

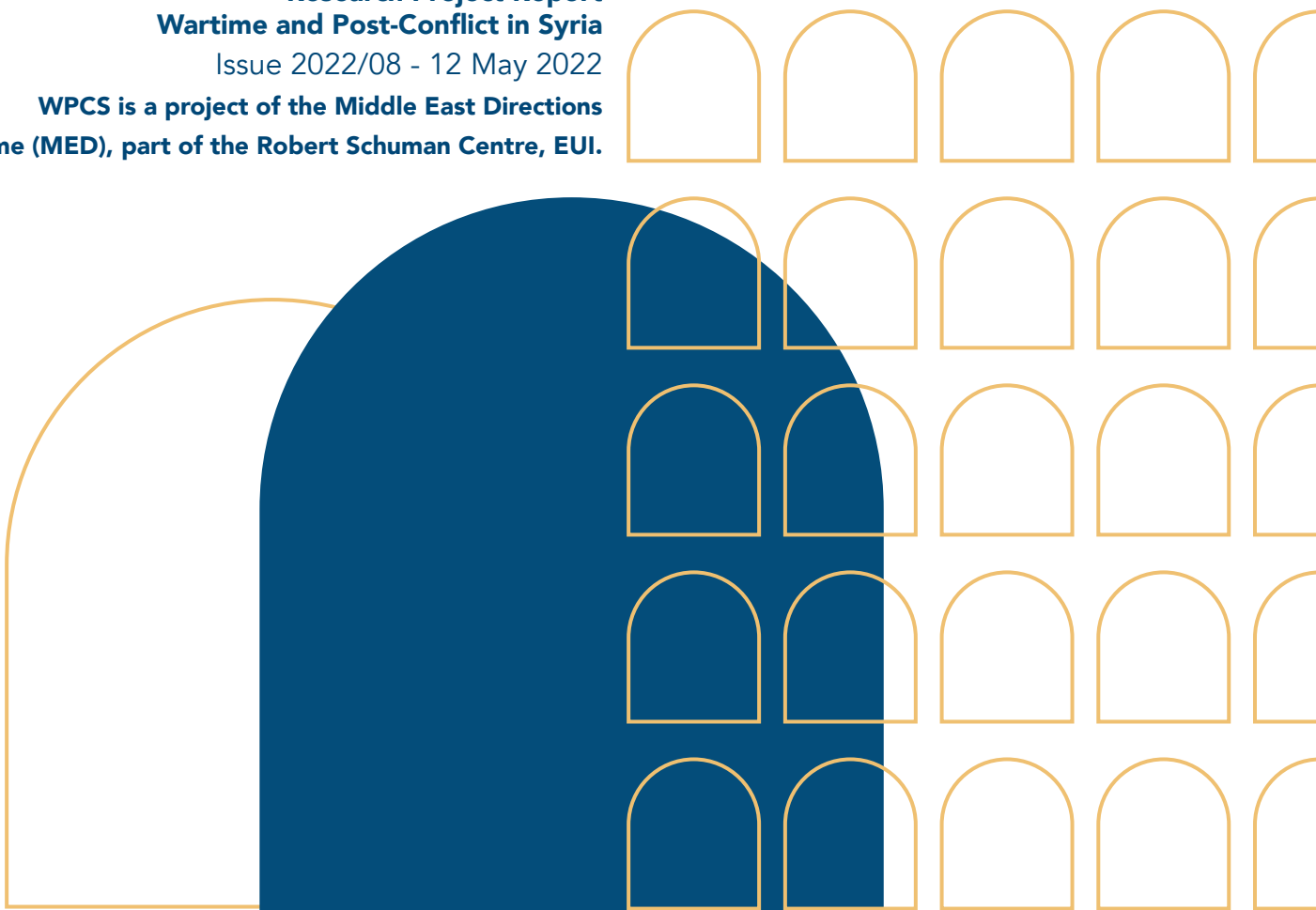
Kinship Ties in Safe Areas During the Syrian Conflict: The Case of Tartous

Suleiman Haider

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Executive Summary

War in Syria has revitalised local politics in Tartous, a regime stronghold often referred to as an island of stability. In this political and security environment, new and long-established local actors have adapted their kinship ties to the local and national dynamics of the conflict. This has transformed local power structures, rendering them more localised and complex than before 2011.

The al-Sayyed, Raslan, and Hassan families all have a religious and social status in their localities and strong connections with the Syrian regime. Their kinship ties have affected the local policies in terms of religion, humanitarian aid, and the war economy. The al-Sayyed family has maintained its traditional religious leadership, monopolising for decades the city's religious endowments. The Raslan family owed, instead, its continued local prominence to the public offices occupied by its members and to their economic influence. For its part, the quickly rising Hassan family has reinforced its position through its place in the local economy and through active participation in the war economy.

These three families have ensured themselves key positions in the socio-political order of post-war Syria. They have done so by fostering their local networks and by establishing their role as mediators for powers outside the governorate. Nonetheless, their political influence should not be exaggerated. They have not ascended to a position that allows them to challenge the largely informal power arrangements of local politics. These are still determined very much at the central level. The regime, meanwhile, is still able to control their local networks.

Introduction

Families and extended families, including clans and tribes, are the basic social units in most Syrian cities and towns. In times of hardship, they serve as a haven, offering members informal access to services, resources, and positions in state institutions. More broadly, power in Syria is exercised through intermediary channels shaped by kinship, regional affiliation, and personal connections. Kinship ties are usually stronger in rural areas than in cities, where intermarriage is more common and where relatives tend to live closer to one another.

The Syrian war has naturally affected kinship ties, both in areas that witnessed military operations and those that remained relatively calm. Kinship ties have been weakened in hot spots where destruction has been most visible, owing mainly to the disintegration of families, ensuing waves of displacement, and the political and ideological schisms that the war has created. Meanwhile, due to the ways families in safer areas have acted in response to the conflict, kinship ties have been reinvigorated. Here they have been crucial in shaping local politics.

Tartous governorate, which encompasses Tartous city and its countryside, is a useful case study for understanding kinship dynamics in safe areas. A regime stronghold, it has mobilised and continues to mobilise civil and military resources in defence and support of the Assad regime. Furthermore, its relative stability throughout the conflict has attracted investors, traders, and industrialists looking for a safe environment in which to conduct their business. Finally, many government officials and prominent warlords come from the governorate.

This study aims to test the following hypothesis: the war has revitalised kinship ties in Tartous, especially those of traditionally prominent families and others seeking to enhance their social status. These revitalised ties play a crucial role in shaping the local post-war socio-political order, consolidating kinship structures at the local level, and increasing the Damascus regime's reliance on families as informal intermediary channels with local communities. To this end, the present research focuses on three families native of Tartous governorate, each of which is located in a specific geographical area and each of which has a distinct social background and sphere of influence. The al-Sayyed family are Sunni and hail from Tartous city. They have for decades had a monopoly over the city's religious endowments. The Raslan family, scattered across the Draykish and Safita areas, belong to a lineage of notables from the same Alawite clan as Assad, and many of its members are senior security officers and influential businessmen. The Hassan family, who are from Brummanet al-Mashayekh, are associated, instead, with the Alawite sheikhs and their social status has risen thanks to their role in the war economy.

This study relies on qualitative data obtained through eighteen interviews conducted between October 2021 and January 2022 with individuals residing in the coastal region and from outside Syria. It also makes use of open-source information available in online forums, newspapers, and relevant social media posts.

1. Tartous: Mobilisation and Transformation

During the war years, Tartous remained safe and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and businessmen flocked there. Meanwhile, its local residents were recruited into regime forces to respond to military needs across the country. The war has thus reinvigorated local politics on this part of the Syrian coast. However, it has also created pressure on its local community and on the Assad regime.

The waves of displacement to the area increased its population by 50% in 2014.¹ IDPs have settled in different areas according to their communal ties and their finances. For example, many poor families displaced from Aleppo and Idlib took up residence alongside relatives working in agriculture in al-Kharab and Wadi Baqarah. The region of Shalihat Basira received, instead, middle-income families, an almost non-existent class in Tartous before the conflict. In addition, many Alawite state employees returned to their towns and villages in the governorate after obtaining permission to temporarily relocate their employment.² This measure allowed for family reunifications and further fortified kinship ties. Finally, most of those displaced to Tartous returned to their towns of origin after 2016, and resettlement centres were eventually closed down in October 2021, with some IDPs still unable to return home.³

Moreover, many traders and businessmen have relocated to Tartous. For example, between 2011 and 2016, the governorate saw 37 new enterprises established by newcomers,⁴ who in turn had to adapt to the city. Modern cafés, to give one instance, proved unpopular in Tartous, forcing business owners to make changes in line with local preferences. Some concluded, after experiences of this type, that it is premature to claim that Tartous has transformed into an economic and commercial hub comparable to Latakia.⁵

Before the conflict, the regime dominated local politics through intermediaries, taking charge of service provision, security, trade, and local economy. One notable example of a mediator was Abdul-Halim Khaddam, a native of Baniyas who occupied multiple official positions, including the vice-presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic between 1984 and 2004. The regime had, however, to expand its network of local intermediaries with the war.⁶ For instance, it became necessary to respond to the emerging needs and grievances of the Alawite community, or to communicate with local Sunnis in light of heightened sectarian tensions.⁷

To mobilise Alawite fighters in Tartous, the regime has relied on carefully selected individuals. Owing to their family ties and personal networks, these individuals proved crucial in the formation of local armed groups that ended up fighting throughout Syria. For example, Faisal Hassan, a Republican Guard agent,⁸ was tasked with recruiting and arming the Alawite villages in Baniyas. He capitalised on his vast connections to mobilise around 2,000 fighters in 2013. After his leadership was initially limited to the Baniyas region, Hassan went on to become the commander of the National Defence Forces (NDF) in the Tartous governorate in the summer of 2016.⁹

1 International Committee of the Red Cross, "Syria: Increasing Needs by Displaced Families in Coastal Cities" (in Arabic), 11 July 2014, <https://bit.ly/3reBijm>

2 "In 2012, based on ministerial circulars regulating locations of work, I set my location in Tartous instead of Damascus, as did my peers from the other ministries. The population in my city, Safita, increased by about 20%." Interview with a government employee from Tartous, 15 November 2021.

3 Rana al-Hamdan: "Tartous First Governorate to Finish with Shelters Completely" (in Arabic), *al-Wahda*, 24 October 2021, <https://bit.ly/3lHyjpa>

4 Aliqtisadi, "More than 35 Enterprises Moved to Tartous During Crisis" (in Arabic), 7 February 2017, <https://bit.ly/3o6OSDw>

5 Kheder Khaddour, "Tartus in the Present Crisis: A Mirror of the Syrian Regime," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 13 April 2014, <https://bit.ly/3lEUy5y>

6 Kheder Khaddour, "Local Wars and the Chance for Decentralized Peace in Syria," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 29 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/3LcRtUV>

7 According to unofficial sources, at the end of 2021, the number of Alawites in the governorate was estimated at 68%, Sunnis 19%, Christians 6%, and Ismaili 7%.

8 Khaddour, "Local Wars".

9 Skype interview with a member of the NDF in Tartous, 20 December 2021.

By the spring of 2017, the governorate had suffered some 14,500 casualties (dead, injured and missing persons).¹⁰ It was dubbed the “mother of martyrs,” with funerals becoming opportunities for family members to gather and bolster their sense of unity. Given the state’s dwindling resources and inability to meet the demands of grieving families, the regime proved ready to license new non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to assuage Alawite concerns. Most of these NGOs were set up by individuals who were either affiliated with the state bureaucracy, informally connected to regime officials, or related to families actively participating in local mobilisation.¹¹ The years 2012-2019 saw 87 new NGOs established in Tartous, around 67% of which were established before 2015 when military operations were at their peak.¹² For example, the Loyalty to Martyrs Association (*al-Wafaa lil-Shuhada*) was founded in the town of al-Qadmous by an individual affiliated with both the NDF and the security forces. It provided an array of health, relief and social services to the families of the killed and injured.¹³

In the city of Baniyas, social structures have historically been dominated by families of traders and small landowners who served as regime entry-points to the Sunnis of the city. After Abdul-Halim Khaddam defected in 2005, families with interests intertwined with the regime’s clientelist networks, such as Fahel and Bayassi, rose to prominence.¹⁴ Then, after 2011, the regime took revenge on the Bayassi family, since many of its members had actively participated in the protest movement. The regime sought, instead, the support of the Wahoud family.¹⁵ It appointed Mohammad Abdullah Wahoud as Secretary of the Baath Party in Baniyas, before promoting him to the membership of the People’s Assembly for the cycle 2012-16. Wahoud was also the regime’s key figure in ‘national reconciliations’ in Baniyas. Since 2015, he has facilitated the return of Alawite traders from the Upper Market (*Souq al-Fawqani*) in the village of Abtla to the central al-Hal Market in Baniyas.

Kinship ties thus significantly restructured local power structures in the Tartous governorate throughout the war. The scale of the social and economic transformations has been, there is no question, immense. The flexible nature of these ties has, though, allowed traditional families – whether those with feudal past such as the al-Sayyeds, Alawite notables such as the Raslans, or up-and-comers such as the Hassans – to shape the local, post-war socio-political order. These families, furthermore, have had a considerable impact on religion, security, humanitarian aid, and the war economy.

10 Dam Press, “Martyr’s Office in Tartous: Governorate Registered 7,986 Martyrs, 975 Missing Persons, and 5,450 Wounded” (in Arabic), 29 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/3Mml9kh>

11 Kheder Khaddour, “The Coast in Conflict,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, July 2016, <https://bit.ly/3D15d2R>

12 Statistics obtained from the Syrian Official Gazette between 2011 and 2019.

13 Khaddour, “The Coast in Conflict.”

14 A businessman who works in shipping, Ahmad Fahel, was elected member of the People’s Assembly in 2007-2011.

15 Businessman Mohammad Ali Wahoud belongs to this family. Ma’ al-Adala, Profile of Businessman Mohammad Ali Wahoud (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3K48EZf>

Map: Tartous Governorate



Source: The author

2. Endowments as Legacy and Clout: The al-Sayyeds

A few Sunni families occupy central positions within the local structures in the city of Tartous. The al-Sayyed family have long monopolised the religious endowments institution as though it were an exclusive family right. They have managed, on the back of this power, to consolidate their religious leadership, marginalise their competitors, and maintain good relations with the Alawite community by allying themselves with the regime. This has made them highly influential in local affairs, albeit only within the regime's red lines.

The al-Sayyeds, who come from feudal-commercial roots,¹⁶ have dominated the Endowments Directorate in Tartous since the end of the Ottoman era. Among its nine historical directors, six have been from the family, the most recent of whom is Abdullah Mohammad Abdul-Sattar al-Sayyed (since 2019). Moreover, two members of the family have been Ministers of Religious Endowments: Khairuddin al-Sayyed (1971-1980) and his son Mohammad Abdul-Sattar (since 2007).

Monopoly control over the religious endowments is crucial to the al-Sayyed family, since it affirms their leading religious and social standing amongst the Sunnis in the city. This leadership was threatened, it is said, by competition from other Sunni religious scholars, with pre-war conditions precluding a decisive victory in favour of the al-Sayyed family. This competition for religious leadership in Tartous has spanned several decades. While the al-Sayyeds were in charge of several mosques in the city, most notably al-Omari Mosque (otherwise known as al-Saha), their rivals the Mansour family built a self-named mosque in the Barrania neighbourhood. This posed a threat to al-Sayyed religious leadership. Sunni worshipers soon flocked to the new mosque, especially after the appointment of Ahmed Hamza Abdul-Baqi, an Azhar-trained imam rumoured to be close to the Mansours. Abdul-Baqi's religious education and social status made it impossible for the al-Sayyeds to remove him in the years preceding the conflict. When protests broke out at the Mansour Mosque in 2011, however, they took the opportunity and worked against him until his death in May 2015. Instead of a follower of Abdul-Baqi, an imam loyal to the al-Sayyeds was subsequently appointed.¹⁷

As the conflict expanded, the Assad regime and the al-Sayyed family grew apprehensive about Iranian influence on the Syrian coast, often disguised as support for displaced Shiites. Iranian-affiliated groups have invested in mosques and charitable trusts registered by other charities, thus falling outside the control of the Ministry of Religious Endowments.¹⁸ A few organisations were also sponsored by the al-Bustan Charity Foundation.¹⁹ Pro-Iranian charities – such as Dar al-Hujjah for Culture and Social Development,²⁰ established in 2014 by Shiite Sheikh Mohammad Ali Darwish – hosted activities for the local Shiite community. The Assad regime and the al-Sayyeds took measures to check Iranian influence. The Youth Religious Team, for instance, was founded in January 2016 and headed by Abdullah al-Sayyed. A committee supervised by the Endowments Ministry, the Team was to spread moderate religious discourse. However, it soon became evident that this organisation was there to contain and co-opt Alawite and other clerics loyal to Iran.²¹ Another measure was to bring effectively independent

16 Abdullah Hanna, *Images from the Lives of Syrians in the Twentieth Century* (in Arabic), (Beirut, The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2019), p. 304.

17 Skype interview with a source who asked to be anonymous for security reasons, 17 January 2022.

18 The Jaafari Islamic Society, "Response by the Jaafari Islamic Society in Safita to the request to transfer ownership of the Society's headquarters and mosque to the Ministry of Religious Endowments" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 2 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3HD90EN>

19 Rami Makhoul was the honorary president of the Jaafari Islamic Society in Tartous, according to Sheikh Adnan Abboud, chairman of the Jaafari Islamic Society in Tartous and manager of the al-Bustan Charity Foundation in Tartous. Abdul-Aziz Mohsen, "Sheikh Adnan Abboud, Chairman of the Jaafari Islamic Society in Tartous: Over 250 Surgeries for the Poor Since Beginning of Year Through the Society" (in Arabic), *Syria Panorama*, 20 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/3GAg6bV>

20 Dar al-Hujjah belongs to the Great Prophet Complex in Latakia. Sheikh Mohammed Ali Darwish, "Brief Biography of the Sheikh" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 2 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3B8c2OS>

21 Among the sheikhs who joined the Youth Religious Team, there were Sheikh Ali Hassan Ramadan, who is affiliated with Hezbollah, and Sheikh Zulfikar Fadl Ghazal, whose father was Mufti of Latakia. For more, Hama Endowments Directorate, "Information on the those appointed members of the first Central Council of the Youth Religious Team" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 31 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3HgBy71>

mosques,²² as well as charities operating in Alawite areas – such as the Jaafari Islamic Society in Safita, at work since 1974 – under the Endowments Directorate’s sway and control.²³ At the national level, Law 31 of 2018, which regulates the structure and functions of religious public affairs, was issued to further the Endowments Ministry’s hegemony.²⁴ These developments granted the minister and his son the authority to appoint Alawite graduates from Sharia faculties as preachers and superintendents of religious centres in their areas, providing them with salaries and social security.²⁵ This obliged these graduates to attend regular meetings at the Endowments Directorate. Significantly, the minister and his son brokered a settlement for Alawite preachers whose activities and loyalty had been brought into question.²⁶ Their actions elevated the family’s standing within the governorate’s religious circles.

Throughout the past decade, leveraging the Endowments Directorate, the al-Sayyeds have enhanced their ties with the Alawite community through charitable initiatives and policies. For example, the Directorate allocated two properties, first in 2017 and then in February 2022, to construct two branches of Dar al-Aman. These provide comprehensive social care for around 1,000 students from the families of military and NDF martyrs.²⁷ The Directorate also agreed to a solution that legalised the disposition of its lands on the Akkar Plain, offering occupants (mainly Alawite farmers) lease contracts for a negligible sum.²⁸

The kinship ties of the al-Sayyed family have been vital in enhancing their political and economic power in regime-controlled areas. In the 1980s and 1990s, Abdul-Sattar al-Sayyed’s contact with Hafez al-Assad allowed his eldest son, Fawaz, to frequent the Presidential Palace in Damascus. Fawaz, and subsequently his brothers, forged close relations with Palace officers, who in turn recommended them for public offices. Khairuddin al-Sayyed, for instance, Fawaz’s brother, held several positions in the health sector in Tartous, until he became the head of the Tartous Health Directorate (2000-2013). He was then appointed Governor of Idlib (2014), ran successfully for the People’s Assembly (2016), where he headed the National Reconciliation Committee, and has been a member of the Baath Party Central Committee since 2017. These positions have increased the family’s influence in Tartous. For instance, they have allowed Khairuddin to employ relatives of martyrs in the Health Directorate,²⁹ as well as to reportedly accumulate personal wealth. According to local sources, Khairuddin purchased real estate close to the port,³⁰ and created the al-Khair Group, Zad al-Khair Kitchens in 2016. This business has been used both to provide for endowments initiatives and to promote other family-owned companies locally.³¹ Finally, in March 2014, the Minister of Religious Endowments endorsed the appointment of

22 Even if mosques are administratively affiliated to the Endowments, some were operating autonomously. There are 227 mosques in the Tartous governorate, divided as follows: Tartous and Hamidiyah 42; Safita 61; Draykish 23; Sheikh Badr 21, al-Qadmous 14, Baniyas 13; and Baniyas countryside 53. Syrian Ministry of Religious Endowments, “List of Mosques in Governorate of Tartous” (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3rnzPHp>

23 In August 2017, Dr. Ali al-Shuaeebi was prevented from giving a lecture about martyrdom and martyrs in a mosque in Duweir Raslan by order of the Tartous Endowments Directorate, which noted that it had not licensed the lecture.

24 Syrian Arab News Agency, “President al-Assad issues Law No. 31 Regulating the Work of the Ministry of Religious Endowments” (in Arabic), 12 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/3APbhdK>

25 Business 2 Business, “In Syria... Pensions (for Sheikhs) Financed by Social Security” (in Arabic), 29 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3ozbCfs>

26 A follow-up office in the Presidential Palace summoned several preachers from the Alawite countryside following security reports. They were released after the Director of the Endowments Directorate Abdullah al-Sayyed intervened. Interview with a source who asked to be anonymous for security reasons, 20 December 2021.

27 Dar al-Aman, “Interview with Rawa Ali, director of the second branch of Dar al-Aman” (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 27 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3lr0vgp>

28 Mourasiloon, “Real Estate Registered as Lebanese Endowments ... Tartousis Suffering Pending Central Authorities Refuse Since Years!” (in Arabic), 17 January 2018, <https://bit.ly/3K1v3Gg>

29 Khairuddin al-Sayyed employed around 250 people from families of martyrs as director of the Health Directorate in 2011-2013. Sourya al-Ilamiya, “Meeting with Head of the Martyrs’ Families Office in Tartous Governorate” (in Arabic), 9 July 2014, <https://bit.ly/3BYfVGK>

30 Zaman al-Wasl, “From Tartous to Idlib... Biography of Governor Who Escaped the Revolutionaries” (in Arabic), 2 April 2015, <https://bit.ly/3lrz8Tr>

31 For example, this group promoted products from the Al-Sayyed Warehouses for Pharmaceuticals and Cosmetics, which is owned by Muhammad Fawaz al-Sayyed, the nephew of both the Minister of Endowments and of Khairuddin al-Sayyed.

Salma Ayyash,³² a Qubaysi preacher who is an in-law of his sister, as Deputy Minister of Endowments.³³ With a stronger alliance with the Qubaysi movement, the Minister has further promoted his family's status in Tartous and inside the Presidential Palace. This would allow him to secure the funds to construct the first branches of Dar al-Aman and to put up several mosques in Tartous city.

The regime, in turn, granted the al-Sayyeds authority to select the head of Tartous City Council, who is customarily Sunni, as well as the mukhtars (neighbourhood-level civil servants) of two neighbourhoods (Meena and Barrania). The family's interests have thus been secured in the city, particularly in the areas it has traditionally dominated. That said, its influence could still not break the rules regulating local power structures, which are set in line with the dictates of local power balances. For example, due to opposition by local Sunni families, the Minister of Endowments failed to promote the appointment of Mahmoud Saqr (head of the Syrian Trading Establishment in Tartous) to a vacant seat in the Governorate Council left by the newly elected member of the People's Assembly, Akram Abdul-Khalil (2020-2024).³⁴ A compromise candidate, Ahmad Mohammad, was chosen instead.

Traditionally prominent families with legacy and social status in Tartous have adapted to the changes brought about by the war. They have re-aligned their interests with those of the regime to bolster their local influence. This new alignment has been replicated by other historically prominent families from the Alawite countryside.

3. Notables in Their Localities: The Raslans

In rural areas in Tartous, families of Alawite notables have been prominent in their communities. The Raslan family have been known for their many political, economic and military leaders dating back to the years before Syria's independence. During the current conflict, the Raslans' family ties and personal connections have brought them into local politics. In addition to established business interests and strong connections with the regime, members of the Raslan family have assumed high positions of power that helped them maintain their local standing.

Named after their grandfather Sheikh Raslan bin Allan al-Ziyadiya, the Raslans belong to the Kalbiya clan,³⁵ which is the same as the Assad family's.³⁶ A series of historical events, economic incentives, and intermarriages have contributed to their concentration in the Safita and Draykish areas. In the 18th century, the system of *iltizam* (Ottoman tax-farming)³⁷ proved the family's foundation, with Tripoli court records identifying the family as being dominant in Safita.³⁸ The Ottoman Sultanate granted the family the honorary title *Agha* (Lord) in the 19th century. Until independence, the eponymous branch of the family, the Raslans, had been the most powerful. Members of this branch served as parliamentary representatives for Safita, such as Mohammed Amin Raslan who ran for the People's Assembly in 1954. In the 20th century, the Melhem branch rose to prominence, with some of its members joining the army and occupying high military offices. An example would be Major General Muhammad Abdul-Aziz Melhem, a friend of Hafez al-Assad and head of the Schools for Children of Martyrs

32 Syria Live, "Salma Ayyash, Syria's First Woman to Become Deputy Minister" (in Arabic), 18 March 2014, <https://bit.ly/34vldwT>

33 The Qubaysis are an elite, woman-led Islamic preaching group founded by Munira al-Qubaysi.

34 Tartous Governorate Council, "The Sixth Ordinary Session of Tartous Governorate Council" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 31 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/34eywBO>

35 Syrian Modern History, "Alawite Clan Divisions in Syria" (in Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/3HvFz7C>. Among the most notable branches of the Raslans are Raslan, Melhem, Ismail, Suleiman, Ali, Othman, Shaheen, al-Assaad, and Khodor.

36 Jneinet Raslan Club, "Excerpts from Satita Ottoman History book by Munir Abdul-Hamid Saqr" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 2 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3gFLX0x>

37 *Iltizam* is an Ottoman method of tax collection, based on *hillas* (groups of houses or small villages). It authorises individuals, called *multazims*, as officials tasked with collecting taxes and making advance payments for the area under their control. They thus received deeds from the Ottoman state authorising them to collect taxes in that area.

38 Stefan Winter, *A History of the Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic* (in Arabic), (Istanbul, Harmoon Centre for Contemporary Studies, 2018, translated by Bassel Watfa and Ahmed Nazeer Atassi), p. 229 and 235.

Committee between 1977 and 1994. Other prominent branches include the Assaads, whose most distinguished businessman, Nizar Jamil al-Assaad, has accumulated substantial business interests and privileges after Ghada Muhanna (a relative of his mother) married Muhammad Makhoul (Hafez al-Assad's brother-in-law).³⁹

After 2011, different branches of the Raslan family supported the Assad regime in its fight against the uprising. On the economic level, Nizar al-Assaad, nicknamed 'Emperor of Oil', facilitated the supply of the equipment necessary for the maintenance of oil facilities.⁴⁰ This proved a pivotal service and a vital outlet for evading Western sanctions. He also provided financial and relief assistance in his hometown of Draykish, thereby aiding the regime by supporting its social base in that area.⁴¹ His daughter, Nada al-Assaad, funded many charitable initiatives sponsored by Asma al-Assad. These included the Centre for Children Stem Cell Transplantation and Cellular Therapy in 2021.⁴²

Additionally, security and military officers from the Melhem and Ismail families assumed command missions during the conflict. Major General Kifah Melhem and Major General Ghassan Ismail – who are relatives⁴³ – were appointed, in 2019, as heads of two major security institutions: Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence. This speaks to the enormous trust placed in the Melhems and Ismails by the Assad family,⁴⁴ as well as to their strong relations with Bashar al-Assad's director of the Military Office, Major General Wajih al-Abdullah, a native of Tartous.⁴⁵ Their appointments coincided with the beginning of the rift between Rami Makhoul and Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, part of their job was to purge these institutions of Makhoul loyalists.

The NGO sector has seen similar phenomena. In the summer of 2020, Brigadier General Abdul-Salam Suleiman became the director of the Tartous branch of the al-Areen Charitable Foundation, which has direct affiliation with the Presidential Palace, and which was formed out of what was left of the al-Bustan Charity Foundation headed by Rami Makhoul. Al-Areen branch would not have been headed by Suleiman had he not received security endorsement from Major General Ismail: Suleiman's job was again to crack down on Makhoul's networks in Tartous.⁴⁶ Ismail and Suleiman belong to the Raslan family and enjoy a strong friendship and work relationship as fellow security officers. From their positions, both men ensured full control over the appointments of members of the sub-committees responsible for preparing lists of beneficiaries, as well as the support allocated to each area. In this way they consolidated their clientelist networks and bolstered local influence. In the summer of 2020, Nada al-Assaad also employed her connections with Asma al-Assad to support Suleiman's daughter – who is her friend from the village of Daren – to head the National Union of Syrian Students. Furthermore, Major Generals Ismail and Melhem supported Amer Raslan in opening a recruitment centre, Syria's Commando Rally (*Istiqtab Maghaweer Sourya*), in the al-Sayyed-dominated Meena neighbourhood in Tartous. This centre has assisted in settling the status of those who have absconded from military service, mobilised fighters for the Fifth Corps, and recruited security personnel to protect Nizar al-Assaad's businesses in Algeria.⁴⁷

39 Ayn al-Madina, "Nizar al-Assaad from Years of Plight to Years of Abundance" (in Arabic), 22 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/3Mgtoym>

40 Iqtisad, "Scandal of Rehabilitating Banias Refinery" (in Arabic), 3 November 2020, <http://bit.ly/3smjwtl>

41 Tal Kalkha Official Page, "Nizar al-Assaad aid distribution to the locals of Jabal Talkha village in Draykish," Facebook, last accessed 2 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3sFZDPT>

42 Nada al-Assaad was a board member of BASMA Children with Cancer Support Association, whose president was her sister Mia al-Assaad. Through their work with the association, the two consolidated their connections to Asma al-Assad.

43 Major General Kifah Melhem is married to Major General Ghassan Ismail's sister.

44 Kifah Melhem served in the Republican Guard under the command of Bassel al-Assad. There are reports that he was the liaison officer with Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Zoubi. Syria TV, "Who is Major General Kifah Melhem Whose Military Intelligence Post Was Renewed by Bashar al-Assad?" (in Arabic), 29 November 2021, <https://bit.ly/3shSYd1>

45 In early 2021, Major General Wajih al-Abdullah was replaced by Major General Talal Makhoul as director of Bashar al-Assad's Military Office.

46 All centres of al-Bustan Charity Foundation in the Syrian coast were renamed as al-Areen Charitable Foundation. Al-Areen currently has a person in each municipality called 'member of core committee', assisted by three members of sub-committees, who receive salaries from the Foundation and the municipality. All those are Baath Party members tasked with preparing lists of beneficiaries and all are appointed by Brigadier General Abdul-Salam Suleiman.

47 Interview with a source who asked to be anonymous for security reasons, 20 November 2021.

Members of the Raslan family have benefited from their official positions to mediate between their communities and the regime. They served their home districts and thus strengthened their local status. For example, Major General Ismail and his brother Samer, a judge on the Counter-Terrorism Court, have taken up many service provision roles in their hometown, Jneinet Raslan.⁴⁸ The two have also been keen to make regular visits to the town, meet with its residents and sheikhs, and do what they can to satisfy requests. This explains their substantial popularity there.

Prominent members of the Raslan family have had a decisive say in naming and selecting officials in their localities. Their choices to promote non-relatives to official positions are notable and may be explained as an effort to expand alliances or to appease other families and avert possible tensions. Their direct involvement often takes the form of informal mechanisms such as verbal requests and directives. For example, in the parliamentary elections of 2020, Major General Ismail and Major General Melhem both supported two natives of their town, Suhail Salam Khodor and Rania Hassan, for seats in the People's Assembly. They used the support of Asma al-Assad's networks to do so.⁴⁹ In the local elections of 2018, Nizar al-Assaad endorsed Sami Sweidan, a candidate on the National Unity lists, and gave directives to choose him as head of the Draykish City Council, taking over from Nisreen Badr, a family member of former Minister of Transport Yarob Badr (2006-2011).⁵⁰ Consensus and agreement have not always prevailed among the Raslans in selecting local officials. For instance, in April 2020, Major General Melhem directly supported his friend's son, Samir Ali, to become Secretary of the Baath Party Branch in Draykish. But all did not go smoothly. Ali tried to get himself promoted for the position of Secretary of Baath Party in Tartous, but his attempt to curry favour with Major General Ismail drew the ire of both Melhem and the incumbent secretary Mohammed Habib Hussein. Shortly afterwards, in October 2021, Ali was removed from his Draykish office and replaced by a lawyer, Ahmed Shoubasi.

Prominent families in the Alawite countryside have helped the regime in its recruitment and mobilisation efforts, and they were rewarded with local influence. The regime also worked hard to expand its network of mediators to include emerging, more dependent families into its informal networks.

4. Economics is Key: The Rise of the Hassans

The Syrian conflict has created a political and security environment that brought to the fore new local actors. From Brummanet al-Mashayekh, a town in Tartous which is the home of many families of Alawite sheikhs, the Hassan family rose to prominence during the war and gained reputation beyond the city. Owing to its position within the local economy, as well the involvement of its members in the war economy, the family's rise has revitalised its kinship ties, bolstered its local support base, and made it a significant ally to the regime.

During the last decade, Hamed Hassan, a local merchant, has emerged as one of the most distinguished warlords working with the Fourth Division. His family has enjoyed social and economic status at the local level. His father, Muthanna Hassan, was a retired officer who served in the Presidential Palace as a security guard for Maher al-Assad, in addition to being one of the town's Alawite sheikhs.⁵¹

48 Jneinet Raslan Club, "Major General Ghassan Ismail and His Brother Judge Samer Intervene to Address the Water Crisis in Jneinet Raslan" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 2 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/32YKf6X>

49 Suhail Salam Khodor took over the Red Crescent branch in Tartous from 2013-2019, then worked in al-Areen Foundation. Rania Hassan was part of initiatives to care for the wounded and the families of martyrs. Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020: The Regime's Social Base Contracts," Research Project Report, (Florence, Italy, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, European University Institute), 30 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/37FktHf>

50 Nisreen Badr lost her position after the political decline of her supporter Ali Nada, a businessman and former member of the People's Assembly (2012-2016).

51 Hamed's grandfather was Sheikh Hassan Ibrahim Hassan, son of Sheikh Ibrahim Ali Hassan.

His mother, Maraya Waqqaf, also belongs to a family of sheikhs.⁵² The modernisation of Syria's economy and society had diminished the role of Alawite sheikhs.⁵³ The conflict, however, has revived their role as social figures whose homes were turned into community centres for the families of the dead and wounded, as well as venues in which to meet and exchange stories. These figures also played an important role in mobilising young Alawites for the war, thereby strengthening blood ties and Alawite solidarity bonds within their communities.⁵⁴

Prior to the conflict, Hamed Hassan worked as a tobacco trader who procured surplus tobacco from farmers, sold some of it on the domestic market, and smuggled the bulk to Lebanon. His hometown's tobacco production was the second largest in Tartous after al-Qadmous, with a crop yield of 837,554 tons in 2008.⁵⁵ With the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, Hamed's trade would open more prospects for him. Through his family, and thanks to his wife's indirect kinship with Major General Ghassan Ismail, Hamed Hassan obtained security certification and he was able to work with the Fourth Division.⁵⁶ He was tasked with supervising convoy escort and fee levy operations in the areas between the Lebanese border and Aleppo, and there gained the nickname 'al-Hajji'. Hamed, along with his brother al-Hassan, also worked with Ayman Jaber in the tobacco trade,⁵⁷ managing the commercial representation of Pall Mall, a foreign cigarette distribution company. By 2017, following the dismissal of Ayman Jaber, Hamed Hassan, by this time a figure of some power, took over the commercial representation of 1970, another cigarette distribution company. A year later, he was chosen to escort Asma al-Assad in her tour of the Tartous countryside following her cancer diagnosis.⁵⁸ He introduced her to Alawite sheikhs in the Sheikh Bader area, including Salman Mayhoub al-Dabaybiya and Mohammad Ghanem al-Safliya.

The Hassan family worked to foster their popularity beyond Brummanet al-Mashayekh, and to establish economic ties with different segments of the population. This further promoted their local standing. For instance, Sheikh Muthanna, Hamed's father, served as board member of the Association for the Martyrs, War-Wounded and Disappeared in Brummanet al-Mashayekh until his death in 2014, with his sons continuing to support the association to date. Moreover, the two brothers have provided regular financial support and food baskets to families of martyrs and others in need in the towns and villages of the Sheikh Bader area.⁵⁹ They have also funded other local organisations that provide services to the local population,⁶⁰ and that support charitable initiatives led by Alawite sheikhs in the Sheikh Bader area.⁶¹ Additionally, the family has started a number of business and charitable enterprises thus building a vast economic network responsible for hundreds of jobs in the area. These include the al-Muthanna Sewing Factory⁶² and the Ruwaisat Cheese and Dairy Factory.⁶³

52 Her Father is Sheikh Hamed Waqqaf, and her grandfather is Sheikh Youssef Waqqaf.

53 An Alawite sheikh's home essentially served as a school, a registry office, a hospital, a spiritual and counselling centre, and a courthouse. In return, the sheikh receives alms in lieu of an official income or salary. See: Leon T. Goldsmith, *Alawite Clerics*, Georgetown University in Qatar, 2018.

54 Khaddour, "Tartous in the Current Crisis."

55 Ismail Khalil, "Brummanet al-Mashayekh: A Reclusive Daughter of the Mountain" (in Arabic), *ESyria*, 16 September 2009, <https://bit.ly/3urxbm0>

56 Ayman Aldassouky, "The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict," Research Project Report, (Florence, Italy, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, European University Institute), 24 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3w7wAGm>

57 Bashar Jaber, "Did Ayman Jaber Flee Syria?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 15 September 2016, <https://bit.ly/3srXRk6>

58 Arabi Post, "In Pursuit of Healing of Breast Cancer: Asma al-Assad's Secret Visit to the Sites and Shrines of Alawite Sheikhs" (in Arabic), 15 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/3GpAdtm>

59 Official Bashmaa in Brummanet al-Mashayekh, "The locals of the village of Bashmaa give thanks to Hamed Hassan and his brother al-Hassan for their support to the village" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 2 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3vp7Lps>

60 Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Trade, "Brummanet al-Mashayekh bakery supported with a kneading machine at a value of 12 million Syrian pounds" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 2 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3C2kwHK>

61 Salman Mayhoub al-Dabaybiya has a strong relationship with Hamed Hassan, and Hamed in turn provided financial support to the sheikh's initiative, which he launched in June 2020, to provide stipends to students at universities and institutes in a number of Tartous villages, including al-Wardiya.

62 Tartous Official Radio and Broadcast Centre, "Al-Muthanna Factory Provides Job Opportunities to the Families of Martyrs and Wounded in Tartous" (in Arabic), YouTube, 19 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3BZ22YR>

63 Tartous Official Radio and Broadcast Centre, "Dairy Facility in Brummanet al-Mashayekh in the Sheikh Bader Countryside" (in Arabic), Facebook, last accessed 28 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3lqESNo>

Financial assets and social status enhanced Hamed Hassan's ability to mobilise the locals of his area in support of the Syrian regime. Hamed's sponsorship of pro-Assad demonstrations and rallies during the 2021 presidential elections explains the high turnout in Sheikh Bader.⁶⁴ Likewise, he leveraged his family connections to help settle the status of NDF fighters from Sheikh Bader. He also worked to settle the status of others who had absconded from reserve service, recruiting them into escort and guard groups operating under the Fourth Division-affiliated company Al-Maham for Protection and Private Guarding.⁶⁵

Hamed Hassan's rise has also paved the way for other members of his family. Recommendation of relatives for public offices is of paramount importance in this context, as it enables families to strengthen their inner ties, expand their patronage networks, and protect and grow their economic interests. In 2015, Hamed supported Doctor Hassan Hassan, his aunt's brother-in-law, in taking over the management of the Martyr Mazen Ibrahim Hospital in Sheikh Bader. With the inauguration of al-Kindi Hospital in July 2021, in which al-Hassan Hassan serves as Vice Chairman, the Hassan family has achieved a remarkable presence in the public and private health sector. In a governorate teeming with injured people, the Hassans leveraged this position to provide healthcare to their relatives, close associates, and network members.⁶⁶ Furthermore, as the local economy is reliant primarily on tobacco cultivation, the Hassan family attempted to monopolise positions in the offices of both the Agriculture Directorate and the Tobacco Establishment in Brummanet al-Mashayekh. These are the two government entities in charge of subsidising, licensing and marketing tobacco. Controlling the two institutions promises control over the tobacco crop and dominance over farmers, and thus over a vital economic base. Two members of the Hassan family have headed the office of the Agriculture Directorate in Brummanet al-Mashayekh: Adnan Issa Hassan (2009-2019) and Nizar Younis Hassan (since 2019). Nabil Hassan has, instead, been an inspector at the Tobacco Establishment in Brummanet al-Mashayekh for many years.⁶⁷

Hamed Hassan supported his aunt's husband, retired Brigadier General Ahmed Ali Hassan, in his bid for a seat in the People's Assembly (2020-2024), thus securing parliamentary representation for Brummanet al-Mashayekh for the first time in 47 years.⁶⁸ It is possible that this support was a show of force. Arguably, Hamed was asserting his influence and his family's right to represent the town. Representation at the national level would consolidate the family's social standing and offer opportunities for drawing benefits to the family and the area. Additionally, the Hassan family showed interest in supporting candidates at the governorate level, as happened with Alia Mahmoud, the head of the Tartous Governorate Council, customarily an Alawite position. Endorsed by Hamed, Mahmoud was also supported by her brother Major General Ali Mahmoud, an officer in the Fourth Division. Another person endorsed by the Hassan family was lawyer Samer Ali, who was soon appointed as a member of the Governorate Council in 2018. These appointments are symbolically powerful and chart the rising status of the family. They also present the Hassan family with further access to public resources and increased influence in governorate-level policies. Despite the lack of tangible evidence, it is likely that the family has leveraged its influence within the Governorate Council to obtain special benefits. One indicator of this is the establishment of the al-Muthanna Trading and Contracting company, which was founded by the Hassan brothers and that has already implemented housing projects in Tartous.

64 Sources indicate that Hamed paid 70 million USD campaigning for Assad in these elections. He got some of this back with the higher price of tobacco after the elections. Syria TV, "Game of Whales: Who is Responsible for Raising Cigarette Prices in Latakia?" (in Arabic), 31 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/3B2LwGN>

65 Manhal Baresh, "Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service," Research Project Report, (Florence, Italy, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, European University Institute), 10 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3yzFKwY>

66 During the COVID-19 pandemic, al-Kindi Hospital was instructed to receive infected individuals who work with Hamed in the tobacco trade, at a time when public hospitals were incapable of receiving anyone infected. Skype interview with a local source on the Syrian coast, 30 October 2021.

67 Tobacco inspectors are directly responsible for granting tobacco cultivation licences and for controlling the crop from the cultivation to marketing stages. They are also responsible for distributing tobacco cultivation inputs to farmers, and often for buying the surplus crop and selling it to local traders.

68 Ahmad Ali Harfoush served as a member of the People's Assembly for Brummanet al-Mashayekh in 1973-1977.

The regime's support for Hamed's family, a reliable intermediary and integral part of its informal networks, should be highlighted. It explains the family's rise to power in the conflict years. However, two other dynamics must also be pointed out to fully understand this rise. The first dynamic is economic. It can be seen in the regime's need to curry favour with local traders and assimilate them into its business networks. The regime has used this practice since long before the conflict, and it continues to resort to it in the coastal region and across the country, especially in light of the fragmentation of the central economy.⁶⁹ The second dynamic relates to the importance of family ties for individuals accessing state resources and services. This explains the regime's engagement with emerging local families. The regime uses these to channel communications with its social base, ensuring loyalty and public support. Despite low morale among regime supporters, it is unlikely that their discontent would escalate into disobedience, as long as these communication channels remain open.

Conclusion

The war has transformed and revitalised local politics in Tartous, rendering it more complex and less subject to central regime control. While traditionally influential families have fortified their influence, other lesser-known actors have risen to prominence. All these local actors share connections to the regime and a degree of social status before the conflict. Many families have revived their kinship ties to adapt to the changing dynamics of the conflict, expanding these ties in their localities, aligning their interests with those of the regime, and working to ensure their positions in the socio-political order in post-war Syria.

Despite the growing role of families in local politics, however, caution must be advised in assessing their real powers. Families have not risen to a position that allows them to reshape the power balances as set and maintained by the regime. Assad still holds sway over local politics. This means that the coastal region has no real autonomy. Rather, families in this region are playing a growing role in controlling and administering local policies, while the regime aims to oversee these families through informal recognition of their authority to appoint local officials.

Consequently, foreign actors seeking to play an effective role at the local level, whether in Tartous or on the coast in general, must find partners who belong to prominent families and serve as intermediaries in local power structures. Such partners, with their kinship ties, are the most capable powerbrokers. In this vein, Iran's failure to expand its networks along the Syrian coast cannot be explained by sectarian reasons alone. It is rather the regime's success in keeping the loyalty of such prominent families while incorporating them into its intermediary networks. It is this that has curtailed the attempts of foreign powers from expanding their influence along the coast.

69 Ayman Al-Dassouky, "What We Can Learn from the Rise of Local Traders in Syria," in *Local Intermediaries in post-2011 Syria: Transformation and Continuity*, ed. Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, (Beirut, Lebanon: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2019), <https://bit.ly/3w9woGI>

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