

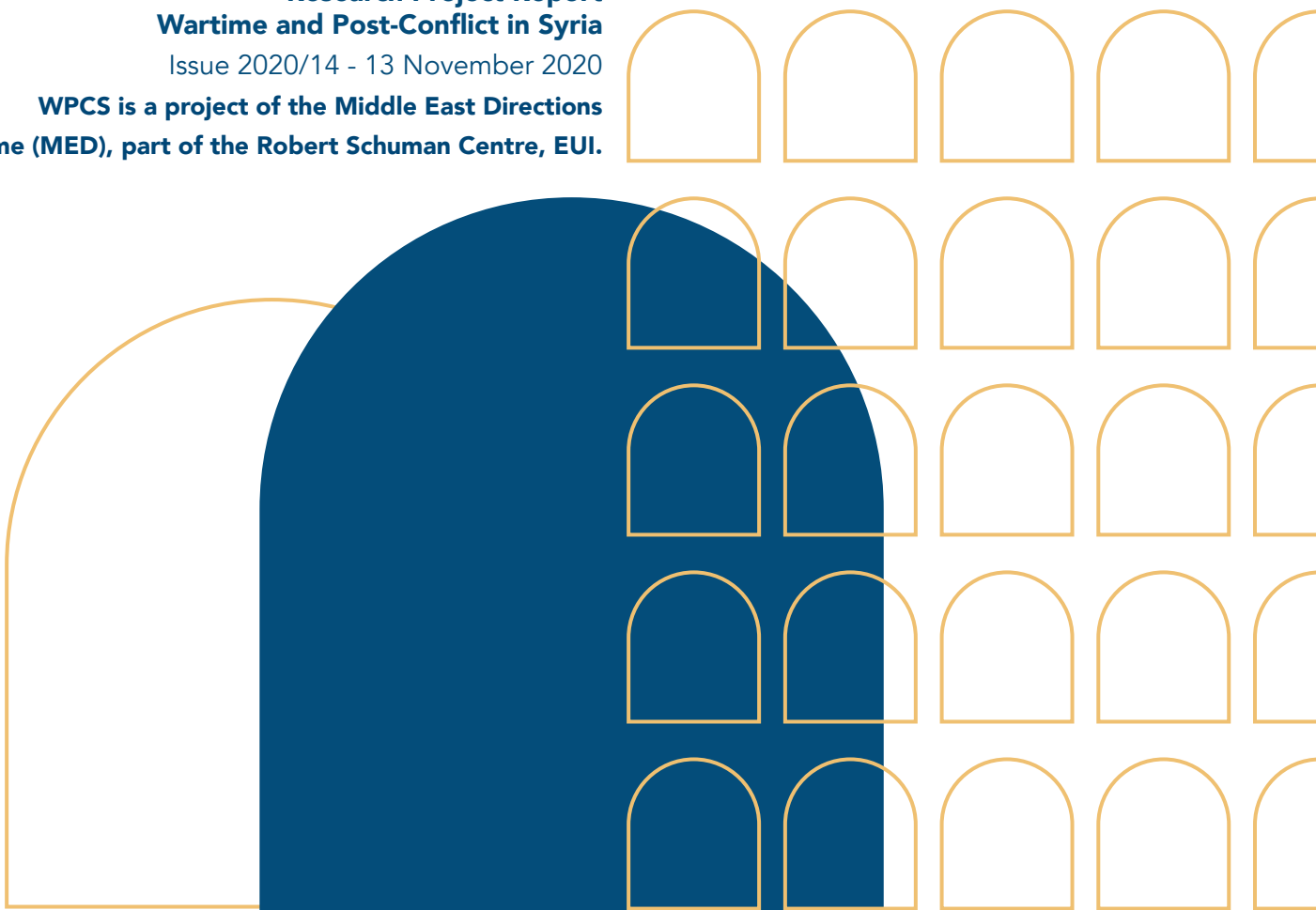
The Syrian Chambers of Commerce in 2020: The Rise of a New Business Elite

Joseph Daher

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Joseph Daher*

* Joseph Daher is a part-time affiliate professor at the European University Institute, Florence (Italy). He works under the aegis of the 'Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria' research project in the Middle East Directions Programme. He has completed a doctorate in Development Studies at SOAS, University of London (2015), and a doctorate in Political Science at Lausanne University, Switzerland (2018).

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Executive Summary

Two years after the end of their mandates in 2018, the formation of new boards of directors of Syrian chambers of commerce in September and October 2020 shows significant changes in the regime's businessmen networks. These elections saw a rise of businessmen who expanded their economic activities during the war and are often connected with the presidential palace and/or are affiliated with the Fourth Division and pro-regime militias, especially in Damascus, Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Tartous. The profiles of these newcomers reflect a deepening of the features of the Syrian political economy, which is characterised by an over-development of trade, especially in imports and service sectors such as construction, money exchanging, food production and trading, and furniture services. At the same time, some prominent business figures close to the presidential palace were not re-elected. In the most important chambers of commerce in Damascus and Aleppo their absence is partially filled by the promotion of older and more traditional business figures, although they are very far from having the same weight as the new rising personalities.

Introduction

In the mid- and late-1980s, the state progressively restored the role of the chambers of commerce and industry in Syria, just when liberalisation of the economy accelerated following the fiscal crisis and economic networks connected to the Syrian regime started to solidify. For decades, the composition of the boards of the chambers of commerce has been tightly controlled by the regime, just like the General Federation of Trade Union Workers, the General Federation of Peasants, other professional associations and other representative institutions in the country including the parliament. While such institutions are widely regarded as of no use under authoritarian rule, chambers of commerce appear to be significant institutions for two reasons. First, they usually gather the most important and influential businessmen in the country and since 1990 their composition has often reflected the growing power of networks of businessmen with close links to the regime.¹ Second, the fourteen chambers of commerce – one per governorate – and notably the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, which includes representatives from all the governorates, have significant influence in collaborating with the government and ministries to establish and develop economic policies and measures.

In this perspective, it remains important to analyse the composition of the new boards of directors in the Syrian chambers of commerce formed in September and October 2020 to better understand the evolving landscape of businessmen networks in Syria and more generally of the political economy of the country. The departure or side-lining of many important businessmen since the beginning of the conflict is assumed to have created a space for the emergence of new business actors. This study demonstrates that these newcomers, who very often have expanded their wealth in collaboration with security agencies, are well-represented on the new boards of directors of Syrian chambers of commerce in 2020. However, in Damascus and Aleppo some older personalities with past responsibilities in various economic and official institutions have made a comeback or seen their positions elevated.

This research paper first presents the structures of the chambers of commerce and the rules which frame their composition. It then examines in detail the boards of directors of the two main chambers of commerce in the country, Damascus and Aleppo. It also gives an overview of the composition of the other chambers and of the Federation. The research for this study was primarily conducted in open databases on the websites of the chambers of commerce and the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, official media coverage and social media (Facebook accounts).

1 In the early 1980s, some members of the chambers of commerce already played crucial roles in supporting the regime, such as Badr al-Din al-Shallah, chairman of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, who contributed to stopping strikes in Damascus during the Hama massacre in 1982 by guaranteeing the loyalty of large businesses he commanded to the Syrian regime. Bassam Haddad, "The Syrian Regime's Business Backbone," *Middle East Report* 262 (Spring 2012), <https://bit.ly/3l0jgvN>. By the late 1980s, prominent members of the board of directors of the Damascus Chamber assumed powerful positions in different key government agencies, most notably the Committee for the Guidance of Import, Export and Consumption. In the parliamentary elections of 1990, three members of the chambers of commerce – two in Damascus and one in Aleppo – became MPs, showing the entry of businessmen into politics. Volker Perthes, "Syria's Parliamentary Elections: Remodelling Assad's Political Base." *MERIP*, No. 174 (January-February 1992), 15-18.

1. Structures of the Syrian Chambers of Commerce

Between 8 September and 17 October 2020, elections for the boards of directors of all the chambers of commerce were held in Syria, after they had been postponed four times since 2018. The elections were organised less than two months after the parliamentary election, which saw a sharp increase in the representation of businessmen on the People's Council.² Two thirds of the members of the board of directors of each chamber of commerce are elected – with a third being appointed by the Ministry of Domestic Trade – for a mandate of four years (2020-2024).³ The larger chambers of commerce – Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Latakia – are composed of 18 board members. Smaller chambers, namely the chambers of commerce and industry, which jointly represent the commerce and industry sectors, generally have 12 board members. Each board of directors elects an executive bureau, which is composed of seven members for the larger chambers and five for the others.

Following these elections, a new board of directors and executive bureau of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce was elected at the end of October 2020. The Federation, which was established in Damascus in 1975, coordinates and promotes the interests of the fourteen chambers and more generally of traders. Its members contribute to drafting legislation in various ministries and helping with the implementation of new bills. The Federation also represents the interests of the Syrian chambers of commerce abroad, including by nominating their members for positions on the boards of the Joint Arab Foreign Chambers of Commerce. It provides Syrian exporters with certificates of origin, certificates the origin of goods imported into Syria, facilitates the movement of Syrian businessmen abroad and provides both Syrian companies with information on foreign markets and international companies and foreign companies interested in investing in Syria with information on the local market.⁴

Economic actors and traders elected to the boards of chambers of commerce and in the Federation benefit from facilities to promote their own and sectoral interests within the country, and potentially outside it as well, although to a lesser extent in the current context with the various sanction regimes hitting Syria.

2 Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020: The Regime's Social Base Contracts," Syria Transition Challenges Project, Geneva Centre for Security Policy and European University Institute Middle East Directions Programme, Research Project Report No. 2, October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3eGcVml>

3 The Syria Report, "Chambers of Commerce Elections Mark Fading Influence of Businessmen Who Accompanied Bashar's Rise," 21 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2lLeAvt>

4 Business 2 Business, "The Law Establishing the Single and Joint Chambers of Commerce," (in Arabic), 21 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3m5xbAJ>

Table 1: The Structure of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce

The General Assembly is composed of 212 members

All the members of the boards of directors of the chambers of commerce, the joint chambers of commerce and industry, and the appointed members of the Federation's board of directors

The Board of Directors is composed of 29 members:

Chairmen of the chambers of commerce

The secretary of each of the chambers of commerce of Damascus and Aleppo

A member elected by the boards of directors of each of the chambers whose board of directors has 18 members for a period of two years

6 members appointed by the Ministry of Domestic Trade, including four members of state institutions (with at least the rank of director)(representatives of the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade and the Ministry of Finance); and two members from the private sector.

The General Director of the Chamber

The Executive Bureau is composed of nine members elected by the Board of Directors:

Chairman

First Vice-Chairman

Second Vice-Chairman

Secretary

Treasurer

Four members

Source: Fourth Estate, "The Final Chapters of Law 8 of 2020, the New Law Defines the Tasks of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce ... and its Revenues and Organisational Structure" (in Arabic), 18 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/38BGZ23>

On 20 April 2020, Law No. 8 was promulgated by presidential decree,⁵ setting a time limit of six months for elections to be held of the boards of directors of the Syrian chambers of commerce, the mandates of which were extended after January 2018. This new law now governs economic chambers and replaces Law No. 131 of 1959, which was already amended in October 2018. While many traders and employers did not register their workers with the Social Security Organisation (SSO), the amendment of 2018, the provision of which is retained in Law 8, requires members of the chambers of commerce to register their employees with the SSO. One of its objective was to target individuals who did not have any real economic activities and only wanted to benefit from the advantages of membership of a chamber, especially the possibility of entering Lebanon.⁶ Since the amendment of the law, the total

5 The law was approved by the People's Council on 11 March 2020.

6 Azz al-Din Nabulsi, "A Tense Atmosphere between the Ministry of Internal Trade and the Syrian Chambers of Commerce..." (in Arabic), *Majesty News*, 22 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/358utEM>

number of registered members of the chambers has diminished massively, for example the Damascus Chamber of Commerce has witnessed a reduction of more than half of its members.⁷ Former Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis stated in 2018 that there were 80,000 licensed private establishments and 476,000 subscribers to chambers of commerce, of which a large number in that period had not registered their workers.⁸

The candidates are traders and economic actors registered in the different chambers. They are listed in five categories depending on various standards, including capital size, number of workers and solvency: premium, first, second, third and fourth categories. Public sector companies and joint ventures between the state and private investors are automatically classified in the premium category. Each category is accredited with a particular number of representatives on the board.

The elections of the boards of directors of chambers of commerce came with the usual accusations of corruption. The al-Baath newspaper reported that the electoral process witnessed operations of “buying and selling votes” as in the previous elections.⁹ Important trader Hassan Azqoul and four other candidates disputed the results of the election for the board of directors of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce because of corruption and fraudulent operations in the registration of voters.¹⁰ A businessman in Aleppo commented that the results of the elections were, as in past ones, arranged in order to favour particular candidates close to the regime.¹¹

The promotion of influential businessmen affiliated with regime inner circles into chambers of commerce is not a new phenomenon. In 2009 for example, the Damascene entrepreneur Bassam Ghrawi, who was close to Bashar al-Assad, was appointed by government decree as chairman of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce. He also occupied the position of chairman of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce.¹² Kamal Ismail al-Assad, a relative of Bashar al-Assad and a significant businessman,¹³ was already chairman of the Latakia Chamber of Commerce and Industry since the beginning of the 1990s. Tarif Akhras, a relative of Asma al-Assad, has been among the largest importers of food commodities in Syria, and was chairman of the Homs Chamber of Commerce and Industry and therefore a member of the board of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce.¹⁴

7 The Syria Report, “Chambers of Commerce Elections”

8 Al-Iqtisadi, “For Fair Elections ... the Damascus Chamber of Commerce Decides to Make it Electronic” (in Arabic), 29 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dFyfs4>

9 Kul Yawm, “The Baath Reveals Corruption in the Chamber of Commerce Elections: Selling votes!” (in Arabic), 15 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dwrljm>

10 Al-Sharq Syria, “Candidates Challenge the Results of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce Elections” (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 20 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3jrSTx8>

11 Phone interview with a businessman in Aleppo, 16 October 2020.

12 Caroline Donati, “The Economics of Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria,” Heydemann and Leenders (eds.), *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Stanford, CA, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures 2013, 41.

13 He has investments in multiple economic sectors, including public sector contracting, the food industry and maritime businesses. He is the founding partner of the al-Jabal Company for Trade, Industry and Contracting and of the Al-Kamal Company for the Development of Agricultural Industries.

14 Stéphane Valter, “The Dynamics of Power in Syria,” in Hinnebusch and Imady (eds.), *The Syrian Uprising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, 52.

2. Major Changes and Dynamics in the Two Main Chambers of Commerce: Damascus and Aleppo

After the beginning of the uprising in mid-March 2011, major changes occurred in the composition of chambers of commerce. Muhammad Hamsho, a businessman close to Maher al-Assad, entered the board of directors of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce at the beginning of 2014 by ministerial decision and assumed the position of secretary. He replaced Bassam Ghrawi, who had left the country in 2012. At the end of the same year, elections at the chambers of commerce in Aleppo and Damascus saw a significant turnover of their members. Of the twelve elected board members in each of these chambers, ten in Aleppo were newcomers and seven in Damascus, many of whom were unheard of before 2011.¹⁵ While major changes had already taken place in 2014, the 2020 elections further highlighted a high rate of renewal of the composition of chambers of commerce.

2.1. The Damascus Chamber of Commerce

A major reconfiguration of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce was expected, as eight incumbent members of its board of directors announced they would not run in the election, including the chairman of the board, Muhammad Ghassan al-Qallaa,¹⁶ its secretary, Muhammad Hamsho, and the two vice-chairmen (Ammar al-Bardan and Irfan Drakel).¹⁷

The Damascus traders list, led by the now famous businessman Wassim Qattan, won the election with a fair majority, with nine of its candidates elected.¹⁸ Three candidates from other lists were elected: Yasser Ekraym from the Fayha Damascus traders list, and Muhammad al-Hallaq and Imad Qabani from the Damascus List. Among the winners, only three were already members of the former board:¹⁹ Muhammad Abu al-Hoda al-Lahham, Muhammad al-Hallaq (former treasurer of the Chamber) and Muhammad Khattab. Meanwhile, Hassan Azqoul, a former board member and well-known trader who had lost the parliamentary election in July 2020 in Damascus, was defeated.

The election of Wassim Qattan confirms his continual rise on the Syrian political and economic scene. Qattan emerged during the war and one of the initial sources of his wealth was his involvement in illegitimate commercial activities during the siege of Eastern Ghouta.²⁰ He has benefitted from multiple governmental contracts to invest in hotels and malls and has diversified his investments in various economic activities, notably real estate and goods services. He most probably acts as a frontman for Maher al-Assad and he was placed under European Union and U.S. sanctions in February and July 2020 respectively.²¹ Qattan has increasingly occupied official positions in various state and economic institutions, such as being made chairman of the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce in February 2018. Alongside the consolidation of Qattan's power in Damascus, numerous medium-sized traders on the board have demonstrated their support for the regime by representing it at international conferences

15 Jihad Yazigi, "Syria's Implosion: Political and Economic Impacts," in Collombier, Favier, and Narbone (eds.), *Inside Wars, Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, European University Institute, <https://bit.ly/2STQwsc>, 4.

16 He has been chairman of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce and chairman of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce since 2009. Al-Qalaa inaugurated the Sochi conference at the end of 2018 in Russia, alongside the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov.

17 Ramez Mahfouz, "Seven Members of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors are not Running in the Elections" (in Arabic), 6 September 2020, *Al-Watan*, <https://bit.ly/372L1zE>

18 Emmar Syria, *Facebook*, 4 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2H021Md>

19 Economy 2day, *Facebook*, 9 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3LlnIOM>

20 Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, "The Phantoms of Marota City," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, April 2019), <https://bit.ly/37mlUli>

21 US. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Continues to Pressure Investors and Companies Supporting the Assad Regime's Corrupt Reconstruction Efforts," 29 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/370298Z>

and on various national committees (Yasser Ekraym),²² or by reportedly contributing to 'national reconciliation agreements' and 'honouring' fighters in the Syrian Arab Army and the National Defence Forces (Imad Qabani).²³

More established traders who benefit from old connections with the regime were also newly elected. For example, Mazen Baha al-Din Hassan is a new figure on the board, but his family is historically linked to the regime. His father, Baha al-Din Hassan, was an MP for more than twenty years (1990-2011) and Mazen previously held various positions in the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce (as treasurer between 2015 and 2018 and then a member until September 2020).²⁴ Similarly, Zouheir Sharabati is a long-term member of various state institutions and regime-linked committees (in the Damascus Chamber of Industry and that of its countryside since 2000, the Syrian Economic Group and the Economic Committee of the Army Club). Finally, the three members of the former board who were re-elected in 2020 have all been loyal to Damascus for a long time: Muhammad Khattab was first appointed by the Ministry of Domestic Trade in 2014 to replace former board member Bassam al-Malak, who had joined the opposition ranks;²⁵ Muhammad Abu al-Hoda al-Lahham and Muhammad al-Hallaq have been sitting on the board since 2001 and 2009 respectively and both have occupied various official positions in economic institutions.

Among the six members appointed by the government, two seats were granted to medium-size businessmen over sixty years old (Mansour Abaza, who was also chairman of the committee overseeing the election of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, and Ghatfan Ajoub). In addition to them, businesswoman Jinan Hanna Bakerji, who was vice-chairwoman of the Businesswomen Committee at the Damascus Chamber of Commerce before 2011 and who has a long-term relationship with the regime, was nominated. The last seat allocated to a representative of the private sector went to Amir Nabil al-Kuzbari, brother of Ahmad al-Kuzbari, an MP since 2012 and head of the Syrian government's delegation to the Constitutional Committee. His other brother, Shadi al-Kuzbari (who died in 2018) was accused of funding pro-regime militias and of being close to Muhammad Hamsho.²⁶

The board of directors of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce is therefore composed of three main groups. The first of these are established business personalities in the capital, generally over sixty or seventy years old with long-term presences in state institutions (al-Lahham, al-Hallaq, Bakerji, Sharabati and to some extent Abaza). They occupy the main positions in the new executive bureau. Associated with them on the board is a generation of rising influential and relatively young businessmen, generally around 40 years old with strong connections with personalities close to the presidential palace (Qattan, Baha al-Din Hassan and al-Kuzbari). The last group is composed of medium-size businessmen who are rather unknown (Nasr, al-Qutb), but some have served the regime in particular institutions (Ekraym and Qabani).

22 Member of the delegation to Astana in 2017 and Sochi in 2018. He served as chairman of the Council of Elders in Syria (2018-2019) and as President of the al-Ihssan Charitable Society in Kafr Soussa in 2018-2019. He ran in the parliamentary election in 2016 but lost. Facebook, Yasser Ekraym, 20 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/34fGhos>; Syrian Consumer News (in Arabic), Facebook, 12 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3mbXAgb>

23 "Other Than God, Syria and Bashar, we Don't Choose" (in Arabic), Facebook, 7 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/2TkCn7m>

24 Al-Iqtisadi, "Mazen Baha al-Din Hasan" (in Arabic), 20 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TgxJXY>. His father was also chairman of the Syrian-Turkish Businessmen Council, al-Iqtisadi, "Bahaa al-Din Hassan" (in Arabic), 16 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/37dKYkj>.

25 Business 2 Business, "Four New Members of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors," (in Arabic), 7 January 2014, <https://bit.ly/34cRPZm>

26 Enab Baladi, "The Death of the Syrian Businessman Shadi al-Kuzbari. Who is he?" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/219qrn1>

Table 2: Members of the Executive Bureau of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce

Name	Position
Abu al-Hoda al-Lahham	Chairman
Mansour Abaza	First Vice-Chairman (appointed by the Ministry of Domestic Trade)
Abdullah Nasr	Second Vice-Chairman
Muhammad al-Hallaq	Secretary
Mazen Baha al-Din Hassan	Treasurer
Muhammad Samer al-Qutb	Representative of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce in the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce
Wassim Qattan	Member
Imad Qabani	Member

Source: Syrian Days, "Abu Al-Hoda Al-Lahham, Chairman of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce and Mustapha for Rural Damascus" (in Arabic), 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3mllapH>

Table 3: Members of the Board of Directors at the Damascus Chamber of Commerce²⁷

Name	Elected (Number of Votes)	Category	Main economic activities
Abdallah Nasr	549	1	Little-known garment trader.
Wassim Qattan	539	1	Owner of various companies, including Muruj Cham Investment and Tourism Group, Adam Trading and Investment LLC, Wassim Kattan LLC and Larosa Furniture and Intersection LL.
Muhammad Khattab	500	1	General manager of the Al-Khattab Company for Import and Export. Chairman of the board of directors of the Al-Manal Corporation for Tourism, Travel and Shipping. Owner of a facility for the manufacture of ready-to-wear clothes.
Muhammad Hallaq	490	1	General Manager of the al-Hallaq Corporation for Import and Export since 1990. Founding partner in the Nural Aluminium Company until 2015. Member of the Syrian Olive Oil Council. Member of the board of directors of Badia Cement.
Zuheir Daoud	465	1	Owner of the Daoud Brothers Company. Food production and trade. ²⁸

²⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the data about the main activities presented in this table are from the al-Iqtisadi specialised website.

²⁸ Facebook, Zouheir Daoud, 21 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Tir9jG>

Mazen Baha al-Din Hassan	463	1	Member of the industrial committee responsible for following up the affairs of industrial establishments in the Tal Kurdi area of Damascus.
Yasser Ekraym	408	2	Chief Financial Officer and one of the partners in Qasiyon Mall. Founder of several companies relating to electronics companies.
Mohi al-Din Arab al-Halabi	395	2	
Imad Qabani	394	1	Investments in manufacturing and trading of clothing and fabrics, and in the fields of communications and construction.
Muhammad Abu al-Hoda al-Lahham	359	1	Owner of the al-Lahham Company for Trade and Contracting. Member of the Board of Directors of Bank of Jordan Syria.
Muhammad Samer al-Qutb	No competition/ 238	3	General manager and founding partner of the Samman and Qutb Company in Syria.
Zouheir Sharabati	469	4	Involved in the production of socks, Sharabati and Mufti Company.
Mansour Abaza	Appointed -Representative of the Private Sector	-	Director and founding partner of the Syria Markets Company
Majed Omran	Appointed- Representative of the Public Sector	-	Director of Damascus Customs since September 2019
Alaa Rustom	Appointed- Representative of the Public Sector	-	Director of the Damascus branch of the General Establishment for Domestic Trade in Metals and Building Materials since August 2019.
Ghatfan Ajoub	Appointed- Representative of the Private Sector	-	Founding partner of two companies: Yahya Trading and Contracting Company and Juman Company
Amir Nabil al-Kuzbari	Appointed- Representative of the Private Sector	-	Owner of multiple companies
Jinan Hanna Bakerji	Appointed- Representative of the Private Sector	-	Founder and owner of an important company trading in medical laboratory work supplies.

Source: Information retrieved from Facebook, Damascus Chamber of Commerce, 9 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2iSl4sr> and Bank Insurance, "Names of All the Winners in the Elections of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry in the Governorates" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3p0WuWY>

2.2. The Aleppo Chamber of Commerce

As in Damascus, the composition of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce had already seen a profound change in the 2014 elections. In 2020, the newly elected board has no members from the 2009-2014 mandate, demonstrating significant changes in the economic landscape of Aleppo.

The composition of the new board seems to partly confirm the results of the parliamentary election two months earlier when warlords swept Aleppo almost unchallenged.²⁹ The al-Shahba list, which includes businessman Muhammad Fadl Qaterji, won 11 of the 12 seats on the new board of directors. Muhammad Omar Fares Hamwi, a new MP since July 2020, and Mahmoud Assi, received the most important numbers of votes among all the candidates. The Hamwi family has had connections with the regime for a certain amount of time. Hamwi's brother, who passed away in October 2014, was chairman of the board of directors of the Craftsmen Federation and a member of the Aleppo Governorate Council.

The overwhelming victory by this list reflects the continual growing influence of the Qaterji family in Aleppo and more generally in the north. Muhammad Fadl Qaterji is reportedly the younger brother of businessmen Hussam and Baraa Qaterji. Qaterji's brothers were little known traders before 2011, and they have operated as brokers in the trade in oil and cereals between the regime and the Democratic Union Party, the dominant actor in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (and, before 2017, Islamic State).³⁰ Numerous elected members of the board maintain good relations with the Qaterji family and some of them publicly supported the candidacy of Hussam Qaterji during the last parliamentary election, including Muhammad Hamwi and Abdallah Badenjaki. Another significant business actor newly elected on the same list is Muhammad Ali Abu Rass, who has been accused of having funded groups of *shabih*s in various Aleppo neighbourhoods during the first years of protests.³¹

While the elections reflected the rise of new business personalities in the city of Aleppo, such as Hamwi and Assi, the new board of directors also includes more established economic actors with long-term investments and positions in economic institutions. This is the case of Muhammad Salih al-Mallah, the only winner outside the al-Shahba list, who ran on the Aleppo list. Al-Mallah is a well-known and long-established business personality in Aleppo. He was an MP between 1998 and 2002 and chairman of the board of directors of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce between 1995 and 2008. Another relatively noteworthy businessman, Rafaat al-Ammo, who has been playing a growing role in industrial representative institutions since 2016 in Aleppo and then at the national level, was elected.³² Al-Ammo has also acted as an intermediary for the regime in discussions with the Democratic Union Party in Aleppo and its countryside.³³ He is also reportedly in charge of managing relations between pro-regime and Iranian militias and the Syrian Democratic Forces in areas around the towns of Nubl and Zahraa in northern Aleppo.³⁴

29 Awad and Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020."

30 Hussam Qaterji is now one of the most important businessmen in the country and has been an MP since 2016 for the governorate of Aleppo. In January 2020, Bashar al-Assad ratified laws granting the Qaterji brothers three contracts in Syria's oil distribution sector. In the same period, Arman Hotel and Tourist Management LLC, a company owned by the Qaterji family and founded in 2018, was awarded a contract to develop a marina and upscale hotel in the southern part of the Tartous city seafront. In October 2020, the Arman company opened a new three-star hotel in the city of Aleppo. In November 2020, Homs Refinery company announced the signature of a contract valued at \$23 million with the BS Oil Services Company owned by the Qaterji Group for the supply of pumps, copper tubes, control devices and spare parts necessary for functioning of the refinery. In the same month, the U.S. Department took sanctions against Hussam Qaterji "for being a senior official of the Government of Syria". His brother, Baraa, was blacklisted in 2018.

31 Syria, Freedom, Dignity and Democracy (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 27 March 2012, <https://bit.ly/31D3ijw>

32 Elected in 2016 as representative of the owners of engineering sector industrial establishments on the board of directors of the Sheikh Najjar industrial city, al-Ammo is also a member of the board of directors of the Syrian Federation of Industrial Chambers formed in December 2018 and has been chairman of the Industrial City Committee of Cheikh Najjar since June 2019. *Syrian Days*, "Aleppo Industry Elects Members of the Board of Directors of the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City" (in Arabic), 4 August 2016, <https://bit.ly/2GLMM9G>

33 Mansour Hussayn, "Warlords Win the Battle of Chambers of Commerce ..." (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 8 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/37nT4at>

34 Khaled Katib, "Al-Shahba List" is the Interface of "al-Qaterji" Influence in the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce" (in Arabic), *Syria TV*, 2 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3p0y1Rn>

Only three members of the former board (elected in 2014) retain their seats in 2020 (Abdullah Badendjki, who was vice-president in 2019-2020, Ayman al-Basha and Ali Rida Turkmani),³⁵ while their previous colleagues did not run in the election, including the former chairman of the board, Muhammad Majd al-Din Dabbagh, who had been present since the 1990s.³⁶ All three members were active supporters of the Syrian government during the conflict. For example, Ayman al-Basha has been travelling to various countries to represent and promote the interests of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce.

Alongside the elected members, the government re-appointed Lina Safwan Ashrafiah and Harut Karra Jamjian as representatives of the private sector and Nubar Qalusian as representative of the public sector. Through these appointments, the government secured the representation of businesswomen and minorities (Armenian Christians). It also appointed Hussein Kharboutly, a businessman from a family tribe loyal to the regime.

The composition of the new board of directors is characterised by a domination of businessmen from or close to the Qaterji family. In addition, a large number of the new board members are businessmen with some form of connection with the regime (Hamwi, Turkmani, Kharboutly and Ali Abu Rass). Others occupied positions in state institutions before 2011 (al-Mallah and Ashrafiah) or after the beginning of the uprising (al-Basha, Kazara, Jamjian and Qalusian). The businessmen with long-term official positions are well rooted in the more traditional Aleppo business society, which has, however, lost most of its representatives.

Table 4: Members of the Executive Bureau of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce

Name	Position
Muhammad Omar Fares Hamwi	Chairman
Muhammad Ali Abu Ras	First Vice-Chairman
Muhammad Ayman Nasr	Second Vice-Chairman
Muhammad Fadl Qaterji	Secretary
Ayman al-Basha	Treasurer
Ali Rida Turkmani	Representative of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce in the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce
Muhammad Kazara	Member
Harut Karra Jamjian	Member (appointed by the Ministry of Domestic Trade)

Source: Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, *Facebook*, 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2J93CAAd>

35 He is from the family of the former Syrian Defence Minister, Hassan Ali Turkmani, who was killed in 2012 in a bomb explosion. He has lost other family members fighting with pro-regime militias in the past few years. He is known to be close to Iran and has extensive relations with the leaders of the local pro-Iranian militias in Aleppo, the al-Baqer Brigade and the Aleppo Defenders Corps. He travelled with a delegation of businessmen led by Muhammad Hamsho to Iran in October 2018. Az al-Din Nabulsi, "Aleppo"; Facebook, Ali Rida Turkmani, 3 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/352ZsSA>; Khaled Katib, "Al-Shahba List" is the Interface of "al-Qaterji."

36 Khaled Zanko, "Al-Shahba Supported by "Qaterji" Sweeps the Elections of "Aleppo Commerce"" (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 25 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3iSbJNp>

Table 5: Members of the Board of Directors of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce

Name	Elected (number of votes)	Category	Main economic activities
Muhammad Omar Fares Hamwi ³⁷	766	2	His company, Hamwi Furniture Brothers, is involved in the manufacturing of furniture. He is also a money transfer broker.
Mahmoud Assi ³⁸	707	1	One of the co-founders of the al-Haram Exchange and has invested in real estate. The al-Haram Exchange has been sanctioned by the US treasury and the Gulf Cooperation Council for materially assisting, sponsoring, or providing financial, material or technological support for, or goods or services to or in support of, ISIS.
Muhammad Ali Abu Rass	704	Premium	Owner of several companies involved in the import and export of tyres, auto spare parts and batteries.
Samr Abd al-Aziz Nuawy	677	2	Involved in construction and trade.
Muhammad Fadl Qaterji	677	3	Owner of the largest shares in the steel manufacturing, import and export company that was opened recently by the Qaterji family.
Abdallah Badenjaki ³⁹	674	Premium	Represents the Badenjaki family, which owns a well-established trading company that distributes, markets and manufactures food and consumer products in Syria. It is agent for a number of brands.
Muhammad Salih al-Mallah	631	1	Active in trade, import and export. Owner of a number of factories and companies and chairman of a number of their boards of directors.
Muhammad Ayman Nasr	583	1	Active in trade (import and export).
Ayman Basha	574	1	Active in electronics, electrical and medical trade. He has been active for the Chamber and in a personal capacity travelling to India, Iraq and Iran (including with a delegation of businessmen led by Muhammad Hamsho in October 2018). ⁴⁰

37 According to one source, he supports pro-Iran militias in Aleppo, Khaled Katib, "Al-Shahba List" is the Interface of "al-Qaterji."

38 Business 2 Business, "Establishment of Al-Haram Real Estate Development Company in Syria" (in Arabic), 7 September 2014, <https://bit.ly/2lq60BX>

39 Badenjaki Group, Facebook, 21 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ktbIBi>; Az al-Din Nabulsi, "Aleppo" (in Arabic), Syrian Daily News, <https://bit.ly/3IU5sCN>

40 Facebook, Ayman al-Basha, 20 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/38zZa7V>

Rafaat al-Ammo	551	2	Founder of the Rafaat al-Ammo Institution for Industry and Trade in 1998, which is specialised in housing furniture and products. Secretary and chairman of the board of directors of the Future Housing charity association from 1988 until 2019.
Muhammad Kazara ⁴¹	559	4	Production of and trade in leather and other essential goods. Chairman of the Footwear and Leather Industry Committee in the Aleppo Chamber of Industry and Secretary-General of the Arab Federation for Leather Industries.
Ali Rida Turkmani	547	1	Director of the Afak Exhibitions Company and of a shipping and transportation company. He also manufactures and trades in cloths and textiles.
Hussein Kharboutly ⁴²	Appointed Representative of the Private Sector	-	Medium-size businessman hailing from a tribe, most probably from Rural Aleppo, with connections with the regime.
Harout Qarah Jamajian	Appointed Representative of the Private Sector	-	Member of the former board of directors of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce.
Yassin Jawad	Appointed Representative of the Public Sector	-	Director of the Aleppo Customs Directorate since April 2019.
Nubar Qalusian	Appointed Representative of the Public Sector	-	Director of the Central Bank branch in Aleppo. Member of the former board of directors of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce.
Lina Safwan Ashrafiah	Appointed Representative of the Private Sector	-	Founding partner of Achrafieh Pharmaceutical Industries and vice-chairwoman of the board of directors of Bab al-Farag Company for Tourism and Hotels. Long-term chairwoman of the Businesswomen Committee of Aleppo Chamber of Commerce and member of the former board of directors of the Chamber. ⁴³
Luay Ibrahim Ibrahim	Appointed Representative of the Private Sector	-	

Source: Facebook, Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, 27 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/37ELAjx> and Bank Insurance, "Names of All the Winners in the Elections of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry in the Governorates"

41 Facebook, Muhammad Kazara, 13 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dNzoxW>

42 Facebook, Hussein Ahmad Kharboutly, 3 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TUL88n>

43 Al-Iqtisadi, "Lina Safwan Ashrafiah" (in Arabic), 2 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/34Uj6jK>

3. Overview of the Election Results in Other Chambers of Commerce

3.1. The Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce

In Rural Damascus, the previous board elected in 2014 was dissolved by the government in February 2018 on corruption charges and a need to undertake an auditing of the work of the chamber's board of directors. The government instead appointed a new committee to manage the affairs of the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce which was led by Wassim Qattan until the election of the new board. In October 2020, the final number of candidates, after multiple withdrawals, corresponded to the number of seats allocated as elected representatives.⁴⁴ All were therefore elected without competition.⁴⁵

Five members of the 2014 board retain their seats. These include Usama Mustapha, a Baathist MP since 2016 and former chairman of the board of directors who is also a member of the board of trustees of Dar al-Assad for Culture and Arts and secretary of the Syrian-Chinese Business Council.⁴⁶ Mustafa benefited from the support of the Fourth Division to build his wealth as a construction contractor.⁴⁷ The other former members are well-known established businessmen who have continued to play significant roles in government and economic institutions demonstrating their uninterrupted loyalty to the regime. Samir Amouri was vice-chairman of the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce (2015-2020) and he is involved in many activities with foreign businessmen.⁴⁸ Muhammad Khayr Sariul, who established his al-Khair Company for Contracting and Trading in 1985, was elected as Baathist MP in 2016 for Rural Damascus and he has been Secretary of the Business Administration Committee of the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce since February 2018.⁴⁹ Ruba Abboud also holds many positions, including head of the businesswomen's committee in the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce.⁵⁰ The last member of the 2014 board re-elected in 2020 is Muhammad Sheikh Ali, from the city of Madaya.⁵¹

Among the seven newcomers elected to the board of directors, Amer Kheiti appears to be a rising prominent business personality. A native of the city of Duma, Kheiti has received the support of the Fourth Division headed by Maher al-Assad to significantly extend his economic and political influence and entered the Parliament for the first time in July 2020.⁵² Muhannad Zayd, a former MP (2016-2020), commanded the Qalamoun Shield forces in his native town of Ain al-Tineh before he turned into a businessman and became co-owner of the Zayd and Kheiti Company.⁵³ The other newly elected members are mostly new medium-size and small traders (Ali al-Shibli from the city of Arbeen, Yassin al-Nisrin from Duma, Uday al-Habsheh from al-Nabek, Khaled al-Tabl, who is a member of the Central Committee of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce for Export, and Muhammad Louay Sary).

44 Three candidates who withdrew their candidacy before the voting day were finally appointed to the board by the government as representatives of the private sector: Muthana Karakar, Ahmad Ali Razi and Mazen Muhammad Khayat.

45 Business 2 Business, "After the Recent Withdrawals, the Candidates for the Damascus Province Chamber of Commerce Won by Acclamation" (in Arabic), 5 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/372HCR5>

46 Al-Iqtisadi, "Usama Mustapha" (in Arabic), 14 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3drfB73>

47 Awad and Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020."

48 Owner and chairman of Amouri Group Companies since 1978, Amouri has been the treasurer of the Syrian-Chinese Business Council since 2019 and one of the founders and secretary of the Syrian-Turkish Businessmen Council. He travelled to Iran with a delegation of businessmen led by Muhammad Hamsho in October 2018. Al-Iqtisadi, "Samir Amouri" (in Arabic), 20 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/31gEeP6>

49 He also held the position of Head of Supervision and Investigation at the Construction Contractors Association. Al-Iqtisadi, "Muhamad Khayr Sariul" (in Arabic), 21 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3m00955>. His company is involved in construction, trade, contracting and manufacturing.

50 Abboud is also a member of the board of directors of both the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce and the Exporters Association and has been a member of the Advisory Council of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers since November 2019. She is the owner and director of Rajhamika Modern Furniture for the manufacture and trade of modern furniture, which is located in the industrial city of Adra. Al-Iqtisadi, "Ruba Abboud" (in Arabic), 19 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kbmoEo>

51 Facebook, Muhammad Sheikh Ali, 21 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3jjPBMf>

52 For his profile, see Awad and Favier, "Syrian People's Assembly Elections 2020." In November 2020, the U.S. Department took sanctions against Amer Kheiti for being connected to the Syrian government.

53 Facebook, "Muhannad Zaid, "member of the Syrian People's Assembly" (in Arabic), 21 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/35scdFD>; Republican Guard Ain al-Tineh (in Arabic), Facebook, 26 May 2016, <https://bit.ly/37DBMpA>

Similarly, the members appointed by the government represent a mix of relatively small new businessmen (Muthana Karakar, who is in his mid-late thirties)⁵⁴ and older economic actors (Mazen Muhammad Khayat).⁵⁵ The appointment of Rima al-Omary also allowed the representation of businesswomen on the board.⁵⁶

The composition of the board of directors in Rural Damascus shows a consolidation of two main types of businessmen: some are affiliated with militias and security forces (Mustafa, Kheiti, Zayd) and others are well-established in government and economic institutions. This duality is reflected in the new executive board. Mustapha remains the chairman of the board, while Kheiti and Amouri are respectively first and second vice-chairmen. Zayd is the new treasurer and Abboud maintains her positions as representative of the board to the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce and chair of the Businesswomen's Committee. Karakar, secretary of the new board, al-Shibli and al-Habsheh complete the executive bureau.⁵⁷

3.2. The Homs Chamber of Commerce

In Homs, of the 18 former members of the board of directors, only seven remained. The United list won all the elected seats.⁵⁸ Except for the famous businessman Tarif al-Akhras, who retained his seat from 2009 until 2020, but did not run in these latest elections,⁵⁹ the main personalities on the 2014 board were re-elected. Former secretary of the board of directors, Antoine Daoud, who is also a member of the Syrian-Russian Business Council, received the highest number of votes, followed by MP Firas al-Salloum al-Hadba and former treasurer of the board Iyad Draq al-Sibai.⁶⁰ The former chairman and former vice-chairman were also re-elected, Dr. Abdel al-Nasr Sheikh Futuh and Ibrahim al-Atassi respectively.

The newly elected members are medium-sized businessmen, such as Nizar Kafa, who was among the Syrian businessmen to attend the Dubai Food Exposition in February 2020, and Dr. Sateh Kasuha, an agent of both the Italian company Doxal and the Russian company Avivac in Syria.

Among the members appointed by the government there are many significant economic actors. Halim al-Akhras, who occupied the position of vice-chairman of the board of directors of Homs Chamber of Commerce before 2011, has been the Director of Economy and Foreign Trade in Homs since 2002.⁶¹ Less influential than al-Akhras, Muhammad Fadlallah al-Zein, who lost in the 2020 parliamentary election, is chairman of the Homs Governorate, Sports, Cultural, Social and Cultural Club created in 2018,⁶² and businessman Quraysh Sahloul is a member of Homs city council.

54 General Manager of the Karakar Group for Trade and director and owner of Onyx International Tourism, Travel and Tourism Investments established in Syria in October 2019. He held the position of chairman of the National Union of Syrian Students in Malaysia between 2014 and 2019. He is from Yabroud. Facebook, "Muthana Kraker," 6 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3laeFXW>

55 He is the owner of multiple companies, mostly established before or in 2011, including the United Contracting and Energy Limited Liability Company and the Khayyat and Muhayri Trading Company. Al-Iqtisadi, "Mazen Muhammad Khayat," (in Arabic), 2 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/2JsKHQK>

56 Syrian National Women's Foundation (in Arabic), Facebook, 7 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/3k6wupk>. Three other appointees are Nizar Bakour, Director of the Directorate of Economy and Foreign Trade in Rural Damascus, Samer Muhammad Zuhayli, Director of the Popular Credit Bank branch in al-Nabek, and Ahmad Ali Razi, owner and founder of the Ghazi and Olayan Group of Companies (food commodities).

57 Syrian Days, "Abu al-Hoda al-Lahham, head of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce and Mustapha for Rural Damascus."

58 Facebook, Dr. Abdel al-Nasr Sheikh Futuh, 11 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/2SU2Oby>

59 Pro-Justice, "Tarif al-Akhras," 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nL1BK2>

60 He is also president of the al-Wathbat football team in Homs and of the historic Khalid Ibn Walid Charity Association, which is involved in various humanitarian activities and the restoration of buildings and shops in the city.

61 Al-Iqtisadi, "Halim al-Akhras" (in Arabic), 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/34th0r6>

62 Facebook, "We Build and Cultivate, the Candidate for the People's Assembly Elections, Muhammad Fadlallah al-Zein" (in Arabic), 2 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/385Udnk>

These results led to some relatively important changes in the new executive bureau: al-Sibai is the chairman and al-Akhras is the first vice-chairman, while al-Atassi remains the second vice-chairman. Newly elected members Muhammad Samer Safwah and Muhammad Bashar al-Taban (also a member of the executive bureau of Homs city council) are respectively secretary and treasurer of the board. Kafa and al-Salloum al-Hadba are also members of the executive bureau.⁶³

3.3. The Hama Chamber of Commerce

As in Rural Damascus, the former board of directors of the Hama chamber was dissolved in January 2018 due to corruption-related charges against the chairman at that time.⁶⁴ A month later, Ayman Malandi, an MP since 2012 on the Baath list, was appointed chairman of the chamber of commerce. He did not run in the election for the board of directors in 2020.

The al-Bina list won all the seats.⁶⁵ This list was notably supported by Ahmed Sbahi, an important businessman in Hama who withdrew his candidacy in the 2020 parliamentary election before the voting day.⁶⁶ On the new board of directors at Hama Chamber, his family is represented by Abdel Razaq Sbahi. Abd al-Latif Shakr, who is co-founder of a company of pipe and carton components products in Hama, and Abdel Karim Habbal became respectively chairman and first vice-chairman of the chamber's board of directors.⁶⁷ Among the six personalities appointed by governmental decree, the most prominent is Abd al-Rahim Rahal, who was already a member of the previous board and is former treasurer of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, has been chairman of the Central Committee for Exports in the Federation since December 2019, is a member of the board of directors of the General Organisation for Fairs and International Markets, and a member of both the Syrian-Russian Business Council and the Syrian-Iranian Business Council.⁶⁸ In addition, Mrs. Doha Karkour, chairwoman of the Board of Directors of Banna Private School, was also reappointed. Alongside the reappointment of Rahal, Karkour and Kanazi, the newly appointed members are relatively little-known business personalities.⁶⁹

3.4. Smaller Chambers of Commerce and Industry

In the case of certain small chambers of commerce and industry (Sweida, Daraa, Idlib, al-Hasakah), in addition to Latakia, no major changes occurred in the last elections. Their new boards of directors were generally agreed on without much competition and most of the former board members were re-elected.⁷⁰ In Latakia, 11 of the 12 elected members are former members, including former chairman Kamal Ismail al-Assad, a relative of Bashar, vice-chairman Maher Zein, and the important trader Anas Dib Joud, who hails from a famous business family and is also a member of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce.⁷¹ In the new executive bureau elected on 25 October 2020, all three keep the

63 Hashtag Syria, "The Chambers of Commerce in Daraa, Tartous, al-Hasakah, Sweida, Homs and Rural Damascus Elect their Boards of Directors" (in Arabic), 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/37HXaKG>

64 Enab Baladi, "Dismissal of the Board of Hama Chamber of Commerce on Charges of Corruption," (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/32k611D>

65 Shamra, "The al-Bina List Wins the Hama Chamber of Commerce Elections" (in Arabic), 11 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/31820wq>

66 He is CEO of the Sbahi Company for Industry and Trade, and he co-owns both the City Centre Complex in Hama and the Dream Mall Complex in Aleppo. Al-Iqtisadi, "Ahmad Hassan Sbahi" (in Arabic), 21 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TI3WxB>

67 Al-Watan Syria, "Abdul Latif Shakr, Chairman of the Hama Chamber of Commerce" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/35Ne1Jx>

68 Al-Iqtisadi, "Abd al-Rahim Abd al-Qadr Rahal," (in Arabic), 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/31Y1amH>

69 SANA, "Hama Chamber of Commerce Announces the Names of its New Office Members" (in Arabic), 25 November 2014, <https://bit.ly/2luqjOR>

70 The chairmen of the former boards of directors of the chambers of commerce and industry remain in position in al-Hasakah (Mohammed Khair Shekhmous), in Sweida (Faisal Seif), in Idlib (Mohammed Abdullah Shatat) and in Daraa (Qasim al-Masalma).

71 The Joud family is one of the richest in Syria and is particularly involved in shipping and trade. The economic empire of the family expanded considerably under Subhi Joud, who was a prosperous Sunni entrepreneur from the city of Latakia and a protégé of Hafez al-Assad. He passed away in 2016.

same position they had on the previous board. In contrast to the elected members, more government appointees are newcomers.⁷² Among them, Bassam Dallati is one of the most important businessmen in the country and owner of the largest clothing and fashion companies in Syria,⁷³ and Amjad Suleiman is General Director of Latakia port.

In contrast to the case of Latakia, the Tartous Chamber elections saw fierce competition between two lists: the Tartous Hope list led by businessman Mazen Hammad and the Tartous Merchants and Industrialists list headed by Samir Kaddour, former secretary of the board of directors. Two prominent figures on the second list, former chairman of Tartous Chamber of Commerce Muzhar Younes, whose assets were recently frozen by the government,⁷⁴ and Ali Wahib Mehri, former vice-chairman and son of former chairman Wahib Merie (who died in 2017), withdrew their candidacies before the voting day.⁷⁵ The Tartous Hope list eventually won six seats, against only two seats for the second list.⁷⁶ Hammad, who is a business personality with close ties to the regime, gathered the most important number of votes. Owner of various companies, he has been involved in trade and construction contracts and has increasingly been engaged in charity initiatives in Tartous.⁷⁷ In late 2019, he also launched the first solar energy project in the country, in Tartous, at a cost of 5 billion SYP (\$10 million at the time).⁷⁸ His victory reflects his growing influence in the governorate – and more broadly in the country – at the expense of the other economic elite members, particularly Younes and Merie. He became the new chairman of the board of directors of Tartous Chamber of Commerce on 25 October. Only two members of the former board of directors were re-elected, while the executive bureau is composed completely of newly elected members.⁷⁹ Among other important businessmen, Muhannad Ali Ismail, general manager of Tartous port, was appointed by the government, as was Sami Khairallah Diaa after he lost the election on the Tartous Merchants and Industrialists list.⁸⁰

Like Tartous, the composition of the chambers of commerce and industry in Deir al-Zor, Quneitra and Raqqa has been greatly renewed, and in particular their chairmen. In Raqqa, Fayez al-Hussayn replaced Randa al-Ajili, who remains on the board of directors.⁸¹ In Quneitra, Imad Qassem replaced M. Mofid Mashafj.⁸² Finally, in Deir Zor, Hafez al-Qassem al-Arab, (also known as Hafez Fayz al-Nuri), son of Fayez al-Nuri (former chief judge in Syria's Supreme State Security Court, nominated in the period of Hafez al-Assad),⁸³ replaced the long-term former chairman Mazen Daoud Kenamah, who is still a member of the board.⁸⁴

72 Syrian Days, "Publication of the Names Victorious in the Latakia Chamber of Commerce and Industry Elections" (in Arabic), 17 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3lIMu27>

73 Souriat, "A Wedding Worth Half a Billion in Latakia" (in Arabic), 23 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HV729u>

74 He is a relatively wealthy trader, owner of Sham Trading company and acts as agent for various foreign companies. He is son of General Tawfiq Younes, former head of the Internal Intelligence Department.

75 Syrian Days, "The Competition is Fierce to Elect the Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Tartous" (in Arabic), 30 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/31nVWjL>

76 Kifah Samir Qaddour and Muhammad Kamel Sakheya. Syrian Days, "Announcing the Winners of the Tartous Chamber of Commerce and Industry" (in Arabic), 18 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/31mRKR9>

77 On several occasions Hammad participated in funding the provision of complete school uniforms to children of the martyrs and disappeared in Tartous. Economy 2day, "With the Support of Businessman Mazen Hammad" (in Arabic), 13 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3j8YXKE>

78 Enab Baladi, "It Caused the Arrest of a Journalist Recently ... Who is Businessman Mazen Hammad?" (in Arabic), 9 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/2HlSqir>. In September 2020 Hammad was accused of corruption regarding his investments in solar energy contracts.

79 Al-Watan, "Hammad as Chairman of the Tartous Chamber of Commerce and Industry..." (in Arabic), 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kEhikz>

80 Tartous Merchants and Industrialists' list, (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 13 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3mShLQH>

81 Raqqa Chambers of Commerce and Industry (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 10 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2HOq4Ot>

82 Al-Watan, "Imad Qassem, Chairman of the Quneitra Chamber of Industry and Commerce" (in Arabic), 25 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2JinfWt>

83 He is guilty of issuing tens of thousands of death sentences without trials in the 1980s and beyond.

84 Sada al-Dayr, *Facebook*, 27 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3mzJLIA>

4. The Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce

Following the elections in the chambers of commerce in each governorate, the new board of directors and the executive bureau of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce were elected at the end of October 2020, with major changes. Of the 29 former members of the board of directors, only 11 were re-elected.

The organisational structure of the federation's board of directors follows the dispositions explained in Table 1. The two representatives of the private sector selected by the government are famous business personalities from Damascus. The first, Pascal al-Katib, had lost in the election of the board of directors of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce but was eventually appointed by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and then elected to the executive bureau of the Federation. Al-Katib owns a food company and was a director of Caritas Syria between 2012 and 2016.⁸⁵ The second, Fahd Darwish, occupies numerous important positions in state economic institutions, including the vice-presidency of the Joint Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce and chair of the board of directors of the Higher Investors Committee of the Public Establishment for Free Zones.⁸⁶ Darwish has played a prominent role in promoting Iranian economic interests in Syria and has extensive commercial links with Teheran. He is notably chairman of the Syrian Armada Company for Trade and Construction – agent for the Syrian-Iranian Auto Manufacturing Company – and General Manager of the al-Baraka pharmaceutical company, which has its mother company located in Iran. He is also one of the supervisors of the Iranian Centre in the Damascus Free Zone, which includes 22 Iranian companies.⁸⁷ Darwish lost the parliamentary election in the capital in July 2020. These two nominations allow the representation of religious minorities on the board (respectively Christian and Shiite).

The traditional distribution of positions is respected in the Federation's new executive board. The chairman and secretary of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce became chairman and secretary of the Federation, while the chairmen of Aleppo and Homs are respectively the first and second vice-chairmen. The chairman of the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce maintains his position as treasurer. The rest of the members elected are two medium-size businessmen (Qassim Masalma and Muhammad Samer al-Qutb) and two important private actors (Anas Joud and Pascal al-Katib).

In many respects the composition of the Federation reflects the trends observed in the main Chambers of Commerce with the representation of two main groups: first a generation of rising and influential young businessmen with close connections with the regime and personalities linked to it; and second, more established and older businessmen, generally with extensive presences in state economic institutions.

Table 6: The Board of Directors of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce (2020-2024)

Name	Position	Governorate/Ministry representation	Elected or appointed by the government
Muhammad Abu al-Hoda al-Lahham	Chairman of the Federation	Damascus	Elected
Muhammad Amer Hamwi	First Vice-Chairman	Aleppo	Elected
Iyad Draq al-Sibai	Second Vice-Chairman	Homs	Elected
Muhammad al-Hallaq	Secretary	Damascus	Elected

85 Al-Iqtisadi, "Pascal Habib al-Katib" (in Arabic), 27 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2HJMYql>

86 Al-Iqtisadi, "Fahd Darwish" (in Arabic), 27 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3mwVaJd>

87 Asharq al-Awsat, "Syria: Electoral Campaigns Reflect Russian Absence, Iranian Influence," 17 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3eFVfHm>

Osama Mostafa	Treasurer	Rural Damascus	Elected
Qasim al-Masalma	Member of the executive bureau	Daraa	Elected
Anas Joud	Member of the executive bureau	Latakia	Elected
Muhammad Samer al-Qutb	Member of the executive bureau	Damascus	Elected
Pascal al-Katib	Member of the executive bureau	Representative of the private sector (Damascus)	Appointed
Kamal Ismail al-Assad	Member of the board	Latakia	Elected
Abd al-Latif Shahr	Member of the board	Hama	Elected
Mazen Hammad	Member of the board	Tartous	Elected
Imad Qassem	Member of the board	Quneitra	Elected
Hafez al-Qassem al-Arab (also known Hafez Fayz al-Nouri)	Member of the board	Deir al-Zor	Elected
Faisal Talal al-Seif	Member of the board	Sweida	Elected
Muhammad Abdallah Shattat	Member of the board	Idlib	Elected
Fayez al-Hussayn	Member of the Board	Raqqa	Elected
Muhammed Khair Shekhmous	Member of the Board	Al-Hasakah	Elected
Muhammad Fadl Qaterji	Member of the Board	Aleppo	Elected
Ali Rida Turkmani	Member of the Board	Aleppo	Elected
Ruba Abboud	Member of the Board	Rural Damascus	Elected
Firas Salloum	Member of the Board	Homs	Elected
Abdel Razaq Sbahi	Member of the Board	Hama	Elected
Manal Abu Raqti	Member of the Board	Representing the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade.	Appointed – Director of the Foreign Trade Directorate
Munther Wannous	Member of the board	Representing the Ministry of Finance	Appointed – Director General of the Tax and Fees Authority
Shady Jawhara	Member of the board	Representing the Public Sector	Appointed – General Manager of the General Organisation for Foreign Trade
Ahmed Najm	Member of the board	Representing the Public Sector	Appointed – General Director of the Syrian Trade Establishment
Fahd Darwish	Member of the board	Representative of the private sector (Damascus)	Appointed
Muhammad Fares al-Jijakli	Member of the board	General Director of the Federation	

Source: Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, Facebook, 27 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3oCkLIX>

Conclusion

The formation of the boards of directors of the chambers of commerce and the Federation constituted a tool for Damascus to (re)construct networks of businessmen supporting the regime while renewing its popular base. These elections witnessed meaningful changes in the compositions of the boards of directors of several chambers of commerce. The size of the change to some extent reflects a significant modification of the economic landscape, business activities and networks in every city. The larger chambers of commerce include a high number of newcomers on their boards: 55.5 percent in Homs, nearly 67 percent in Aleppo, 72 percent in Rural Damascus and over 83 percent in Damascus and Hama. The only exception to this trend is Latakia, where more than 60 percent of the board members were on the former board, demonstrating a stability of the economic elite in this region, which did not suffer mass destruction.

One of the most notable aspects of these results is the election of business personalities who rose during the war and are connected with the presidential palace, the Fourth Division or pro-regime militias (mainly in Damascus, Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Tartous). Most of the newly elected economic actors are generally in their forties. They were initially involved in various sectors of the war economy and smuggling. They have acted as commercial intermediaries importing particular products and goods lacking in Syria or as front men for influential regime personalities. In the past few years, these businessmen have increasingly invested in the formal economy. They have now consolidated their power by occupying official positions in state institutions, such as the parliament and the chambers of commerce. At the same time, the departure of very prominent businessmen, such as Mahmoud Hamsho and Tarif al-Akhras, from the boards of directors of chambers of commerce and the Federation does not necessarily mean a decline in their power and influence but rather their withdrawal from state and economic institutions. Interestingly, similar dynamics were observed among the businessmen elected as MPs in July 2020.⁸⁸

However, compared to the profiles of the MP businessmen, the main difference in the composition of the new chambers of commerce is the return or the promotion of old and established business figures, often over sixty or seventy years old with historical presences in economic and government institutions. Although they are very far from having the same weight as the new rising businessmen, they are generally more entrenched in the traditional economic elites of their cities. Their elections or appointments could first be an attempt to give more credibility and weight to these chambers due to their centrality in the Syrian economy. This could secondly mean that the regime may use them as intermediaries in the near and medium future to convince businessmen who left the country to come back.

88 Awad and Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020s."

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