

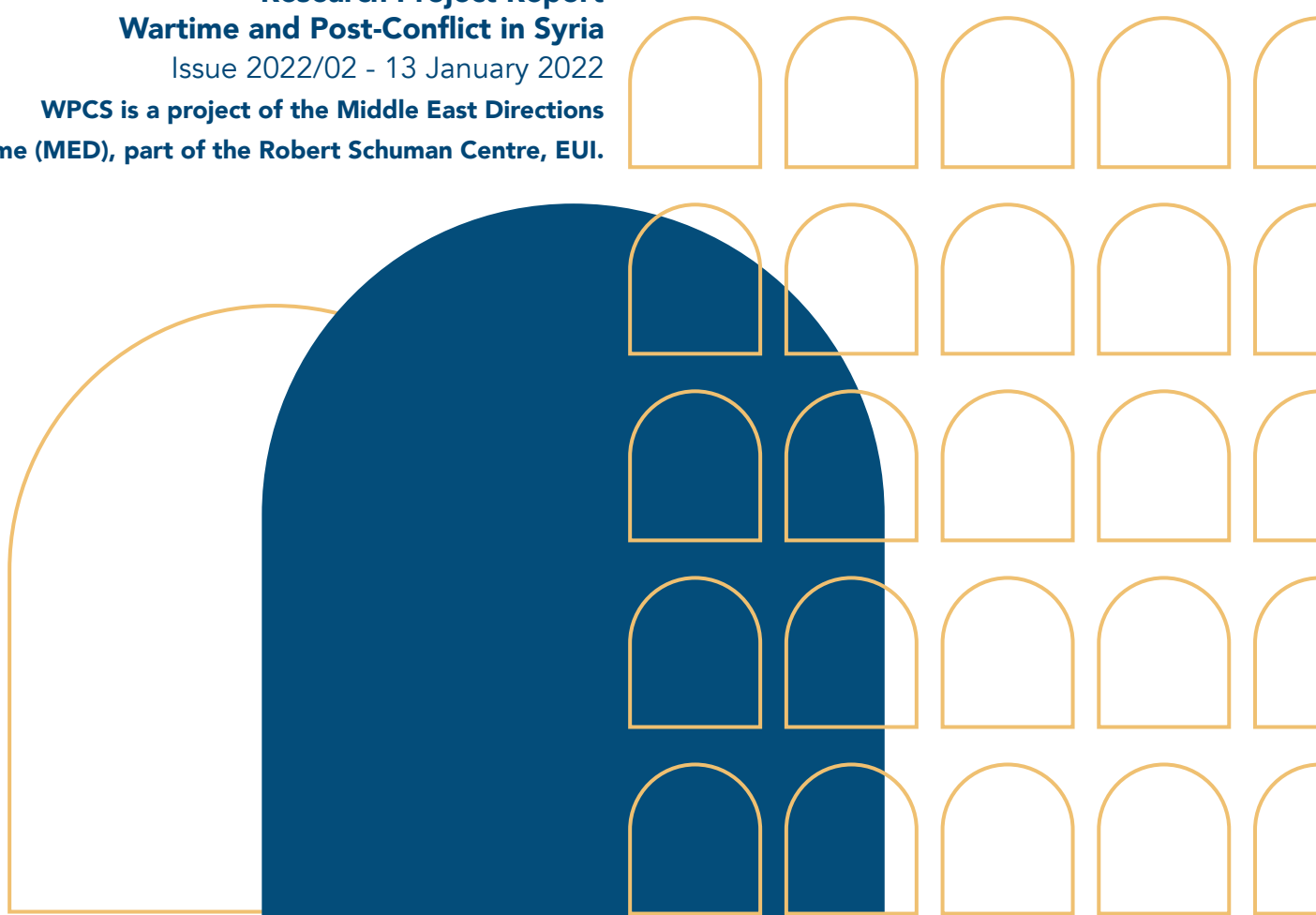
Tribes and Power in Aleppo City

Ziad Awad

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Tribes and Power in Aleppo City

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Table of Contents

Executive summary	5
Introduction	6
1. The Roles of Tribal Groups During the War	7
1.1. Tribal Divisions: Confronting the Protest Movement	7
1.2 The Central Role of Tribal Militias	9
2. The Growth of Loyalist Tribes' Influence in Post-Conflict Aleppo	13
2.1. Increased Tribal Presence in Representative Councils	13
2.2. Partial Hegemony Over the New Shadow Economy	14
2.3. Social Elevation of Tribal Chiefs	17
Conclusion	19
Annexes	20

Executive summary

To fortify Aleppo and shield it from the revolution, the Syrian regime appealed to its various business, religion, and the tribe-based allies across the city. Among the last, a group of tribes from the Bab al-Nayrab neighbourhood came to operate alongside the security forces to crush the uprising. This was an alliance, however, which brought with it divisions and disagreements among these tribes. Fleeing their strongholds in the then opposition-controlled eastern neighbourhoods, loyalist tribesmen established militias in the western areas of the city that had remained under regime control. The militia offered a structure of shared aims and interests through which the regime and tribes were able to connect. For the regime, these militias served as a necessary tool for enforcement, in a period when its military forces were taking part in many battlefronts elsewhere. For the tribes, the militias offered an umbrella under which to protect and preserve the interests of their members, while also serving to generate new chiefdoms and reinforce existing ones.

After the end of regime military operations in Aleppo in December 2016, the military significance of the Bab al-Nayrab tribes diminished. Small and medium-sized militias fell in numbers or were disbanded. Only the foreign-backed militias were able to remain and grow as they went to fight on other fronts. In a city whose eastern half had been destroyed completely, and whose traditional elite had, for the most part, been forced to flee, the tribal groups had different sources of capital for their political, economic and social influence. This included the military roles they had assumed, and the positions their chiefs had held within the regime networks that came out of the war. Since 2016, Bab al-Nayrab tribal leaders have occupied several seats in official representative structures, most notably the People's Assembly. They have also, with key actors outside of the tribal milieu, been involved in taking control of the most profitable sectors of the shadow economy, which is, apparently, bigger now than the city's formal economy. These chiefs have also succeeded in strengthening their social position, both in relation to their own and other tribes – in particular those which were poor or fragmented – and in relation to urban Aleppo, which has been weakened by the loss of its traditional intermediaries.

Introduction

The war in Aleppo began in the summer of 2012, when opposition forces took control of the eastern parts of the city: it ended in December 2016 when the regime took back control over the entire city. Aleppo changed dramatically during this period. Waves of displacement almost emptied the eastern neighbourhoods, with the concomitant departure of most of its top and middle-level traders and industrialists. The rise of new elites and the decline or departure of the traditional elites disrupted, meanwhile, its traditional class structure. The destruction of Aleppo was not simply a material one: it also marked “an end to the set of relations that had sustained and structured the city.”¹

From the wreckage of war, new actors have emerged, such as regime-leaning tribal chiefs,² who saw their influence increase during the war and afterwards. Their trajectories have not yet been subject to significant study. The present research looks at how the relationship between certain loyalist tribal groups and the regime has evolved in the city of Aleppo since 2011. The selected case studies are the tribes of the Bab al-Nayrab neighbourhood, namely the Jays (led by the Berri family), the Asasneh and the Baggara tribes.³ These three tribes all played key roles during the war and came to occupy influential positions in the local power landscape as the war wound down.

During the rule of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000), local communities were subject to various forms of regime penetration. In the case of rural tribes across Syria, this process depended on the structures of the Baath Party, the Farmer's Union and public sector institutions. Yet for the tribes of Aleppo, which had begun to settle in the city, starting in Bab al-Nayrab, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards,⁴ regime penetration was less formal. It was done, for example, by mediation in cases of mafia-like conflicts between the families of these tribes,⁵ or by sending heads of the intelligence services to collude with some tribal chiefs in illegal economic activities. The need for a different approach can be partly explained by the lower levels of public-sector employment, educational attainment and Baath Party enrolment among said tribes. On a broader societal level, the regime's growing hegemony over state and society – especially after its bloody struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s – and the growth of the shadow economy also contributed, with many of the Bab al-Nayrab tribespeople involved in unplanned urban expansion, debt collection, and smuggling operations. The wealth and the patron-client ties that came out of these activities, as well as the connections forged with security officials, contributed to the rise of new chiefs and the consolidation of the position of existing ones within some of these tribes. The relationship between the regime and these tribes did not change significantly after Bashar al-Assad took power. In the first decade of his rule, the tribes of Bab al-Nayrab proved of little importance to the new president. The tribes continued to answer directly to regime officials rather than state institutions, and the informal ways in which the two parties converged (where the tribe's chief had at least a partial role) remained mostly unchanged.

1 Kheder Khaddour, “Consumed by War. The End of Aleppo and Northern Syria's Political Order,” *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, October 2017, <https://bit.ly/3miFoUK>

2 Because of the specific characteristics of Aleppo tribes, the researcher uses the term ‘chief’ (*za'im*) to refer to the leadership of the Bab al-Nayrab tribes, instead of the term ‘sheikh’ which is commonly used in other parts of Syria. Being a chief is not necessarily hereditary, as is the case in al-Jazira and the Euphrates: there, tribes were settled in predominantly poor rural areas and in large, complete groups, mostly preserving their hereditary leadership structures as they moved from nomadism into settlement.

3 These tribes were originally concentrated in Bab al-Nayrab and its urban outskirts, as well as in some surroundings villages like Issan, Tarkan and Tell Shegheb, south-east of Aleppo city.

4 The vanguard of Bab al-Nayrab's tribes arrived in the old, grand and rich city of Aleppo as individuals, families or in small, disparate groups. It was only later that tribal links among these individuals and groups were revived or established. Leadership among these tribes emerged after they had settled in the city, and in many cases, a chief of a street or neighbourhood would later emerge as a tribal chief. This was especially the case after the increase of arrivals from tribal families to the city.

5 Azmi Bishara, *Syria: A Way of Suffering to Freedom, a Foray into Current History* (in Arabic), Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, March 2013, p. 344.

The tribes had long been settled there, and their first dwellings in Bab al-Nayrab were close to the citadel in the city centre. But the tribes continued to live apart from urban life for several decades. They resided, isolated, in informal settlements in southern and eastern neighbourhoods. They showed little interest in integrating into urban society and city society largely looked down on them. The tribes were happy to keep to their own world, stepping outside it mostly to request support of or leniency from the authorities: they were intent on increasing or preserving their own centre of power. The regime, meanwhile, had sufficient levels of surplus power to manage its relationship with the tribes prior to 2011: it used both subjugation and co-optation, depending on the situation.

This paper will explore the ways in which the war affected the roles played by the actively pro-regime tribesmen of Aleppo, both in relation to power structures and to social position. In answering this question, this paper relies first on interviews conducted either in person or over the internet with 60 individuals. Interviewees include dignitaries and active members of the tribes who have occupied different roles, in addition to other categories of Aleppians (lawyers, judges, traders, intellectuals, university students, clerics, public-sector employees, and former members and officials of the Baath Party). Other sources include content published on pro-regime social media platforms, social media accounts of members of the tribes, and government websites.

1. The Roles of Tribal Groups During the War

The ways in which the Bab al-Nayrab tribes responded to the revolution, as well as to the strategies of the regime to suppress it, were various and have contributed to internal divisions. This could be seen in particular after armed conflict broke out in the summer of 2012 as the Free Syria Army (FSA) took control of Aleppo's eastern neighbourhoods, some of which were tribal strongholds. A large proportion of the tribal chiefs relocated to regime-controlled western areas, partly out of fear of the revolutionaries. These chiefs sided with the regime, first in the security response against the peaceful revolutionary movement, and then in military terms in the formation of tribe-based militias. These militias – aside from their key military role before the cessation of hostilities in December 2016 – helped strengthen the ties between these tribes and the regime and its Iranian allies.⁶ In addition, they were a key factor in gaining – or maintaining – the chief's status within his tribe.

1.1. Tribal Divisions: Confronting the Protest Movement

Most tribal chiefs, along with the majority of Aleppo's urban elite including clerics, industrialists and traders, took the side of the regime. A few others took a more neutral position. In some cases, political positions fluctuated as the conflict developed. Three main factors influenced the stances of tribal chiefs: the strength of their ties with the regime before the uprising; their personal characteristics; and the way in which they had assumed leadership positions.

The most striking case in this respect is the Jays tribe, which is made up of small families clustered around the prominent Berri family, whose members in 2011 were estimated to be 5,000 men and women.⁷ Since the 1970s and 1980s, strong ties have linked Shaaban Mahmoud Berri, and later his sons, to the heads of the intelligence services.⁸ This fact proved key in the position taken by the

6 The Russians seemed little concerned with establishing special networks with Aleppo, despite backing the Jerusalem Brigade which was mostly composed of Palestinian refugees from the al-Nayrab camp in the southeast of Aleppo.

7 Interview with Saadallah Berri, a leading family figure, September 2021.

8 In some history books, the ancestors of Shaaban Berri are mentioned as leading figures and *chiefs* in the Bab al-Nayrab area. Kamil al-Ghazzi, *River of Gold in the History of Aleppo* (in Arabic), Aleppo Maronite Press, Part Two, p. 456. Family leadership shifted from Rajab bin Mahmud Berri, a contemporary and supporter of the post-independence national governments, to his brother Shaaban who embodied the new model of the tribal chief. Shaaban was illiterate and disengaged from conservative values and customs; he was more violent than his ancestors, and more reliant on his connections to the authorities.

tribe/family's chief, Zein al-Abideen bin Shaaban (known as Zaino), at the start of the revolution.⁹ Zaino was known to be headstrong, reckless and quick to violence. It seems to have proved relatively easy for the security services to turn him against the protest movement. He spearheaded efforts to mobilise Aleppians in support of the regime, and soon came to form his own *shabiha* group (loyalist gang). In the gang there were hundreds of his own tribespeople and family members, alongside others from his sphere of influence; they came from his own stronghold in Bab al-Nayrab and from the village of Tell Shegheb, where the poorest parts of the tribe reside. Among the many *shabiha* groups formed in the first months of the revolution, Zaino Berri's group was known to be the most brutal. This was particularly so in their crackdown on student protests in Aleppo university.

The Asasneh and Baggara tribes offer further illustrations of the extreme loyalist position taken by tribal chiefs – those whose status relied on ill-gotten wealth and close ties to the authorities. An example from the Asasneh tribe, which had an estimated population of 70,000 in 2011, is Hussein bin Ahmad Humra. Up until the mid-1990s, Humra had a lowly profile working as a truck driver, transporting cattle to Saudi Arabia. By taking advantage of these trade links, however, and later his security connections, he was able to accumulate significant wealth trafficking drugs. By the following decade he had become one of Asasneh's top chiefs. During the revolution, he and his sons came to lead a *shabiha* group, made up of men from his tribe, which participated in the crackdown on protests outside the Umayyad Mosque in central Aleppo. They also confronted protestors in the southwestern neighbourhoods of Sayf al-Dawla and Salah al-Din, as well as in al-Marjeh neighbourhood, the tribal stronghold. In a comparable example from Baggara, a tribe of approximately 60,000 people, Abdallah al-Hamad (known colloquially as 'Bassouteh') also used his wealth and security connections to rise to a position of power. From a humble start, in the early 1990s, selling soil from the back of a tricycle, he went on to work in property sales, before finally becoming a chief. He exercised his power fraudulently over large areas of land, through the urban expansion of the Handarat area; over the course of a decade, he had built a mosque and a guesthouse there, consolidating the status and social position he had gained.¹⁰ Similarly, Bassouteh also led a gang which carried out several road ambushes in Handarat in the north-east of the city, targeting those who had fled from the security services.

A relatively small number of chiefs from the Bab al-Nayrab tribes adopted a more neutral position. This tended to relate to the personal characteristics of those chiefs, and their experiences within the tribes. An example of this is the longest-standing and most influential chief of the Baggara tribe in the city, Satouf bin Hammoud al-Meri.¹¹ Al-Meri eluded the invitation to meet Bashar al-Assad as part of a tribal delegation from Aleppo in April 2011.¹² He also refused the offer extended to him by General Adib Salameh, the head of the Air Force Intelligence branch, to receive weapons for the purpose of forming a *shabiha* gang in summer 2011. Al-Meri remained in his residence in Bab al-Nayrab after the FSA took control of eastern Aleppo in the summer of 2012. It was only the airstrike campaign that forced him, along with most residents, to flee. He sought refuge in Turkey in 2014,¹³ but he did not involve himself with the opposition tribal councils.¹⁴

9 Interview with Hayel Berri, a relative of Zaino, September 2021.

10 Online interview with a former friend of al-Hamad from the Baggara tribe, September 2021.

11 Since the 1940s and 1950s, there have been two separate chiefdoms in Aleppo's Baggara tribe: the first, in Bab al-Nayrab, is the livestock trader Hammoud al-Meri, the father of Satouf, whose leadership extends over the tribespeople living in the city; and the second is the agent of the feudal Mudarres family, Jassem al-Hamadin, and subsequently his sons, whose leadership extends over the tribespeople living in several villages surrounding the city.

12 To avoid being seen personally to favour the regime, al-Meri sent one of his sons to the delegation in his place. Interview with one of Satouf al-Meri's relatives, October 2021.

13 Until his death in 2021.

14 Since 2016, a number of tribal councils have been established in opposition-controlled areas and in Turkey, aiming to mobilising support against the regime and the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration. The most prominent of these has been the Syrian Council of Tribes and Clans, established in early 2017.

Aside from the chiefs whose positions shifted back and forth between neutrality and support for the regime, there were also divisions in terms of the tribespeople themselves. The range of differences varied from one tribe to another, but as the war went on, they generally became more rather than less divided. Three main factors influenced the degree and direction of the tribes' response to the revolution: their level of diversity and their openness to Aleppo's urban community, depending on educational attainment and former work relationships; the power held by the tribe's loyalist chief; and the strength and influence of the opponents to the regime within the tribe.

Some of the prominent members of the Berri family, such as brothers Said al-Din and Saadallah Rajab Berri, supported the revolution. However, the power held within the tribe by their cousin Zaino meant that all opponents of the regime were marginalised and shut out of the tribe's sphere of influence. Zaino Berri consolidated his position by overseeing the transfer of weapons-holding licenses (issued by the security services with his mediation) to hundreds of men from his and other tribes. He continued to build up his support base in this way until he was killed in July 2012. In the Baggara tribe, more peripheral pro-regime chiefs were able to frustrate any revolutionary pockets among their tribesmen. Therefore, despite the neutrality of most of the Baggara, its loyalist faction remained by far the strongest.¹⁵

Division was most apparent in the Asasneh tribe, whose leadership was split across different families and branches.¹⁶ The Asasneh tribe was considered the most open to Aleppo's urban community, and some of its members grew close to the protest movement's leading figures in the city and university, owing to professional connections or friendships. This allowed the protests to move into al-Marjeh, Asasneh's stronghold, in the summer of 2011, along with other eastern neighbourhoods such as al-Sakhour and Tariq al-Bab.¹⁷ The protestors thus had something like civil protection in those areas, while the ability of pro-regime chiefs or prominent tribesmen to confront them was curtailed.¹⁸ Despite this, the *shabiha* groups from Asasneh and Baggara, as well as the one led by Zaino Berri, continued to have a central role in suppressing the protests, and in obstructing and isolating the revolutionary movement – especially in the western neighbourhoods of the city.

1.2 The Central Role of Tribal Militias

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely how and when each of the pro-regime tribal militias came into being. However, they generally emerged in reaction to a shift in the balance of power in favour of the opposition, and they began to take shape as clear-cut military entities from the beginning of 2013.¹⁹ Following the takeover of the city's eastern neighbourhoods by FSA factions, the opposition gained a significant upper hand: many tribespeople and others joined either the ranks of the FSA (including hundreds of new recruits from the Bab al-Nayrab's tribes and thousands from the city's eastern areas), and to a lesser extent jihadist factions, or non-governmental organisations and revolutionary local councils which were emerging at the time. During the same period, many former supporters of the regime switched sides.²⁰ Many loyalists were, meanwhile, fleeing the eastern side of the city for western neighbourhoods (such as al-Hamdaniya, al-Shahba al-Jadida and Jamiyat al-Zahra).

15 Interview with Mohammad Jabr Abboud from the Baggara tribe (who worked as a vegetable seller before becoming a senior member of the Sharia Committee of the Tawhid Brigade, the largest FSA faction in Aleppo), September 2021.

16 Interview with Khaled Qadriya, one of the chiefs of the Asasneh tribe, September 2021.

17 The coordinating body of the Tariq al-Bab neighbourhood had ten members: six university students, an Arabic-language teacher, a driver, a shoemaker and a blacksmith. Online interview with Adnan Ghajar, one of the active members of the coordinating body, October 2021.

18 Interview with Abd al-Qader Hajj Moussa, from the Asasneh tribe, one of the organizers of the first protest in al-Marjeh, September 2021.

19 Interview with a former leader in a now-disbanded militia which fought in Aleppo city, October 2021.

20 Among them, for example, were some of those who had signed a statement supporting the regime written in the name of the Baggara tribe in Aleppo city in April 2011.

The founders of pro-regime tribal militias – all of whom were former leaders, sponsors or prominent members of *shabiha* groups – entered the conflict for different reasons. One motivation was the desire for revenge or retaliation after their position or gains had been frustrated by the revolutionaries, or after a family member had been killed. Another was the fact that their fate had become intertwined with that of the regime, giving them greater cause to fear the consequences of the collapse of the regime. Finally, they were incentivised by the possibility of the gains and privileges that could be won from the regime by those who gave their support.

All these factors applied in the case of Hassan Shaaban Berri, whose brother Zaino was killed by FSA members in 2012,²¹ and whose group became fragmented and whose family was broken up after the FSA took control of their Bab al-Nayrab stronghold. In 2013, Hassan established a special militia composed of members of the Jays and other tribes, called the Zein al-Abideen Berri Brigade, with the backing of Air Force Intelligence. Several other militias were established in a similar fashion between 2013 and 2014 from the remnants of the Baggara and Asasneh affiliated *shabiha*. Some of these militias had clear structures and identities, such as the Baqir Brigade from the Baggara tribe. Others remained small groups within larger entities, under the direct command of the intelligence agencies. Such groups were dispatched to strategic areas, such as the area surrounding Air Force Intelligence in the north of the city, and the Municipal Palace building which overlooked the front lines in the centre of the city.

Most pro-regime tribal militias began with just tens of fighters. These were bound either by family ties or by mutual interest and benefits beyond family circles. However, as the conflict developed, so too did the need for recruits. The militias differed in size and reach according to three factors: their backer (security body or foreign ally); their capacity to mobilise or revive tribal bonds, e.g. by stoking fears among conscripted tribesmen, or by offering financial or other kinds of benefits; and their ability to build alliances outside of the tribe.

In the case of Asasneh, rather than one large and established military formation, multiple militias emerged. This was because of numerous pro-regime figures within the tribe, and their almost equal ability to mobilise support and offer benefits, as well as the rivalry that existed between them. This can be seen, for example, in the militias established by Hussein Humra and Ahmad Sheikh al-Daya, who came from two different branches of the Asasnehs. The Jays and Baggara tribes, meanwhile, came to enrol hundreds of fighters in their own militias. The Zein al-Abideen Berri Brigade conscripted a large number of fighters from the village of Jibrin near the airport in the east of the city. The Baqir Brigade emerged from the Baggara tribe but came to expand into other tribes. These two brigades, which were hundreds-strong between 2014 and 2016, were part of the Local Defence Forces backed by Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – under the nominal leadership of regime army officers. These tribal militias were spread out over multiple fighting fronts in the city, as well as military bases and airports around the city. It is difficult to evaluate their military role independently, since most of them were engaged in combat alongside official military units. However, the number of casualties in each militia gives some indication as to their commitment. For example, up until 2017, the Berri Brigade reportedly lost 140 fighters in battles in and around the city.²²

Once the regime had recaptured the eastern neighbourhoods of the city at the end of 2016, the military role for these militias receded. As a result, small and medium-sized militias were either disbanded or reduced in size, while only the militias which relied on foreign intervention – such as the Iran-backed Baqir Brigade – were able to continue operating. The Berri Brigade exhausted its capacity to expand after the end of the fighting in Aleppo, thus preventing it from participating in the large operations on more distant fighting fronts. The Baqir Brigade, on the other hand, was able to continue expanding,

21 Zaino Berri was captured and then killed by the FSA after its factions entered Bab al-Nayrab in July 2012. Zaman al-Wasl, "Zaino Executed: FSA Detains the Berri Tribal Sheikhs as Ceasefire Ends" (in Arabic), 31 July 2012, <https://bit.ly/3BmR9hG>

22 Majdi al-Bassiouni, *The Citadel: Aleppo from Siege to Victory* (in Arabic), Damascus, Dar al-Sharq Printing and Publishing, 2018, p. 189.

growing to 1,500 fighters by 2020. This brigade relied on increasing levels of backing from Iran, in terms of financial support (monthly salaries ranged from USD 50-75),²³ training, and arms. Its leaders and broader membership also profited from looting properties and other spoils of war, especially during the large military campaign launched by the regime and its allies against the Islamic State (IS) in Deir al-Zor in 2017. Finally, a further advantage for its members was that time served in the brigade was included against mandatory military service, a significant incentive for young men from the Baggara tribe looking to avoid conscription in the regime army.²⁴

The militia offered a structure of shared aims and interests through which the regime and tribes were able to connect. For the tribe, the militia which emerged from it served as an entity that could protect and preserve the interests of its people. Pro-regime members of the tribes were more inclined to join these militias than they were to join official militias such as the Baath Brigades and the National Defence Forces, established at the end of 2012. For the regime, meanwhile, the militia served as a necessary addition to its military forces, with numbers depleted from the war of attrition and a growing number of fighting fronts.

Alongside continued military support in the case of the Baqir Brigade, one of the most significant pro-regime roles the loyalist tribal groups play today is popular mobilisation. Now that the regime has extended its military and security control over all Aleppo city, the Bab al-Nayrab tribes are racing to shore up the regime's authority. An example of this was the organisation of electoral propaganda during the presidential election in May 2021.²⁵ Moreover, they organise tribal conferences and gatherings both against the opposition factions and their Turkish allies, and against the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration and its American allies.²⁶

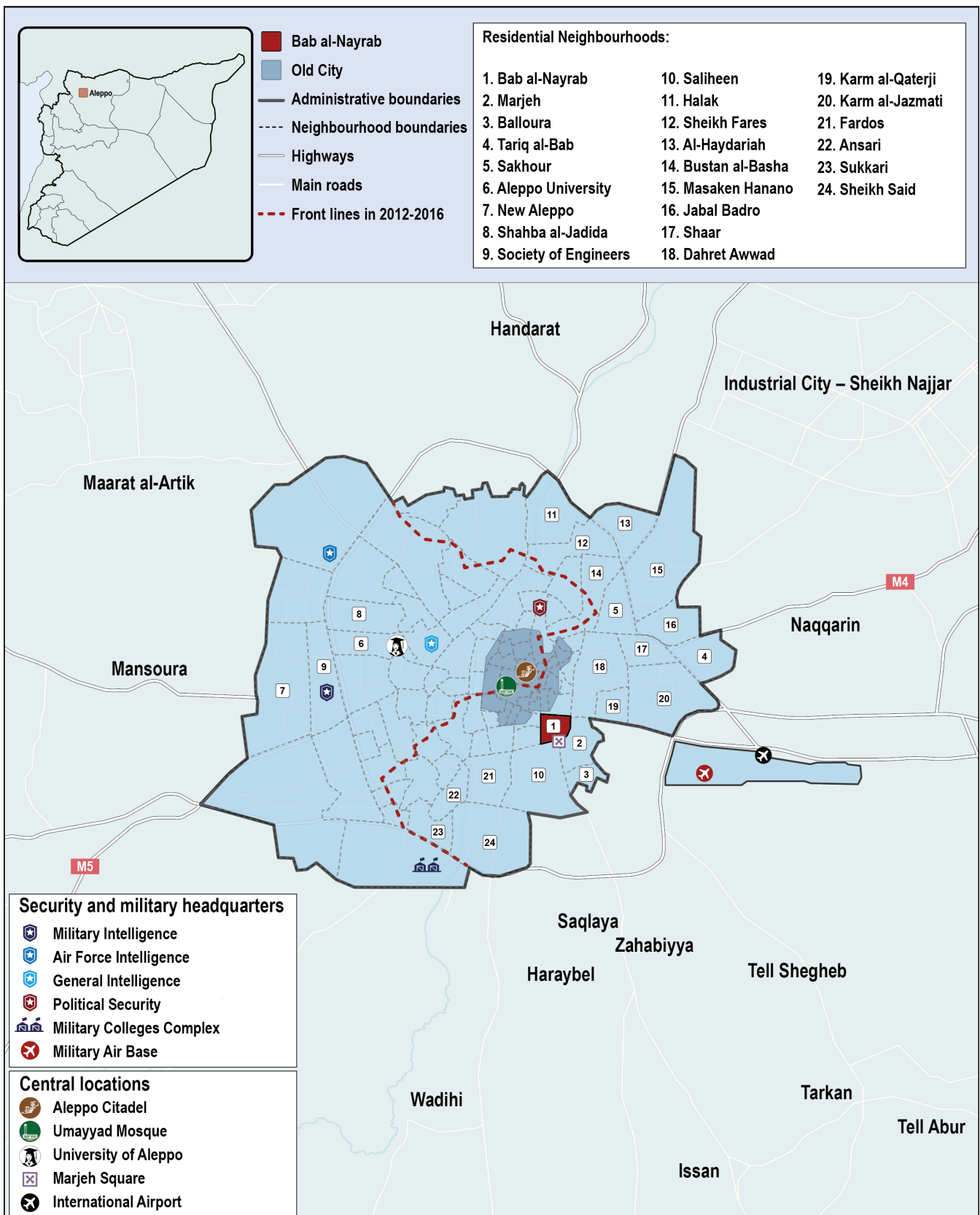
23 According to the Syrian lira exchange rate in the summer of 2021. Online interview with a former leader in a disbanded militia, September 2021.

24 Online interview with a member of the Baggara tribe close to the brigade's leadership, September 2021.

25 Bab al-Nayrab tribes organised a number of celebrations in support of Bashar al-Assad during the electoral campaign and after he was declared to have won. For an example of the Asasneh tribe, see Al-Jamahir, "A National Tent Erected in Celebration of the Success of the Presidential Election" (in Arabic), 29 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3FQDP7F>

26 Al-Jamahir, "Syrian Tribes' Forum and National Elites in Aleppo: Supporting the popular resistance in al-Jazira against the occupier and its mercenaries until they are expelled" (in Arabic), 20 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3btKN5H>

Map 1: Aleppo City and Its Surroundings



Source: The Author

2. The Growth of Loyalist Tribes' Influence in Post-Conflict Aleppo

The regime's military operations destroyed most of eastern districts of Aleppo, displacing the majority of their inhabitants - a population estimated at 1.2 million, or half of the city's total population, in 2011.²⁷ But the impact of the conflict extended into western areas too, home to the city's original inhabitants, especially those with upper and middle-class backgrounds. Subsequent economic crises took a heavy toll on the city, and the city lost, in this period of strife, most of its elites, either because they had fled or because their importance had waned as other elite groups emerged. Since the fighting ended in the city, the influence of the chiefs and other prominent figures from the Bab al-Nayrab tribes has grown to unprecedented levels, in political, economic and social terms. They have been elected to various representative bodies, most notably the People's Assembly; they have come to control key sectors of the shadow economy; and finally, they have been able to strengthen their internal ties, gaining prominence both among other tribes and in Aleppo's urban community.

2.1. Increased Tribal Presence in Representative Councils

In terms of their political influence, the chiefs and other prominent members of the Bab al-Nayrab tribes have increased their presence in official representative institutions since 2016. This is particularly notable in the case of the People's Assembly, considered by tribal chiefs as the paramount structure. Since the number of seats in the assembly had been increased in 1990, the number of representatives of these tribes for the two Aleppo's constituencies (Aleppo City and Aleppo Regions) had not exceeded three in most elections before 2012. In the 2016 elections, however, when several prominent members of the militias and security operations also won seats,²⁸ the number of representatives from the Bab al-Nayrab tribes increased to five – two for Aleppo City and three for Aleppo Regions. In the 2020 elections, they enjoyed even greater successes, most significantly in the Aleppo Regions, with five MPs from Asasneh, two from Baggara, and one from the Berri family.²⁹ Six were elected to independent seats, and the remaining two to Baath Party seats. Most of them had previously been leaders or sponsors of tribal militias.

The tribes also won seats in the 2018 local administration elections.³⁰ Issa al-Ibrahim, a dignitary from Asasneh, retained his seat in the executive office of the Aleppo Governorate Council, which includes also representatives from each of the Baggara tribe and the Berri family.³¹ It is notable that the biggest increase in representation for the Bab al-Nayrab tribes in the People's Assembly and the local administrative councils came on seats allocated to the governorate (i.e. rural areas) - despite the majority of candidates residing in the city, and most of their activity centring either in or just on the outskirts of the city. This allowed the regime to maintain economic, social and religious balances in the parliamentary representation for the city of Aleppo. The tribes themselves were not greatly concerned

27 Compared to the total population of around 2.4 million in 2011, Aleppo's population was estimated at 1.6 million, including internally displaced persons, in December 2019. Myriam Ferrier, "Rebuilding the City of Aleppo: Do the Syrian Authorities Have a Plan?" Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria), March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ts7NMC>

28 Ziad Awad and Agnes Favier, "Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016-2020)", Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria), April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3GAHRm6>

29 From Baggara: Omar Hussein Alloush and Adnan Abd al-Wahhab al-Hamad from Manbij, in the Aleppo Regions constituency; from Asasneh: Ahmad Hussein Humra, Mohammad Subhi Sheikh al-Daya, Hassan Shahid, and Taha al-Hajj Ali in the Aleppo Regions constituency, and Salloum Salloum from the Aleppo City constituency; and from the Berri clan: Hassan Shaban Berri from the same constituency.

30 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), February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3nGz1dx>

31 Ezz al-Din Hussein Shaban Berri and Mahmoud Hassan Alloush.

by this; their priority was simply to sustain the status and additional benefits that this representation affords. Finally, the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, whose makeup began to shift significantly in 2014 to reflect the rise of new warlord businessmen,³² saw the election of an Asasneh tribesman as a board member in October 2020.³³ He was the first representative of the Bab al-Nayrab tribes to ever enter the Chamber.

The families and branches of the Bab al-Nayrab tribes that gained political influence in these three representative bodies have certain characteristics in common. First, they are either traditionally wealthy families, such as those of Berri and Humra, or those which became rich during the war, such as the Alloush family. Second, they all have direct links to security officials. In the case of Asasneh's Sawej branch – which includes the Issa, Humra and Shahid families, and which is represented in the People's Assembly, the executive office of Aleppo City Council, and the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce – its chiefs enjoy strong ties with leading security figures. These include General Kifah Mulham, the head of the Military Intelligence division who had worked in Aleppo city,³⁴ and Brigadier General Fadi Abbas, a leading officer in Air Force Intelligence who played a prominent role in the battles for Aleppo.³⁵ Similarly, the family of Shaaban Berri – which maintained its representation in the People's Assembly and which gained representation in the Aleppo Governorate Council – has long-standing links with several security leaders, such as General Ali Mamluk, the head of the National Security Bureau. The family also enjoys support from the Special Bureau at the presidential palace. As for the Alloush family, which rose to the top of the Baggara tribe, and which is represented in both the People's Assembly and the Governorate Council, it relies on support from the Iranians, who have become a central player in the governorate.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the tribes of Bab al Nayrab saw no increase in their influence in the Baath Party leadership or its affiliated organisations, nor in the directorates of government institutions.³⁶ As evidenced by the 2020 selections for the Baath Party Aleppo branch leadership, the regime maintained the 2000-2011 quotas, representing the main regional, religious, and national groups of the Aleppo governorate. That said, the younger generations of influential families among tribes acquired, in the war, notable aspirations due to direct connections with the official centres of power – whether military, security or civil. Many decided to complete their secondary education to be able to train as officers in military colleges. This is the case with at least two members of the Berri family, which had produced no officers prior to the revolution.³⁷ Others did so with the aim of entering university, most notably the Faculty of Law, in which several individuals from the Berri, Alloush and Humra families enrolled. A law degree would qualify them for government institutions, as well as for prestigious positions such as police officers, judges and lawyers.

2.2. Partial Hegemony Over the New Shadow Economy

While the ways in which the Bab al-Nayrab chiefs and prominent tribal figures increased their political influence were relatively similar, the same cannot be said of the shifts in their economic position. This is predominantly because of the differences between the pre-war social classes of these various figures.

32 Joseph Daher, "The Syrian Chambers of Commerce in 2020: The Rise of a New Business Elite," Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria), April 2021 <https://bit.ly/3ldudw9>

33 The representative was Louay Ibrahim Ibrahim, from the Issa family, who worked as a driver on a family-owned transport vehicle in the 1990s, before buying his own vehicle, without becoming rich at the level of his tribe before 2011. After that, he moved between working as a broker to secure the release of detainees for money, and trading in food items and later construction materials. Online interview with a dignitary from the Asasneh tribe, October 2021.

34 Between 2008 and 2012, Mulham was the deputy head of the Military Intelligence branch in Aleppo governorate.

35 Majdi al-Bassiouni, *ibid.*, p. 79.

36 Unlike government institutions, the representative bodies require little in the way of qualifications, and they are generally unhampered by lengthy, slow-moving processes.

37 In an indication of the increased importance of army officers for the tribes, Omar al-Hassan, a member of the People's Assembly, headed up a delegation from the Baggara tribe to give congratulations on the small-scale promotion of two young officers in the village of al-Akramiyah. Omar al-Hassan's Facebook page, "As a Delegation from the Baggara Tribe, We Congratulate Abu Ali on the Promotion of His Heroic Sons" (in Arabic), Facebook, 4 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/3mpAvCv>

Overall, two trajectories can be identified in post-2011 economic shifts: the increased wealth of poorer or less-distinguished branches of a tribe or family; and the temporary decline of traditional pre-war wealth holders, who later attempted to seize new opportunities for profiteering.

The sons of Hussein Hassan Alloush, of a less-important family from the Baggara tribe, provide one example of the exorbitant wealth that could be made from the war. The Alloush brothers – Khaled, al-Baqir Brigade Commander; Hamza, a leading member of the same brigade; and Omar, a member of the People's Assembly started out as construction workers, and then small-time shop owners in the poor Balloura neighbourhood before the revolution. They would become well-known tycoons. They own tens of homes, shops, warehouses, and have vast quantities of land for construction in Aleppo. All this they bought cheaply or fraudulently, especially in eastern areas such as Bab al-Nayrab, al-Marjeh, Ferdous and Sheikh Said. They also acquired hundreds of hectares of farmland to the south of Aleppo,³⁸ other residencies in Damascus, and properties in the Lebanese city of Baalbek and in the southern suburbs of Beirut (*al-Dahiyeh*), where they invested in selling and smuggling drugs, taking advantage of their ties to Hezbollah-affiliated traders.³⁹

In contrast to the rise and exorbitant wealth of the Alloush brothers, examples of a different kind of economic trajectory can be found in Shaaban Berri's sons, and some of the chiefs of the Asasneh tribe. Having accumulated significant wealth in the shadow economy during the decades preceding the conflict, they saw their wealth decline in the first few years of the war. They then attempted to pursue new profitable enterprises. In the case of Shaaban Berri's sons, it is difficult to trace the fluctuations in their wealth. During the two decades preceding the war, their family had become prosperous mostly thanks to the real-estate sector, especially with the extension of the official boundaries of the city in the 1990s to include large areas of farmland and vineyards owned by the brothers on the airport road.⁴⁰ But the family suffered significant losses in the war as this sector suffered. It is, likewise, difficult to assess the wealth of Asasneh's tribal chiefs, who had built their wealth prior to the revolution in sectors that were heavily affected by the war. These included the smuggling of drugs to Saudi Arabia in cattle and goods trucks;⁴¹ the monopolised loading, transporting and unloading of grains in government storage centres; and corrupt dealings and the manipulation of the quantities and quality of these goods.⁴²

The form that the new shadow economy took during the war was influenced by a number of factors. The most significant of these was the weakness of the city's governmental institutions; the rise of corruption and nepotism; and territorial divisions across the country among the different actors and forces, which have largely transformed Aleppo's economy. Many tribal chiefs, and the militia leaders most prominently, began to involve themselves in the shadow economy's growing enterprises, seeking alternative resources to compensate for the losses and damages they had sustained. This was also true of other influential actors outside of the tribal milieu of Bab al-Nayrab, including other militia leaders and up-and-coming traders from the city. These actors all enjoy direct support from the security apparatus, especially the executive and board members of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce. The most prominent and profitable economic activities of tribal chiefs today can be broken down into four main areas.

First, there are payments for protecting the city's traders and industrialists from customs and finance controls. Warehouses are rented out from tribespeople in Bab al-Nayrab, Marjeh and Balloura, as well as in other eastern areas and villages surrounding Aleppo. They are used to store Turkish goods smuggled through the city of Manbij and transported by the Fourth Division into the city to the benefit of traders and industrialists. The Bab al-Nayrab tribespeople would guard goods, before transporting them either to factories and processing sites, or to sales points in the markets.

38 Such as the villages of al-Mleyhia, Haraybel, Ein Assan, and Tell Abbour.

39 Online interviews with three members of the Baggara tribe, one of whom is a relative of the Alloush brothers.

40 There are large areas of land there known as the Berri vineyards. See: Majdi al-Bassiouni, *Ibid.*, p. 177.

41 Interview with Abboud al-Mousa, former owner of a land freight company in Aleppo city, August 2021; and other interviews with people from the Asasneh tribe.

42 Interview with a former contractor of grain loading and unloading in storage centres belonging to the Asasneh tribe, August 2021.

The leaders of the Baqir Brigade and the Berri Brigade are active in this enterprise. They have taken over hundreds of warehouses which had been owned by refugees and displaced persons.⁴³

Second, the trade or the use of absentee properties, including houses, shops, and farmland. Ezz al-Din Shaaban Berri, for example, seized hundreds of hectares around Aleppo city, renting them out to farmers or selling them to the newly wealthy such as the Qartaji brothers. Issa al-Ibrahim, a member of the executive office of the Aleppo Governorate Council from the Asasneh tribe, took advantage of his position to invest (or collude with others in their investment) in hundreds of hectares of land in rural Aleppo. Omar Ashour of Baggara, meanwhile, had been one of the top traders in construction iron before the revolution, and compensated for the reduction in his income by starting to trade in luxury absentee-owned houses, mostly in the high-end districts of New Aleppo and the Society of Engineers. There Ashour owns more than fifty houses.⁴⁴

Third, there is contract work on destroyed buildings and the trade in scrap metal. This kind of work relies on huge amounts of war-related rubble in the eastern neighbourhoods. Work in these areas began with the search for scrap metal, especially construction iron, and metal doors and windows. The son of one of the Asasneh chiefs and MP Mohammad Subhi Sheikh al-Daya is active in this kind of work, using fake names of contractors to take public tenders. In August 2021, for instance, after using the name of another contractor, Sheikh al-Daya won a contract put out by the directorate of technical services with a value of SYP 260 million (around USD 75,000).⁴⁵ This allowed him to take over two sites to collect rubble in Sheikh Said and Tell al-Daman for two years.⁴⁶ Clientelism between the different actors involved also played a role in this profitable industry. These actors included the General Intelligence Branch and the Military Intelligence Branch, which follow up on public projects through their economic bureaus, as well as the Governorate Council, City Council and the Services Directorate.

Fourth, there is the drug trade inside the city. All through the war and into the post-conflict period, the drugs trade and drug addiction grew across many cities in Syria, with Aleppo being a prominent example.⁴⁷ This is related to the influence that the Lebanese party Hezbollah – which operates and protects a drugs network between Lebanon and Syria – holds in the city. A number of individuals from the Bab al-Nayrab tribes, especially current or now-defunct militia leaders, built up close ties with Hezbollah's drugs network, including the Alloush brothers from Baggara; Jasim Mohammad Berri, the head of the Zein al-Abideen Berri Brigade; and Khaled Hassan al-Hamada, known as Abu Hassan Jadeeh, from the Asasneh tribe.⁴⁸

The size of the shadow economy, with its various profit-making industries, has, apparently, come to exceed that of the formal economy. Among the reasons for this are the decline in industrial production, and the obstacles to the movement of legal trade – most notably international sanctions, but also bureaucratic obstacles and the imposition of taxes and royalties. For many chiefs and prominent tribespeople, these new industries have created opportunities for significant riches – while still being relative in comparison to the period preceding the revolution. However, the gradual depletion of the resources needed to fuel this shadow economy, owing to overall economic decline, raises questions as to how long these activities will continue to be profitable. If there is a decline there may be conflict among the tribal groups, and tribal chiefs may seek new sources of work outside the country.

43 Online interview with a trader from Aleppo city, October 2021.

44 Interview with a former friend of Ashour from the Baggara tribe, September 2021.

45 Interview with a friend of Sheikh al-Daya from the Asasneh tribe, September 2021.

46 Facebook page of the services directorate in Aleppo, "Announcement of the First Open Bid to Invest in Scrap Metal and Other Recyclable Materials" (in Arabic), 2 August 2021.

47 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "In Line with Other Syrian Regions... Promotion and Sale of Drugs by Middlemen, With the Backing and Cover of Pro-Iran Militia Leaders, Escalates in the City of Aleppo" (in Arabic), 14 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3CpbhB6>

48 Interviews with five tribespeople in Aleppo city.

2.3. Social Elevation of Tribal Chiefs

A related trend, alongside the political and economic rise of the tribes, was the social elevation of the chief within his tribe, and the growing influence of both the 'tribe' and the 'chief' in the broader Aleppian community. Meanwhile, the conditions for becoming chief became stricter. There were, prior to the revolution, two conditions: absolute loyalty to the regime; and social activity considered to benefit fellow tribespeople. Two further conditions emerged during the war: the provision of military services through a militia; and enough finances to enter into nascent clientelist networks. The status of previous chiefs thus declined, while the status of others was consolidated. An increasing number of tribespeople have come to look at a strong and influential chief among them as a necessity for mediation with the authorities and other communities. The sons of Shaaban Berri, in many ways, represented strong and influential chiefs before the revolution, and continue to do so today, despite the rise of other tribespeople performing the same role to a partial or to a less-significant degree. The same applies to the tribe of Baggara, with many of its tribespeople living in regime-controlled areas coming to see Khaled Hassan Alloush and his brothers as the best able to offer protection and benefits. An example of this can be found in the neighbourhood of Balloura, the new stronghold of Baggara. There security forces must first coordinate with the chiefs and militia leaders before carrying out house raids in search for an individual wanted for criminal or security proceedings.

Another phenomenon is the activation of tribal links within loyalist groups, or among those living in regime-controlled areas, following on from the huge political ruptures and waves of displacement which significantly depleted the Baggara and Asasneh tribes.⁴⁹ Activated connections outside the tribe may provide material gains but they may also offer self-protection. This is especially so in the face of the various threats arising from the decline of legal and state control and the predations of the security services and militias.⁵⁰ The tribal chief appears to have been a key element in activating and managing these connections, with the aim of meeting his and his tribe's mutual interests.

The management of these connections bolstered the status of the chiefs within the Baggara, Asasneh and Berri tribes. It also strengthened their status in relation to other tribes and families in the city and the surrounding rural areas.⁵¹ The most important element of the relationship between the chiefs and these other tribes is the influence enjoyed by the former within unofficial power networks, whether linked to the regime or to its Iranian allies. For tribes which are poor, divided, or which have little connection to centres of decision-making and influence, getting close to the Bab al-Nayrab chiefs really means getting closer to power. Perhaps the clearest evidence of the rise in status and influence of the chiefs since the revolution is the successful interventions of Asasneh and Baggara chiefs in resolving conflicts and forging truces between families and tribal groups. For example, Ayman al-Jasim, an Asasneh chief, secured a truce between the Hamida family of the Naim tribe and the Dundun family of the Bobana tribe in August 2021.⁵² Khaled Alloush from Baggara, and the newly rising Khaled Hassan al-Hamada from Asasneh,⁵³ also mediated in May 2020 a reconciliation between the Ghazal and Hassan families, who were in conflict before the courts for the killing of two members of the Ghazal family.⁵⁴

49 Prominent and active members of the Asasneh tribe estimate that the proportion of its population who are refugees in Turkey or displaced in the opposition-controlled areas in the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib are roughly half the tribe's total number. The number of refugees and displaced people from the Baggara tribe are thought to be a third of its population, according to similar estimates.

50 These risks even extended to senior civilian officials, with the deputy governor of Aleppo who were shot at, in August 2021, by two men from the Afr branch of the Berri family. Albaath Media, "Deputy Governor of Aleppo Faces Gunfire" (in Arabic), 10 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/2Zxuwu8>

51 Such as the tribes of Boubatoush, Kiyar, Bani Zayd and Mashahdeh.

52 Facebook page of Ahmad Sadiq Haydar, "An Address by Sheikh Hussein al-Jasim, a Dignitary from the Asasneh Tribe, on Behalf of Those Forging Peace" (in Arabic), 15 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3lgsvd8>

53 Before the revolution, Khaled Hassan al-Hamada moved between different kinds of work, from selling sweets to selling chickens, and then dealing in drugs. After 2011, he led a *shabiha* group made up of members of his family, which became a fighting group during the war. Interview with two members of Asasneh tribe, October 2021.

54 Facebook page of Abu Hassan Jadh Doshka, photograph of the truce made between two families (in Arabic), 17 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3l15kNZ>

Finally, the chiefs of the Bab al-Nayrab tribes have extended their influence within the urban community of Aleppo as a whole. This is significant because the latter held their rural and tribal neighbours responsible for the destruction wrought upon the city, even those supporting the regime. Aleppians have little choice today but to solicit help from some of these tribes. The clerics and businessmen who mediated with the regime before the war have less power now or have fled the country. Many of the traders and industrialists who remain in the city, with the regime incapable of creating a material or legal environment which would allow their activities to restart, rely now on the Bab al-Nayrab chiefs. Among the benefits they seek from the chiefs are paid protection so other influential actors in the city cannot take from them; the avoidance of heavy taxes and fees imposed by fiscal or customs agencies; and mediation in wranglings with the security services. However, outside of these kinds of mutually-beneficial interactions, it appears that neither of the two parties seek to strengthen their relationship in any other way. The psychological barrier that has long existed between them still stands. The urban population has a covert disdain towards the, in their eyes, violent and underdeveloped world of Bab al-Nayrab. The tribes, on the other hand, have an indifference towards what they see as the city's monotonous, closed and overly complex society.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Jean Claude David, *Aleppo: An Eternal City in History* (in Arabic), translated by Badr al-Din Arudki, The World Institute, February 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Wjg1rY>

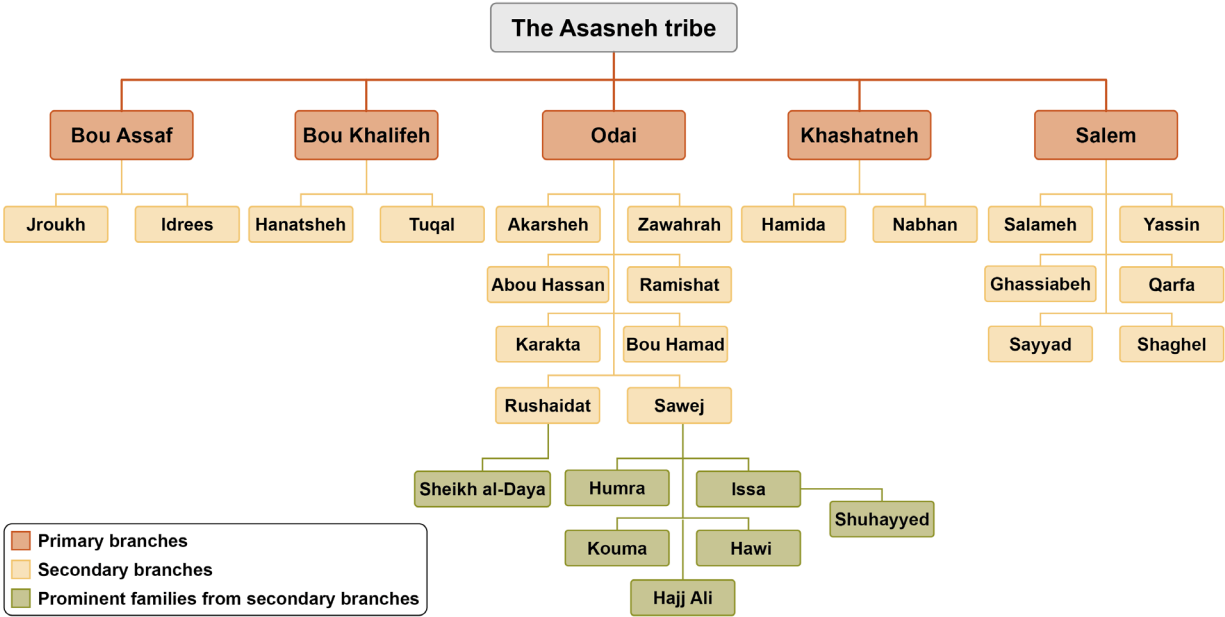
Conclusion

Since 2011, the tribes of Bab al-Nayrab have grown in strength and influence, within a steadily weaker environment. Nearly six years since the regime recaptured the whole of Aleppo and the threats posed by armed opposition disappeared, the vestiges of war continue to weigh heavily on the city. There are destroyed buildings and divided communities, crushed by crisis after crisis. The regime, despite its security power, remains unable to curb the various clientelist networks – linked not only to its loyalists but also to its Iranian allies. Nor can it rebuild its legitimate power as previously derived from the state. Government institutions became unable to provide services for the population, the police and judicial machinery is unable to reclaim its authority. All the while those with influence continue to set little store by the state, violating its laws and jeopardizing its interests.

As a result, the regime has lost the monopoly of power it once enjoyed at a local level. Its allies and supporters take a share in this power, especially in areas where their authority is concentrated – in the centre or on the outskirts of the city. The regime also lacks a policy of rebuilding ties with the local community and usually improvises in response to multiple crises. This all contributed to the rise of loyalist tribal groups which face no threats from the regime. Despite their increased presence in official representative structures, these tribal groups still lack integration into the state, which they perceive as a mere collection of irksome or restrictive institutions and laws. In the view of the tribes, while an effective state should simply be ignored where possible, a damaged and incapacitated one should be ignored entirely.

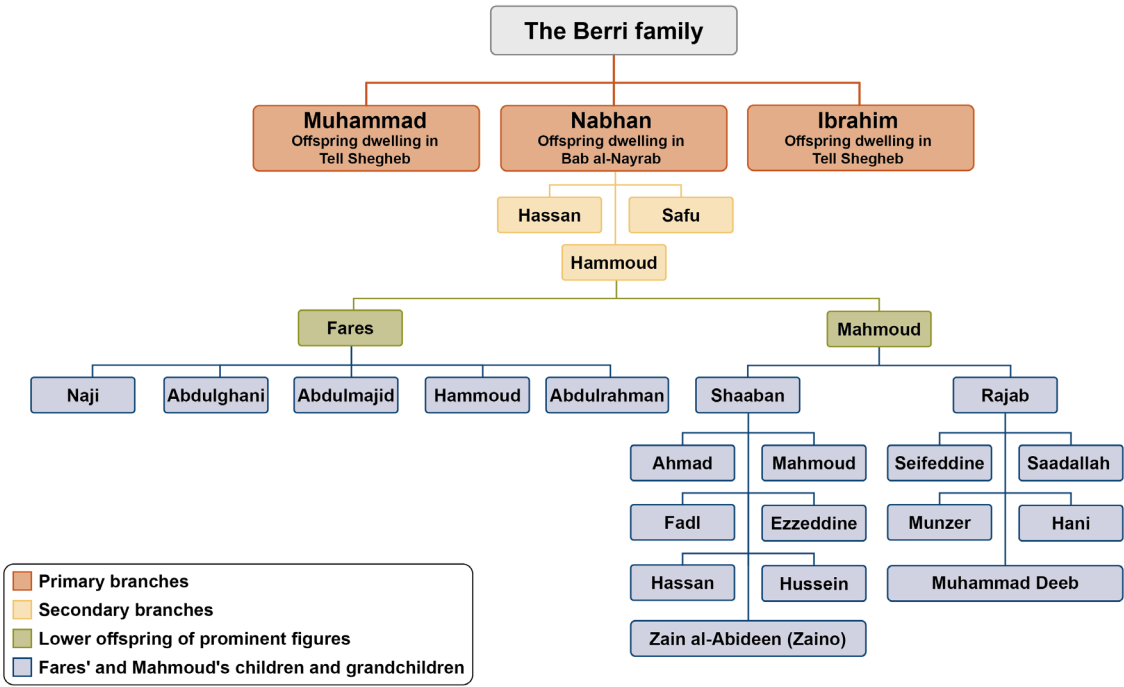
Despite the significance of their economic activities in creating jobs and lining the pockets of their chiefs, the tribes mostly owe their rise to the tribe-based militias. During the conflict, these militias were a structure for the mobilisation and for the renewal of internal ties. More importantly, however, they created an opportunity for the tribes to establish a partnership with the regime and to renew their mutual alliances. While this framework served the power holders within both the tribes and the authorities, it did not necessarily benefit either the rank and file of the tribes or state institutions. Finally, aside from the economic disparities that grew between the current tribal elites, the ongoing decline of the Syrian economy might create further challenges for them. The stoppage in production, the slowing of the natural movement of trade, and the flight of capital abroad, all threaten to undo the shadow economy in which these elites are active. This could result in a change in the relationship between the tribes and the power-holders which support them, and in the emergence of conflicts between the chiefs and their tribespeople. This, in turn, may push some tribal chiefs to withdraw from the public sphere entirely. They might either settle for the position they had held before, or search for work and investment opportunities, legal or otherwise, abroad.

Chart 1: The Asasneh tribe



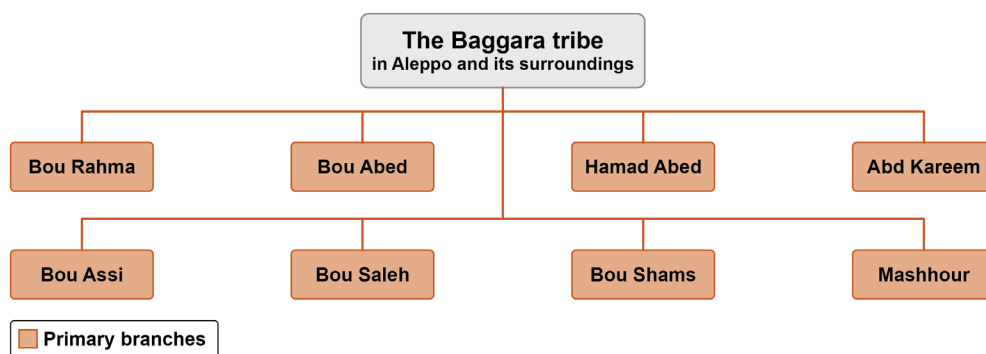
Source: The Author

Chart 2: The Berri family



Source: The Author

Chart 3: The Baggara tribe (and its branches in Aleppo)



Source: The Author

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