavals caused by the conflict, the Syrian authorities organised the election in a manner similar to the pre-war process. The Regional Command of the Baath Party played a key role in the pre-selection of candidates despite having lost its role as the leading party in society and the state in the 2012 constitution. It oversaw the establishment of the National Unity lists, which included Baathist candidates, those of the other parties in the National Progressive Front and – in some electoral districts - independent candidates, all of whom were elected.

As a result of this selection before the election day, the distribution of seats by political affiliation did not fundamentally change during the war and neither did the representation of different social groups – despite a significant turnover of MPs. The Baath Party increased the proportion of the seats (more than 67%) it has held in the Council since 1973. The slight rise in the number of Baath Party seats came at the expense of both the other authorised political parties (only six of the National Progressive Front parties and one party newly established after 2012 won seats in 2016) and independents (the number of which has never been so low since 1990). Although the distribution of seats by sectarian and ethnic group and gender is not a recognised form of representation in the People's Council, the implicit quotas for minorities which were applied in the pre-war decade were also much the same in 2016.

However, the profiles of MPs show significant changes to the traditional categories which were usually represented in the People's Council before the war and included active members of the Baath Party or of its affiliated popular and union organisations, notables and tribal elders, businessmen, Sunni clerics and public figures. Except for traditional Baathists, who still were the most numerous in 2016, the characteristics of representatives of other interest groups (such as businessmen, Sunni clerics and tribal leaders, who are traditionally elected as 'independents') profoundly changed and new social categories (such as militia leaders and families of martyrs) emerged. The common characteristic of these newcomer MPs is that they had participated in war efforts alongside the regime. Shifts were more visible in governorates which had experienced major military, political and demographic upheavals (Aleppo, Daraa, Rural Damascus, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa) than in ones which had been spared from violence (Damascus, Latakia and Tartous) or retaken early by regime forces (Homs).

The 2016-2020 Assembly looked like a 'council of war' and reflected three priorities of the regime in one of the most critical periods of the armed conflict. First, the regime needed to promote its most active supporters (involved in military or propaganda activities) all over the country at a time when its first objective was to win the military battle. Second, the large presence of traditional Baathists reveals a decision to restore the central role of the Baath Party in keeping alive state institutions after the internal crisis and shifts within the party in the first years of the uprising. Finally, the election of new actors (such as members of martyrs' families) illustrates the need for the regime to maintain its social base, particularly among minorities.

Introduction

In the nine years since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, the ruling authorities have not bypassed organising elections for its parliament, which is officially known as the People's Council (or People's Assembly). Two such elections have taken place: one in 2012 and a second in 2016. A third election scheduled for 10 April 2020 has been postponed in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ These elections illustrate the Syrian regime's concern to give an impression of continuity in state institutions during the time of conflict.

Although the Council is an old institution, having existed with various names since 1919, it is still largely unknown to many observers and policymakers and remains under-studied.² Similarly, the People's Council has been of little importance to the majority of Syrians in the country's modern history. In the authoritarian context that has prevailed since the 1960s, the institution has often been perceived as nothing but a forum for applauding the highest authority in the state and rubber-stamping government decisions. In view of the major events and changes that have ravaged the country since March 2011, parliamentary elections have become of even more marginal importance for the Syrian population.

However, for the political leadership, the People's Council has remained an essential institution and the ruling Baath Party has invariably kept it under its control since the first legislative elections organised under Hafez al-Assad's mandate in 1973. In the nine legislative elections between 1973 and 2007, which took place every four years during the reigns of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, the Baath Party secured parliamentary majorities ranging from 53% to 67%. In addition to the number of seats reserved for the Baath Party (at least half) and more broadly for the Baath-led National Progressive Front (NPF) (three quarters of the seats),³ the number of so-called 'independent' MPs increased by about 35 out of a total of 185 seats until the end of the 1980s to 83 out of 250 seats from the 1990 election to 2003.

Given that all candidates, including independents, have historically been vetted by the leading party and the security services, the composition of the Assembly was not indicative of any true political life before 2011. Instead, it reflected the priorities of the Syrian regime to reshape its social base according to specific historical circumstances. The integration of different social, ethnic and religious groups in the Parliament from one election to another has illustrated how the regime has expanded and shifted its patronage networks over the decades to respond to internal or external challenges and ultimately to secure the power of the ruling family. The 2003 election came at an important moment to consolidate the authority of the new President, Bashar al-Assad,⁴ and the subsequent one in 2007 was held just before the People's Assembly nominated Bashar al-Assad as candidate for a second presidential mandate.

¹ A decree issued on 14 March postponed the election until the end of May 2020. On 8 April, the Supreme Constitutional Court issued another statement that the President of the Republic might again postpone the poll until the disappearance of Covid-19.

² Volker Perthes, "Syria's Parliamentary Elections: Remodelling Assad's Political Base," MERIP, No 174, 1992; Souhaïl Belhadj, (2013) *Bashar al-Assad's Syria. Anatomy of an Authoritarian Regime* (in French), 261-288 (Paris: Belin, 2013); Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Electoral Campaign of April 2007: Localism, Corporatism, and the Alliance of Money and Islam," 2007, unpublished; Mona Ghanem, Sabah al-Hallaq, et al., "Women and the People's Council in the Syrian Arab Republic" (in Arabic), United Nations Development Fund for Women and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, no date.

³ Since 1972, the NPF has included ten parties representing all officially recognised political parties until 2012: the leading Baath Party, the Syrian Communist Party, the Unified Syrian Communist Party, the Arab Socialist Union Party of Syria, the National Covenant Party, the Arab Socialist Movement, the Socialist Unionists, the Democratic Socialist Unionist Party, the Arab Democratic Unionist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. The latter joined the NPF in 2005.

⁴ Belhadj, *ibid*, 287.

While the 2011 uprising deeply challenged the authoritarian regime in several regions, analysis of the post-2011 elections seems central to understanding how the regime attempted to renew its social base, which is assumed to have shrunk considerably during the first years of the conflict. This study therefore offers an analysis of the results of the 2016 election but does not deal with the activities of the People's Council in wartime nor with the relations between the MPs and their constituencies.⁵ However, given the scarcity of information on the Council in the pre-war decade, the study cannot build any systematic comparison between the pre-2011 and 2016 parliaments but whenever possible it will compare the 2016 election results with those of 2007. It therefore proposes hypotheses on how the armed conflict has transformed the Council's composition. The paper first demonstrates that the distribution of seats by political affiliation did not change fundamentally during the war and neither did the representation of different social groups. However, the study argues that the representatives of these traditional categories were often linked to activities related to the regime's war efforts, which gave the 2016 Assembly a specific make-up.

The research for this study was primarily conducted on open databases on the websites of the People's Council and the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections, and further drew from official media coverage and social media (MPs' Facebook accounts). These open sources were supplemented with online meetings conducted by the researchers with thirty people in various parts of Syria who have first-hand knowledge of the MPs. The data collection regarding the identity of the MPs focused on ten indicators (place and date of birth; educational qualifications; profession; political affiliation; religious affiliation; number of times elected as MP; the key political, partisan, union-related, institutional and economic activities of each MP before and after entering parliament; social status and influence; family background; and the form of support received in order to enter the parliament). Almost all of Syria's governorates were covered in the research.⁶ Unless otherwise stated or cited, the data presented in this paper come from online meetings and have been cross-checked with the personal pages of MPs on social networks and references in official media coverage.

⁵ The choice to focus on the 2016 election rather than the one in 2012 - which should have been held in 2011 but was postponed due to the uprising - meets two considerations: first, the 2016 election would allow for a better analysis of the changes five years after the beginning of the uprising; second, the analysis of the 2016 Council - whose mandate expired in April 2020 - could serve as a comparative basis for the study of the next election.

⁶ In total, this study has collected data on 200 members of the People's Council elected in 2016 out of a total of 250. The ten districts covered most are Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo city, Aleppo Regions, Latakia, Tartous, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Sweida and Daraa. Data were collected between November 2019 and March 2020.

1. A Wartime Election: No Major Changes in the Distribution of Seats

The April 2016 election took place in a country deeply divided and subject to bombing. The Russian military intervention launched in September 2015 had not yet resulted in a reversal of the military balance of power in favour of the regime, which at that time controlled less than 40% of the territory. Pro-government forces only started a gradual military recovery of the insurgent-held areas in the second half of 2016 (Aleppo city in December 2016 followed by parts of rural Damascus, Daraa and northern Homs in 2018). At election time, the international coalition was also far from having won the war against Islamic State, but had already empowered the PYD-Kurdish leadership, which established its own governance structure and held elections in its territory in the northeast. Denounced by the Syrian opposition and its allied countries as illegitimate, the parliamentary election was held on 13 April, coinciding with the first day of a new round of diplomatic talks in Geneva, which seemed to contradict the timetable for political transition agreed on by the United States and Russia.⁷

Despite the profound upheavals caused by the conflict, the Syrian authorities organised the 2016 election in a manner relatively similar to the pre-war process. In addition to some amendments to the electoral law, the composition of the lists under the aegis of the Baath Party maintained implicit quotas in terms of partisan/independent representation, sectarian affiliation and gender balance.

1.1. Rules and Practises to Run Elections

Neither the new constitution adopted in 2012 nor the new laws on political parties (2011) and elections (2011 and 2014) had any substantive impact on the electoral process in 2016.⁸ The division of the electoral districts, the number of seats per electoral district and the quotas allocated in legal provisions to ‘workers and peasants’ (127 seats out of 250) remained unchanged (Figure 1).⁹ Moreover, the Regional Command of the Baath Party continued to play a key role in the drawing up of the electoral lists despite having lost its role as the leading party in society and the state in the 2012 constitution.¹⁰

⁷ Anne Barnard, “Syrian Parliamentary Elections Highlight Divisions and Uncertainty,” 13 April 2016, *The New York Times*, <https://nyti.ms/2KooNvm>

⁸ For an overview of constitutional and electoral reforms, see Syrian Centre For Political and Strategic Studies and Syrian Expert House, “Syria Transition Roadmap,” 2013, <https://bit.ly/3autWMW>

⁹ The candidates run for election either in category A (workers and peasants) or category B (other members of the populace). The numbers of seats reserved for categories A and B are defined by law (127 and 123 respectively). This classification has lost all sociological significance since the transition to a market economy under Bashar al-Assad, but the Baath Party uses these quotas as a means of sorting when preparing the electoral lists. The number of seats per political affiliation is defined on an ad hoc basis by the political leadership of the Baath Party and may vary depending on the circumstances. A Baathist candidate can run in category A or B, and independents can similarly choose whether to present themselves as ‘worker or peasant’ or as ‘other member of the populace.’ The political affiliation does not appear on the lists of candidates or on the lists of results published by the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections.

¹⁰ Agnes Favier and Marie Kostrz, “Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?,” Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, February 2019), <http://bit.ly/38771a4>

Figure 1. Distribution of Seats by Categories A and B and Numbers of Candidates by Category (2016)

Electoral districts	Number of seats for Category A	Number of candidates Category A	Number of seats for Category B	Number of candidates Category B	Total number of candidates	Total number of MPs
Damascus	10	44	19	309	353	29
Rural Damascus	10	50	9	170	220	19
Homs	11	50	12	118	168	23
Hama	13	41	9	99	140	22
Aleppo	7	76	13	327	403	20
Aleppo Regions	17	79	15	178	257	32
Idlib	12	32	6	60	92	18
Latakia	9	141	8	183	324	17
Tartous	6	51	7	82	133	13
Raqqa	4	10	4	38	48	8
Deir ez-Zor	8	45	6	60	105	14
Al-Hasakah	8	104	6	115	219	14
Daraa	5	25	5	25	50	10
Sweida	4	17	2	18	35	6
Quneitra	3	51	2	51	102	5
Total	127	816	123	1,833	2,649	250

Source: The authors (based on official sources)¹¹

In addition to the creation of a Higher Judicial Committee for Elections to replace the Ministry of Interior as the body overseeing the electoral process from 2011 onwards, a few amendments to the electoral law were adopted in February 2016 to adapt the organisation of the poll to the military situation.¹² For the first time, police and military personnel were given the right to vote (wherever they were in the country) in parliamentary elections, something that the regime had long banned to avoid any political involvement of army officers. Second, voters were allowed to use their personal or military identity cards instead of their voting cards, which were launched in 1998 and became the sole official document accepted for voting from 2003. Finally, the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections was given the authority, when necessary, to move polling stations in one or more districts to

¹¹ Based on data published by the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections, <https://bit.ly/2VOYqWo>

¹² People's Council website, "Law 8 of 2016 Amending the General Elections Law No. 5 of 2014" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2WrP0R5>

other districts to allow IDPs from insurgent-held areas residing in regime-held areas to vote.¹³ These measures did not, however, lead to a dramatic increase in the turnout, which was officially said to be 57.5% (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Numbers of People with the Right to Vote and Turnout (2003-2016)



Source: The authors (based on official sources)¹⁴

In 2016, roughly 11,000 people filed candidacy applications, although only 2,649 candidates remained in the race until voting day. This high rate of withdrawal of candidacies during the election campaign is typical and was observed in elections prior to 2011. It is partly the result of a mechanism adopted by the Baath Party’s Regional Command to maintain control over the number of candidates. Following recommendations given by the Regional Command to the heads of the party branches in each governorate, the branches usually request a large number of party members to nominate themselves as candidates for a few days before subsequently asking them to withdraw.

Although the electoral law upholds the principles of individual voting and individual candidacy, together with the counting of individual votes followed by announcements of the results for each candidate one by one, the Baath Party issued lists of candidates for the National Progressive Front (NPF) as it did in the past. Starting with the 2012 election, the name of these lists was changed from ‘National Progressive Front Lists’ to ‘National Unity Lists,’ with implicit reference to the fact that ‘the nation’ was going through a crisis requiring ‘national unity’. In the five districts of Homs, Idlib, Hama, Deir ez-Zor and Quneitra, the National Unity Lists included both NPF and independent candidates – the latter in numbers equal to the remaining seats reserved for independents. In other districts, the Baath Party left certain independent seats open – that is, they were not decided in advance, which theoretically left a margin for true competition.

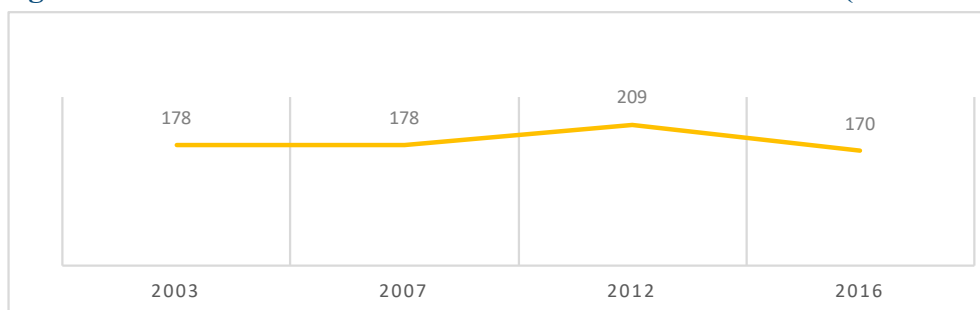
¹³ Polling stations were opened for: IDPs from Raqqa and Idlib residing in Hama, Homs, Latakia, Tartous and Damascus; IDPs from Deir ez-Zor residing in Damascus, Latakia and al-Hasakah; and IDPs from Aleppo residing in Damascus, Latakia and Tartous. At the same time, no measures were taken to extend voting to refugees and IDPs outside regime-controlled areas. SANA agency, “In Preparation for the Constitutional Deadline ... The Electoral Centres Complete their Preparations in the Governorates” (in Arabic), 12 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/34ZDdLR>

¹⁴ For 2016 and 2012, see the People’s Council website, respectively at <https://bit.ly/39yHdVi> and <https://bit.ly/3cBLU2g>. For the 2007 election, see the Regional Command of the Baath Arab Socialist Party “Results of the People’s Assembly Membership Election for the Ninth Legislative Assembly” (in Arabic), 23 April 2007, <https://bit.ly/3cz174j>; For the 2003 session, Tishreen Newspaper, “Results of the Eighth Legislative Session of the People’s Council” (in Arabic), 6 March 2003, <https://bit.ly/2THX8cX>

1.2. The Distribution of Seats by Political Affiliation: Baathists, NPF Allies and Independents

Despite the high turnover of MPs in 2012 - a historical trend which was similarly observed in elections prior to 2011-, and to a lesser extent in 2016 (Figure 3), the distribution of seats by political affiliation did not change fundamentally during the war (Figure 4).

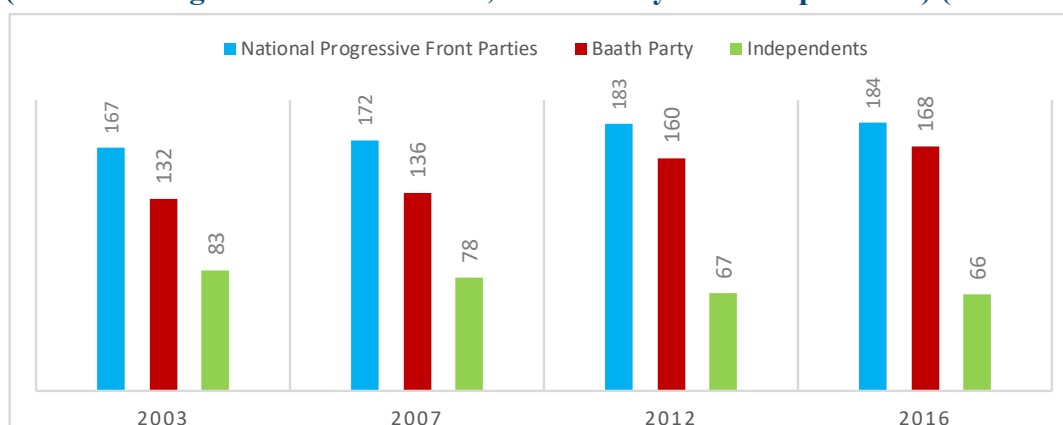
Figure 3. Numbers of New MPs from one Election to Another (2003-2016)



Source: The authors (based on official sources)¹⁵

All the candidates on the ‘National Unity Lists’ were elected, which means that they were subject to a mere plebiscite on the election day after their selection by the Regional Command of the Baath Party. The lack of competition between candidates became evident in discrepancies between the numbers of votes obtained by each candidate. 69% of the candidates received fewer than 1,000 votes; more than half received fewer than 100 votes; more than a third received fewer than 10 votes; and a tenth of the candidates received no votes at all.¹⁶ Publications of the Higher Judicial Committee also reveal a large disparity in the numbers of votes between the last winning candidate and the first losing candidate in all the districts except in two cases.¹⁷ In each electoral district, Baathist candidates were at the forefront of winners in category A, followed by candidates from NPF parties and then independents. Furthermore, in every district, Baathists won at least the first three seats in category B, with those remaining going to other Baathist, NPF or independent candidates in orders varying from one district to another.

Figure 4. Distribution of the 250 Members of the People’s Council by Political Affiliation (National Progressive Front Parties, Baath Party and Independents) (2003-2016)



Source: The authors (based on official sources)¹⁸

¹⁵ The same sources used in footnote 14.

¹⁶ See the detailed results published by the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections on its website at <https://bit.ly/2VOYqWo>

¹⁷ The first case occurred in the Tartous district, where the difference in votes between the last winning candidate (Khoder Mohammed Hussein, a businessman) and the first losing candidate (Mahmoud Ali Bilal, a lawyer) was 2,196 votes. The second occurred in the Aleppo city district, where the difference between the last winning candidate (Zainab Khawla, the head of a charitable organisation) and the first losing candidate (Mohammed Rabie Afar, a merchant and militia leader) was 6,947 votes.

¹⁸ The same sources used in footnote 14.

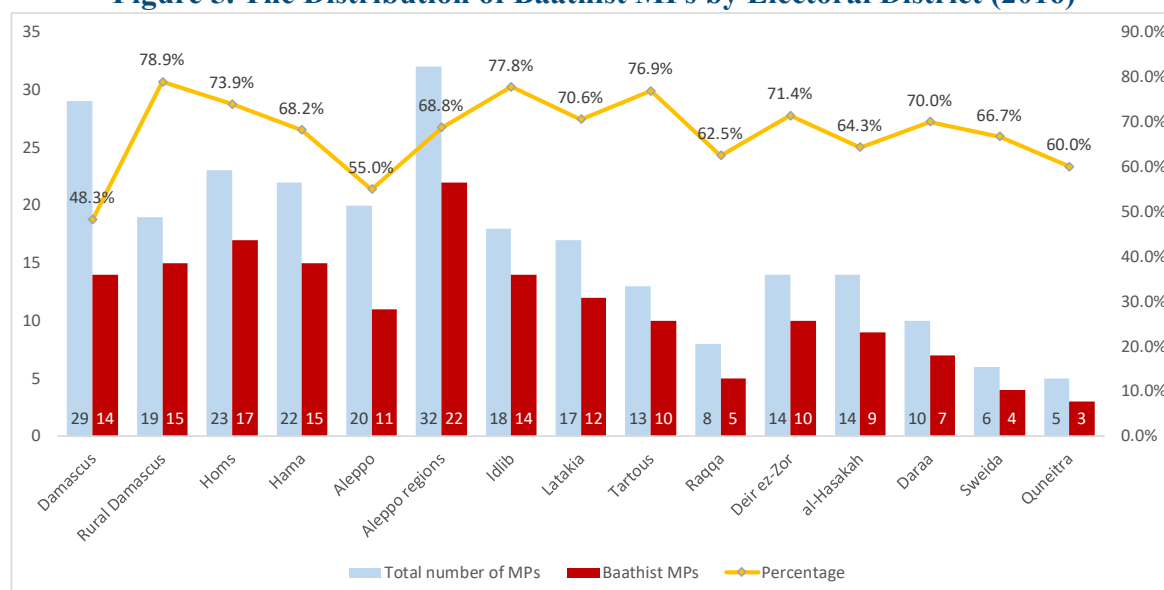
An Increasing Majority for the Baath Party

The number of Baath Party members in the parliament increased from 136 in the 2007 election to 168 of the 250 seats in 2016. The ruling party kept its hegemony (more than 67% of the seats) in the Council despite the decline of its role as the principal instrument of power wielded by the regime, a role which had already been waning since Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000 and particularly after the revolution-turned-war sent the Baath Party into a state of turmoil and internal crisis in 2011-2012.

However, the party had begun to consolidate its ranks by appointing an all-new Regional Command in July 2013. The new party leadership was tasked with overcoming the obstacles that had turned the Baath “from a party fighting for a cause to one laden with state bureaucracy”, according to Bashar al-Assad’s own criticism of his party’s performance at the time.¹⁹ Starting in 2014, the Regional Command began taking steps to rebuild the party’s base with a measure they called ‘membership confirmation’, which entailed sorting actual members from nominal ones in their records.²⁰ There then followed a series of decisions to restructure the leaderships of the party branches in each governorate. The discrepancy between the Baath’s diminishing role outside parliament before 2011 and its growing representation in the Council in 2016 indicates a contraction of the popular base on which the regime depended before the revolution and the limited options available to it to create reliable alternatives. It also reveals the regime’s intention to revive the role of the party.

In terms of geographical distribution, Baathist MPs have historically been less represented in Damascus than in the rest of the country, and the 2016 election confirmed this. This exception reflects attempts by the regime to attract the Damascene bourgeoisie and its established social base in the city into politics, a base which has historically been less involved in the Baath and other Arab nationalist and leftist parties than its counterparts in the other major cities. It is noteworthy that the two governorates with the highest proportion of Baathist parliamentarians are Rural Damascus, large parts of which were in rebel hands in 2016, and Idlib, which was also largely outside regime control (Figure 5). This is also the case, albeit to a lesser extent, in Deir ez-Zor governorate, where the regime only controlled a small pocket of territory inside the city at the time of the vote. Daraa represents another similar case in point.

Figure 5. The Distribution of Baathist MPs by Electoral District (2016)



Source: The authors (based on official sources)²¹

¹⁹ President Bashar al-Assad speeches, “Interview President Bashar al-Assad with Baath newspaper” (in Arabic), 11 July 2013, <https://bit.ly/33kKuVO>

²⁰ Favier and Kostrz, “Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?”

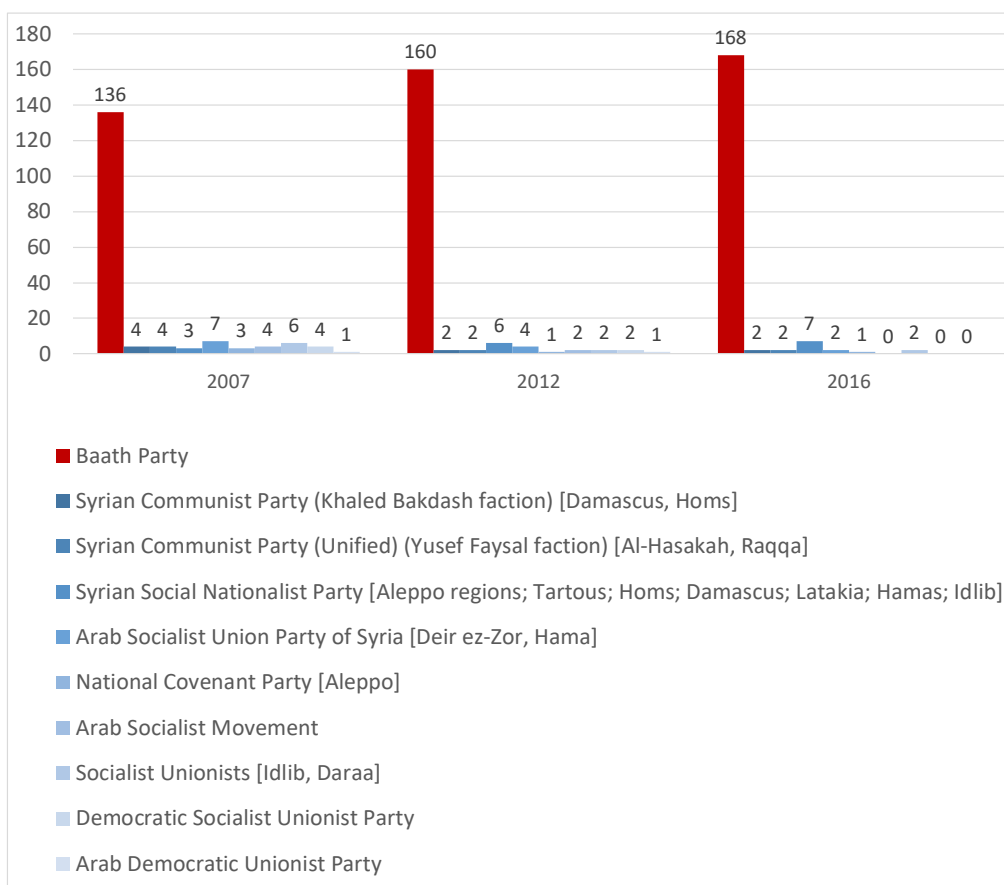
²¹ The figure relies on the database on the People’s Council website, after correcting six technical errors.

The Decrease in Seats for Other Political Parties

The increase in Baath Party seats came at the expense of other parties in the NPF. In the 2007 election, all the NPF parties were ultimately represented (with a total of 36 seats), whereas only six of these parties won a shared total of 16 seats in 2016 (Figure 6).

Unlike the dwindling representation of the other Baath allies, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) increased its share of seats from three in 2007, to six in 2012 and up to seven in 2016 as a result of three advantages it enjoyed over other parties: its popular base, especially among religious minorities; its civil activities and relatively strong ability to mobilise; and its early and direct involvement in the war through the Eagles of the Whirlwind militia, the military wing of the party.²² During the first years of the conflict, the SSNP benefited from organisational synergy with its main branch in Lebanon, known as the Central Wing, which enjoys the backing of Hezbollah. The party faction known as the Secretariat Wing also received significant financial support from Bashar al-Assad’s cousin, the renowned businessman Rami Makhlouf. Finally, the party benefited from the ministerial position of Ali Haydar, the leader of the party’s Intifada Wing, who was appointed Minister of National Reconciliation in June 2011. In 2016, the SSNP’s MPs included a doctor, three lawyers (one of them a woman), an agricultural engineer, a media writer and the branch manager of a private industrial company.

Figure 6. The Distribution of MPs Among the National Progressive Front Parties (2007-2016)



Source: The authors (based on official sources)²³

²² Christopher Solomon, Jesse McDonald and Nick Grinstead, “Eagles Riding the Storm of War: The Role of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party,” Policy Brief (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, January 2019), <https://bit.ly/3eEkry6>

²³ The same sources used in footnote 14. The mention of the electoral district for each party corresponds to the 2016 election.

With the exception of the SSNP, the decrease in the number of seats for the other Front parties reveals the narrowness of their partisan base and their inability to adapt to the requirements of the regime in wartime. Among the nine Council members representing the remainder of the NPF parties, six seats went to their heads or to heads of their local branches. The Syrian Communist Party (Khaled Bakdash faction) was represented by Ammar Bakdash, the son of its historical leader and current head of the party who has held his seat in Damascus since 2003, and engineer Georges Aziz al-Shenour, a member of the party's central committee who was elected in Homs. As for the other wing of the Syrian Communist Party (Unified), known as the Yusef Faysal faction, its two seats were won by two members of its political bureau, Ismail al-Hajjo, a lawyer from Raqqa, and Melloul al-Hussein, a textile engineer from al-Hasakah. One of the two seats won by the Arab Socialist Union Party was accorded to Abd al-Rahman Ozkaji, a member of the political bureau from Hama. As for the National Covenant Party, its one seat went to one of its leaders, Mohamed Yahya Kaadan, a civil engineer from Aleppo.²⁴

It is important to note that the decline in the representation of the parties allied with the Baath within the NPF did not work in the favour of the emergent political parties licensed under the new party law of 2011. Among the ten new political parties authorised to present candidates in 2016,²⁵ only the newly established People's Party won two seats.²⁶ Many other tolerated parties, including parties that Russia had recognised as legitimate opposition groups, such as that of the former Minister of Finances Qadri Jamil, boycotted the ballot.²⁷

The Lowest Number of Seats for Independents since 1990

In a show of relative economic and social openness after a decade of crisis, in the 1990 election the political leadership encouraged independent personalities to run for election to broaden the representation of the commercial bourgeoisie, the Sunni clerics, tribes from the east and centre of the country, and even cultural circles.²⁸ Between 1990 and 2003, independents formed a heterogeneous new bloc of 83 MPs in the People's Council, which was less likely to change from one election cycle to another than their Baathist and NPF counterparts. As in the Council overall, there was a high turnover among independents in 2012, with only 13 MPs from 2007 re-elected to parliament, as compared to 23 MPs from 2012 who were re-elected in 2016. Despite the election of a large number of new candidates to the Council, independents still theoretically represented the same social strata as they did before 2011 (businessmen, tribal leaders and the Sunni religious current) (see section 2.2).

²⁴ Alongside these party leaders, one seat went to Mohamed al-Meshaali (Arab Socialist Union Party – Deir ez-Zor), a war profiteer, small-time contractor and emerging security broker, and two further seats to two members of the Socialist Unionist Party: Khalid al-Aboud, a political analyst famous in loyalist circles in the Daraa district (MP for Rural Damascus district in 2012); and Zakwan Assi in Idlib, who was first elected in 2012 as a member of the Democratic Socialist Unionist Party.

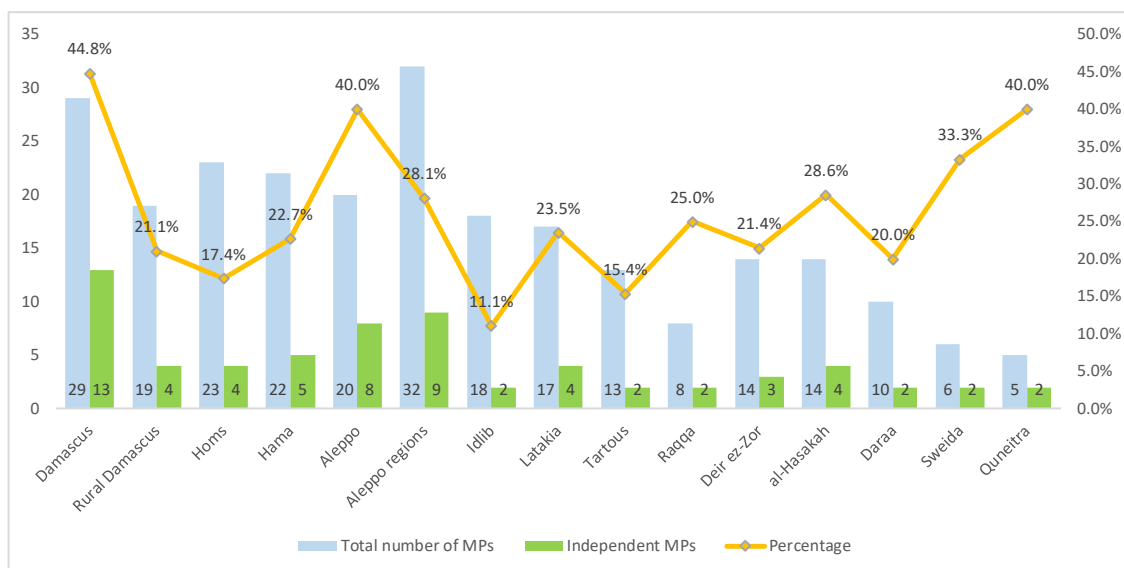
²⁵ The ten parties which ran in the 2016 election outside of the NFP were: the Solidarity Party, the Syrian Democratic Party, the Democratic Vanguard Party, the Arab Democratic Solidarity Party, the National Development Party, the Syrian National Youth Party, the National Youth for Justice and Development, the Syria Homeland Party, the People's Will Party and the People's Party.

²⁶ Abd al-Aziz al-Melhem in the Homs district and Nashaat al-Atrash in Sweida. In both cases, membership of the party, which had paramilitary factions, did not grant them additional support, as both enjoyed status and influence within their communities.

²⁷ Qadri Jamil was elected in 2012 as the leader of the Popular Front for Change and Liberation, which was established in August 2011 and recognised as the official political opposition. Backed by Russia, he founded the People's Will Party. Jamil was expelled from parliament in 2015 after he boycotted the presidential election in 2014. Al-Baath Media "The People's Council Drops Membership of a Number of its Members, including Qadri Jamil" (in Arabic), 30 July 2015, <https://bit.ly/2vR0Nxx>

²⁸ Perthes, "Syria's Parliamentary Elections"; Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton: NJ Princeton University Press, 1998).

Figure 7. The Distribution of Independent MPs by Electoral District (2016)



Source: The authors (based on official sources)²⁹

Since the 1990 election, the cities of Damascus and to a lesser extent Aleppo, the two most populous and significant cities in the country, have had the largest share of independents and are the two districts in which independent candidates usually run on electoral lists (Figure 7). In 2016, there were four independent lists in Damascus, two of which shared the 14 seats reserved for independents in the capital. These were: the Damascus Candidates list, led by Samer Debs, a senior board member of the Chamber of Industry of Damascus and Rural Damascus, who later became its chair; and the Cham list, led by Mohamad Hamsho, a famous businessman and prominent board member of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce before becoming its secretary. In Aleppo, a single list of independents was formed, the Aleppo Authenticity list, and its seven members were elected.³⁰

To conclude, it is important to emphasise that partisan affiliation – which is one of the few available variables on the parliament’s official website – does not have a real political meaning and could be misleading. As the formation of electoral lists shows, ‘independent’ candidates may be co-opted onto the Baath-led National Unity Lists in certain electoral districts. Beyond the support of the Baath Party, proximity to senior officials and support by the intelligence services are other powerful means to enter the parliament in an indiscriminate way for both Baathists and independents. Moreover, most of the independents elected in 2016 seem even more loyally affiliated with the regime than some Baathist members, as will be demonstrated below. Why, then, do these figures not join the Baath Party itself? The answer may be twofold. First, during Hafez al-Assad’s reign, the Baath Party gradually transformed from being the ruling party into a tool for administration and organisation, as power became concentrated in the person of the president and the intelligence services. The second reason is that independents may stand to gain more by remaining outside the Baath Party’s structures, such as being able to accumulate large amounts of wealth faster than if they were Baathists and to obtain and consolidate social prestige under the title of ‘independent’. However, in contrast, ‘independents’ may choose to become Baathist candidates, such as in the case of Ahmad al-Kuzbari, an independent representative in Damascus in 2012 who was re-elected as a Baathist in 2016 - after he participated in the Syrian government delegation negotiating at the Geneva conference in 2014 and before he was nominated head of the government delegation to the Constitutional Committee in 2019.

²⁹ The figure relies on the database on the People’s Council website, after correcting six technical errors.

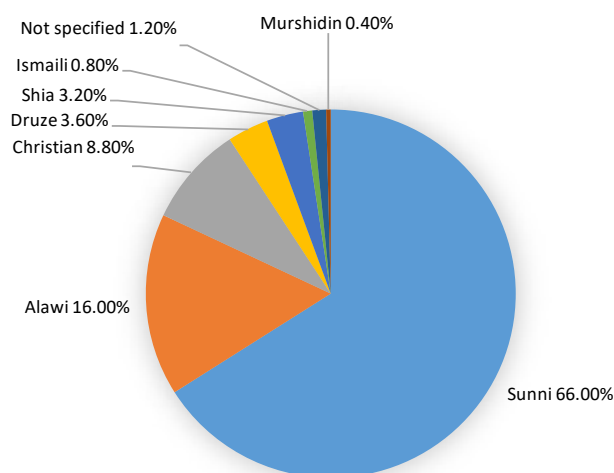
³⁰ In 2007, in Damascus, two lists competed and shared the independent seats: the Fayha List led by Mohamad Hamsho (with Samir al-Debs) and the Sham List. In Aleppo, two lists were also formed: the Shahba list, a coalition of ‘trustworthy’ businessmen and clerics, won all seats, while the urban bourgeoisie’s list, the Friends of Aleppo, was prevented from winning a single seat by the intelligence services. Pierret, “The Syrian Electoral Campaign of April 2007.”

1.3. The Representation of Minorities and Women

Contrary to the official discourse, which sidesteps ethnic and religious differences under a national banner, the regime has always integrated and manipulated sectarian and ethnic groups through other recognised forms of representation in the distribution of Council seats. In the absence of official data on the religious affiliation of MPs, the numbers presented in Figure 8 were obtained from a field survey and may contain a margin of error. However, they reveal that the implicit quotas for minorities according to the demographic weight of each group across Syria and within each district in 2007 were much the same in 2016 - albeit with a slight decrease in the number of Sunni representatives in favour of minorities in some districts.

Figure 8. The Distribution of MPs by Religious Community and Electoral District (2016)

Electoral district	Sunni	Alawi	Christian	Druze	Ismaili	Shia	Murshidi	Not specified	Total number
Damascus	21	1	5			2		-	29
Rural Damascus	15		2	2				-	19
Latakia	4	11	2					-	17
Tartous	3	9	1					-	13
Homs	9	10	3			1		-	23
Hama	9	8	2		2		1	-	22
Aleppo	15		3			1		1	20
Aleppo Regions	29					1		2	32
Idlib	16	1				1		-	18
Deir ez-Zor	13					1		-	14
Raqqa	8								8
Al-Hasakah	12		2						14
Daraa	7		2			1			10
Sweida				6				-	6
Quneitra	4			1					5
Total number	165	40	22	9	2	8	1	3	250



Source: The authors³¹

³¹ The figures are based on data collected by the authors through online interviews with people with personal knowledge of the MPs. These data have been cross-checked with death notices for family members of MPs and/or with MP's personal pages on social networks.

As in previous elections, the majority of the Christians who won seats in parliament ran with the Baath Party and its allied NFP parties. Of the 22 Christian MPs elected in 2016, around half of them were candidates on Baath Party lists, three were members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and one represented the Syrian Communist Party. In some districts, the Baath Party showed interest in the traditional dignitaries of the Christian community, such as in the case of Hamouda al-Sabbagh, the grandson of one of the symbolic historical figures in the city of al-Hasakah, who became the president of the People's Council in 2017, in a historical precedent since 1943. However, the ruling authorities generally selected Christian candidates on the basis of other considerations. For instance, in Damascus, two former police and military officers and a second-rank businessman with close ties to the regime were elected. The rest ran as independents through alliances with other strong candidates - such as Mohamad Hamsho and Samer Debs in Damascus, and Fares Shehabi in Aleppo - or with the direct support of the Orthodox Church, the influence of which expanded both in its own constituency and in regime circles.³² Despite the growing role of the Church, the fact that a majority of Christians continued to be elected through their inclusion on the 'National Unity Lists' may be a sign of the degree of vulnerability that still affected the Christian community and its continued need to rely on the regime.

The representation of Alawites was concentrated in four governorates (Latakia, Homs, Tartous and Hama) except for two MPs in Damascus and Idlib. Everywhere, most of them ran on Baath Party lists and only eight of the 40 were independents. The Alawi representatives from Homs and Hama seem to have been more involved in war activities than those from Tartous and Latakia. In Homs district, four Alawi MPs participated in the formation of the People's Committees (*lijan shaabiyya*) at the beginning of the revolution before these committees turned into militias under various names. In Hama district, three of the eight Alawi MPs were also involved in similar activities, as opposed to only one in Latakia and none in Tartous. This may be explained by the adjacency of sectarian groups in the city of Homs and its countryside and in Hama countryside, with both governorates being the arenas of many battles over the wartime years.

As before 2011, the representation of Druze remained almost stable (nine seats) and was primarily centred with six seats around the governorate of Sweida, where the Druze community constitutes the overwhelming majority. Additionally, two seats were designated for Druze in Rural Damascus due to there being Druze settlements in the areas of Jaramana and Sahnaya and in the villages of Mount Hermon south and southwest of Damascus.

The representation of the small Shia minority, which historically enjoyed one or two seats, rose from two in 2012 to eight in 2016. This expanding representation may reflect the political influence of Iran, since six Shia MPs had Iranian support.³³ Half of them were Baathists and the others ran as independents. Two are natives of the emblematic Shia cities of al-Fouaa in Rural Idlib (Mohamed Ragheb Hussein, a political activist)³⁴ and Nubl in Aleppo Regions (Fadel Hussein Kaade, a university professor). Two others come from the Shia minorities of Busra al-Sham in Daraa (Faiza al-Adhbe, a teacher) and Hatla in Deir ez-Zor (the activist Mohamed Amin Hussein al Raja, whose family converted to Shiism in the 1980s). One representative elected in the Aleppo Regions district, Omar

³² A clear example of this is the civil engineer Riad Shtaiwi, a native from Quneitra who resided in Damascus and was elected in Daraa in 2016. At this time, he was the head of the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development, a charity organisation affiliated to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East (GOPA), in Daraa governorate.

³³ Two Shiite Baathist personalities were elected because of their social or partisan positions (Abbas Abdulkarim Sandouq in Damascus and Sami Qasem Amin in Homs) rather than because of direct support from Iran. Two others MPs – allegedly converts to Shiism though this is not confirmed – were backed by Iran: Mujib al-Rahman al-Dandan, elected in the Aleppo Regions district; and the lawyer Abdul Majid Kawakibi, descendent of an ancient Aleppo family, was elected in his native district before being nominated governor of Deir ez-Zor.

³⁴ Mohamed Ragheb Hussein seems the most representative of the Iranian political role in Syria, as he started various activities early, the most notable of which was founding the National Reform Party in 2009.

Hassan, was the honorary commander of the al-Baqir Brigade militia, which is loyal to Iran. The agricultural engineer Hadi Sharaf, whose brother is the head of the Syrian branch of Hezbollah's Martyrs' Organisation, was elected in Damascus. Through the sponsorship of close personalities, Iran showed more visible influence than Russia in the 2016 election. However, the Iranian intervention in the electoral process remained marginal, or at least not commensurate with the scale of its military involvement.

Finally, most Kurds, who had suffered from state discrimination for decades,³⁵ abstained from electoral participation in 2016. In certain predominantly Kurdish areas along the Turkish border in northern Syria, the PYD-led local authorities announced that they would not participate in the election after the gains they began to make starting from summer 2014 as partners in the international coalition to defeat IS. None of the three Kurdish MPs elected – one for each of the districts of Damascus, Aleppo Regions and al-Hasakah – represented the Kurdish political mainstream at the time. For example, Omar Osei from Damascus, a former member of the PKK in the 1990s who was first elected in 2012, was probably re-elected due to his role in political mediations between the PYD and the regime.

Alongside the representation of minorities, the presence of women in the People's Council increased from 4 in 1973 to 21 in 1990, and has since exceeded 30 in every cycle from 2003 onwards.³⁶ Over the decades, women's representation has been monopolised by women activists within the Baath Party and leaders from the General Union of Syrian Women. In 2016, there were clear signs of a partial shift in the representation of women, as in a historical precedent seven women were elected as independents alongside 24 Baathists and a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. A common feature of the seven female independents was that they were not engaged in any feminist activity but had other forms of involvement in public affairs. Some played a role in the religious sphere (Farah Hamisho in Damascus and Reem al-Saai in al-Hasakah); while others were engaged in cultural and political advocacy (Nora Arisian in Damascus) or in charity work (Zainab Khawla in Aleppo). Three others belonged to 'families of the regime's fallen soldiers' (see section 2.3). In another precedent Hadiyyeh Abbas, a veteran Baathist leader from Deir ez-Zor, was elected as president of the Council in 2016 before being dismissed from this position a year and half later for having "failed to manage sessions in a constitutional manner", according to the justification given by the Council.³⁷

Classical electoral sociology, which focuses on the distribution of seats according to partisan, sectarian and gender affiliations, remains interesting in that it shows that the quotas – set by legal provision for categories A and B and by ad hoc political decision for seats reserved for the NPF, independents, minorities and women – remained almost identical between 2007 and 2016, despite the profound social and political transformations engendered by more than five years of armed conflict. However, this approach does not provide sufficient explanation to understand the changes in the composition of the Council. It is therefore essential to further analyse the profiles of the MPs to measure the specific tint of the 2016 Parliament.

³⁵ In al-Hasakah district, which is the main Kurdish stronghold in Syria, Kurdish votes were persistently squandered on 'closed lists' supported by the Baath Party. On the Kurdish question in Syria, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

³⁶ In Syria, women first won the right to run as candidates for seats in legislative councils in 1953, and the first woman was elected to parliament in 1958. Ghanem and al-Hallaq, "Women and the People's Council."

³⁷ Sputnik, "The Syrian People's Assembly Reveals the Real Reasons for the Speaker's Withdrawal of Confidence" (in Arabic), 21 July 2017, <https://bit.ly/2x7AR0T>

2. Old and New Faces Representing Traditional Categories

The composition of the pre-war People's Assemblies included active members of the Baath Party and of its affiliated popular and union organisations, notables and tribal elders, businessmen, clerics and public figures. These traditional categories, which are defined by the social status or the main occupational activity of each member and may overlap, were still represented in the 2016 council. However, the profiles of MPs within each category changed significantly. Moreover, a new type of actors emerged in the parliament after 2011, the common characteristic of whom was that they had actively participated in war efforts alongside the regime. Shifts in the representation of these interest groups were more visible in governorates which had experienced major military, political and demographic upheavals (Aleppo, Daraa, Rural Damascus, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa) than in those which had been spared from violence (Damascus, Latakia and Tartous) or retaken early by regime forces (Homs).

At least three main interrelated factors can explain the new composition of the People's Assembly in 2016. First, internal shifts within the Baath Party during the first years of the conflict later affected the profiles of Baathist parliamentarians in the 2016 Council. Second, with the outbreak of the revolution and the war, many businessmen, tribal leaders and dignitaries from prominent families left the country or remained silent, thus refraining from running for Council elections, which offered an opportunity for new actors to emerge. Third, the regime needed to promote its most active supporters across the country at a time when its first objective was to win the military battle.

2.1. The Survival of 'Traditional Baathists'

More clearly than in 2012, the election in 2016 revealed the regime's criteria for selecting Baathist members of the Council, particularly since the party had appointed an all-new Regional Command in July 2013. Perhaps the most significant step taken by the new Baath leadership was to move the party towards organised military activity by establishing more local branches of the Baath Brigades in most Syrian governorates and placing them under a central command in Damascus with their expenses allocated from the Regional Command budget.³⁸ If these internal changes led to the emergence of a new Baathist profile (see section 2.3.), the model existing before the revolution still described about 70% of Baathist MPs in 2016 and remained prevalent everywhere with the exception of Tartous.

As was the case before the revolution, the average Baathist parliamentarian has two major – and sometimes overlapping – characteristics that contributed to his selection onto the party's electoral lists: experience within the party and academic qualifications. Family background may also appear relevant, mainly for some members of ancient families in main cities.³⁹ The Regional Command, or influential members within it, are the main backers of these candidates, but public or private ties with influential figures within the security services are an asset. This party-security support may be devoid of personal networks and based only on the candidate's history within the party before and after 2011.

³⁸ The Baath Brigades first appeared in Aleppo city in late 2012 on the order of Hilal Hilal, the former party secretary of the Branch Command of Aleppo, who was promoted to Assistant Regional Secretary of the Syrian Baath Party in July 2013. Abdullah al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 14 May 2019), <https://bit.ly/2xt3tSp>

³⁹ A typical example of the combination of these characteristics is Abbas Abdulkarim Sandouq, who was elected in Damascus with the highest number of votes across Syria (more than a million). He holds a PhD in mechanical engineering from Damascus University, has been the Secretary of this university since 2004 –having previously been the Deputy Secretary of the Baath Party branch in the Faculty of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering – and belongs to an old and esteemed Shia Damascene family (from the neighbourhood of Shaghour).

A long history of active leadership within the party or one of its affiliated popular or union organisations is the first characteristic of traditional Baathist MPs. Most of the traditional Baathists in the 2016 People's Assembly often started in secondary school with the Revolutionary Youth Union and then progressed to a student union at university or another institute. After graduation, all became employees in the public sector – except for lawyers and to a lesser extent for doctors. Then, they had followed one of two paths: (1) a minority stayed in government institutions or public sector companies while engaging in party activities within them and then proceeding with career advancement, which sometimes involved winning positions in local administration units; (2) a majority worked full-time for the party in one of its regional or local sections, or in one of its preparatory schools or in Baath-affiliated professional or popular organisations. In every electoral district there are examples of central and branch leaders from the Syria's Students Union or/and the Revolutionary Youth Union, the Baath Vanguard Organisation, the Farmers' Union, the Workers' Union, the General Sport Federation and the General Women's Union. For Baathist lawyers and doctors, a stint in the professional union has been a must before election to the parliament.

Second, Baathist MPs usually have academic qualifications – in each electoral district, at least one parliamentarian has a PhD and two-thirds have a university degree. For instance, in Deir ez-Zor district, representative Taha al-Khalifa is a professor at the Faculty of Agriculture at Al-Furat University and former secretary of the Baath Party branch in Deir ez-Zor (2008-2013) who purposely did not flee from the city during the conflict so as to maintain, at least symbolically, the presence of the Baath Party there. His colleague in the same faculty, Abdelsalam al-Dahmouh, also a former secretary of the party branch in the governorate before the revolution, was elected in 2012 and again in 2016. In Damascus, four Baathist MPs have a PhD and at least seven are university graduates.

Family background is considered to some extent in the selection process and is an especially important criteria in large cities, where members may hail from prominent old families. In Damascus, the university professor Mohamed Mozhar Arabi Katbi belongs to an ancient Sunni Damascene family, from which prominent clerics emerged in the past; and Ahd Saleh Al-Kanj also comes from a large family with an illustrious history among the Alawite community in Latakia. In Homs, Mohamed Marouf al Sibai belongs to the family of Sheikh Moustafa al Sibai, the first comptroller general of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s.

In comparison to the pre-war elections, the only difference within the category of traditional Baathists in 2016 was the absence of members close to retirement, who occupied around 10 seats in 2007 and whose election was a sort of honorary award for their services to the state.⁴⁰

With this traditional model of Baathist parliamentarians, the regime managed to prevent the structure of the party and its affiliate organisations from disintegrating or collapsing entirely, despite a weakening in most governorate branches. The model also clearly contributed to the survival of government institutions, which faced similar challenges in governorates which remained under the regime's military control. Alongside the reproduction of the previous Baathist model, some old allied partners of the regime – mainly businessmen – who were independent MPs in the pre-war decade were re-elected in 2016 and have helped to keep other institutions (such as Chambers of Commerce and Industry) functioning. However, the war created conditions for the emergence of many new actors among the independents.

⁴⁰ The 2007 People's Assembly included former Deputy Foreign Minister Suleiman Haddad, former Governor of Damascus Mohamed Zuhair Thalbi and two former Presidents of the General Women's Union, Suad Sheikh Bakur and Nihad Siris.

2.2. Crony Businessmen, Sunni Clerics and Tribal Leaders

Since 1990, tribal leaders and dignitaries from prominent families, clerics from the Sunni religious mainstream and businessmen have predominantly been represented by independents.⁴¹ These segments of society continued to be represented in 2016, albeit by a new set of MPs with different profiles.

Old and New Crony Businessmen

With the exception of some individual Damascene businessmen who opposed Bashar's policies and paid the price in the pre-war decade,⁴² there has generally been a harmonious partnership between the Assad family's inner circle and the business class. The 2007 Council included 18 first-rank businessmen (including eight in Damascus and four in Aleppo),⁴³ but this number dropped to just four in 2012. The 2016 Council included thirteen businessmen, only a minority of whom could be considered well-established in the trade and industry landscape.

Five businessmen elected in 2016 had built their businesses in the pre-war decade and were well-integrated within the wider traditional business class at the level of their governorates or nationally, irrespective of the different ways in which each had built his vast fortune. In Damascus, the heads of the two 'competing' lists, Mohamad Hamsho and Samer Debs (Sunnis), kept the seats they had occupied since 2003. In Tartous, Khoder Hussein (Alawi), the distributor for the Toyota Motor Company in Syria, also kept the seat he had occupied since 2007. In Homs district, Badea Burhan Droubi, a qualified dentist and full-time businessman in the construction, industry and insurance sectors, entered the Council for the first time in 2012. Finally, Fares Shehabi, the president of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry since June 2012 and head of the Aleppo Chamber of Industry since 2009, comes from a wealthy manufacturing family and is a known supporter of the regime. He was elected for Aleppo city district for the first time in 2016.

These well-known personalities aside, others had little in the way of reputation and did not enjoy extensive business networks before their arrival in the Council. They were local traders or war profiteers who started accumulating money illegally before laundering it by establishing formal companies. Their election in 2016 resulted from the immense void left by the departure starting in 2012 of most of the traditional business class primarily to Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Perthes, "Syria's Parliamentary Elections." It was indeed extremely rare for these personalities to run on the Baathist lists. If it happened, the candidate also had a long experience in the Baath Party that brought him to the Council. For example, Adnan al-Sukhni, owner of the Asia Pharmaceutical Industries Company, was elected on the Baath lists in 1998, 2003 and 2007 in Aleppo city. He was then appointed governor of Raqqa (2010-2012), and subsequently Minister of Industry until 2013. He was an old member of the party and the former head of the Directorate of Industry in Aleppo.

⁴² The most famous examples were Riad Seif (elected MP in 1994 and 1998), and Mamoun al-Homsy (1990, 1994 and 1998), both from Damascus. They were imprisoned in 2001 for five years.

⁴³ In Damascus, these businessmen were Mohamad Hamsho, Bahaa al-Din Hasan (trader of building materials and medical equipment and vice-president of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce in 2009), Samir al-Debs, Adnan Dakhkhni (an industrialist and member of the Board of the Damascus Chamber of Industry), Hashem al Aqqad, Zahir Daabul, Amin Masri and Muhi al Din Habbush. In Aleppo, four businessmen on the same list were elected: Salih al-Mallah, the President of Aleppo's Chamber of Commerce; Khaled Alabi, one of the country's wealthiest businessmen, Abd al-Karim al-Sayyid, who was mainly involved in trade with Lebanon, and Edouard Mukarbana, the Christian Vice-President of Aleppo's Chamber of Industry. Pierret, "The Syrian Electoral Campaign of April 2007."

⁴⁴ Joseph Daher, "Syria's Manufacturing Sector: The Model of Economic Recovery in Question," Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2019), <http://bit.ly/2TPEBg3>

In Damascus, what three of the four newcomers had in common is that they received support from the highest circles of the regime.⁴⁵ Engineer Mohamed Hammam Msouti (Sunni) entered the Council thanks to his wife, Lina Kinaya, a prominent staff member of the Presidential Palace. His first official recorded entry into the business world was via a trading company he founded in 2015, before he established a tourism company in 2018 and an industrial company in 2019.⁴⁶ As for Khalil Jerji Tohmeh (Christian), he began his career as a small-time auto parts dealer in his father's store and then, before 2011, became a semi-permanent contractor with the Ministry of the Interior. After the uprising, he expanded his business by receiving larger project allocations from the Ministry to conduct maintenance on its buildings and prisons. He also benefited from close ties with the Makhlouf family and his name is listed among the 70 shareholders of the Cham Holding Company. Another businessman was elected in an unusual way on the Baath list in Damascus: Nabil Tohmeh (Sunni), who established his company Al-Sharq Production and Distribution in 1999, and later the Orient House for Publishing and Distribution, is considered affiliated to Maher al-Assad's office.

The shift in the representation of the business class in 2016 was even more visible in the Aleppo city district, with a complete absence of former industrialists and traders, many of whom refused to fund the regime's war efforts and started leaving the country as of 2012.⁴⁷ Alongside Fares al-Shehabi, who alone represented Aleppo's businessmen in 2016, one of the most infamous warlords, Houssam Qaterji, also entered the Council for the first time as 'businessman'. Qaterji was able to amass a huge fortune with his two brothers between 2011 and 2016 as a major intermediary between Islamic State and the regime in the oil trade, and between the Autonomous Administration and the regime trading oil and grain.⁴⁸ He is also known for being the founder of a private security company, which was initially tasked with protecting his businesses before evolving into an outright militia engaged in battles alongside regime forces.

In other districts, some local traders also expanded their activities during the conflict. In Latakia, Adnan Al-Darf, a contractor and building materials trader who had a contract to feed Syrian army units in the governorate, entered the Council for the first time in 2016 as an independent. In Homs, two other businessmen were re-elected: Firas Salloum al-Hadba (prior MP in 2007), a merchant from the poor al-Zahraa Alawi neighbourhood on the outskirts of Homs who doubled his wealth during the war through his close affiliation with the Fourth Armoured Division's security bureau,⁴⁹ and Wael Melhem (MP in 2007 and 2012), a retired policeman who became a contractor and businessman who had enjoyed the support of the Presidential Palace since 2007. Both men used their wealth to support local militias and popular committees in the governorate.

What most of these newcomers, who were almost unknown before 2011, have in common is that their means to accumulate capital were completely dependent on their relations with the inner circles of the regime or with the security apparatus at the local level. They thus seem to reproduce the model of typical cronies which was embodied before the war by Mohamad Hamsho, who was still unknown

⁴⁵ There is no confirmation of such support for the fourth businessman elected in Damascus, Mohamed Maher al-Bustani, who received a license for a private radio station in 2007 but was unable to operate it. He then turned to real estate and advertising.

⁴⁶ Al-Iqdisadi, "Mohammed Hammam Msouti" (in Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/2Un0Uch>

⁴⁷ The marginalisation of traditional businessmen in Aleppo was obvious in 2012 and 2016, but it was not a completely new phenomenon. After the Islamic uprising of the early 1980s gathered much wider support among the merchants in Aleppo than in the capital, the authorities were less confident of the loyalty of the old Sunni families in the second largest city and therefore prevented the election of the urban bourgeoisie's list in 2007 Pierret, "The Syrian Electoral Campaign of April 2007."

⁴⁸ The Qaterji brothers then established several companies. Al-Iqdisadi, "Houssam Ahmad Qaterji" (in Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/2XPPUav>

⁴⁹ He traded with areas outside regime control with special facilities he received from officers of the Fourth Division and in 2017 established a huge milling company at a cost of 1.3 billion Syrian pounds. Panorama Syria, "Inauguration of al-Hadba Mill in Tartous" (in Arabic), 24 February 2017, <https://bit.ly/34L0lxy>

a couple of years before his first election in 2003. This model became dominant in the 2016 Council since members of old merchant families disappeared from the scene, with the exception of Samer Debs in Damascus.

A Deep Shift in the Representation of Sunni Clerics

Until the 2007 election, the representation of the Sunni religious mainstream was almost exclusively confined to the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, where Sunni clerics had occupied three or four seats in each district since 1990. They were notoriously close to the regime, and throughout the 2000s were systematically elected on lists supported or even put in place by security agencies.⁵⁰ Their most prominent representative was Sheikh Ahmad Hassoun, who was elected to the Council for the Aleppo city district in both 1990 and 1994, before becoming the Mufti of Aleppo and then the Mufti of the Republic (following the death of the former Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaro, in 2004). In 2007, the four representatives of the Sunni clergy were two young members of the Kaftariyya school in Damascus, Mohamed Habash and Abdul Salam Rajeh (both since 2003); Abd al-Aziz al-Shami from Aleppo (since 1990); and Zakaria Silwaya from Latakia. These clerics were all candidates on independent lists and formed alliances with businessmen (in Damascus and Aleppo)⁵¹ or with influential Alawite notables (in Latakia).⁵²

The 2016 election produced a unique situation for Sunni religious representation as clerics were replaced by activists in a new religious movement, the Religious Youth Group (*al-Fariq al-Dini al-Shababi*).⁵³ This group was founded by the Religious Endowment Ministry in December 2015. At the time of its foundation, it included 60 activists (men and women, graduates aged between 25 and 40) from most governorates, the majority of whom were Sunnis alongside the symbolic presence of Shiites and Alawites.⁵⁴ This unprecedented movement in the history of Syrian Islamic organisations was the brainchild of Bashar al-Assad and the Minister of Religious Endowment, Mohamed Abd al-Sattar al-Sayyed, whose intention was to “confront terrorist *takfiri* thought [...] and [uphold] the importance of pedagogy and religious education in making a generation confident in their homeland and religion, able to confront their enemies with science, thought and work”.⁵⁵ The initiative appeared to be motivated by Assad’s perception of the declining influence of major clerics loyal to him and the necessity to replace them so as to influence the younger generation, which prompted him to appoint new official representatives of the Sunni religious mainstream from among a new generation.

Led by the son of the Endowment Minister, the Religious Youth Group monopolised the representation of the new ‘Sunni official religious mainstream’, winning four seats in the 2016 election a mere five months after its inception. This included three independents: engineer and activist Anas Zrei (from Damascus); activist and Religious Endowment Ministry employee Farah Hamisho (Damascus); and professor Reem al-Saai in al-Hasakah district. The fourth member, Khalid Kadouj, entered the Council on the Baath list in Tartous. The absence of any representative of this Sunni mainstream in the city of Aleppo in 2016 should be noted, despite the key role of Mufti Ahmad Hassoun, the architect of the

⁵⁰ Thomas Pierret, “Syrian Ulemas in the XXth-XXIst Centuries. Tradition as a Resource in the Face of the Challenges of Social Change and Authoritarianism,” Doctoral Thesis in Political Science Directed by Felice Dassetto (Catholic University of Louvain) and Gilles Kepel (Institute of Political Studies in Paris), 2009.

⁵¹ Pierret, *ibid*.

⁵² Issam Khoury, “The Ninth Syrian Legislative Elections Report” (in Arabic), *al-Hiwar al-Mutamadun*, 18 June 2007, <https://bit.ly/2Vpme2u>

⁵³ The marginalisation of Sunni clerics started in the 2012 election in which only sheikh Anas al-Shami was elected in Aleppo. He had inherited the seat from his brother.

⁵⁴ Soha Suleiman, “Dam Press ... Meets the Director of the Tartous Endowments and the Director of the Religious Youth Team” (in Arabic), *Dam Press*, 1 February 2016, <https://bit.ly/3a7CSsi>

⁵⁵ SANA, “Al-Awqaf Launches a Discussion Forum for the Religious Youth Team” (in Arabic), 25 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3eEdr4f>

list of Aleppo independents. This could be explained by Hassoun's preference to promote warlords and militia leaders in the place of clergymen with proven loyalty at a time when Aleppo was largely besieged in the spring of 2016.

Tribal Leaders: More Space for Small Clans

In 2007, the People's Assembly included 28 notables with hereditary social status. Among them were: nineteen sheikhs from a Sunni tribe who inherited their positions from their families and were elected across nine electoral districts; three heads of large Sunni families from cities or rural towns; three Alawite hereditary notables; two Druze notables from the two largest families in Sweida; and a Christian hereditary notable from the Assyrian minority in al-Hasakah.

In 2016, although many independent MPs claimed to be tribal leaders, only eleven were sheikhs from a Sunni tribe or sons of recognised prominent clans within their communities. Five of them had already been elected in 2007, but none were elected for the districts of Daraa, Raqqa or Aleppo Regions. In these three areas outside of regime control in April 2016, some MPs from leading clans who were elected in 2007 defected (Daraa), remained neutral (Raqqa) or were replaced by more active supporters of the regime (Aleppo Regions).⁵⁶ Those who were re-elected in 2016 did not hesitate to maintain their public loyalty to the regime after the outbreak of the revolution. This is the case of Abd al-Aziz al-Melhem, sheikh of the al-Hasnah clan in the governorate of Homs, whose son Nawaf is close to Iran and a founder of the new People's Party and its militia. In Aleppo city, the trader and smuggler al-Hasan Mohamed Shaaban Berri was also re-elected as a representative of the influential Bedouin tribe of the district of Bab al-Nayrab (Qais clan), which has been a model family gang involved in illegal activities for decades. His family, which has maintained a steady representation in the People's Assembly since 1994, was accused of being involved in the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s and of playing an active role in defending the regime by establishing groups of thugs (*shabiha*) in 2012 which then developed into a militia to fight against opponents in Aleppo.⁵⁷ The other well-known Sunni tribal clans which maintained their representation in the People's Assembly in 2016 were the Bani Ezz clan from the Hama countryside (sheikh Abdelkarim Maat al-Ismaaili), the Baggara clan from Deir ez-Zor (sheikh Najm al Salman), and the Tayy clan from al-Hasakah (sheikh Mohamed al-Fares al-Abd al-Rahman).

The six new tribal representatives who entered the Council after 2011 either came from smaller tribes or were sons of prominent families from known clans but without the personal social status traditionally required. The first case was illustrated by two MPs in Raqqa governorate: Khalil al- Kasheh (MP since 2012, independent), the sheikh of the small al-Majadmeh clan in the village of Khneiz north of Raqqa; and Faysal al-Sibat (Baathist), the sheikh of the small al-Jaabat clan. Similarly, in Rural Damascus, Mohamed Kheir al-Nader (MP since 2012, independent) is the leader of a small branch of the al- Nu'im clan in the small village of al-Zreiqiyeh on the outskirts of the Eastern Ghouta. As for the representation of prominent families by individuals without the typically high social status, two MPs from Deir ez-Zor entered the Council for the first time in 2012: Muhanna al-Nasser, the son of the sheikh of the al-Bou Saraya tribe; and Sattam al-Dandal (Baathist), the son of the sheikh of the al-Hassoun tribe (branch of the al- Aqeedat). In al-Hasakah, Hasan Mohamed al-Muslit inherited the seat of his deceased father (MP in 2007, died in 2010) whose family status came from the al-Jbour clan.

⁵⁶ In Daraa, three MPs elected in 2007 defected in the first months of the revolution, among them were Yusuf al-Saadi Abu Roumieh (a prominent notable from Hauran who criticised the repressive behaviour of intelligence services against demonstrators) and Khalil al-Rifai from Um Walad. In Raqqa, Abd al-Mohsen al-Rakan (sheikh of the al-Bou Sibeia tribe) left the country for Saudi Arabia and Mohamed Faisal al-Huwaidi (sheikh of the al-Afadlah tribe) remained neutral in his home in Raqqa before leaving for Damascus in 2017. Finally, in Aleppo Regions, Mohamed Khair Al-Mashi (sheikh of the Boubani clan), who inherited the seat of his father Dhiab al-Mashi after his death in 2009, was elected in 2012 but was absent in 2016.

⁵⁷ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Liwa al-Shaheed Ali Zain al-Abideen Berri: Local Defence Forces Unit" (in Arabic), 29 May 2019, *Al-Tamimi Blog*, <https://bit.ly/2YhyjIH>

Regardless of their personal and social status, the commonality between most of the tribal representatives was a very assertive allegiance to the regime since the beginning of the conflict. At least five of them were active participants in the successive tribal meetings organised by the intelligence services from 2011. Six founded – or supervised the establishment of - militias to fight alongside the regime forces. For instance, in 2013, al-Abd al-Rahman formed a militia thought to be the largest military force of Arab tribes fighting alongside the regime in the governorate of al-Hasakah. Al-Nasser established a smaller militia, which entered his home village of al-Shmaitiyeh in Deir ez-Zor alongside regime forces in 2017 in the fight against IS.

The departure, defection or neutrality of many businessmen, Sunni clerics and tribal leaders from 2012 – either in protest against the regime’s repression or to protect themselves – opened the door for the election of new players in 2016. Many of these newcomers participated, in their own way, in the regime’s war efforts. They therefore share many characteristics with what we identify below as ‘warrior MPs,’ whose main distinction is that they appear to be pure products of war. This new profile of MPs, which was inexistent in 2007, owes their election purely to the various services they rendered to the regime during the war, the representation of traditional social groups notwithstanding.

2.3. The Emergence of a New Type of MP: The Warrior

Some new members, both Baathists and independents, have little in common with pre-war MPs. Their election was due first and foremost to their involvement, directly or indirectly, in security, military or propaganda activities during the first five years of the conflict. Though their number remains relatively small, their profile is exceptional enough to be highlighted. They can be classified according to the nature of their activities before being elected to parliament. While some performed important functions (within militias) in exceptional circumstances and therefore risked having a less important place in the future, others may represent an important social base for the regime in post-conflict Syria (families of martyrs).

Militia Leaders

In addition to the six clan elders who founded (or supervised the establishment of) militias, fifteen other MPs were involved in militia activities, either as the actual or honorary commander of a militia or as the main contributor to its creation. Notably, they were elected in Aleppo Regions (5), Aleppo city (3), Rural Damascus (2) and Idlib (2). The three others gained seats in Hama, Latakia and Deir ez-Zor respectively. All of them, except the representative from Latakia, came from the areas hardest hit by military confrontations.

Eight of these militia members are Baathists. Among them, four were active in the Baath Brigades: Bassem Sudan (Latakia), who became head of these brigades at the national level, and his deputy, Omar al-Aaroub (Aleppo Regions), both of whom had undertaken a leadership position in the Syria’s Students Union before being promoted to new positions (Sudan was nominated to the Central Committee of the party in April 2017 and al-Aaroub was appointed vice-president of the General Sport Federation in February 2020). The third is Muhannad al-Haj Ali (Aleppo city), a former law student at the University of Aleppo, who fought in the local Baath Brigades at the end of 2012 and was promoted to battalion commander after he was injured. The fourth is Abdelwahid Razouq, a member of the Revolutionary Youth Union who was the main contributor to the establishment of the Baath Brigades in the town of Harem in Idlib.

In addition, the Baath Party selected on its lists the head of the Local Defence Forces in Salamiyeh (Hama district), the lawyer Fadel Wardeh, whose father was the Chairman of the Ismaili Council until December 2019. Finally, the party also promoted members of family militias or minority armed groups, such as judge Hussein Farho, co-founder of the military arm of the small ethnic al-Mardal minority

in Aleppo city, who also coordinated judicial decisions with intelligence services on demonstrators in the city; lawyer Jalal Darwish Mido, co-founder of a family militia in the same city and a distant cousin of the Baath Regional Command member, Mohamed Shaban Azouz; and Khaled al-Daher, a former small car dealer from the southern countryside of Idlib, who founded and led Suqur al-Daher – a militia of the sons of al- Hleibat.

The military role of these Baathists was the main source of their political capital, alongside their activity in the party or in one of the affiliated organisations. Moreover, most of them also benefited from strong relationships with senior officials in Damascus that undoubtedly helped them enter into the People's Assembly (as in the case of Khaled al-Daher, who enjoyed the support of the head of Air Force Intelligence, Major General Jamil Hassan, and its prominent officer, Brigadier General Suhail Hassan; or in the case of Bassem Sudan, who was first sponsored by intelligence officer and former ambassador Bahjat Suleiman, and then by the head of the Syria's Students Union, Ammar Saati, a friend of Maher al-Assad and the husband of Luna al-Shebel, the media advisor to Bashar al-Assad).

The political capital of militia members elected as independents was not fundamentally different. Of the eight seats for independents in the Aleppo regions district, four went to leaders of local militias. Two were honorary commanders of pro-Iran militias: Omar al-Hassan, the honorary head of the Baqir Brigade militia affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and lawyer Mujib al-Rahman al-Dandan, who helped found the al-Mahdi Thunder Regiment affiliated with the Local Defence Forces, also loyal to Iran. The two others were involved in tribe militias: Hassan Shahid, commander of the al- Aasasna Regiment, and Obaid Sharif al-Issa, who also founded a militia consisting of members of his al-Bumasarh clan.⁵⁸ In Rural Damascus, two of the four seats for independents also went to militia commanders: Mohammed Abdo Asaad, commander of the Homeland Fort militia, and Muhannad Zeid, commander of the Qalamoun Shield militia. Both come from the small village of Ain al-Tineh in the Qalamoun region. Finally, in Deir ez-Zor, Ibrahim al-Dayer, a former contractor in the Gulf who originates from the al-Sheitat clan (which was the victim of an infamous massacre committed by IS in the summer of 2014), helped to establish a tribal militia aligned with the regime.

Although there are some differences between the trajectories of the Baathists and those of the independents, all these new parliamentarians who emerged through their military and security activities are of rural or semi-rural origin. With the exceptions of Bassem Sudan (Alawite) and Fadel Wardeh (Ismaili), all are Sunni and no leader of a prominent Alawite militia was elected in 2016. This may illustrate differentiated mechanisms for the selection of local intermediaries within the Sunni communities and within the Alawite minority. While Sunni communities, especially rural ones, posed a military threat, the co-optation of certain military leaders from these communities would be crucial for the regime. As for the Alawite minority, which constituted the core of the loyalist social base, it may represent a social threat and its representatives were therefore chosen from amongst families of martyrs rather than military leaders.

Media Warriors and other Public Figures

The conflict was not limited to military activities - it also gave rise to a media war which began in the earliest days of the revolution. In 2016, the election of at least 12 personalities from various media and cultural backgrounds (media professionals, intellectuals and artists) appeared to be part of the regime's efforts to build a coherent narrative of the conflict.

⁵⁸ With the exception of the lawyer al-Dandan, who comes from a well-known and educated family (from the al Bou Bani clan in Manbij) which built a long-standing relationship with intelligence officials, the others belong to what one might call the 'sub-proletariat' which began to rise up in the 1980s in Aleppo governorate. All come from the poor rural class and are members of tribes, a large part of which settled in the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, becoming involved in smuggling, robbery and drug trafficking and had long-standing relationships with the intelligence services before the war. These families may have experienced a certain social ascent throughout the 1990s, but their involvement in the repression of protest movements in the first years of the revolution was the key factor behind their new positions in the People's Assembly.

Three journalists elected in 2016 had previously played a leading role in the media coverage of the events: reporter for the Lebanese channel al-Jedid, Nidal Hamidi (from Idlib), who had accompanied the Syrian army during its first major military intervention in the city of Jisr al-Shoughour in June 2011; reporter for Iraqi Ishraq TV and young TV producer, Walid Darwish (from Quneitra); and Hussein Abbas (from Hama), editor-in-chief of the local official newspaper al-Fidaa. These three journalists were soldiers for the regime in their news coverage of military battles. In addition, the political analyst Khalid al-Aboud was a semi-permanent guest on satellite channels affiliated with or loyal to the regime and a prominent mouthpiece for the regime on political talk shows.

Three well-known actors who entered the Council in 2016 had also played propaganda roles: Tawfiq Iskandar (Alawi) from Homs, who made frequent visits in military clothing to sectarian militiamen in Homs; Arif al-Tawil (Sunni) from Damascus (Barzeh), who was well-known due to his fanatical support for the regime; and Zuheir Ramadan, the head of the Artists Union, who launched targeted attacks against the “artists of the opposition”.

Besides these advocates, other cultural and intellectual figures also offered an alternative narrative to the one which the opposition promoted. These included the writer Nabil Saleh (from Latakia), one of the most ardent promoters of a secular Syrian movement who became the main critic of the Endowments Ministry in the Parliament after his election; and the famous film director Najdat Anzour (from Aleppo city), who made several films echoing the regime’s narrative regarding the revolution, war and conflict, and reportedly had close ties with the Presidential Palace. Some of these cultural figures played a more specific propaganda role within their own social circles, such as the Armenian music composer, Gerard Ra’isian, and the Armenian cultural activist, Nora Arisian, who is considered to be an intermediary between Assad and the Armenian government and publicly displays her proximity to the president’s wife, Asma al-Assad.

The election of these highly diverse members was not only a reward for their propaganda roles during the war years: it was also a means to empower them and give them more consideration in order to counter the narrative of the opposition that several intellectuals and artists had joined. Similarly, the election of well-known sports figures – who did not necessarily play a prominent propaganda role – was important to counter the media coverage of other sportsmen who took an active part in the revolution, like the emblematic soccer player in the national team, Abdel Basset Sarout. In Damascus, Tarif Qotrosh, a famous former professional basketball player who hosts a sports programme on official state television and has known Bashar and Maher al-Assad since high school, was elected in 2016.⁵⁹ In Aleppo city, two other famous former basketball players were elected (in 2012 and 2016 respectively) : Boutros Marjana, who took a seat reserved for the Christian minority, and Maher Khayyata, the son-in-law of former intelligence officer Omar Humeida.

Families of Martyrs

With the new reality of the conflict, by 2016, tens of thousands of families from pro-regime areas had experienced the loss of relatives in the war against the armed opposition groups. These victims were considered to be martyrs and were lauded in pro-regime public opinion as heroic sacrifices, thus entitling them to honours. In response to this prevalent attitude, brothers, sisters or wives of people killed on the battlefield were elected in 2016. At least 10 MPs presented themselves as members of martyrs’ families. Other parliamentarians also counted martyrs among their relatives but had other significant activities or social status behind their elections.

⁵⁹ His family is a relatively prominent Kurdish Sunni family in Damascus. Like other media figures, Qotrosh was appointed to the government delegation of the constitutional committee in 2019.

Many of these representatives of ‘families of martyrs’ are women, such as Nour Al-Shagri (independent, Sunni, Latakia), whose brother was killed in action in the Syrian army’s ranks. This was also the case for: political activist Ashwaq Abbas (independent, Alawi, Tartous), who lost two of her brothers during the war; Dima Suleiman (Baathist, Alawi, Tartous), the sister of two dead recruits; and Noura al-Hasan (Baathist, Alawi, Tartous), who became a social activist on the issue of martyrs’ families after the deaths of her husband and son, both of whom were army officers killed in battles against the opposition. Janset Kazan, a highly influential socialite whose son was also killed fighting alongside regime forces in a Circassian militia, also entered the Council for Quneitra in 2016.

Before being elected to the Council, these women embodied cases in which family, without any other sources of support, was the vessel taking them towards the parliament. However, the selection process among thousands of similar cases was not random; for example, al-Shaghri’s case became famous because IS posted a video of her brother being executed after being captured in Raqqa. Dima Suleiman’s case also became famous as her two brothers were commemorated with statues, which the governor of Tartous unveiled an event broadly covered by the local media.

Some of these families are also represented by men, such as Ahmed Adib Zaytoun, a teacher from Rural Damascus whose brother was killed along with three other members of his family in an ambush by an opposition faction. Some retired army and police officers, appointed to symbolically recognise and honour the status of officers representing the army and the police, were at the same time honoured as fathers of fallen soldiers. This was the case of the former commander of the First Corps, Maj. Gen. Kamal Ayyash from Daraa. Others, like Hatem Omran from Latakia, were appointed in recognition of the war-wounded.

Conclusion

The People's Assembly elected in 2016, whose term ended in April 2020, was a council of war which reflected three priorities of the regime in one of the most critical periods in the armed conflict. In April 2016, the regime first aimed for a military victory over the opposition, then to preserve the Baath Party and the civil structures of the state, and finally to keep its social base, particularly among minorities.

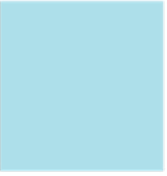
Although the distribution of seats according to partisan, sectarian and gender affiliations remained almost identical between the pre-war decade and 2016, with a clear majority for the Baath Party, the re-composition of the Council in 2016 was a turning point. Though traditional Baathists were still the most highly represented group in every district, the characteristics of representatives of other interest groups (such as businessmen and tribal leaders, who are traditionally elected as 'independents') profoundly changed and new social categories (such as militia leaders and families of martyrs) emerged for the first time.

On the threshold of a new election cycle, and while the regime has taken advantage of the military-security level, the outstanding question to ask is what the next People's Council will look like. It is likely that the political leadership will only change the number of seats reserved for the NPF and independents in minor proportions. The means of selecting candidates on the National Unity lists should be more or less identical to the process in 2016, but the number of 'closed lists' (which included independents on the National Unity lists) is likely to decrease to cover fewer electoral districts or disappear entirely. The Baath Party is likely to continue to dominate the scene, but the balance between traditional and rising Baathists remains to be seen. A decrease in the number of representatives of the Syrian Social National Party could happen, following a decline in the influence of some of its leaders. Some political parties registered after 2011 which present themselves as 'the national opposition from within' may win some seats to produce a new image of 'pluralism' and to prevent these parties from fading.⁶⁰

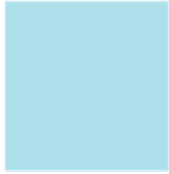
Given the exacerbation of economic challenges and the social crisis that they generate, the number of businessmen is likely to increase in the next Council. Several personalities have indeed launched their candidacy under slogans of 'reconstruction' and several businessmen candidates have also launched initiatives to counter the Covid-19 pandemic. Tribal leaders, elders and members of families of those killed in the regime forces are likely to maintain similar numbers of seats as were obtained in 2016. Some former militia leaders could also enter the Council again, but after rebranding themselves as notables, tribal leaders or businessmen. Irrespective of the success or failure of the Youth Religious Team established by the Religious Endowment Ministry, this religious activist group will probably continue to be the main representative of the Sunni trend. However, the competition between the Endowment Minister and Mufti Hassoun over the leadership of the Sunni religious mainstream at the national level could lead to the election of followers of the Mufti in Aleppo. In addition, some symbolic figures among the Sunni sheikhs who were involved in 'reconciliation deals' (such as in Rural Damascus) could enter the next Council.

Finally, the composition of the People's Assembly in the 2020 election is likely to clarify the extent of Russia and Iran's foreign interventions. In 2016, the Russians showed no particular interest in supporting electoral candidates, while the Iranians only backed eight MPs – a number that appeared marginal in comparison to the huge military and security involvement of the two main allies of the regime. The Iranian influence could expand slightly and Russia could be more involved in the electoral process, notably through the growing role of the Russian-backed Orthodox Church.

⁶⁰ Notably, Fateh Jamous, a former leader of the opposition Communist Labour Party and the founder of the Path of Peaceful Change in February 2012, who is considered a key figure in the opposition inside Syria, issued a statement to call for "serious internal national opposition forces" to take part in the People's Council election.



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