

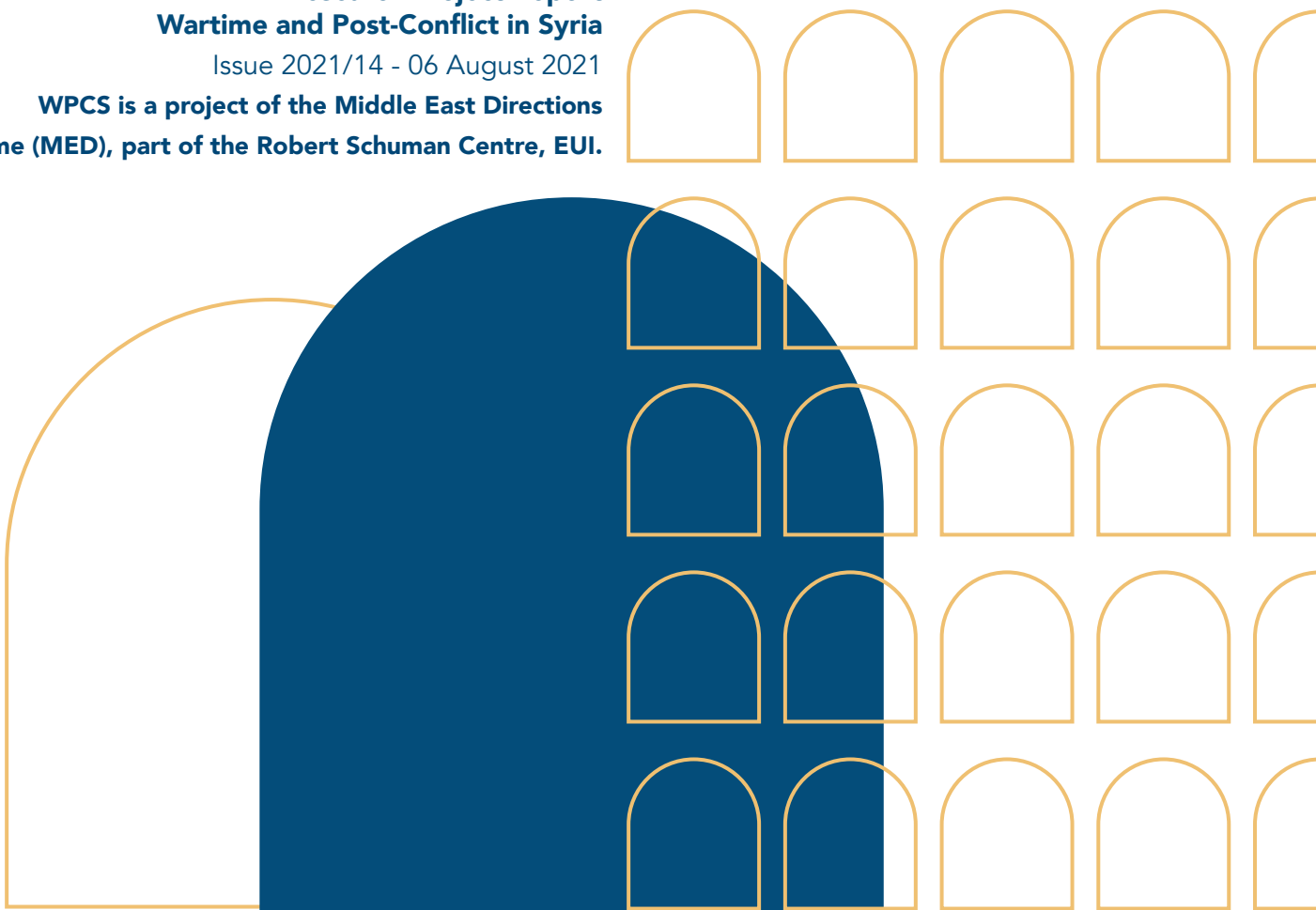
# The Families of Rastan and the Syrian Regime: Transformation and Continuity

Ayman Aldassouky

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# The Families of Rastan and the Syrian Regime: Transformation and Continuity

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## Executive Summary

During the rule of Hafez al-Assad, senior army officers and Baathists from influential families in Rastan, a city in northern Homs, assisted with regime control over the city. In the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's tenure, however, businessmen and security leaders from outside the city, not to mention local officials from lesser families, were put in place where they failed to play a similar role. This change helped destabilise the regime's social base, something which became evident in 2011 when Rastani officials were unable to contain the uprising.

In spring 2012 Rastan fell under the control of rebel groups. Many members of local families played a leading role in the uprising. They formed armed factions and established a local council to manage the city's affairs. Some also played, later on, an indirect role when the regime recaptured the region, through their involvement in the Families Council, a Russian initiative that helped finalise the May 2018 'reconciliation' agreement. The agreement displaced a large part of the city's population.

Since retaking control, the regime has sought to re-establish its authority in Rastan by reconfiguring its network of local intermediaries. An informal Follow-Up Committee was put in place for coordinating the provision of public services between government institutions and the local community. As the Families Council disintegrated, a select few Rastani family members were handpicked for the new Committee. These local officials share two traits: loyalty to the regime; and a lack of a local power base that could threaten the regime's hegemony. The city's socio-political reconfiguration is ongoing. But the regime's attempts to impose full control are hamstrung by its limited resources, the fragmentation of its local authority and the inadequate social capital of city council members and Baath officials.

## Introduction

The regime of Hafez al-Assad used local intermediaries to weave a network of informal contacts within communities.<sup>1</sup> These intermediaries were prominent within their circles, either as members of prominent families or tribes, or as religious leaders and businessmen.<sup>2</sup> Socio-political dynamics within each community helped select intermediaries. In rural communities, for example, a family's influence is determined by its size, and individuals rely on their families for social and financial support. Moreover, many important rural families had maintained their social standing through the Ottoman era and the French mandate. Assad relied on members of these families, especially those involved in the Baath Party and in state institutions.

This changed once Bashar al-Assad assumed power, with a new class of intermediaries emerging and the influence of the old intermediaries falling away. Bashar al-Assad goal was to build a loyalist elite, to liberalise the Syrian economy and to counter rising regional security threats from the instability of Iraq and Lebanon. In 2011, local intermediaries were unable to contain the spreading protest movement, and several cities and towns fell out of the regime's military and security control. Since 2016, with a combination of force and negotiations, the regime has, with significant Russian help, progressively recaptured areas previously controlled by the opposition. It has also attempted to re-establish its hegemony over those local communities which have come back under its authority. This can be seen in its reconfiguration of the local intermediary class: some have been favoured and some have been marginalised or crushed. This process has been tied to the socio-political dynamics in each area and from wartime developments. Thus, various intermediary models have emerged in areas formerly under opposition-control.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, the city of Rastan is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it shifted its loyalties. Before 2011, it had a pro-regime social base, as shown by the large number (around 2,500) of commissioned and non-commissioned Rastani officers in the military.<sup>4</sup> It would become, however, one of the most notable social bases for armed opposition in the governorate of Homs from 2012 until 2018. Second, it is a city defined by family-based social ties. Some members of its large families – such as former Minister of Defence General Mustafa Tlass – have played a pivotal role in Syria's recent political history. The regime took back control of Rastan in May 2018. The city is strategically located because it lies on the Damascus-Aleppo highway known as the M5. Rastan is the administrative seat of the district to which the Talbiseh sub-district belongs. Before 2012, the Rastan district was referred to locally as Northern Homs and later as the Northern Rural Homs area, which included towns administratively located in both Homs and Hama governorates (Maps 1 and 2). As of February 2021, Rastan city has more than 70,000 residents,<sup>5</sup> 15,000 fewer than in 2011. This is the result of demographic changes and of forced displacement during the conflict.

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1 Intermediaries are individual actors that connect local communities to external authorities. They can include businessmen, religious leaders, government officials, family elders, and local notables. Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur (ed.), *Local Intermediaries in Post-2011 Syria: Transformation and Continuity*. (Beirut: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2019), 10, <https://bit.ly/3zlv4d2>

2 Kheder Khaddour, "Local Wars and the Chance for Decentralised Peace in Syria," *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 28 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/3l79ydJ>

3 For example, the regime relied on intermediaries created by the war economy in Deir al-Zor, as well as others from the former elite. Ziad Awad, "The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, March 2019), <https://bit.ly/2Vg8Csu>. In the governorate of Daraa, the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade emerged as a military intermediary in the eastern region. It has been more effective than the Central Negotiating Committee (CNC), a civilian intermediary in Daraa al-Balad and the western parts of the governorate. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 11 April 2019), <https://bit.ly/3xuvqD3>

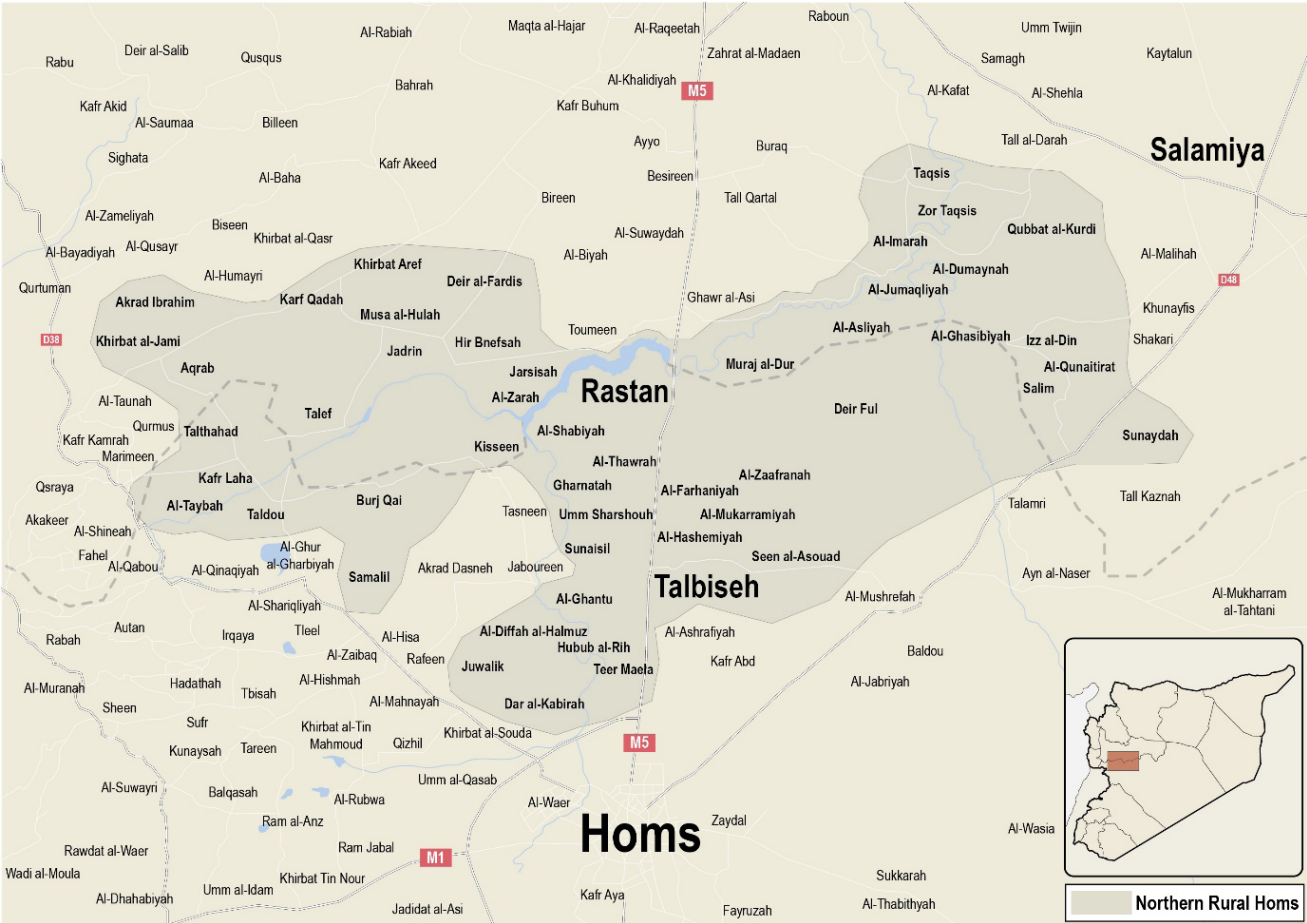
4 Urwa al-Mundhir, "Rastan. Military Reserve of Sunni Officers in the Regime's Army" (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 11 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/3wZ4uve>

5 Good Morning Homs, "Interview with Eng. Hassan Taibani, President of Rastan City Council" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 21 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3xmW68i>

Throughout the past decade of conflict, the Assad regime’s ambition has been to restore the pre-2011 *status quo ante*: in spite of the massive changes to Syrian society in that time. This study examines the regime’s strategy for re-establishing hegemony over Rastan, in comparison to its pre-war approaches to the city. Through a city-level analysis of the reconfigurations of intermediaries there, it contributes to an expanding research agenda on power dynamics within ‘reconciled’ areas and between the regime and local communities. It provides insights into an understudied socio-political aspect of the conflict, namely the role of families, as they move from resisting to assisting the regime. To this end, this research attempts to answer a number of questions. Who were the Rastani intermediaries under Hafez al-Assad and then, under Bashar al-Assad before 2011? What role did Rastani families play during the period of opposition control? Who are the intermediaries upon which the regime relies now that it has regained control of the city? And are they capable of establishing and maintaining political hegemony over the city?

The study draws on ten interviews, by an assistant researcher based in Northern Rural Homs, with individuals still residing in Rastan, conducted between March and May 2021. The author also conducted seven interviews during the same period with people living in Turkey and northern Syria, including notables and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Rastan, as well as with individuals who held military and civil positions in opposition-controlled Rastan. Online newspapers, forums, and social media platforms have also been employed as sources.

**Map 1: Northern Rural Homs**



Source: The author, based on interviews. Designer: Ayoub Lahouioui, July 2021

## 1. Influential Rastani Families before the War (1970-2011)

Hafez al-Assad relied on senior military officers and senior members of the Baath Party who belonged to major Rastani families to establish his regime's dominance over the city: this in a community where a family's social status depends on its size. These regime figures played the role of intermediaries between the local community and the state. They become less important, however, under Bashar al-Assad as business tycoons and security officials from outside the region rose to prominence. Some local officials were, meanwhile, replaced with those from lesser Rastani families or from outside the region. This helped destabilise the regime's social base, something which became evident in 2011 when Rastani officials failed to contain the uprising.

### 1.1. Baathists and Senior Army Officers under Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000)

Hafez al-Assad delegated decision-making authority in Rastan to Baathists and to senior army officers from major families. Besides allowing them to keep their positions for a long time, this also allowed them to build patronage networks that cemented regime dominance in the city.

Rastan is traditionally organised around family ties. Rastani families are distributed across two areas, roughly separated by al-Karaj Road. Major families in Lower Rastan (al-Tahtani) include the Mashayekh family with their various branches (Sheikh Ali, Hajj Ali, Hajj Yusuf, Saadeddine, Madani, Mahmoud) and the Ayoub family, together with the Tlass and the Farzat families who share an antique lineage. In Upper Rastan (al-Fawqani), the most prominent families are the Ashtar and the al-Dali. Tensions would often emerge between the families of the two areas.<sup>6</sup> Lower Rastan families were considered more influential, mostly because a number of their members were local notables during the Ottoman era and the French Mandate. For example, Abdul Qader Tlass, Lieutenant General Mustafa Tlass's father, used to provide supplies for the Ottoman army, and later became a local chief (*mukhtar*) under the French Mandate.<sup>7</sup> Lower Rastan's importance also came from the large number of college-educated residents: something which allowed them to occupy government positions; their substantial involvement in military institutions and the Baath Party, motivated as it was, by both ideology and self-interest; and their relative wealth, the result of agricultural revenues being invested in the freight trade.

Assad favoured the families of Lower at the expense of those of Upper Rastan, appointing members to high positions in the army and the Baath Party. This decision may have been due to their local influence or simply due to personal connections Assad himself had with those from Lower Rastan in the army and the party. It is also possible that the regime sought to sow divisions between families in order to more easily control them. Mustafa Tlass, who had a personal relationship with Hafez al-Assad dating back to 1952 – when they were at the Homs Military Academy together – was Minister of Defence for 32 years (1972-2004). He also was a member of the Baath Party's Regional Command from 1965 to 2005. In addition, Abdul Razzaq Ayoub, who was close to Mustafa Tlass, was a member of the Baath Party's Regional Command for some 15 years (1985-2000).

Assad relied mainly on these two figures to administer the Rastan region, giving them the authority to hire, appoint and enlist individuals from their area into state institutions, the army and the party. During the 1990s, Abdul Razzaq Ayoub appointed his relative Muhammad Mukhayber Ayoub as head of the Homs Branch of the General Union of Peasants. Another relative, Mustafa Ayoub (known as Abu Anwar), became a leading member of the Baath Party's Homs Branch.<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Tlass was known, meanwhile, for facilitating bureaucratic affairs for Rastanis, and for helping them get into the Homs

6 Mustafa Tlass, *Mirror of My Life: First Decade 1948-1958* (in Arabic), Damascus: Dar Tlass: 2006, 47.

7 Ibid, 25-27.

8 WhatsApp interview with a dignitary from Rastan, northern Syria, 22 April 2021.



Military Academy. Both figures were also able to choose representatives from the area for the People's Assembly, Syria's legislative authority. Abdul Razzaq Ayoub got his two relatives Mustafa al-Issa and Khaled Mansour into the People's Assembly, probably in the 1990s. In addition, Tlass and Ayoub were entrusted with resolving family disputes in Rastan without any reference to the judicial or security authorities. The rule of law, in some senses, did not apply in the city in those years.<sup>9</sup>

One indication of the clout enjoyed by Rastani decision-makers is that the city was nicknamed the 'Eastern Qardaha.'<sup>10</sup> Many individuals from Rastan's most important families were able to take advantage of their family ties or of wider relationships with Rastan-born officials, obtaining privileges or government benefits that enabled them to build up wealth and businesses. One of the sons of the Minister of Defence, Firas Tlass, emerged as a businessman after founding the Min Ajl Suriyya (MAS) Group in 1980,<sup>11</sup> through which he profited from deals to supply the Syrian Arab Army with food, medicine, and clothing.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Rastanis attribute the wealth of businessman Mahmoud Farzat to Mustafa Tlass's helping him to profit from arms deals between Syria and Romania, where Farzat had studied in the Ceausescu era.<sup>13</sup> The patronage and protection that Mustafa Tlass and Abdul Razzaq Ayoub extended to Rastanis facilitated the switch by some of them from agriculture to the freight trade, especially following the drought that struck northern Homs in the early 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Rastan became later, in the 2000s, second only to Aleppo in terms of its number of freight vehicles.<sup>15</sup> According to one Rastani, everyone feared those from the city who worked in freight. No one dared to interfere with them, including the workers at Tartus and Latakia ports in the Syrian Coast.

The regime's reliance on Tlass and Ayoub entrenched these families' power, but it also provoked a rivalry between the two families, notably over which family had the largest number of officers in the army.<sup>16</sup> This explains why no unified bloc of Rastani officers has taken shape within the military establishment. Sensitivities also emerged between the families of Lower and Upper Rastan, who always went to the Tlass and Ayoub families to enlist their sons in the military or to have them join the Baath Party. Tlass and Ayoub maintained their positions and authority under Hafez al-Assad. However, when the father died in summer 2020 and Bashar al-Assad, his son, assumed power, the situation started to change.

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9 For example, Tlass intervened to resolve a family dispute between the Tlass family and Suleiman Khanfoura, which had resulted in fatalities on both sides; Abdul Razzaq Ayoub intervened in a family dispute between the Farzat and Abbas families, which had also resulted in deaths. Ibid.

10 Qardaha is the birthplace of Hafez al-Assad, located in Latakia governorate. Individuals from Qardaha enjoyed privileges in state, civil and military positions.

11 Aliqtisadi, "Profile of Firas Tlass" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3gQBAYm>

12 Al-Arabiya News, "The Full Story behind the Defection of Gen. Manaf Tlass," 9 July 2012, <https://bit.ly/3xFM9UI>

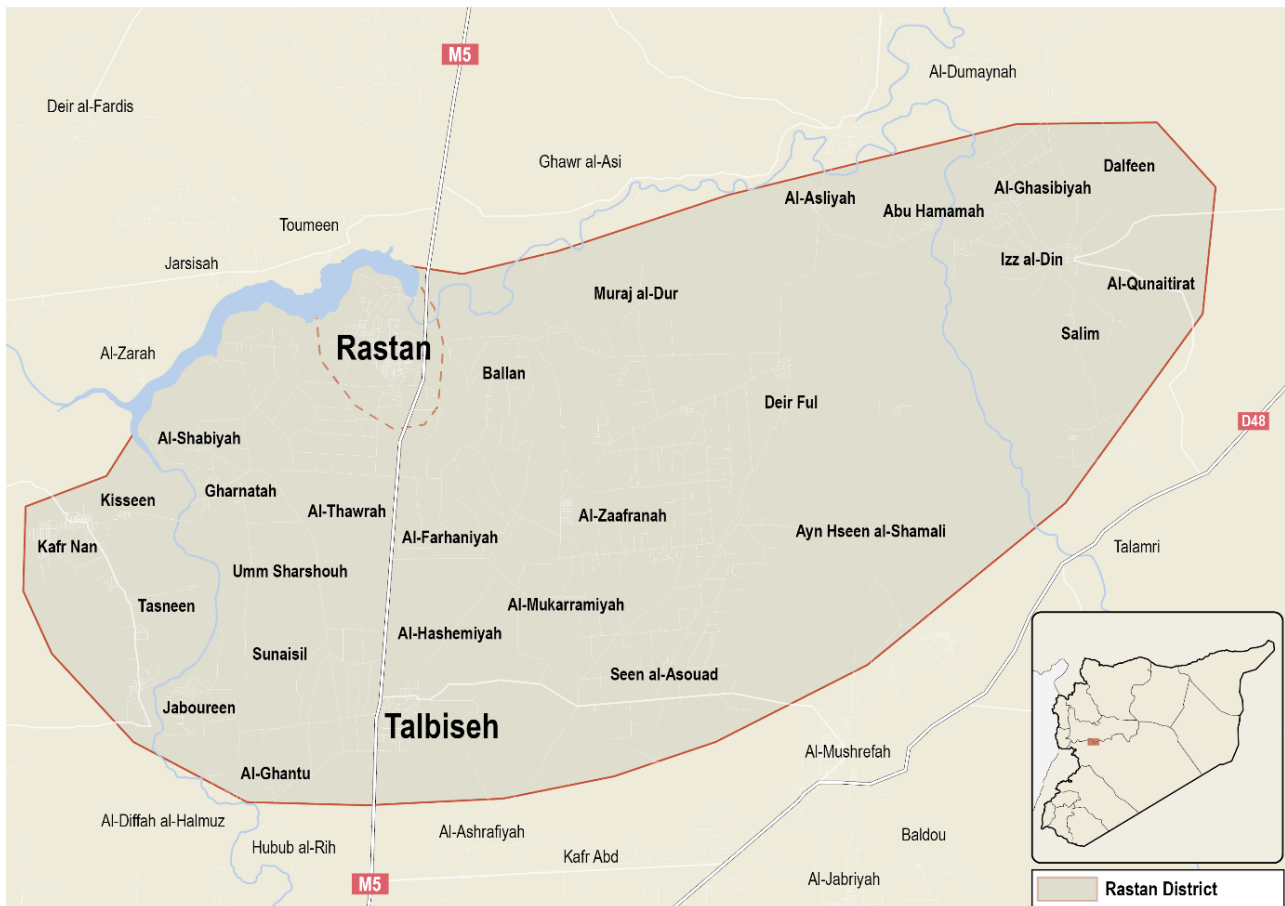
13 Aliqtisadi, "Profile of Mahmoud Farzat" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2Rvjj9d>

14 Abdul Latif Saeed and Ahmad Amin al-Daheek, *Landmarks and Figures of Talbiseh* (in Arabic), (e-book, 11 June 2009), 119, <https://bit.ly/3r39xbU>

15 Abdul Karim Ayoub, "What Remained of Rastan Freight Cars Fleet? Where and How Does it Work Today?" (in Arabic), *Eqtsad*, 22 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/3gAwYEz>

16 Rayan Muhammad, "Rastan... 'Capital of Dissidents' in Syria Prepares for Displacement" (in Arabic), *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 5 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/3oiT55l>

## Map 2: Rastan District



Source: Official Administrative Divisions. Designer: Ayoub Lahouioui, July 2021

### 1.2. The Failing Influence of the Major Families in Bashar al-Assad's First Decade (2000-2011)

Bashar al-Assad's regime worked to remove the old guard, gradually dismantling their local networks and facilitating the rise of a new elite that would be beholden to him. Thus, major families and traditional intermediaries in Rastan began to lose their influence and businessmen and security officers – some of them from outside the city – came to have greater power there. This was accompanied by other changes that affected local officials and traders, thereby disrupting the relationship between the regime and Rastan.

In June 2000, Abdul Razzaq Ayoub lost his seat on the Regional Command of the Baath Party. This was a severe blow to the Ayoubs influence. In 2010, for instance, Abdul Rahman Ayoub (Mustafa Ayoub's brother) ran as the family's candidate for the Secretary of the Baath Party's Rastan Branch, but he lost the elections to Ezzeddine Obaid.<sup>17</sup> A local saying that summarizes these transformations spread: "The Ayoub family's fork has broken".<sup>18</sup> 'Fork', note, is used to mean 'clout' in the area.

Mustafa Tlass, on the other hand, remained Minister of Defence until he retired in 2004, perhaps as a reward for facilitating a smooth transition of power from Hafez to Bashar. A year later, however, he lost his position on the Baath Regional Command. Soon afterwards, Tlass' status as a local intermediary

17 Ezzeddine Obaid hails from a family from Lower Rastan, but he resided in Upper Rastan. Before taking the position of Secretary of the Baath Party Branch, he had worked as a schoolteacher and head of the Youth League in Rastan.

18 WhatsApp interview with a dignitary from Rastan, *ibid*.

started to crumble, something seen in his inability to resolve a dispute between businessman Mahmoud Farzat and Homs Governor Iyad Ghazal in 2008-2009.<sup>19</sup> Regardless, the Tlass family maintained its special privileges. Firas Tlass' investments grew between 2000-2010 as he established ten new investment projects with other businessmen,<sup>20</sup> and his brother, Brigadier-General Manaf Tlass, took command of the 104th Brigade of the Republican Guard. Unlike their father, however, Firas and Manaf did not have strong ties to Rastan.<sup>21</sup> The regime also worked to stir up disputes within the Tlass family and to weaken the central part Manaf played there. As such, Major-General Talal Tlass, who did not have a close relationship to Manaf, took command of the 9th Division at the beginning of Bashar's reign.<sup>22</sup> He then took over the 3rd Corps in 2008.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Manaf did not succeed his father as the Minister of Defence, as the Tlass family had hoped.<sup>24</sup>

By 2005 it had become clear who the actual decision makers in Rastan were: business tycoons with close ties to the regime, and security officials. Of course, this did not mean that the two groups were always in agreement. On the one hand, economic liberalisation policies increased the influence of major businessmen associated with the regime, some of whom took on official positions at the local level. This was exemplified in the appointment of one businessman close to Bashar al-Assad, Iyad Ghazal, as the governor of Homs, or the 'ruler' of the province as locals used to describe him.<sup>25</sup> Ghazal instructed service institutions in the governorate not to submit their reports to the security services.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, growing regional instability and threats to the regime, following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, made Assad increasingly dependent on security officials in controlling local communities. Security approval, for example, became necessary for many economic activities in Rastan. According to a former resident, "although drilling wells was illegal in the Rastan area, it was permitted with a cover provided by Tlass and Ayoub, but it was forbidden after they were dismissed, requiring the approval of security officials."<sup>27</sup>

These transformations affected the positions of local officials from the major Rastani families, many of whom were replaced by individuals from lesser families in Upper Rastan, or even from outside the area. It appears that these replacements were carried out under the supervision of the security services the Homs Governorate Council, and the Baath Party. In this context, Mustafa Ayoub, a leading member of the Baath Party's Homs Branch, was replaced by Muhammad Khatib (2000-2004) and then by professor

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19 In 2008-2009, the Directorate of Environment in Homs issued a decision requiring either the relocation of Mahmoud Farzat's factory or the installation of a refining plant to treat the factory's waste. This meant financial losses for Farzat, who requested the intervention of Lieut. Gen. Tlass. After his request failed, Farzat was forced to adhere to the request of the Governor of Homs' office manager, the lawyer Mahmoud al-Naqari, to pay eight million Syrian pounds in cash and provide financial support to the al-Karamah Football Club. Skype interview with a source familiar with the story who wished to remain anonymous, 15 April 2021.

20 Aliqtisadi, "Profile of Firas Tlass," *ibid*.

21 According to a Rastani, "the few visits Manaf Tlass' made to Rastan were to attend his relatives' special occasions. Firas, however, I don't remember that he ever visited Rastan." WhatsApp interview with Mustafa Hussein, member of the Negotiation Committee in the Northern Homs and Southern Hama Countryside, northern Syria, 19 April 2021.

22 Maj. Gen. Talal Tlass was backed by Maj. Gen. Assef Shawkat, the husband of Bashar al-Assad's sister, who was deputy head of the Military Intelligence Department, then its head in 2005-2009.

23 Jisr TV, "Bashar Restores Tlass to the Ministry of Defence" (in Arabic), 2 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/367fXx3>

24 Rastanis circulated rumours about Bashar al-Assad promising Manaf that he would hand him the post of Minister of Defence. According to Rastanis, Bashar "betrayed the friendship and the covenant" when he appointed Gen. Hassan Turkmani as Minister of Defence. WhatsApp interview with Shaher Obaid, former member of the affiliated-opposition local council of Rastan, Azaz, 30 May 2021.

25 Al-Jazeera, "Swaid Tells the Details of His Meetings with Al-Assad" (in Arabic), 13 January 2012, <https://bit.ly/2SUe438>. Muhammad Iyad Ghazal was Governor of Homs from 2005-2011. He was born in the governorate of Aleppo to a family from Iskenderun. Ghazal held several government positions, including director of the Presidential Palace in Aleppo, and general director of the General Organisation of Syrian Railways in 1999. He was very close to Bashar al-Assad, and several interviews indicated that security services submitted reports about his corruption and authoritarianism in Homs, but that these were ignored by Bashar al-Assad. The interviews also indicated that Iyad Ghazal was a partner to businessmen Rami Makhlof and the Labib Brothers in real estate in the governorate of Homs, though no official documents confirm this. After 2011, Ghazal's name emerged clearly in the business field, with his founding of the Cartel Group in the United Arab Emirates in 2012, as well as the Schuster Pictold Syria Engineering Consultancy in 2019, which is, according to the Aliqtisadi website, located in Rural Damascus.

26 WhatsApp interview with Shaher Obaid, *ibid*.

27 Skype interview with a former resident of Rastan, Turkey, 17 April 2021.

Adnan al-Sheikh Hammoud in 2004. Both are from Talbiseh<sup>28</sup> and were likely supported by members of the Baath Regional Command.<sup>29</sup> Since the position had previously been occupied by Rastanis, a joke became popular in Talbiseh which drew on the local meaning of 'fork' as clout or influence: "Why do Rastanis eat watermelon with a spoon? Because their fork broke."<sup>30</sup> In 2007, engineer Abdullah Ahmad Taqtaq, a member of a small family from Upper Rastan, was brought into the People's Assembly.<sup>31</sup> It seems that the relationships Taqtaq had built up while working at the Military Housing Establishment and the Homs Governorate Council had given him enough support to win the parliamentary seat. Yahya Darwish, from Lower Rastan, was removed from his position as the president of the Rastan Peasants Association and replaced by a new appointee from outside the region.

Finally, changes among the city's decision-makers also affected local business magnates, who soon began losing their privileges. This became evident in the governorate's targeting of freight companies operating in the area. These were given heavy fines, for contravening tonnage law. As explained by an owner of a freight company at the time,<sup>32</sup> this law limits the load-size of freight vehicles for certain highways and for certain vehicles.

Discontent grew among some from Lower Rastan over what they considered to be their deliberate marginalisation. Meanwhile, the families of Upper Rastan hardly noticed the difference, since despite their continued representation in state institutions and the Baath Party, their officials' decision-making power and the distribution of perks to relatives and acquaintances had never been substantial. With time, the self-interest of Rastan's most influential sons had come to outweigh the interests of their families. The result was a disruption in the relationship between the regime and Rastan, a disruption that would come back to haunt the regime in the 2011 uprising.

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28 Talbiseh's families were not as favoured by the regime as those of Lower Rastan. This may be explained by the fact that the people of Talbiseh tended to work in agriculture and trade and rarely sought state employment, as well as by their general distaste for volunteering in the military, something that was considered a disgrace for them. WhatsApp interview with Sheikh Abdulaziz Bakour, one of the notables of Talbiseh, northern Syria, 19 March 2021.

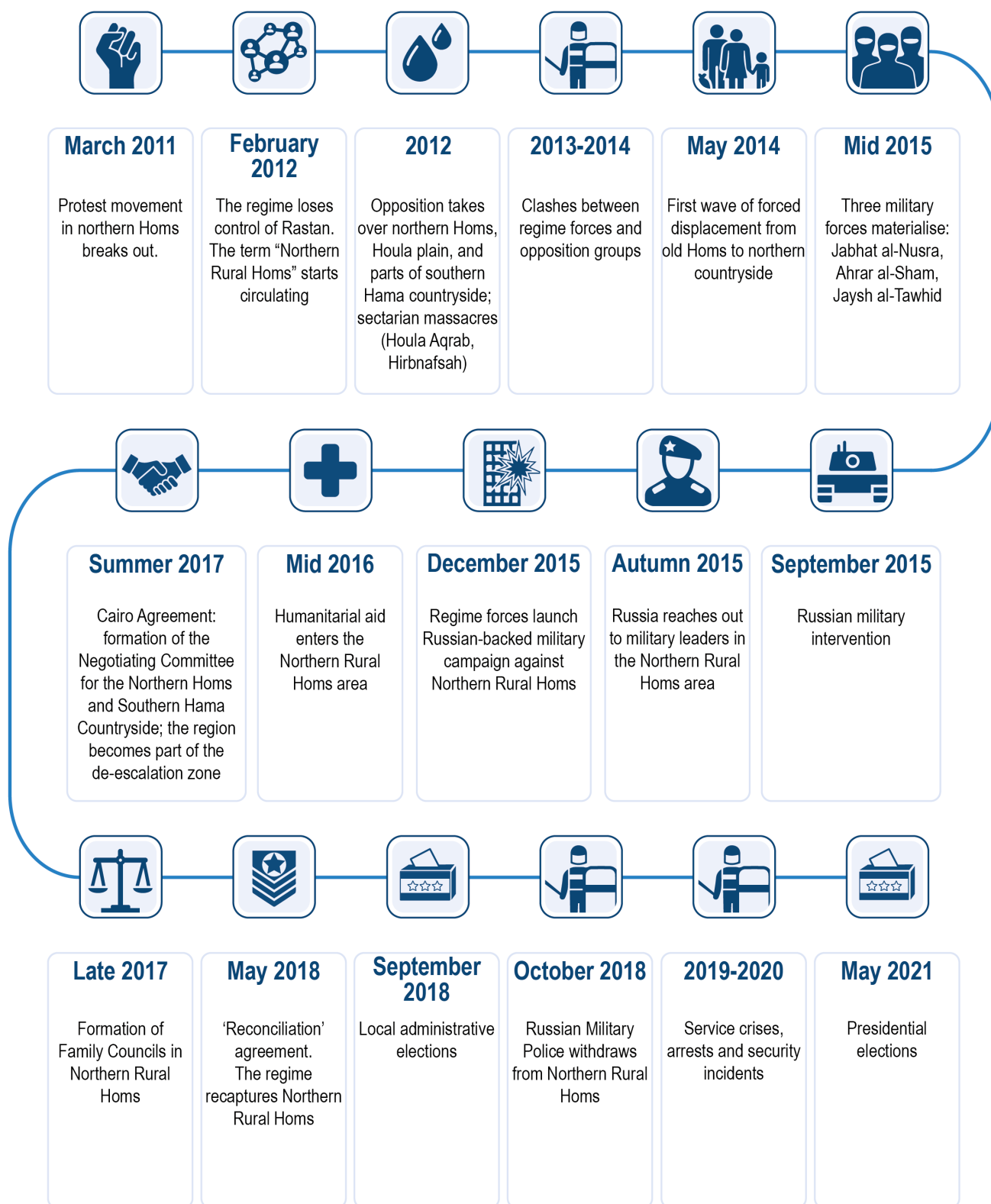
29 Some testimonies mentioned the name of Muhammad Hussein, a member of the Regional Command of the Baath Party, who hails from Deir al-Zor and who was Minister of Finance from 2003 until 2011.

30 WhatsApp interview with Rastani dignitary, northern Syria, ibid.

31 Al-Jaml, "The Results of the People's Assembly Elections for the Ninth Legislative Cycle" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2U1LvBE>

32 Skype interview with an owner of a freight company in Rastan, Turkey, 28 May 2021.

## Timeline: Key Events in Northern Rural Homs between March 2011 and May 2021



Source: The author. Design: Ayoub Lahouioui, July 2021

## 2. Divisions and Transformations in Rastani Families in Wartime (2011-2018)

In March 2011, the protest movement erupted in Upper Rastan. While some of the young from Lower Rastan participated in the demonstrations, Lower Rastan notables preferred to remain neutral. Either they wanted to see if the rising came off or they held back in anticipation of a move of the regime towards them. After the regime lost control of the city in February 2012, representatives of some major families came to the fore and took charge of the city's civilian and military affairs. Meanwhile, the regime continued to have some influence in the city through those local officials who did not leave. In May 2018, thanks to their membership in the Rastan Families Council, some family representatives played an indirect role in a local 'reconciliation' agreement: displaced Rastanis call it the 'displacement' agreement. The agreement led to the expulsion of 35,000 people from the Northern Rural Homs area towards northern Syria,<sup>33</sup> 17,000 of whom were from Rastan.<sup>34</sup>

### 2.1. Opposition-Controlled Rastan: Family Competition and Regime Infiltration

Between spring and summer 2011, some Rastani officials tried to calm the protests on their own initiative. For example, Abdullah Ahmad Taqtaq, a Member of the People's Assembly, retired Major-General Ibrahim al-Mahmoud,<sup>35</sup> and Brigadier-General Manaf Tlass reached out to the Rastani demonstrators. Their weak social ties with the Rastani community, however, and their failure to offer any corresponding commitment from the regime, along with the increasing number of deaths among protesters, all spoke against them. On the other hand, Sheikh Abdul Karim al-Raya pacified the protestors for a time.<sup>36</sup> He managed to do so thanks to his closeness to them, but also thanks to the mandate given him by security leaders, by which some detained protesters were released.

As the demonstrations continued, the situation on the ground escalated and became more violent, and the people and families of Lower Rastan got more involved. This angered some Upper Rastanis, who complained, "we came out against the regime, and you were at its core, and now you are at the forefront again!"<sup>37</sup> At the same time, some Rastan family members who had held government and party positions left the city in fear of their lives. For instance, Abdul Razzaq Ayoub's cars were seized by protestors and Rastani demonstrators assaulted him. Conversely, other officials chose to stay in the city, either because of the nature of their work or due to directives from the regime. One of the most prominent to remain was Samir Zabateh, director of the Rastan Cement Plant, member of a minor Upper Rastan family. Engineer Shaalan al-Dali, head of Rastan's Electricity Department and son of a major Upper Rastan family, and Hassan Taibani, then member of the Rastan City Council and member of a less important Lower Rastan family also remained.

At the military level, a number of Rastanis in the Syrian army began to defect from June 2011. The most prominent of these was Brigadier-General Manaf Tlass, who defected in July 2012 and travelled to France. Some attributed this to Manaf's tense relationship with Bashar al-Assad after Manaf refused to lead a military unit in attacking the neighbourhood of Baba Amr in Homs city in spring 2012: shortly after, the army attacked his hometown. Manaf was also not promoted to the rank of major-general

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33 Jalal Suleiman, "This Is How IDPs in Homs Countryside Spend Their Ramadan" (in Arabic), *al-Jazeera*, 9 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2VMaWYR>

34 WhatsApp interview with Muhammad Kanj Ayoub, member of the Negotiating Committee for the Northern Homs and Southern Hama Countryside, northern Syria, 13 April 2021.

35 Maj. Gen. Ibrahim al-Mahmoud was born in Rastan in 1948 and traces his line back to a Mashayekh family. He held several positions in the army, the last of which was Deputy Director of the Political Directorate in 2001-2008, before becoming a Member of the People's Assembly in 2012-2016.

36 Abdul Karim al-Raya is an imam from Rastan currently residing in northern Syria.

37 Skype interview with a former resident of Rastan, northern Syria, 6 April 2021.

during the July 2012 promotions.<sup>38</sup> Major-General Talal Tlass, on the other hand, was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general and appointed Deputy Minister of Defence.<sup>39</sup> This was a reward for his loyalty and a tactic to incentivise the Rastani officers who had remained in the military. The number of defecting soldiers from Rastan was estimated at 1,500 out of more than 2,500 commissioned and non-commissioned officers.<sup>40</sup> These defectors began, with civilians, to establish armed opposition factions which operated in and outside the city.<sup>41</sup>

At the civilian level, after opposition factions took control of Rastan and after state institutions ceased functioning, members of Rastani families went on to establish a local council to run the city at the end of 2012. The Ayoub, Ashtar, and Obaid families had the greatest influence over this council's composition and activities. The council was integrated into the governance structures of the Syrian opposition, first within the Free Homs Governorate Council (formed in January 2012), and then within the Ministry of Local Administration of the Interim Government established in September 2013.

After a phase of local solidarity, sensitivities between and within Rastani families resurfaced in 2013. This can be attributed to competition for external support and for family leadership positions. No family or family alliance was, as it happened, able to take control of military decision making in Rastan, something that prevented the formation of a unified military faction for the city. The imbalance of representation between Upper and Lower Rastan families in the local council – which would be an important channel for communication and for securing support from donors – was also a sensitive issue. For example, in 2016, council member Muhammad Ayoub withdrew his candidacy for the council's presidency and chose to support a candidate from another family. Possibly he feared provoking other Rastani families, especially as his family already assumed leadership positions in the city's Revolutionary Command and Shura Councils.<sup>42</sup> Leadership disputes also erupted within a same family. Ahmed Khalil Ayoub, for instance, was hostile to the Revolutionary Command Council due to a personal disagreement with a leading member of this council, Muhammad Kanj Ayoub.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the regime losing security and military control over Rastan, it indirectly maintained its presence by paying employee salaries through the period of opposition control. It also maintained a network of local officials from the city who did not leave, and who carried out whatever tasks they were assigned. For example, the director of the Rastan Cement Plant, Samir Zabateh, persuaded the local council to transfer the property deeds for Northern Rural Homs from the district's directorate within the city to the Cement Plant near the engineering battalion north of Rastan.<sup>44</sup> Zabateh, who had connections to officials in the Political Security Directorate, the Homs governorate, and the Baath branch in Homs, did so based on official letter from Talal al-Barazi, the Governor of Homs at the time. Furthermore, many Rastani notables maintained security relationships with the regime, especially through the

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38 France 24, "Defected Brig. Gen. Manaf Tlass in Paris and Hopes for a Transition in Syria" (in Arabic), 17 July 2012, <https://bit.ly/3kb5rgs>

39 Zaman al-Wasl, "Sources... Bashar Dismisses His Forgotten Deputy Defence Minister" (in Arabic), 19 December 2016, <https://bit.ly/3AXWD3x>

40 Al-Mundhir, "Rastan... Military Reserve of Sunni Officers in the Regime's Army," *ibid.*

41 The most famous brigades that operated in the Rastan area in the first years of the conflict were: the al-Ihsan Brigade led by Lieutenant-Colonel Nizar Juma'a; the Sons of Al-Walid Brigade led by Major Anwar Hussein; the Khaled bin Al-Walid Brigade led by Hassan Ashtar; the 313th Brigade led by Qassem Mansour; the Dhul-Nourain Brigade led by Captain Abdullah Ezzeddine; the Muhammad Shield Brigade led by Ayman Ayoub; the al-Ghadab Brigade led by Faisal Obaid; and the Hamza Brigades led by Captain Ibrahim Ayoub. Outside the Rastan area, Captain Abdul Nasser Shumair established the al-Rahman Legion in Eastern Ghouta, and Lieutenant Abdul Razzaq Tlass established the Farouk Brigade in Homs.

42 The Revolutionary Command Council appeared in 2011 and included revolutionary young Rastanis engaged in coordination-committees. Rastan's Shura Council was formed in 2016. It was the highest administrative body in the city, entrusted with selecting members of the local council and with coordinating the relationship between the city's civil and military institutions. In 2016, Captain Ibrahim Ayoub headed the Revolutionary Command Council, and Muhammad Ayoub the Shura Council. Interview with Muhammad Ayoub, member of the local council of Rastan for several sessions, Turkey, 25 April 2021.

43 Interview with Muhammad Ayoub, *ibid.*

44 This transfer occurred between September 2014 and February 2015. At that time, the Rastan Cement Plant was designated as a safe area free from bombardment due to an informal understanding between the regime and opposition factions in Rastan. Property deeds were later electronically archived there and sent to the governorate council. *Ibid.*

Reconciliation Committee in Homs. This committee was responsible for 'settling the status' of people wanted by the security services, as well as of reaching agreements with opposition groups.<sup>45</sup> The head of the Reconciliation Committee was Major-General Talal Shalash al-Nasser,<sup>46</sup> and the pilot Fayez Madani was an active member who reportedly played a role in providing services and implementing 'reconciliations.'<sup>47</sup>

The dynamics of inter-family competition and the extent of the regime's infiltration of Rastan weakened the local council's ability to manage the city. Service crises recurred as did citizen protests. In this environment of conflict and weak governance, the Russian military intervention which began in September 2015 decisively helped the regime to regain control of many opposition areas, including Northern Rural Homs.

## 2.2. The Families Council: A Russian Plan to Fragment the Area

Following Russian military intervention, representatives of some families began to respond to Russian initiatives. There was perhaps the wish to be in good favour with the Russians and to get privileges that would elevate individuals' status both in their families and in their city. These men formed the Russian-backed Families Council, which had an indirect role in the 'displacement' agreement.

At the end of 2015, Russia began reaching out to Northern Rural Homs through several mediators, most of whom were from outside the region.<sup>48</sup> In focusing on Rastan, Russia's goal was to work with officers from Rastan who had defected from the army. This can be seen in the Russian offer to put a truce in place and to allow humanitarian aid in exchange for Russia's support and protection of factions combating 'terrorism.'<sup>49</sup> Although the Rastani factions rejected this offer, there were strong lines of communication with Jaysh al-Tawhid in Talbiseh.<sup>50</sup> Russia operated on two main tracks: intensifying pressure to cut off opposition factions' supply chains and reduce their areas of control;<sup>51</sup> while also inciting competition between Rastan and Talbiseh. Take the Cairo Agreement, which was signed in August 2017 by Jaysh al-Tawhid and other parties, under Egyptian auspices, but that excluded the Rastani factions.<sup>52</sup> This agreement ultimately failed after it was rejected by a significant portion of the population in Northern Rural Homs, as well as opposed by several main factions operating there.<sup>53</sup>

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45 In June 2012, the Ministry of State for National Reconciliation Affairs was formed, led by Ali Haidar. Reconciliation committees linked to the ministry were subsequently created in the governorates. Tartous Youth Club, "Settlement of the Status of 86 Militants from Homs and Its Countryside" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 28 September 2014, <https://bit.ly/36AAE4r>

46 Maj. Gen. Talal Shalash al-Nasser took command of the 24th Division at the beginning of the protest movement. He hails from the village of Ghasbiya in the north-eastern countryside of Homs, and he enjoyed good relations with Maj. Gen. Ali Younes, deputy head of the Military Intelligence Directorate.

47 Enab Baladi, "Murder Incident Forces 'Tahrir al-Sham' Completely Out of Rastan" (in Arabic), 13 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2UHlqrF>

48 Among these mediators were TV host Kinana Huwajja, daughter of Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Huwajja (1987-2002), former director of Air Force Intelligence; Ahmed Assi Al-Jarba, head of the al-Ghad Movement and former head of the National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (2013-2014); Luay Hussein, head of the Building the Syrian State Movement; and businessman Firas Tlass.

49 For the Russians, 'combating terrorism' means fighting Islamist factions, especially those that oppose the Russian project. Al-Jazeera, "Rest of the Story, Russia and the Syrian Revolutionaries... Secret Communications" (in Arabic), December 2016, <https://bit.ly/3ewF9Sv>

50 Jaysh al-Tawhid was formed in May 2015 from the merger of several Talbiseh opposition factions, including: the al-Imam Billah Brigades; Humat al-Aqeedah Brigade; Talbiseh Brigade; 313 Jund Badr Brigade; Usoud al-Islam Brigade; Sayf al-Islam Khattab Brigades; Suqour Talbiseh Brigade; Muawiya bin Abi Sufyan Brigade; and the Suyouf al-Haqq Brigades. There were also independent battalions affiliated with the Operations Room. Ahmed Orabi, "Jaysh al-Tawhid. How Did It Begin and Where Is It Now?" (in Arabic), *Ana Press*, 6 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3bxhVtx>

51 Judi Arsh, "Retreat of Opposition Control in Southern Hama... Quarter a Million at Risk North of Homs" (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 17 January 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WL3MV7>

52 Ahmed Orabi, "Full Document... Provisions of the Cairo Agreement and its Annexes Concerning Northern Rural Homs" (in Arabic), *Ana Press*, 19 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/3bizVHR>. Cairo's role in this agreement can be explained by links between Egyptian officials and Ahmed Assi al-Jarba, the head of the al-Ghad Movement who oversaw the agreement with other al-Ghad leaders. It also depended on support from certain Gulf states and Russia; Damascus' acceptance; and Egypt's desire to antagonise Qatar and Turkey and crowd them out of the region.

53 Among these factions were: Faylaq al-Sham; Ahrar al-Sham; Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Tahrir Watan Movement (which was formed in 2014 and included factions from Rastan, most notably the Hamza Brigades, Ahfad Othman Brigade, and Rijal Allah Brigade); and the Homs Legion.



This deadlock led to the formation, in August 2017, of the Negotiating Committee for the Northern Homs and Southern Hama Countryside.<sup>54</sup> It was this committee that became the authorised entity for negotiating with Russia to reach a new agreement. Between summer 2017 and early 2018, it held a series of meetings with Russian officials. There were, though, no results. To overcome this stalemate, Moscow cooperated with the regime's security services (especially its Military Security). The aim was to attract a number of Rastani families and to work with them to weaken the position of the military forces ranged against an agreement and to alienate their civilian base. After unsuccessful attempts through 2016, Rastanis who cooperated with Russian officials – most notably Suleiman and Nasser Madani –<sup>55</sup> reached out to the city's families in the fall of 2017 to nominate representatives for the Families Council. Each family would be represented in proportion to its size. Interviewees estimate that the Council included from 50 to 100 members. Nonetheless, it remained without a president: there was fear that the president would be targeted by those who opposed the council; there was also concern that family sensitivities would suffer were one man chosen in that way. At the end of 2017, the Families Council began its public activities by calling for general open meetings to discuss the region's fate. The Council exploited anxieties about the imbalance of power following on from the Russian intervention, and practised indirect incitement against the 'strangers,' i.e., IDPs from the city of Homs and Islamic factions operating in the region.

Several factors strengthened the position of the Families Council as it called for 'reconciliation.' The most important were: (1) exhaustion caused by the siege of the city and the residents' need for aid in light of declining support from abroad; (2) the Red Crescent's aid convoys in coordination with the Families Council,<sup>56</sup> which strengthened the Council's local standing; (3) the regime's reliance on Families Council members and other loyalists as the primary intermediaries for agreements with opposition factions in Northern Rural Homs;<sup>57</sup> and (4) infiltration by supporters of the Families Council into opposition bodies, such as the local council and the Shura Council.

Disagreements within the Negotiating Committee between representatives of Talbiseh and Rastan led to the withdrawal of Jaysh al-Tawhid in March 2018.<sup>58</sup> Russian officials then called on members of the Rastan Families Council to step up pressure on Rastani factions and civilian figures who rejected 'reconciliation.' At the same time, the commander of the Jaysh al-Tawhid, Manhal al-Daheek, voiced his support for a proposal to form a unified military command for all factions in Northern Rural Homs. From these a political bureau would emerge to replace the Negotiating Committee and to resume negotiations with Russia. The proposal's purpose was to force out those who refused to 'reconcile' with Russia and the regime, especially representatives from Rastan. The unified military command was formed in April 2018,<sup>59</sup> followed by the creation of an affiliated political bureau consisting of civilians and military figures, and the Negotiating Committee was dissolved. However, contrary to the wishes of al-Daheek, the political bureau's elections in Rastan led to the return of Muhammad Kanj Ayoub and Maher Hussein, two fierce opponents of 'reconciliation.'<sup>60</sup>

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54 Al-Souriya, "Opposition in Homs and Hama Countryside Repeal Previous 'De-escalation' Agreement and Negotiate Directly Russia" (in Arabic), 9 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2S2eUuQ>

55 Suleiman Madani is one of the notables from the Madani Sheikh family. Born in the 1950s, he was a freight and transportation businessman and an agent for Hyundai in Homs. He remained in Rastan during the revolution, becoming a partner of Muhammad al-Shumair in the flour trade. He was also involved in the commercial crossing trade. Nasser Madani is also a notable from the Madani family. Born in the 1960s, he is a car and tire magnate and was an owner and shareholder in several companies, such as the Madani Transport Company and the al-Rahman Company.

56 Enab Baladi, "UN Aid Convoy in Northern Rural Homs" (in Arabic), 19 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/2UJgz9q>

57 For example, the high voltage power line (known as the 400 Line) agreement occurred in the spring of 2018 and was mediated by Fayez Madani and Shalan al-Dali. Ali Ezzeddine, "Electricity Repair Workshops Begin in Northern Rural Homs" (in Arabic), *Horrya Press*, 29 January 2018, <https://bit.ly/3pXH86j>

58 Shaam Network, "Jaysh Al-Tawhid in Homs Withdraws from Negotiating Committee Due to Lack of Seriousness about Final Agreement in Rural Homs" (in Arabic), 11 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/3gqBQgq>

59 Shaam Network, "Announcement of a 'Unified Command in the Central Region' as Sole Military Representative for the Northern Countryside of Homs and Southern Countryside of Hama" (in Arabic), 3 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/3w1UCj1>

60 Homs Alrastn, "Election of Rastan's Delegates to the Political Bureau in the Central Region" (in Arabic), *YouTube*, 26 April 2018, <https://cutt.ly/gnJSqvw>

Over several rounds of negotiation, it was clear that there were many intermediaries and negotiators on both sides, as indicated by the circulation of multiple versions of the agreement.<sup>61</sup> However, the political bureau's representatives from Rastan maintained their hard-line position, which saw them receive Russian threats via intermediaries from the Families Council. With the escalation in Russian bombing in Rastan, the Council incited residents to demonstrate and call for 'reconciliation' under the slogan "Rastan is here, she wants Russian police." They were also incited to attack the headquarters of various factions. These events, which came to pass, led to the 'displacement' agreement of May 2018,<sup>62</sup> to the deployment of Russian military police units in Northern Rural Homs, and ultimately to the return of regime control and the subsequent reconfiguration of intermediaries.

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61 The political bureau of the unified military command reached an agreement with the Russian officers in charge of the Russian Reconciliation Centre in Hama and Homs. Firas Tlass also put forward an initiative to this effect with the support of his personal friend, Russian diplomat Mikhail Bogdanov. The final word came from the commander of the Hmeimim Air Base, however, who asked Kinana Huwajja to gather 40 officers who had defected from Northern Rural Homs and inform them of the 'displacement' agreement as *per* the Russian conditions. Interview with Muhammad Kanj Ayoub, *ibid*.

62 Amin al-Assi, "Implementation of the Settlement Agreement Begins in Northern Rural Homs" (in Arabic), *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 3 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/3tASaii>

### 3. The Regime's Attempts to Gain Hegemony through Select Local Intermediaries (2018-2021)

The regime regained Rastan militarily after six years of opposition control. It then attempted to regain its hegemonic control of the city. It did so by weakening and dismantling the Families Council. In summer 2018, it put together a select group of individuals from various families in an informal Follow-Up Committee. The new committee was tasked with coordinating services between government institutions and the local community. In addition, the regime promoted local Baathist officials and heads of administrative units who had remained loyal. Achieving full hegemony over Rastan would prove, though, a difficult undertaking.

#### 3.1. Dissolving the Families Council and Forming a Follow-Up Committee

Following the 'displacement' agreement, the regime counterbalanced the Rastan Families Council by forming a Follow-Up Committee. The two bodies differed radically in terms of their source of power and the interests that each sought to serve. Members of the Families Council saw themselves as an entity that derived its legitimacy from the city's families. As representatives of those families, they felt qualified to speak on behalf of the local population. Members of the Follow-Up Committee, on the other hand, were, and still are, mainly Baathists, heads of administrative units, and current or retired military officers.<sup>63</sup> Their legitimacy comes from the regime's choice to promote them.

These differences would define their respective roles in the city in the first months after the 'reconciliation' agreement. For example, in June 2018, Qassem Obaid, a member of the Families Council, demanded the release of Rastan's detainees: this he believed had been part of the agreement. His attempts to mobilise the population to pressure the regime failed and ended up with him being briefly arrested.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, members of the Follow-Up Committee preferred to avoid the detainee issue except in a limited way.<sup>65</sup> They did not want their loyalty to be called into question, and they recognised the limitations of their position. They focused, instead, on public service activities, such as projects to restore the public bakery and open roads, none of which would have been possible without coordination with officials from the governorate of Homs.

By July 2018, Rastan's Families Council had disintegrated. This may have been due to the fact that it had no military arm; that its social base was negatively affected by the massive displacement of those who had refused 'reconciliation,' about 17,000 people; and finally, by members of the Follow-Up Committee inciting security services against the Council members. The regime selected, as members of the Follow-Up Committee, representatives from families who had not been included in the Families Council. The new representatives - at least those who have positions in the army, the party and state institutions - had, it seemed, certain things in common. They had previously supported efforts towards 'reconciliation'; they had relationships with senior officials in the Baath Party and the Governorate Council that protected them; and they had supported – in one way or another – the regime.

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63 The main members of the committee are Hassan Taibani, head of the Rastan City Council; Gen. Talal Tlass of the Syrian Army; retired Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Mustafa al-Mahmoud; Ahmed Hussein, head of the Red Crescent Division in Rastan; Muhannad Abdul Razzaq Ayoub, member of the Baath University branch of the Baath Party; retired colonel Muhammad Ayoub; Ahmad Tarko Farzat, a local notable; businessman Abu Bassam al-Waari; and Muhammad Mustafa Marwan, Secretary of the Baath Party's Rastan Branch. Among other figures who attended many meetings of the committee, we find Fayez Ayoub, the current head of Rastan's Religious Endowments, and Samir Zabateh, the director of Rastan Cement Plant.

64 WhatsApp interview with journalist Yaarob al-Dali, 18 April 2021.

65 For example, Gen. Talal Tlass intervened to secure the release of Mustafa Farzat after he was arrested by the regime. A local source attributes this to a personal relationship between the two. WhatsApp interview with a local source who wished to remain anonymous, 25 May 2021.

Through this selection process, it also appeared that the regime wanted to stir up rivalries between Rastani families, as evidenced by the inclusion of some local notables in the Committee. For example, Ahmed Tarko Farzat was put there because of his neutral stance towards the demonstrations and for leaving Rastan after it was lost to opposition control. The regime also wanted, once businessman Mahmoud Farzat had been cast out, to have the Farzat family represented by a traditional figure of unquestioned loyalty.<sup>66</sup> Ahmed Tarko's ability to form a local power centre had, meanwhile, been severely curtailed due to his poor finances, the general erosion of his influence in the area, and to his lack of connections with state, security, or Baath Party officials. Another local notable, Fayez Ayoub, attended many Follow-Up Committee's meetings and was, at the same time, appointed as head of Rastan Religious Endowments.<sup>67</sup> His appointment was possibly a reward for his support for 'reconciliation.' But it may also have been a plot to stir up competition within his family by including more than one Ayoub in the Follow-Up Committee.<sup>68</sup> It is also likely that while he was in Rastan, Fayez Ayoub had secretly formed an important bond with Issam al-Masri, head of the Homs Religious Endowment.

After May 2018, another type of family figure from Rastan rose to prominence: those who had been involved with pro-regime militias after the uprising. Although they were not included in the Follow-Up Committee, they made use of their security connections to carry out brokerage and mediation work. This is the case of Khairu Abdul Bari (Khairu Shuwaila), who leads a Tehran-backed militia operating in the governorate of Hama.<sup>69</sup> There is also Khaled al-Dali, who enjoys connections with field commanders in Air Force Intelligence and has good relations with other military formations by virtue of his affiliation with the Russian-backed forces of Brigadier-General Suhail al-Hassan.<sup>70</sup> Both coordinated the return from northern Syria of some Rastani IDPs and cut deals to release prisoners detained by the security services. It is unknown whether they acted out of family considerations or in pursuit of financial gain. We do know, however, that their endeavours were not always successful, a result of the fragmentation of local authority, with a plurality of security apparatuses and military bodies operating in the area.

To date, no prominent members of the former Families Council have joined the Follow-Up Committee. This may be because some committee members have vetoed their membership, using security ties to preclude their involvement. For example, despite his attempts to endear himself to the Committee, Nasser Madani has been unable to join. A local source attributed this to members fearing his influence, as Madani enjoys both an old network of connections and a new one that he formed during his membership of the Families Council. He is close to Khairu Shuwaila, and also has ties to local business magnates associated with the regime and with Russia. These include Talbiseh native Muhammad Alloush.<sup>71</sup> Such connections helped Madani intervene to secure the release of several of his relatives who were detained after the regime regained control of the city. With his exclusion from the Follow-Up Committee, Madani

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66 In April 2020 Mahmoud Farzat funded the restoration of the al-Mahmoud Mosque, which he had built before the conflict began, and the reopening of which was attended by Mufti Ahmad Badreddine Hassoun. However, there are question marks that have hung over Mahmoud Farzat since the beginning of the conflict: the accusation that he was financing the opposition; his exit from Syria; and the conditions he set for financing other restoration projects in the city – such as putting his name on Rastan Bridge. All these led to his exclusion from the Follow-Up Committee.

67 Fayez Ayoub is a former member of both the local council and the Homs Ulema Association – two opposition-affiliated bodies - and he was a volunteer with the Red Crescent.

68 As mentioned in footnote 63.

69 Khairu Shuwaila belongs to a Sheikh family who has been disowned due to his work in nightclubs. It has good relations with Iran and he leads the Rapid Intervention Forces of the 47th Brigade, Aleppo Today, "'Hajj Abu al-Khair' From Candidate for the People's Assembly to Major Smuggler from Lebanon to Syria" (in Arabic), 15 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/33T2cAE>

70 Khaled al-Dali is a notable from the al-Dali family and a well-known businessman prior to 2011. He enjoyed special relations (that preceded the uprising) with Major-General Jamil al-Hassan, former director of Air Force Intelligence (2009-2019). He used this relationship to engage with field commanders in Air Force Intelligence in the smuggling trade to and from Lebanon.

71 The businessman Muhammed Alloush belongs to a medium-sized family in Talbiseh. Prior to 2011, he owned several companies in partnership with other businessmen, most notably from the Droubi family. He also enjoyed good relations with Maj. Gen. Talal Shalash al-Nasser and other warlords and sons of officials, such as former Member of People's Assembly Muhammad Abdo Asaad; Ali Yusuf Khanat, commander of the Hisn al-Watan forces and a close associate of businessman Yusuf Khanat (Ghawar); and Mudar Jawdat Ismail, son of the director of Air Force Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Ghassan Ismail. Aliqtisadi, "Profile of Muhammad Omar Alloush", <https://bit.ly/2TYKkTK>

is working to revitalise his ties to members of the dissolved Families Council. During May 2021, he participated in Bashar al-Assad's electoral campaign in Northern Rural Homs.<sup>72</sup> He seems also to have contributed to funding the campaign in hopes of gaining favour with the regime. He wishes to expand his business operations and to strengthen his position locally. He is an instructive contrast to the weak local officials, relied on by the regime, who do not have adequate influence or social capital in Rastan.

### 3.2. Restoring the Local Administration and the Baath Party: Loyalty above All

After the 'displacement' agreement, Rastan City Council and Baath party branch resumed their work in the city, with the regime relying on officials from the area to manage them. It seems that these men were selected and recommended by officials from the Homs governorate, from the Baath Party, and from the security forces. For the most part, they are local figures without large reserves of social capital, something which makes it easier to control them and to guarantee their loyalty to the regime. On the other hand, the regime's efforts to promote these figures will not be easy in light of fragmented local authority, the presence of rivals, and the state's limited resources.

Between May and October 2018, as Russian military police spread through the Rastani area, most of the state's civil and security institutions returned to work, including the Electricity, Water, and Bread Departments, the recruitment division, security contingents, and the district directorate. Yet, postal service and telephone networks were delayed due to massive damage to their infrastructure. This return to work may have been due to pressure from Russia, which supervised the implementation of the agreement, but it also depended on the regime's interest in showing that these state institutions provided services. The quality of services, in any case, quickly declined, following the withdrawal of the Russian military police.

Rastan City Council had had no influential role before 2011. Its president was often mocked as 'the municipal donkey,' someone who puts up with everything and who gets nothing.<sup>73</sup> Yet since regaining control of the city, the regime has shown interest in activating this Council as a tool for checking up on any anti-regime activities. This was evident in the formation of neighbourhood committees in July 2019 and the duties with which they have been tasked.<sup>74</sup> The council also came under the direct supervision of Homs City Council, which can be explained by Rastan Council's lack of resources, but also by the regime's strategy for greater centralised control and scrutiny of local affairs.<sup>75</sup>

In September 2018, local administrative elections were held in Rastan. As in other cities and towns, the National Unity lists dominated by the Baath Party took most of the seats in the council, indicating the regime's will to re-tool the party to control the local administration.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the Council's president, Hassan Taibani, was re-elected for another term. Taibani has connections to Homs City Council officials and to military security officers. It is not unlikely that Taibani leveraged these connections to stay in favour and to keep his position while rivals tried to undermine him.<sup>77</sup> His reinstatement confirms that the regime has returned to its pre-uprising policy of relying on loyal local officials who come from traditionally less powerful families.

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72 Wael Melhem, "People's Assembly Member Wael Melhem and Other Rastan Figures, Including Nasser Madani, Participated in a Watan Tent Event" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 8 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ymNfF7>

73 Skype interview with a former resident of Rastan, northern Syria, 25 April 2021.

74 Rastan City Council established six neighbourhood committees, the main tasks of which are to monitor the neighbourhoods and communicate their activities to state agencies. Rastan City Council, "Discussion of the Work of Neighbourhood Committees in Rastan City" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 2 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/3xBoLap>

75 Centre for Operations Analysis and Research, "Northern Rural Homs Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile," August 2018, <https://bit.ly/3jhCT2N>

76 Agnes Favier and Marie Kostrz, "Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?" Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project, February 2019), <https://bit.ly/2VD4m6w>

77 Rabiaa Adnan Obaid won the highest percentage of votes, something that would have secured her the position of president of Rastan City Council. But the security directives stated otherwise. Skype interview with a resident of Rastan who wished to remain anonymous, 1 April 2021.

Hassan Taibani belongs to a small family from outside of Rastan. According to local sources, the family is from Taibat al-Imam, but its ties through marriage to the Ayoub family have strengthened its social standing. Taibani began his work in the local administration in 2005, moving through several positions between the Homs and Rastan city councils prior to 2011. When the demonstrations erupted, Taibani remained neutral and stayed in Rastan as a government employee, though with repeated trips away from the city. In 2014, he assumed the presidency of Rastan City Council after bringing attention to how the previous president, Mukhtar al-Saleh (2009-2014), had stolen municipal funds. Taibani was never a part of the Families Council, but he maintained good relations with some of its members.<sup>78</sup> In the spring of 2018, he was the target of a failed assassination attempt carried out by Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>79</sup> This prompted him to leave the city during the period in which the 'reconciliation' agreement took place. After his return, Taibani became one of the Follow-Up Committee's most prominent members, and his role there was cemented when he managed to retain his position as City Council president. He continues his work coordinating services in cooperation with the Homs Governorate Council. He also relies on his contacts with members of the Follow-Up Committee to communicate with the city's families and to collect funds for projects. Finally, Taibani played a prominent role mobilising support for Bashar al-Assad during the May 2021 presidential campaign.<sup>80</sup>

As for the Baath Party, its buildings and networks received their share of discontent from demonstrators in 2011. While the incumbent Baath leaders failed to contain the protest movement, the old party leaders stood by and did little or nothing. Shortly afterwards, some of Rastan's Baathists began to defect in response to escalating violence against the city.<sup>81</sup> As in all Syrian regions, the regime conducted an internal purge of the party's branch in Rastan, prioritising loyalty over all else. At the end of 2011, the Secretary of the Party's Rastan Branch, Ezzeddine Obaid, was kidnapped for a short period. Instead of appointing Mustafa Ayoub, former member of the Homs Branch (who had remained neutral), for this position,<sup>82</sup> the regime chose Talbiseh native Muhammad Marwan. This choice was likely because he was supported by Ahmad Rahal, also from Talbiseh who has close ties to the security services.<sup>83</sup>

Muhammad Marwan belongs to one of the smaller Talbiseh families. He headed Talbiseh City Council from 2003, but he was removed in 2009 due to his failure to suppress building violations.<sup>84</sup> He was given various other positions within state institutions. Muhammad Marwan chose not to play any role at the beginning of the protest movement in 2011. After he left Rastan and settled in Homs, he was active in recruiting fighters from the Rastan area for the Baath Brigades of Homs.<sup>85</sup> But according to interviewees, he did not play a prominent role in the 'displacement' agreement. He secured his position and was included in the Follow-Up Committee thanks to his previous activity in the Baath Brigades; his relationship with Ahmed Rahal; and thanks, too, to the regime's general lack of trust in Rastani party members.

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78 Dr. Tammam Zabateh, member of Rastan Families Council, is the husband of Hassan Taibani's sister-in-law.

79 The al-Nusra Front assassinated pilot Fayez Madani for his involvement with the Reconciliation Committees, but it did not succeed in assassinating Taibani. Marah Mashi, "Rastan and the Requirements for Return: Settling Status and Livelihoods... And Billions" (in Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 19 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/3C0qkBr>.

80 Centre for Social Journalism, "Bread in Exchange for Voting Is Regime's Means of Pressuring People of Homs" (in Arabic), 26 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zwtStN>. See also Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, "Networks, Mobilisation and Resistance in the 2021 Syrian Presidential Elections," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project, 23 June 2021), <https://bit.ly/3rTe1IN>

81 Reuters, "Resignation of 50 Baath Party Members in Besieged Syrian Town of Rastan" (in Arabic), 29 April 2011, <https://reut.rs/3fifYcQ>

82 Syrian TV Official, "Ezzeddine Obaid, Secretary of the Baath Party Branch in Rastan" (in Arabic), *YouTube*, 21 November 2011, <https://bit.ly/3fVdGub>

83 Ahmed Rahal belongs to a small family from Talbiseh. He has held several government positions in the education and local administration sectors and has served as head of the Talbiseh City Council since 2014, having been re-elected in the 2018 local administration elections. He has strong connections with the former governor of Homs, Talal al-Barazi, and with others in the security services.

84 Homs Governorate Council, "Republican Decree Dismissing Head of Talbiseh City Council" (in Arabic), 14 May 2009, <https://bit.ly/2QkbrGZ>

85 Zaman al-Wasl, "With Documents and Names: Baath Militia in Homs. Doctors, Engineers, and Hexagenarians... Remarkable Christians Presence" (in Arabic), 21 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3htDsHk>

At the Northern Rural Homs level, Muhammad Marwan is actively involved in rebuilding the party's networks, holding Baath Party meetings and in recruiting new members. He recently, together with local officials, encouraged residents in the area to participate in pro-Assad activities during the presidential elections of 2021. His efforts to recruit have been met with opposition or indifference from the local population, however.<sup>86</sup> There is also the unspoken rivalry of the long-standing Baathist leader, Mustafa Ayoub. Ayoub re-entered the scene through the Follow-Up Committee, taking advantage of his status as a notable from the Ayoub family and his good relations with city high-ups and magnates. An old-hand at building and managing clientelist networks, Ayoub also used his connections with the Baath Party Branch in Homs.

The regime took several measures to promote the Baath Party and Rastan City Council. It began to require that donors coordinate with the Council's president in order to implement their projects, as was the case when UNICEF renovated three schools in April 2019. It also pushed businessmen and some family representatives to contribute to funding the council's projects.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the regime seeks to activate party representatives in conveying the demands of the local population – such as agricultural workers – and in settling the status of those subject to 'reconciliation' procedures.<sup>88</sup>

Despite all this, the regime's efforts to promote Baath officials, the local administration and the Follow-Up Committee face many challenges. These figures lack the power to make decisions independently, due to centralised decision-making and due to directives from Homs and Damascus. The fragmentation of local authority also hinders the regime's endeavours. For example, the secretary of the Baath Party's Rastan Branch was unable to keep his promise to the region's notables that he would prevent the military police from raiding homes in search of people wanted for military service.<sup>89</sup> Current officials also lack any kind of family clout, in a city where certain families are still present and influential. Finally, the limited resources of local state institutions and their neglect by central authorities weaken the ability of local officials to build clientelist networks.

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86 Aleppo Today, "Despite Threatening Students with Terminal... Baath Party Fails to Organise March North of Homs" (in Arabic), 28 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3fijHzU>

87 Rastan City Council, "Part of the Restoration of Old Police Station Next to Rastan City Council, Funded by Donor from Rastan City and Supervised by Rastan City Council" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 5 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3eX9IAS>

88 Rastan Branch in Homs, "Granting Documents of Stop-Searching for Those with Settled Status in 2018" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 9 May 2021, <https://cutt.ly/XmOfuKU>

89 Orwa al-Mundhir, "Spectre of Forced Conscription Hovering Over Northern Rural Homs" (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 23 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2RdCXXk>

## Conclusion

The power of major families in Rastan started to fail when Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000 and the ties between these families and the regime unravelled. Local developments during the war – not least the forced displacement of Rastanis – further eroded their influence. In contrast, Hafez al-Assad's policy had relied on members of important families and had given them the authority and resources necessary to establish local hegemony.

This downward trajectory for the city's prominent families has extended into northern Homs generally, from May 2018 onwards. Bashar al-Assad's regime knows that consolidating its power over subjugated local communities requires intermediaries whose loyalty is beyond question. This helps explain the regime's return to its pre-2011 approach for managing Rastan, a strategy that mainly depended on local intermediaries from less important families or from outside the city. In this regard, the inclusion of some representatives from major families in the Follow-Up Committee has not marked a change in the regime's general approach. Rather, this was a continuation of the policy of weakening major families by choosing – among them – pro-regime individuals with no local influence. Selecting these figures has also served to provoke rivalries between and within major families. The regime has furthermore been keen to prevent the emergence of intermediaries who are loyal to its allies, Russia and Iran, and who would thus hinder the restoration of Assad's pre-war hegemony. Considering that the Families Council was a Russian initiative, the exclusion of its former members from the Follow-Up Committee – at least at the time of writing – appears to have been an attempt by the regime to monopolise the selection of local intermediaries.

Rastan's political and social re-configuration is an ongoing process. As in other parts of Syria, the regime is relying on local administration units and Baath Party branches to re-establish its authority. For the regime, these local entities are tools for checking up on and for infiltrating communities, for managing competition between local elites, for monopolising donor projects and for obstructing independent initiatives. However, despite the regime's calibrated approach to controlling Rastan, its efforts to impose its hegemony will not be an easy undertaking. Consider the limited resources of state institutions; the breaking down of local authority into a number of security and civilian organisations; and the weakness of family representatives on the Follow-Up Committee. Just as this approach helped destabilise the regime's social base in Rastan in the pre-war decade, the current reconfigurations of local power relations do not promise medium- or long-term stability. As one observer put it the present state of affairs in the Rastan region amounts to a "temporary truce with multiple possibilities."



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