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Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising

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Introduction¹

Historians, sociologists and political scientists have shown a great interest in tribalism, ethnicity and religious identities in the Middle East for many years, and have attempted to study their influence on the stability of the states in the region.² The resilience of tribes towards the traumatic events of the twentieth century highlights their capacity to adapt to changing conditions on the ground, such as the shock of colonialism, which created new political borders in the Middle East, thus hindering tribal movement and migration, and the shock of Arab national-ism, which considered the tribe as a backward part of society that needed to be modernized and incorporated into modern society.³

Arab tribes in Syria have always maintained their culture, solidarity, local leadership and considerable control over their in-ternal affairs. However, since the 1950s, new challenges have emerged that threaten tribal structure and the tribe's traditional way of life. Two distinct periods of Syria's contemporary political history may highlight the relationship between the state and the tribes: the period before and the period after Hafez al-Assad's seizure of power in 1970. The character of this relationship ranged from the state's confrontation with the tribes to incorporation.

More recently, the Arab Spring was accompanied by the emergence of a variety of new phenomena. Most studies have focused on the re-emergence of Islamism and democracy and their by-products.⁴ This article attempts to explain the re-emergence of tribalism. There is a

common perception that Syria's population is now predominantly urban, and that tribal-ism is dwindling further because of the settlement of the Bedouin in urban areas. In fact, *Aneza* and *Shammar* are large tribal confederations that still maintain close tribal connections with their relatives in the Arabian Peninsula.⁵

Following the events of September 11 in 2001, and after the American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, it became clear to the US that tribal affiliations and modes of social order were there all along, and have now re-emerged as a way of organising people in the absence of the state. More books, articles and research papers were published to analyse the tribes in those two countries, but hardly any research has been done about the tribes of Syria.⁶ The weak presence of the tribal question in the academic and the political discourse about Syria does not measure up to the importance of this issue. This study aims to identify briefly the mechanisms governing the relationship between the state and the tribe in Syria, numerous aspects of which have remained unclear or even unknown to academics and outside scholars. In its largest part, it seeks to examine the political dimensions of the tribal phenomenon in modern Syria following the uprising that erupted in March 2011.

The methodology involves a review of some of the literature on the relationship between tribe and state in general and in Syria specifically in addition to some informal interviews with a few informants. Contact with the community concerned in this re-search, has started since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 due to my presence in Syria at that time.

Tribes and the state

Scholars seem to have come to no consensus on the precise definition of a tribe. Because the term has been used to describe different kinds of groups, it is virtually impossible to produce a single clear definition covering all these social formations.⁷ 'Tribe' may be used loosely to describe a localised group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organisation, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins.⁸ There is substantial

literature about the relationship between the state and the tribe by the 13th century North African sociologist Ibn Khaldun. In his *Muqaddimah*, the Khaldunian cycle remains a valuable theory for understanding the socio-economic and political consequences of the historical interactions between tribal culture and urban civilisation in the Middle East.⁹ According to Ibn Khaldun's cyclical theory, as long as the state is strong, the tribes submit by adapting themselves to their economic and political environment. Once the state becomes weak, it becomes vulnerable to revolution by those tribal people it tried to dominate.¹⁰

Evans-Pritchard uses segmentary lineage theory to describe tribal dynamics. The broad idea of this theory is that solidarity plays a major role in forming social groups, which combine or conflict in predictable ways within a cultural system to maintain a general balance of power.¹¹ Gellner expanded on Evans-Pritchard's approach by identifying key characteristics of the tribes, especially where the tribes interact with the state. One of these characteristics is the mercenary option, which would allow for shifts in external allegiance or alliance in order to ensure the survival of the group.¹² The state itself depends on tribal systems for authority and, in return, the tribal system of authority is maintained and preserved in a dialogic way.¹³ Therefore, patronage is one of the most basic forms of social relationship, and it typically manifests when kinship alone is unable to guarantee subsistence and physical security.

Tribes and State formation in Syria

The tribes in Syria have participated in and been affected by local and global forces and have also contributed to change, historically and at present. It should be noted that in the early days of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans in 1916, their forces were largely made up of Bedouin and other nomadic desert tribes.¹⁴ Khalaf argues that during the French mandate in Syria, the colonial forces promoted tribalism as a counterbalance to the rising urban sentiments of nationalism.¹⁵ The Bedouin tribes were separated out and encouraged to set up their own state in the *Badia* (the Syrian Steppe) supervised by a French military unit.¹⁶ Khoury argues that the wedge driven by the French and the settled regions ultimately worked to the detriment of the tribes in the era of the

Syrian independence.¹⁷ When the nationalists came to power after independence, they tried to embark upon a policy which aimed at abolishing all privileges enjoyed by the tribes. The constitution of 1950 included this item “In the electoral law process, special provisions shall be included to meet the special circumstances of the Bedouin and make it possible for them to elect their representatives in the parliament.”¹⁸ This item of the constitution was used to reduce tribal representation in the Parliament. The nine seats which had been granted to the Bedouin tribes during the French Mandate were now reduced to six.¹⁹ Moreover, to bring its coercive power to bear in the outlying tribal areas, the nationalist authorities posted gendarmerie with the aim of imposing law order and preventing influx of arms to the Bedouin tribes.²⁰

Later on, the government became more effective and its economic and military power increased. The Bedouin were subjected to various forms of interference by the government. Nasserite and Ba’thist Party ideology in Syria required that tribes be excluded from the political field and denied access to power in an effort to break their strength and redirect their loyalty towards the state.²¹ The tribes were more politically isolated under the radicalised government of the Ba’th Party when arriving to power in 1963. Tribal leaders lost much of their prestige as many of their functions were gradually assumed by state agencies. Security, livelihood, conflict resolution, range-land management have all become the state responsibility. Thus, the abolishment of (*hima*) (traditional grazing system)²² and the suppression of customary law (*urf*)²³ in addition land reforms have all contributed to the undermining of tribal independence and the increased integration of these groups into the nation-state.

In 1970, Hafez al-Assad set out to broaden the support base for his new regime.²⁴ Although tribalism was considered by government and party officials as one of the major ills of pre-Ba’thist Syria, Hafez al-Assad showed an unusual degree of flexibility in his policies towards the tribes. He chose a strategy, in authoritarian fashion, based on creating a system of clientelism between his regime and influential tribal sheikhs. His strategy was to co-opt tribal leaders and employ them as tools for indirect rule through the use of official appointments and subsidies.

Hafez al-Assad faced growing opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood in major urban centres. The Syrian regime needed to counterweight the traditional urban-based power groups by fostering and maintaining support base among the rural populations including the Bedouin tribes in the Syrian Badia which constitutes 55% of the total area of Syria. Hafez al-Assad used his patronage network with the tribes and unleashed their power to check the Islamists.²⁵ Despite its national slogans of “no sectarianism” and “no tribalism”, the Syrian regime did not hesitate to seek the aid of the tribes to suppress the uprising in 1982 in Hama, the stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁶

The regime called upon the assistance of some tribes, particularly Hadidiyn, in the countryside of Hama to check the flow of guns from Iraq to Hama and to prevent the desert from being refuge for the Muslim Brotherhood members.²⁷ Moreover, Hafez al-Assad used the tribes to counter balance the Kurdish population in the north-east part of the country. In 1973, Hafez al-Assad’s regime started implementing a project that was planned in 1962 during the union with Egypt called the “Arab Belt” project.²⁸ Thousands of people mainly from Busha’ban tribe, who lost their villages in al-Raqqa Governorate due to the construction of Euphrates dam, have been encouraged to settle in villages built over Kurdish fertile lands in order to challenge the status quo of the region, which have traditionally had a Kurdish majority. Tribes were seen very loyal to Hafez al-Assad especially in his battle against the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, after 1982, tribal representation in the Syrian Parliament doubled from 7% to 10%.²⁹ Bedouins began to emerge as important members in the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of agriculture and certain branches of the security apparatus.³⁰

The policies towards the tribes undertaken by Bashar al-Assad between 2000 and 2010 were not different much from the policies carried out during his father’s rule. Bashar has taken the government’s relationship with the tribes a step further by promoting more Bedouins to prominence within the regime and condoning claims by some Ba’ath party members to tribal links or origins.³¹ Moreover, and in a similar way to Hama uprising in 1982, Bashar al-Assad used his network of clients from the Bedouin tribes, who had been encouraged to settle down in the Kurdish

areas, to suppress the Kurdish uprising in 2003. However, the wider popular base of the Syrian society, to which the Bedouin in *al-Badia* and the farmers in the countryside belong, have been marginalized and impoverished. The overconcentration of power and patronage in the ruling clan debilitated the clientelist networks that connected the regime to society.³² In 2003/2004, 5.1 million people were living under the poverty line with 2 million Syrians unable to meet their basic needs.³³ This sparked the Syrian uprising in the predominantly tribal Dar'a. From its beginning the uprising featured a rather unusual degree of mobilization in the countryside against the regime.³⁴

Tribes and collective action in the Syrian uprising

The central element in tribal formation is the establishment of kinship groups. Each member of the group is responsible for each and every other member and the group's "acts" are called "collective action".³⁵ When attacked, group members are obliged to unite to defend themselves; when members sustain injury or loss, group members unite to gain compensation or seek vengeance. When applying these dynamics to Dar'a, which is a predominantly tribal area, where the uprising started, I would argue that the Syrian uprising started as collective behaviour in its first phase and, as a result of the repressive tactics of the regime, it took the form of "collective violence".

Smelser's theory of collective behaviour incorporates a general conceptual analysis of social change.³⁶ It is principally concerned with showing how various kinds of structural strain produce "collective behaviour," which is defined as "mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action".³⁷ Smelser identifies six sets of social determinants whose various degrees produce different kinds of collective behaviours:

First, structural conduciveness refers to structural characteristics that permit or encourage collective behaviour. Tribal bonds between the families of Dar'a have been very important in organising the first protests. Second, structural strain perfectly describes the humiliation that the tribal delegation of Dar'a received from Atef Najeeb, the head of the political

security branch in Dar'a. The delegation asked Najeeb to release the children imprisoned for writing anti-regime slogans on the wall of their school. In a traditional gesture, they took their headbands off and placed them on the table, saying they would take them up again when the matter had been resolved.³⁸ The head-band is the symbol of manhood and chivalry in tribal traditions. Therefore, when making a request, tribesmen would tradition-ally take off their headband expecting the other person to reply positively. By way of response Atef took the headbands of the senior tribal leaders from the table and threw them into the rubbish bin. In response to this disrespectful behaviour, the first demonstration to take place in Dar'a was organised by net-works of tribesmen from al-Zu'bi and al-Masalmeh tribes. Therefore, "Friday of the Tribes" is held in recognition of Syrian tribes participating in protests against the Syrian regime.

Third, growth and spread of generalized belief: the development of mass communication technology enabled the rest of the Syrian tribes to see their fellow tribesmen in Dar'a being shot at and killed in the streets, which made the spark of the revolution move quickly to other regions in Syria. The word *fiz'a* which means the taking up of arms in defense of a mar-tyred relative or honoured individual has been used a lot in Dar'a early protests and is believed to be a motivator for pro-testers from other tribes in Homs, Hama and Deir Ezzor. Fourth, the precipitating factor is a specific event that triggers group action. The arrest and torture of school students in Dar'a by the time the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia had succeeded in bringing two dictators down, was the last straw for the Syrian people to start their action against the regime. The fifth social determinant is mobilization of participants for action. I would argue here that the modern mass media, most important-ly TV channels, have been the main source of mobilisation for the revolution to extend and get bigger over the Syrian regions. Sixth, operation of social control indicates "those counter-determinants which prevent, interrupt, deflect, or inhibit the accumulation of the [above] determinants".³⁹ Tribal leaders played a major role at the beginning of the uprising to prevent their tribesmen from participating in the protests and clashing with the security forces.

The repression and torture exercised by Syrian security forces in their attempt to interrupt and prevent all the above-mentioned determinants which pushed the revolution towards “collective violence”.⁴⁰ The outline of his theory can be summarized briefly. The primary sequence in collective violence starts with the “development of discontent” and then the “politicisation of that discontent”, and finally its “actualization in violent action against political objects”.⁴¹ The armed violence, which came as a response to the regime’s violence corresponds with the concept of *intiqam*, which means revenge for real or perceived offenses committed against one’s kin. Members of the Arab tribes in Syria are bound by honour to take vengeance upon the aggressor, which, in this case, are the Syrian security forces who are deemed hostile towards the members of the tribe.

Sheikhs as “guarantors”

Historically, it was unlikely that states could impose effective control over the tribes in their vast territories because the cost of policing and maintaining control would likely be much higher than what taxes could be extracted from the small number of tribesmen.⁴² To guarantee a continuous and safe passage through tribal regions for the purposes of travel and commerce, states would “buy” the support of the tribes by catering to their leaders. There are numerous historical examples of the establishment of asymmetric alliances and coalitions between strong states or imperial powers and prominent tribal leaders for immediate strategic purposes.⁴³ In Syria, first the Ottomans and later the mandate powers tried to implement a kind of “indirect rule” through the co-opting of Bedouin sheikhs to whom they granted extended privileges such as honourable titles and permission to register extensive private landholdings in their name. As it was mentioned earlier, Hafez al-Assad and later Bashar created a system of clientelism between the regime and influential tribal sheikhs.

By establishing alliances with particular tribal leaders, Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar, were able to maintain control of large areas of the Syrian Steppe. As much as they both relied on the Alawites for filling all strategic military and security positions, they also relied on certain

tribes to join the military and state institutions. They paid acute attention to the tribal and sectarian backgrounds of their top ranking commanding officers. On 18 July 2012, after Defence Minister Dawoud Rajiha was assassinated in a bombing in Damascus, Fehd Jassem al-Frej was appointed by Bashar al-Assad as his successor. It has been overlooked that al-Assad appointed a Sunni Muslim with a tribal background at such a crucial point in the conflict. An-other question that comes to mind is what has made Mohammad Said Bkhaytan and many other officials with Sunni tribal backgrounds so loyal to the Syrian regime thus far? And why is it that army officers with renowned tribal backgrounds have not been defecting?

Over the last few decades, Fehd Jassem al-Frej, Mohammad Said Bkhaytan and many other tribal leaders across the country helped to establish the regime's legitimacy and ensure stability.⁴⁴ During the first few months of the uprising, these tribal leaders had managed to forge convoluted relationships between the state and the community in which they have influence. In the early months of the uprising, many tribal leaders, especially in al-Hasakeh and Raqqa, actively opposed the protests to protect their tribes and clans from the Regime's retribution.⁴⁵ While many regions of Syria like Dar'a and Deir Ezzor where big tribes like *Nu'im*, *Aqaydat* exist have become a veritable war zone, other provinces where tribes of the *Shammar* confederacy and *al-Fadl* live have remained safe enough to absorb the hundreds of thousands of people displaced from other parts of the Syrian *Badia*. In some areas, tribesmen from the same tribe had different attitudes towards the protests. Some tribesmen from *Hadidiyn* tribe issued a statement disowning Fehd Jassem al-Frej and asking him to defect from the regime. Some other army officers from the same tribe announced their loyalty to the regime against the "conspiracy". In an interview with Ahmad Fahed Hadidy, from the *Hadidiyn* tribe, he was asked to clarify these contradictions within the same tribe, he said: "Hafez al-Assad spent decades side-lining the traditional tribal sheikhs by creating a new system of chiefdom of newly appointed sheikhs who had close ties to the intelligence service. By doing so, he hoped to internally dismantle the power of the tribes by placing obstacles between the sheikhs and their people."⁴⁶ The power and the influence within the tribe shifted, says Bander al-Khaledi from *Bani*

Khaled tribe who escaped to Saudi Arabia after the uprising. “The sheikhs that the regime created within each tribe are playing the regime’s game at the moment but these sheikhs have brought shame on themselves and their tribe and there will be a time when they will be brought to court for their crimes.”⁴⁷ It seems that the policies of the Syrian regime in co-opting tribal leaders have succeeded in creating allies within certain tribes that are not interested to see it fall. These policies have created strife within some tribes, sometimes even within the same clan, as some stick with Assad and some oppose him.⁴⁸

“Gathering” the tribes

Tribal gatherings have, on a large scale, emerged following the Syria uprising. During Hafez and Bashar’s reigns, the tribes did not have political coalitions or activities and the tribal political life was confined to some members in the parliament who did not have much weight.

The regime has been trying to win the hearts and minds of tribes by generously bribing the tribal sheikhs with money, cars, and land. This has been successful with a lot of sheikhs who are supportive of the regime, especially the tribal leaders in the north and east. The regime tried to mobilize certain cities and regions by invoking tribal identity on a moral level. The regime started periodically holding “tribal conferences” in Homs, Tartous and al-Raqqa in which sheikhs of tribes were asked to issue statements of loyalty and pledge of support to Bashar al-Assad.⁴⁹ They were asked in front of the state media to encourage their tribesmen to refuse joining the rebels and to condemn western and Arabian Gulf interference in Syrian in-ternal affairs. The loyal tribes attending these conferences have announced the establishment of the Syrian and Arab Tribes and Clans Forum. Sheikh Saleh al-Deli al-Nu'eimi, said that the fo-rum sends a clear message, which rejects foreign interference and the conspiracy against Syria and voices support for nation-al dialogue and reforms.⁵⁰ Tribal Sheikhs were also asked to meet the Russian ambassador and present him with gifts after Russia’s veto against the Security Council resolution condemning the regime massacres. Moreover, they were also asked to meet with the UN Secretary General's envoy Kofi Annan to denounce the “terrorist acts” that target innocent

people rejecting the economic siege imposed on Syria. Syrian state media presented these tribal sheikhs as symbols of Syrian identity and patriotism.

On the other hand, the first tribal gathering against the regime was held in the Jordanian city, al-Mafraq in January 2012. More than 250 people from different tribal confederations like Aneza, Shammar and Baggarah attended the meeting. They confirmed in their meeting that the uprising was based on the tribes and asked the Syrian National Council for a representation that equals their weight in the Syrian uprising.⁵¹ As for the rhetoric of the leaders of the Syrian National Council, while appearing to avoid mentioning the tribal factor, they occasionally spoke of some support and loyalty offered by the Syrian tribes to the opposition – as a reaction to the tribal discourse employed by the official media.⁵² Syrian tribal leaders started holding gatherings, conferences and symposiums in different countries with the aim of unifying the ranks and collecting the legacy of the tribe. They sought to establish coalitions, most recently the Syrian Arab Tribes Council (SATC) which held its founding meeting on April 16th 2011 in Istanbul, with the agreement of the Syrian National Council (SNC). The emergence of SATC has been legitimized by SNC. Therefore, SATC has been a political framework accepted internally and externally, and aims at activating the role of Syrian tribes at this stage of the uprising and post-Assad Syria. Muhammad Mazyad al-Tirkawi, a member of SATC and SNC, stated that SATC will work on the formation of local tribal councils, and will coordinate with the Kurdish and Druze tribes to maintain security after the fall of the Assad regime, and this will be supervised by the SNC.⁵³

In a Skype interview I conducted with Muhammad Mazyad al-Tirkawi, he argued that “the political history of the tribes in contemporary Syria” is affecting their role in the Syrian opposition. He referred to two divisions that emerged within the Syrian National Council. First, the Kurdish-Arab division that is related to previous policies adopted by Hafez al-Assad who encouraged thousands of people, mainly from *Shammar* and *Al-Jabbur* tribes, to settle in villages built over Kurdish fertile lands in order to challenge the status quo of the region, which have traditionally had a Kurdish majority. This big divide created between the

Arab tribes and the Kurds in al-Hasakeh was clearly manifested during a conference for the Syrian opposition held in Cairo in 2012 where the Kurdish parties ended up withdrawing after wrangling with the Syrian Arab Tribes Council (SATC) in which the latter refused a Kurdish suggestion to abolish the “discriminatory” projects initiated by the Syrian regime on their lands.

The other divide appeared between the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the dominant political power in the SNC, and the tribal council. As it has been stated already, Hafez al-Assad incorporated the tribes in his process of state building in Syria. He used the tribes as a counterweight to the Islamists. The coalition between Hafez al-Assad’s regime and the tribes was a thorn in the side of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood continued to pour time and resources into building its influence within the Syrian opposition and has finally achieved its domination over the tribal council by appointing sheikh Salem Abdul-Aziz al-Mislat, who belongs to the movement itself, as the head of the tribal council.

Table of the most prominent tribes in Syria and their stance from the Syrian uprising

The tribe in Syria, as in the rest of the Arab world, is divided into smaller parallel sections – ‘asha’ir’ (clans) and ‘afkhad’ (lineages). These tribes inhabit *Al-Badia*, which covers 55 per-cent of Syria. They constitute 15 % of the Syrian population.⁵⁴

Southern Region Tribes		Central Region Tribes		Northern & Eastern Region Tribes	
Fadl	Split	*Aneza (a group of related tribes including the following:		*Aneza (a group of related tribes including the following:	
al-Zoubi ⁵⁵	Split	*Hasanah	Split	*Fad'an	Loyal
al-Hariri ⁵⁶	Opposition	*Sba'ah	Silent	Al-Jabbur	Loyal
al-Masalmeh	Opposition	Turki	Opposition	al-Mashahdeh	Silent
Nu'im	Opposition	Bani Khaled	Split	Busha'ban	Split
		Fawa'ira	Opposition	Tay	Loyal
		Aqaydat	Split	*Shammar (a group of related tribes including the following):	
		Hadidiyn	Loyal	*Al-Khursah	Opposition
		Mawali	Silent	Al-Aslam	*Opposition
		Nu'im	Opposition		
		Bushakim	Silent		

Notes:

Some tribes inhabit more than one region

- Four classifications distinguish the stance of the tribe towards the regime during the Syrian uprising:
- Loyal (standing with the regime) 2- Opposition (standing against the regime) 3- Split (there is no agreement within the tribe on who to support) 4- Silent (did not take any position and decided to be neutral).

“Tribal Crescent” versus “Shiite Crescent”

A majority of the largest Syrian tribal groups are branches of sub-tribes of a confederated system (*qabila*) that originated in the Arabian

Peninsula and subsequently migrated north to gain access to water and grazing land. Among the most prominent of these groups are the *Aneza* and *Shammar* confederation of tribes from Nejd who began moving north in the 18th and the 19th century to conquer the *Badia* of Greater Syria.⁵⁷ By the middle of the 19th century, both *Aneza* and *Shammar* tribes had established themselves firmly in the *Badia* and controlled the important routes of trade and pilgrimage caravans between Damascus and Baghdad and Damascus and Mecca.⁵⁸

To understand the nature of these deep tribal bonds that span Syria, we need to understand some of the assumptions of classical social anthropology. The Arab tribal formation, that exists today, functions in an analogous manner with a power-balancing conception of international relations.⁵⁹ According to this view, tribes are organized in a horizontal pattern based on patrilineal lines of descent from a common ancestor.⁶⁰ Individual segments engage in a continual process of fission and fusion in response to external conflicts, forming short-lived, complementary opposing power blocs that prevent the rise of a single hegemonic leadership.⁶¹ Therefore, we can notice that the Arab tribal systems are akin to mini-states whose transnational bonds can be tapped into to forge channels of communication and access to foreign powers in the region, especially in the Gulf.

The relationship between certain tribes in Syria and other Gulf countries seems to be very much of the patron and client. The Saudis have always provided *Aneza* with political backing and financial subsidies. During King Abdullah's visit to Syria in 2010, he handed over large cheques to each of the *Aneza* sheikhs.⁶² In return, the Saudis seem to expect loyalty and some indirect pathways into Syrian politics. Moreover, the rulers of other Gulf countries supported different tribes. For example, the annual Palmyra camel race served as a cover for Qatari support to the *Hadidiyn* tribe and other tribes.⁶³ The Syrian regime benefited from these inter-tribal relations in different ways. First, since members of tribes like *Hasanah* and *Turki* from *Aneza* confederation were able to cross borders freely and legitimately, they were exploited by prominent figures in the Syrian regime to smuggle arms and drugs and therefore create a black market that was lucrative for both sides. Second, these bonds provided a

way for the Syrian regime to get rid of a large number of unemployed people from the *Badia* region who have immigrated to the Gulf for economic reasons.

The shared cross-border kinship ties possessed by Syrian tribes and networks of tribal youth in Arab Gulf countries presented a regional geopolitical complication to the uprising.⁶⁴ As soon as the uprising started in Syria and after the bloody crackdown against the peaceful protestors, the tribes of Homs and Deir Ez-zor contacted their “cousins” in the Gulf asking for a firm diplomatic and economic position regarding Damascus. When the Arab tribes in Syria made appeals for protection from the brutality of the Al-Assad regime, their tribal kinsmen in the Gulf States of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have had a hard time ignoring them.⁶⁵ Saudi Arabia and Qatar are reported to be using tribal networks to move materiel and weapons into Syria. The ancestral connections have ignited sympathies among thousands of Saudis, Kuwaitis and Qataris who have donated millions of dollars in aid and recently military equipment to the free Syrian army.⁶⁶

Much has been said about the Gulf’s interest in regime change in Syria to steer Damascus away from Tehran and bolster their regional standing.⁶⁷ Saudi Arabia is troubled by the "Shiite Crescent" that has extended from Iran through Iraq, into Syria and to the Mediterranean shores of Lebanon.⁶⁸ The uprising in Syria created an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to use tribal bonds to destroy the regime of Syrian strongman Bashar Al-Assad. Ahmad Jarba, the current president of the opposition National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, is an influential tribal figure who has close links to Saudi Arabia. It is widely believed that Saudi Arabia has supported him to gain this position after he played a vital role in bridging the gap between tribes in eastern Syria and the opposition.

The Saudi-Qatari competition for influence over the Syrian opposition has tribal repercussions as well. As stated previously, Saudi Arabia has sought to consolidate the position of Ahmad al-Jarba based on tribal connections, to become the president of the National Coalition in July 2013. Riad Hijab, who stood as the rival candidate for what is seen as the

Qatari-backed fac-tion⁶⁹ belongs to al-Sukhne tribe that is based in Deir-Ezzor Governorate. The election of Ahmed Jarba, to be head of the major opposition umbrella organization was a Saudi Arabian victory over Qatar and its candidate. Jarba, is from the paramount sheikhly lineage of the northern [Sunni] Shammar and a close cousin of Ghazi al Yawar, the interim president of Iraq following the liberation in 2003.

Tribal ties put pressure on Iraq

Tribal ties extend beyond the Syrian Iraqi borders and making them united. Among the most prominent of these groups with tribal ties are *Aneza, Shammar, Aqaydat* and *Al-Jabbur*. The first problem that the Iraqi government faced with the upsurge of the Syrian uprising was the large influx of refugees. Most of the refugees crossing over have relatives in Iraq, and intended to head straight to them until the situation back home improved.⁷⁰ Instead, they were crammed together in local schools and government buildings, and the army and police imposed strict restrictions on their movement. Thousands of Iraqis marched through al-Qaim city to denounce their government's policy in preventing their relatives from Syria to stay with them.⁷¹ In a Skype interview I conducted with someone from *al-Jabbur* tribe, he commented on this situation "The tribes in Iraq and Syria are the same but the political borders have divided us. Each family in Syria has uncles, aunts and cousins in Iraq". After the protests of the Iraqi tribes, the government has reached a compromise with them to allow the Syrian refugees to leave the schools provided they had relatives who could "sponsor" them, and if they could deliver written guarantees to the government.

Sheikh Abdul Rahman Ali, chief of the tribal council in Falluja says "when Assad goes, we will have a brother regime at our back."⁷² As the fighting between forces loyal to President Ba-shar al-Assad and the armed opposition has spilled across the Iraqi borders, Iraqi tribes have decisively joined their fellow Syrians in the battles that took place there. More than 40 Syrian soldiers who had sought temporary safety in Iraq from rebel fighters along the border were killed in an attack by the Iraqi tribes.⁷³ The Syrian uprising is stirring Iraqi tribal sympathies and is

increasingly threatening to renew the conflict in a country that is still suffering from instability after the American invasion.⁷⁴

Tribes and the armed conflict:

Now with a brutal civil war raging all over Syria, the Syrian regime has crumbled and as a result society in the desert has fallen back on the tribes.⁷⁵ Tribal militias composed of many Syrian army defectors were formed in different parts of the Syrian Steppe which constitutes 55% of Syrian land. Their mobility combined with their loyalty to their kin groups and their military capacity due to the arms received during Hafez and Bashar's rule make them strong enough to take control of large areas within the Syrian Steppe.

In a remarkable shift from the tense relationship that lasted for decades between the tribes and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, a recent video released by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), showed what it called swearing an oath of allegiance to the ISIS by more than a dozen tribes in the province of Raqqa east of Syria.⁷⁶ The development comes several weeks after ISIS received formal pledges of loyalty from a number of tribal representatives in rural Aleppo.⁷⁷ Different reports confirm the shift towards an alliance between certain tribes.⁷⁸ and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant in joining battles against the regime and the Kurds. Not all tribes fight against the regime, however. Some tribal leaders who have close links to the security services in Syria have remained loyal to the regime.⁷⁹ In al-Hassakeh governorate, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish political group has been engaged in armed conflict with jihadist groups such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. As the fighting has moved into Arab-majority territories between factions, certain clans of Shammar and the Sharabia tribes have joined the Kurds in their battles against the Islamists.⁸⁰ Both of the Kurds and the Islamists have increasingly relied on support from local Arab tribes to tip the balance.⁸¹

Conclusion

The Syrian regimes of Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar utilised the tribes in the build-up of their authoritarian power and used them as tools to fight the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish attempts to gain autonomy. This era witnessed a balanced relationship between the tribes and the Syrian regime through which we could see an alliance between both of them that is based on interests owing to the dynamic and pragmatic nature of the tribes' quest for survival and prosperity. Tribal representation in the Syrian Parliament increased; tribal leaders started to appear in prominent positions in the state institutions (army, security apparatus and the Ba'ath Party branches). However, the collapse of the rural economy of tribal communities in the south and east of Syria during Bashar al-Assad's regime due to drought, lack of development projects and the mismanagement of al-Badia resources ignited the Syrian uprising to start in tribal regions.

Therefore, incorporation of the tribes by the authoritarian regime in Syria was decisive for regime consolidation in order to get support from the tribes and expand their patronage net-works in society while alienation and exclusion of the tribes led at a later stage to de-stabilization of the regime. From Dar'a south of Syria all the way northeast to al-Hassakeh, tribal links have had a strong influence on shaping the nature of the Syrian uprising. In response to the regime's use of force against the protest movement, tribes resorted to armed self-defense against the security forces. The tribes have been largely, but not exclusively supportive of the opposition. Some tribal leaders who have close links to the security services established tribal militias that have been fighting with the regime against the opposition. Moreover, the Syrian uprising has proved that regional tribal bonds are still strong and resilient which is shown in the Arabian Gulf and Iraqi tribal support to their fellow tribesmen in Syria. Whether the Syrian regime falls or keeps power, tribes will play a vital role in any attempt to reconcile social and political differences and to rebuild Syria's fractured polity.⁸²

Endnotes

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- ² For further reading on the relationship between the tribe and state, see for example: Faleh Abdul-Jabar and Hosham Dawod (ed.), *Tribes and Power, Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2004). Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 1991).
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