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Mechanisms of Domination: State Violence, Threat of Greater Violence, and Local Intermediaries in Pre-2011 Syria

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Introduction

On 18 March 2011, Yousef Abu Roumiyeh, a prominent tribal notable and a MP representing Syria's southern Daraa governorate reportedly received a private call from the presidential palace. "There are protests in Daraa city … go and try to find a solution to the problem" (Interview with Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh 2020). The caller was referring to the protest that ignited the Syrian uprising. Abu Roumiyeh, who rose to prominence in early 1990s, was a typical intermediary between state and society: a person who connected his local community with the state—an outside actor not rooted within his community. In the first few months of the uprising many state officials—ranging from the Syrian President all the way to local security officials—reached out to local informal and semi-formal power structures with the aim of utilizing their authority to curb anti-governmental protests in their communities.

By doing that, as this paper argues, the regime was in fact resorting to a tried-and-tested mechanism of conflict management, which it used to respond to internal social or political violence that threatened its order before 2011, especially in the

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peripheries (rural areas, margins of major cities and border peripheries). In its pursuit of this goal, the regime employed various strategies that collectively resembled a somewhat established conflict management approach. At the core of this method lay the re-domination of space lost to opponents through a combination of limited violence, the threat of using greater levels of violence, and the utilization of local power structures as intermediaries between the centre of power, the regime, and those who rebelled against its order.

The cog that enabled this conflict management process was a dynamic interplay between two key elements. First, a combination of implicit and explicit threats made by the regime that underscored its ability and willingness to use much greater levels of violence to restore its order, in the meantime invoking its violent image, notably the Hama massacre of 1982. Second, intermediaries played a pivotal role by utilizing the regime's willingness to resort to greater levels of violence as a way of containing those within their communities who challenged the order, thus aiding the regime in re-establishing its control. At its core, this conflict management mechanism did not necessarily aim for a just settlement or reconciliation; instead, it revolved around a trade-off: minimal state violence in exchange for reaccepting its order with some dividends collected by local community and/or intermediaries.

The objective of this paper is to test this argument through four cases of socio-political violence that occurred before 2011. The most noteworthy example was the Qamishli revolt in March 2004, when violence in a football match escalated into mass unrest especially in Syria's Jazira region. The regime's authority was shaken in the area, and completely collapsed in a few localities on a scale unprecedented since the 1976-1982 Muslim Brethren rebellion. The second is the unrest in Suwayda in November 2000, only few months after Bashar al-Assad inherited the presidency. An inter-communal dispute involving a Bedouin herder and Druze resident escalated into protests against the local authorities, especially the security forces, which was only contained after the deployment of the army. Those were the most serious incidents of collapse of state authority since

Brotherhood's rebellion and therefore best suitable cases to study regime's response to a socio-political unrest before 2011. A potential third case study for inclusion is the 2005 conflict between members of the Alawite and Ismaili communities in the coastal town of Qadmous. This incident involved mediation efforts by local intermediaries and the deployment of the army's elite 4th Armoured Division to contain the conflict (Khaddour 2017, p.6). However, it was omitted due to space constraints and the challenge of obtaining reliable first-hand data.

The paper also encompasses two social disputes—one intercommunal and another tribal—that were less political in nature, though their resolution still entailed limited violence, threats of violence, and the involvement of local intermediaries. Though these conflicts were not necessarily against the regime, they still challenged regime's order, and could potentially even pose a threat had they escalated, which justifies their inclusion here. More than a dozen cases were examined by the author for the purpose of this research but only two such conflicts are included as main case studies. A tribal dispute dating back to 1996 in Inkil, Daraa governorate. And an inter-communal dispute in mid-2000s involving members of an Arab clan and Syrian-Armenian community in Aleppo's eastern peripheries.

This paper seeks to make contributions on multiple fronts. In the context of Syria Studies, the paper seeks to enhance our pre-2011 era understanding of political processes, which remains understudied. While there are valuable works addressing topics such as Ba'th Party's ascend to power (Hinnebusch 2002), transition of power to Bashar al-Assad (Wieland 2012) political violence (Ismail 2018), sectarianism (Surat 2012), authoritarianism (Heydemann and Leenders 2013), local intermediaries (Khaddour and Mazur 2019) and tribal societies (Dukhan 2019) in Syria, to the best of my knowledge, there isn't an in-depth study that thoroughly examines how the Syrian regime managed intra-state, socio-political conflicts from the period following the Hama massacre in 1982 until 2011. This paper aims to fill this gap in the existing literature. Furthermore, the case studies that are mostly based on first-hand data,

provide new empirical details, with the potential to serve as valuable resources for future scholarly work.

This paper also contributes to the broader field of authoritarian conflict management, particularly at a time when the practice is on the rise globally. While this framework has been applied in various cases in Eurasia, East Asia, and some parts of the African continent, its application in the Middle East, Syria included, is almost non-existent. Moreover, the illiberal approach to conflict management is a defining characteristic of the Syrian conflict, encompassing forced displacement, demographic shifts, extreme and one-sided violence, as well as a lack of genuine dialogue and reconciliation. Understanding the origins of Syrian regime's "conflict management style" becomes increasingly crucial in this context. This paper represents the first of a three-part series of academic articles aimed at comprehensively studying and analysing the evolution of how the regime (and after 2011 also its allies) have managed the Syrian conflict, especially in light of the shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding approaches.

This empirical qualitative research study adopts a multi-case study approach, drawing upon the conceptual framework of authoritarian conflict management initially advanced by David Lewis et al. (2018). Regarding data collection, the research leverages secondary sources particularly in addressing topics related to political violence within the Syrian context and understanding intermediaries in contemporary Syria. The primary data is collected by the author via semi-structured interviews, commencing in 2016. These interviews encompass a mix of remote and face-to-face interactions, with the latter primarily taking place in Jordan and Lebanon.

Conceptual Framework

Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM) provides a valuable conceptual framework for investigating how authoritarian regimes handle internal challenges to their authority and domination. Within the context of this study, authoritarian regimes

are understood as "political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism," where "a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits." (Linz in Lewis et al. 2018, 5) This concept of ACM was first introduced by David Lewis, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran in their paper titled "Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management" (Lewis et al. 2018). According to the authors:

> ACM entails the prevention, de-escalation or termination of organised armed rebellion or other mass social violence such as inter-communal riots through methods that eschew genuine negotiations among parties to the conflict, reject international mediation and constraints on the use of force, disregard calls to address underlying structural causes of conflict, and instead rely on instruments of state coercion and hierarchical structures of power. (Lewis et al. 2018, 6)

ACM has its intellectual roots in the fields of peace studies, liberal peace theory and especially the critics that emerged in 1990s against liberal peacebuilding approaches, which essentially promoted liberal modes of conflict transformation based on multi-party democracy, market capitalism, justice, security sector reform, focus on human rights and on international interventions by United Nations and western democracies (Lewis et al. 2018, 2-3; Keen 2021, 246; Smith et al. 2020, 2-4). A core critique has been that since 1990s, interventions inspired by liberal peacebuilding to resolve conflicts in Balkans, West Africa and West Asia failed to produce "fully liberal states with liberal economies, and as a result, scholars began to question the methodologies and theoretical underpinnings of liberal peace theory as a whole" (Keen 2018, 248). Moreover, since 2000s the shift away from liberal mechanisms of conflict resolution to more authoritarian approaches have been evident in many internal conflicts in Sri Lanka, Eastern Turkey, Russia, China, Burundi, Ethiopia, Egypt, Myanmar, Rwanda, Sudan, Syria, Uzbekistan, and others (Lewis 2018, 4; Smith 2020, 2).

ACM was born on the backdrop of this critical debate and the fact that not only do many authoritarian regimes reject liberal

approaches, oppose foreign intervention, invoke sovereign norms, but also because they resort to authoritarian practices to respond to conflicts within the state. Besides violence, they employ a range of political, economic, social, and symbolic practices (Lewis 2018, 14). ACM, according to Lewis et al. (2018, 6,8), attempts to unpack "dynamics of authoritarian modes of conflict management," by assessing practices within three fundamental categories of social life: discourse, space, and economy, which when used together constitute a framework for managing conflicts.

Through discursive control, authoritarian regimes tend to impose "hegemonic discourse" by preventing opposing voices, delegitimizing their foes and their grievances, and by focusing on divisions within society, even aggravating them. (Lewis 2018, 8-10).

The second element is space, which authors see it as contested rather than a fixed category and shaped by conflictual political, economic, and social forces that impact on social processes. While liberal approaches see space as where conflicting views meet to resolve differences, in ACM space is denied to the opponent because it offers a resource for mobilization, fundraising, recruitment, and organization. Dominating the space is both a central element of conflict management and a challenging one given the spatial linkages across space on varying scales: local-regional, cross-border, diasporic, virtual, to name a few. Thus, "Authoritarian actors aim to centralise and homogenise spatial politics," through set of practices: military force, law enforcement, urban design, demographic change, etc. (Lewis 2018, 10-11).

The third element concerns political economic practices that is designed "primarily with the aim of political stabilisation" through denying resources to opponents and by channeling them to loyal cliental networks, who, essentially, receive the lion's share of the so-called 'peace dividend' with overall economic growth being a secondary concern. (Lewis 2018, 10-13)

Part I: Case Studies: Inkhil, Aleppo, Qamishli and Suwayda

Inter-clan dispute in Inkhil, Daraa Governorate

A personal fight in 1996 escalated into a large-scale confrontation involving two extended families from Inkhil, Daraa governorate, which reportedly left three people killed and ten injured. Law enforcement units were deployed to contain the escalating conflict. They came to break up the fight, imposed a curfew and in a bizarre, albeit commonly used tactic, camped in the conflicting families' private property to prevent further escalation. They ate and drank at the hosts' expense and slept in their guest rooms until the conflict was resolved. The authorities arrested 200 people, including women. Some of those involved fled Syria until an informal reconciliation was brokered between the families, which was then formalized by a court. (Interview with Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh 2020)

Such conflicts were common in Syria, especially in tribal lands, rural peripheries, and the peripheries of major cities where strong familial ties still existed. The process of how they were solved varied from case to case (Tokmajyan 2019) While some were solved without the involvement of the authorities, others were managed by the police or solved through a formal court process. In some cases—especially when there was blood spilled, weapons deployed and large tribes involved—the matter took a different turn, sometimes involving high regime officials such as head of the regional Ba'th Party or a presidential envoy, to mediate a solution. Though not necessarily political in nature, such big conflicts were dealt with delicately by the regime to prevent their politicization, gaining of media attention, spilling over into other localities or even turning against the authorities (interview with Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh 2020).

It was not unusual for a big part of the reconciliation process to be done informally, based on informal mediations, tribal or religious customs. Once the agreement was reached, a judge gave a legal enforcement power to it. In numerous instances, victims

of conflicts or their relatives chose to waive their right to pursue legal action (per private law) in exchange for financial compensation from the perpetrator's family. In such cases, the perpetrators served only a short sentence, as dictated by public law. In rarer occasions, to facilitate a solution, the state even eschewed public law by issuing an amnesty for the perpetrators, and with that helping the conflict to resolve without any punishment (Interview with Khalidi 2020; Interview with engineer 2020; Interview with Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh).

Returning to the dispute in Inkhil from 1996, the case shows the delicate process of how the regime contained such social conflicts through a mix of violence, threat to use greater violence, and mediation. The story below is based on the account of an eyewitness, Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh, the son of Yousuf Abu Roumiyeh—a former parliamentarian and well-known Daraa tribal notable—who was one of the three arbiters in the reconciliation process. The details of the account are cross-checked with two other persons involved in the conflict. According to Ibrahim Roumiyeh:

The chief of police in Daraa governorate telephoned my father and said, 'We tried but failed to resolve the dispute. You are a respected notable accepted among the people. Come and try to resolve it.' We went to Inkhil, formed a reconciliation committee that included members from each family, but failed to find a resolution. My father told the police chief: 'No one wants to reconcile. A few ignorant people are spoiling the process and I don't have the necessary authority to force a solution.' The police chief replied: 'Consider that you have all the authority. The state wants this problem resolved, quickly.' My father gave the police chief the names of ten prominent members from both families and said, 'Take them and put them in prison.' The police chief imprisoned [those on the list] and told them, 'You will not leave until there is a solution.' After a few hours in jail, they agreed to resume the reconciliation process, which led to a resolution (interview with Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh 2020).

Inter-communal dispute on the peripheries of Aleppo city

In mid-2000s, a financial dispute escalated into an inter-communal issue between members of a *Fadawi* clan, which spanned out mostly in largely informal eastern parts of Aleppo city, and Syrian-Armenians residing in al-Midan district. The spark was a loan repayment dispute. Some members from the *Fadawi* clan owned home appliances shops in al-Midan district, which was an important center for Syrian-Armenians. Some Armenians bought appliances with unofficial loans facilitated by the shop owners, who gave them very unfavorable terms. The accumulated debts became the reason for clansmen to harass and threaten Armenians. Some Armenian-owned shops were destroyed and vandalized by the clansmen, harassment incidents against Armenian women in the streets were rumored.

The dispute escalated. The months that followed witnessed a negotiation and settlement process that involved local security officials, a senior security official from Damascus, *Fadawi* clan leaders, and notable Armenians including a senior religious personality and Armenian member of Parliament among others. One of the Armenian representatives, who played the role of intermediary in the whole process narrated how the issue was managed and solved by the regime. He said:

> After learning about the conflict, we first went to the neighborhood's [al-Midan district] security chief, who couldn't help. [Our intervention] worsened the situation because the security officials were connected with the clan through network of corruption and patronage. We also didn't get help from his superiors nor from the mayor. We took ourselves and went to Damascus to meet a very senior security official (Interview with Syrian-Armenian religious notable 2018).

The Armenian delegation met the official after they located him with the help of the Armenian member of the Syrian Parliament at the time, and an Armenian friend of the senior security official. According to the author's interlocutor, the official

welcomed the delegation. After breaking the ice with few unrelated topics, the delegation brought up the topic. One of the delegates underlined "the danger of the dispute." He said, "if it got out, on Facebook or somewhere else, it was not going to be good for our country, Syria."

Armenian delegates were contextualizing the matter in a sensitive context, namely that a vulnerable Christian minority was facing a danger from a non-Christian, larger, armed, and stronger group, and that they needed the state's protection; from the very state that praised the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups in Syria and posed itself as the defender of minorities. In this context, the spread of the news through Facebook, especially through Christian networks in the region or beyond, had the potential of harming regime's image.

After the meeting the security official came to Aleppo. Without opening an official investigation, he ordered the local security forces to arrest a few people from the *Fadawi* clan, and then invited one of the clan notables to see him. He, according to the interlocutor, "came with gifts, and was received well" by the security official. The aim was not to detain (given that they were let go after the issue was solved) but to force the clan to renegotiate new terms, agreeable to both sides. The Armenian intermediary recalled:

> I was sitting face to face with the head of the *Fadawi* clan to negotiate the terms. On their side, they had to undo the exploitative measures they took in these business deals. Armenians still had to pay back the money they owed to the shop owners but with better conditions. In this way, the issue got solved.

The intermediary concluded:

> The senior security officer could jail many people and open a court case. He had the power. But that wouldn't have solved the problem. Only exacerbated it. Therefore, he tried to find a solution through [informal] negotiations.

Qamishli uprising in 2004

A chain of events in mid-March 2004 around a football match led to Syria's biggest episode of unrest since the 1976-1982 Muslim Brotherhood rebellion. It reportedly left around 30-40 deaths, hundreds injured, many more arrested and about 350 displaced to the bordering Iraqi Kurdistan region (Amnesty International 2005; Bulletin No 230 2004; The New Humanitarian 2004). Syrian officials put the toll at 25 (Bulletin No 230 2004). The events were taking place within a very tense regional context, less than a year since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which led to the fall of Saddam Hussein regime and the formation of the Kurdish Regional Government that ruled Iraqi Kurdistan (Lowe 2006, 5). These developments happening just across the eastern border inspired Syria's long suppressed Kurdish minority and troubled Damascus, which feared a possible U.S. invasion (Tejel 2008, 124). Although some of the exact details of the events remain unclear or disputed, it is possible to construct the relevant trajectories of the developments through triangulating different sources.

The spark was mass violence in Qamishli's football stadium on 12 March 2004 during a match between the native al-Jihad, mostly composed of Kurdish and Syriac/Assyrian players, and mostly Arab Deir al-Zor's Futuwa team (Khaddour and Mazour 2023). Many sources suggest that the violence was instigated by Deir al-Zor's mostly Arab fans by insulting Kurdish political figures such as Mesud Barazani and Jalal Talibani and praising Saddam Hussein who had a history of suppressing Iraq's Kurds (Tejel 2008, 115). As violence unfolded in the stadium and large number of people started fleeing, a crowd of Qamishli locals started gathering around the stadium (Amateur Video 1; Amateur Video 2). Many sources suggest that the reason for this mobilization was the "Green Stadiums" radio program, which reported that the game was cancelled and that three children died due to trampling, which later turned out to be untrue. The first victims of the events reportedly fell near the stadium when law enforcement units opened fire to disperse the crowd. (In-

terview with Ibrahim Bro 2020; Violations Documentation Center 2020; Kurdish Watch 2009, 4)

The next day, the funeral of those killed turned into a large protest (Interview with Ibrahim Biro 2020; Interview with Marwan Othman 2020). The authorities, which erected checkpoints and increased their presence in Qamishli, failed to disperse the protests. Other cities too witnessed mass gatherings (Gambill 2004). In Amuda, a town near the Turkish border in northern Hassaka, for instance, the city's police and security forces could not contain the angry crowd and fled the city (Interview with Mohammad Ibrahim 2020). In many cities in the Jazira region that witnessed protests public and government buildings were vandalized (Kurdish Watch 2009, 8). Other parts of Syria with sizable Kurdish population like Afrin, Aleppo, and Damascus also witnessed protests (Lowe 2006, 5; Gambill 2004). For at least a few days, the regime had mostly lost control of the situation.

The accounts gathered by the author suggest that in the face of the unprecedented social unrest and unfavourable regional political setting, the Syrian regime employed a combination of tactics to curb the protests and reimpose its security order. First, accounts suggest that the authorities deployed large military and security forces, and conducted arrests, especially in Damascus, within Kurdish communities. According to Amnesty International, some 2000 people, mostly Kurds, including children and women were arrested. Torture and maltreatment were reported (Amnesty International 2005b). Army units were sent to the Jazira by train, land routes and helicopters and the military was widely seen in the streets (Interview with Marwan Othman 2020). It is not clear which units and divisions were deployed though units from the elite Republican Guards and the 4th Armoured Division were present (Kahaf 2016.) The regime also utilized some local Arab tribes, notably the al-Tayy clan, which was allowed to bear arms against the protestors. Clansmen were familiar with the local setting and in cooperation with the regime played an important role in suppressing

the protestors (Khaddour and Mazur 2023).[2] In general, this apparent show of force was crucial in suppressing the Kurdish uprising.

The regime's discourse was heavily influenced by regional developments, especially the increasing U.S. threats against Damascus and the formation of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq that inspired many Syrian Kurds. A telling example is a statement made on 17 March by Syria's vice president, Abdul Halim Khaddam, who emphasized on importance of national unity and blamed "foreign actors trying to benefit from the events" in a likely reference to the U.S. (Al-Arabiya 2004). Similarly, General Hisham Ikhtyar, head of the General Intelligence Directorate, was quoted by al-Ra'i newspaper saying, "foreign hands are trying to plant *fitna* [i.e., dissension] and shake Syria's stability" (Ra'i Newspaper 2004). Al-Ba'th newspaper blamed a "plan" whose objective was to hurt Syria "and contribute to all the known pressure on her" in a likely reference to the notable U.S. pressure (Ibid). However, it is important to note that the regime also imparted a conciliatory tone to its discourse toward the Kurds that pre-dated the 2004 events and amidst expected U.S. intervention in Iraq. Bashar al-Assad, for instance, visited Hassakeh in 2002 and then again in 2005, emphasizing national unity; officials promised to grant citizenship to stateless Kurds, and detainees were released, among others (Lowe 2006, 6).

Kurdish grievances did not find much resonance within the wider Syrian population. The regime's discourse and the U.S. intervention in Iraq explain this. Additionally, as one Syrian writer and human rights defender noted at the time, some practices by more radical elements among Kurdish protestors, influenced by the mood in Iraq, raised "separatist slogans," vandalized public property, and burnt the Syrian national flag,

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[2] A senior PYD official confirmed the information though underscored that not all clans agreed to help the regime. For instance, Jamil Abdul Karim, a notable from the Shammar tribe, refused to bear arms against the Kurdish protestors. Author's interview with Ahmad Abdulsalam, one of the founders of PYD, representative of the AANES in Lebanon, Beirut, May 6, 2023.

all of which made the Kurdish street "lose the ability to win people's trust and respect and the confidence of the Syrian masses" (Al-Bunni 2004).

Accounts suggest that, in addition to repression and de-legitimizing discourse, the regime already on the first two days of the protests reached out to Kurdish political party leaders and influential personalities with the aim of containing the protests. Prior to the Qamishli uprising, communication between state officials and Kurdish leaders was fairly regular (Lowe 2006, 5; Interview with Ahmad Abdulsalam 2023). As a response to the developments, the regime formed a security committee (*lijneh amniyeh*) that included General Hisham Ikhtyar and Muhammad Mansoura, head of the Political Security Directorate with 25 years of experience in the Jazira region. They had meetings with Kurdish notables, influential personalities and especially the leaders of Kurdish parties who agreed to cooperate (Statement by Group of Kurdish Parties 2004; Ra'i Newspaper 2004). The latter formed the Group of Kurdish Parties (*Majmu'et al-ahzab al-kurdiyeh*) to represent the parties and had many meetings with regime officials. There isn't enough evidence to construct the regime's entire strategy towards the crisis but the personal accounts of mainly Kurdish leaders who participated in these meetings allow us to identify two regime approaches to contain the crisis: one propitiatory, the other threatening.

During a meeting that brought together several regime officials, including Ikhtyar and Mansoura, and some 40-50 personalities including the Kurdish political party representatives, religious and secular notables and influential personalities, Hisham according to a Kurdish source, threatened that the state "could have dealt with the situation in other means" but preferred to "cooperate [with them] to prevent bloodshed and restore stability" (Interview with Taher Safouk 2021). The account of another Kurdish leader who was arrested provides another example of regime's strategy of threat and propitiatory (Ibid).

On 13 March, a group of Kurdish party leaders were arrested for communicating with foreign media, imprisoned, and then

interrogated. According to one of the leaders, the interrogator—an officer from the Political Intelligence Directorate dispatched from Damascus—admitted that Kurds had legitimate grievances and suggested that it was possible to discuss them later. He even expressed some understanding when a Kurdish party leader explained that vandalism by Kurdish youth took place because of suppression of all means of expression (Interview with Marwan Othman 2020). Yet the official also made it clear that the state could use greater violence if the unrest continued. He reportedly said "Qamishli is not dearer than Hama" and that "the leadership's patience shouldn't be exploited"—a reference to the bloody events in Hama against the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 (Ibid).

Another Kurdish leader who was arrested in Qamishli, maltreated, and detained for a few hours was surprised to eventually be released. According to him, a few days after his arrest an officer from the State Intelligence Bureau invited him and those who were arrested with him to his office to pass a message from Hisham Ikhtyar. The message urged them to calm down the situation (Interview with Ibrahim Biro 2020). Another Kurdish party leader who regularly participated in the meetings with regime's security committee said that on one occasion Ikhtyar said that "we don't have problem in shelling 'Amuda" as an explicit threat to us of more violence (Interview with Fouad Aliko 2020).

Beyond the political parties the fear that the regime might and could use a much greater force was widespread. One common rumour that was widely circulated was a threat by Maher al-Assad, president's brother, that he was ready to burn 'Amuda down (Interview with Muhamad Ibrahim; interview with Ibrahim al-Youssef). The origin of this threat, whether it was merely a rumour or a fact, or even whether Maher was in the Jazira during the event, was not possible to verify. Nonetheless, this particular rumour seems to have left a strong impact on the collective memory of the locals. Many of the author's interlocutors repeated it without knowing if it was true.

The group of Kurdish political parties and prominent personalities collectively decided and worked towards calming the situation. At first, these traditional leaders had little control over the street which was led by angry youth and was spontaneous. Some senior party leaders admitted having no or little control over the angry crowds in the first few days (Interview with Marwan Othman 2020; interview with Fouad Aliko 2020). But they gradually pulled some strings to calm the situation down (Tejel 2008; Interview with Marwan Othman). A statement by Group of Kurdish Parties (2004b) called for calm and cancelled the Norouz celebration on 21 March (Kurdish new year and a potential cite for confrontation with the regime). They also worked through their party networks to implement their decision (Interview with Abdul Razzaq Tmmo 2020; Interview with Fouad Aliko 2020; Lowe 2006, 6). The PYD, for instance, followed suit, not wanting to be at the forefront of a confrontation with the regime, which was giving it sanctuary against Turkey, and used its wide network across Syria to calm the situation down (Interview with Ahmad Abdulsalam 2023).

There were youth groups that led protests that undermined the traditional leadership. But as Tejel explains, eventually the "elders" (local notables, religious dignitaries and political party leaders) who opted for calm, prevailed. Tensions occasionally rose again in the year that proceeded the 2004 events, most notably after the killing of Kurdish Sheikh Ma'shuq al-Khaznawi, when some protests took place (Stack 2005). Nevertheless, there were no largescale continuous protests until 2011.

Protests in the Druze stronghold of Suwayda

A chain of events that started on November 5, 2000, in predominantly Druze al-Suwayda governorates on the southern border, escalated from an apolitical, inter-communal dispute between Druze and Bedouins into protests that reportedly left 20 dead (16 Druze and 4 Bedouins) about 200 injured, and some 30 Bedouin houses burnt down (Al-Ghawi 2000; Aljazeera 2000). Bashar al-Assad had just come to power in the summer of that year and the conflict posed a major domestic

challenge. It is widely believed that the conflict was sparked after Bedouin-owned animals grazed in Druze farmers' fruit tree gardens in al-Rhua (a mixed Druze-Bedouin town), where grazing was prohibited by law (Abdul Samad 2015; Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023). Many in the Druzi community believed that the authorities did not take appropriate measures against the Bedouins, some even went as far as accusing the security services in orchestrating the whole event (Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023; Interview with Rif'at Amer 2021). The conflict's spark was a familiar issue although the escalation that followed was unprecedented (Middle East Intelligence Bulleting 2000).

How exactly the initial problem escalated is not entirely clear. According to a source who knew persons involved, after the animals transgressed on the garden of Druze Fadi al- A'waj, he went to the house of Sa'ud al-Sa'id, the chief of the Bedouins, to protest, but was shot and killed (Interview with Jerar Agba 2021). This version correlated with other accounts and was cited as the trigger for conflict (Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023; Interview with Rif'at Amer 2021). What is certain is that in the next couple of days, the city of Suwayda experienced unrest, with angry crowds taking to the streets in protest. (Amateur video 3; Interview with Jerar Agba 2021). Predominantly Bedouin areas were attacked while many Bedouins fled their homes to the desert; even some non-Bedouins who had similar outfit were targeted (Abdul Samad 2015; Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023; Interview with Samer Danoun 2023).

The events took a sharp turn on Fadi al-A'waj's burial day, which, according to one witness and participant was on Tuesday, November 7, 2000. According to him, people gathered in al-Ruha to pay their respect before walking to the cemetery. The same crowd then marched towards the center of Suwayda city, which was some five km away. In the meantime, some 50-60 armed security men who had been dispatched from Damascus erected a checkpoint awaiting for the protestors near the National Hospital, right at the southern entrance of the city. As the crowd approached, the security fired in the air. "Each maybe emptied an entire magazine." People dispersed to the sides

of the al-Ruha, Suwayda main road. Young guys among the crowd threw rocks at the security forces. "Rocks fell like Rain." Subsequently, the security forces opened direct fire on the protestors leaving about two dozen dead and many more injured who were rushed the hospital. The security forces then pulled out of the area (Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023).

Besides al-Ruha, other areas also witnessed protests and marches on the same day including Suwayda city itself and al-Shahba. The authorities tried to prevent the influx of protestors from towns and villages into Suwayda city. Local authorities in al-Shahba, for instance, aborted an attempt by a few dozen mostly young men to ride the bus to Suwayda city. Instead, they started jogging the twenty km that separated the two cities. To prevent their arrival to the city, the security forces again erected a checkpoint on the main road. The men never reached the checkpoint, however. According to two sources, one, Salman al-Hajari, a respected religious personality, blocked their way to avoid bloodshed. Out of respect, the men aborted their mission (Interview with Samer Danoun 2023; Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023).

The bloodshed in al-Ruha amplified locals' anger against the regime's security forces and some pro-regime personalities including the governor and few MPs from Suwayda. As several interlocutors explained, these authorities came to be seen as the protectors of the Sa'ud al-Sa'id, the protestors' enemy. A rumor had it that the authorities were hiding him in the governor's building, which may have contributed to a protestors' attack on the building (Qentar 2021, 150). Some indicators show, however, that the protests did not turn outright anti-regime. For example, one of the protestors' slogans was "no one can solve this except [President] Bashar." (Interview with Samer Danoun 2023; Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023). Additionally, the local Lawyer's Syndicate sent a fax directly to the presidential palace emphasizing that what is happening in Suwayda is not a revolt. (Interview Adel al-Hadi 2023).

Nevertheless, the situation in Suwayda those few days were "war like," as one interlocutor put it. He remembered how the

army was deployed, helicopters flew, gun fire was heard, and how he "wouldn't walk in front of the window" in fear of a stray bullet (Interview with Jerar Agba 2021). According to several sources, the first few days the regime had almost lost control of the situation amidst continuation of protests, vandalism, and attack on government buildings (Interview with Fayez Qentar 2021; al-Sharq al-Awsat 2000a). The situation was brought under control only after the regime deployed more forces from within the governorate and brough reinforcements from Damascus. Beyond the deployment of the elite Republican Guard and law enforcement units it is not clear what other forces became involved (Kahaf 2016, 21). By November 11 the authorities had reportedly re-established their control over the situation, shops and schools had opened (al-Sharq al-Awsat 2000b). Although there were small episodes of violence and protests after this, the situation did not escalate again (al-Sharq al-Awsat 2000c; Aljazeera 2000).

During the dispute the regime also actively utilized intermediaries to contain and calm the situation. It relied on state officials who were from Suwayda, had influence and often belonged to large, influential families. For example, reports suggest that Tawfiq Salha, a member of the Ba'th Party Regional Leadership, came to Suwayda in an effort to calm the street (Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023). The same is true for Salam Yasin and Abdullah Al-Atrash, two MPs from Suwayda (Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023; interview with Najat Abdul Samad 2021; Interview with Bassam al-'Aisami 2021). The regime also utilized local religious leaders (*mashayekh al-'aqel*) who enjoyed respect and influence particularly amongst the religious segments of the society. Sources reported that at least one meeting took place between regime representatives and the religious leaders in governor's building (Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023; interview with Najat Abdul Samd 2021; Samer Danoun 2023).

No reports of genuine reconciliation between the families that were involved in the incident from both sides could be found. Government sources claimed in late November 2000 that they captured al-Sa'id and confiscated weapons, though it was not

possible to verify the information (Aljazeera 2000). Locals report that the family of Saud al-Sa'id and other directly involved in the conflict entirely relocated from their homes in and around Suwayda and have not returned to this date (Interview with Bassam al-'Aisami 2021; Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023; interview with Najat Abdul Samad 2021). The government compensated the victims and those injured during the events (ibid). A report in al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper suggests that the families of those who died received 350,000 (7000$), while the injured received 100,000-200,000 (2000-4000)(al-Ghawi 2000).

Reoccupying the space: regime's logic of violence, threat of violence and politics of local intermediaries

In this analytical section, I initially aim to grasp the rationale behind the regime's use of violence and the significance of the threat of escalated violence, both of which play a crucial role in the regime's approach to managing conflicts. Following that, I delve into an exploration of the role of intermediaries, specifically examining how they channel and absorb the regime's propensity to resort to heightened violence. I also try to analyze possible factors that push these personalities to intermediate between the regime and their communities.

Violence And the Threat of Violence

All the cases presented above have significant differences, yet they all exhibit, in different ways, the regime's conflict management approach that aims to re-impose its order on a space where its authority had collapsed due to social or political conflict. In managing those conflicts, the regime resorted to various forms of violence including killing, arrests, and physical violence. I argue though that regime's threats and the use of violence remained limited in scale, primarily tactical, and disciplinary, and as an explicit or implicit threat that it could use

greater violence as it had done in the past (notably in Hama), all that to bring the local communities to reaccept its socio-political order. Thus, it is threat of using greater violence, not actual violence, that was one of the pillars of regime's conflict management strategy.

As the Inkhil case demonstrates, the authorities deployed large numbers of law enforcement personnel to restore order and prevent further damage. That was a standard procedure across Syria in the face of unrest and aimed at containing the conflict and re-establishing state authority. In a large dispute in Sara-qeb in 1996, for instance, the police sought the help of three law enforcement units—some 300 personnel—who "came, hit, ar-rested, and broke up [a] fight" (Tokmajyan 2019, 25). In anoth-er large conflict in Artuz (south of Damascus city) in 2006, which involved local clans from Daraa and Quneitra, the state's approach was similar. Some 200 law enforcement personnel were deployed to contain the conflict and prevent further dam-age (Interview with Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh).

What followed in Inkhil after the regime contained the situa-tion was a mix of explicit and implicit pressure, even threat to use greater violence, all in an attempt to resolve the conflict and restore regime's order. As exemplified in the case of Inkhil, the decision by the head of police to temporarily detain a few prominent individuals from the two families was not intended as a punitive measure. Instead, it served as a method of exert-ing pressure and conveying the message that detention could be a potential consequence. Similarly, in the case of *Fadawi*-Armenian case, the senior security official's choice to arrest a few individuals from the *Fadawi* clan was not a punitive action, especially since they were released once the issue was resolved. Instead, it served as a method to exert pressure on the head of the clan, with the objective of compelling them to reach a com-promise.

In fact, in this context Inkhil's case has more to offer. As ex-plained above, after containing the situation in Inkhil the law enforcement personnel camped in conflicting parties' private property (in their guestrooms, *madafeh*). The aim was to pre-

vent escalation and collateral damage. In these tense conflict situations, especially in kinship societies where there is a duty to back your kin, minor incidents like a hostile glance, the killing of a chicken, have the potential to escalate into major conflicts capable of destabilizing an entire region. The tactic used by the law enforcement authorities was to prevent exactly that. At first sight, the decision to 'camp in' may seem bizarre and a unique incident to Inkhil's case, yet evidence from different parts of Syria including Daraa, Aleppo, Idlib and the tribal lands in the north-east, suggests that it in fact is not.

Moreover, beyond being an effective tactic in containing violence, it serves as a mundane means of pressure against the conflicting parties to reconcile and restore order. One way that pressure is manifested is through the discomfort that the presence of law enforcement units causes to the hosts. A tribal notable from Daraa's Hariri clan explained the logic. He said law enforcement personnel might "remain [in the homes] for a month or two. When they see a lamb they slaughter it, [they] cause deliberate inconvenience to push the sides to reconcile." (Interview with Hariri 2019). Another account from a village in northern Aleppo countryside, where authorities intervened to contain an intra-clan dispute, illustrates exactly the same logic. After containing the situation, the law enforcement personnel stayed in conflicting parties' houses, in a "separate room without harassing anyone, but they would be like 'oh you have lamb, aren't you going to serve us some?'" (Interview with R.B. 2018). In this case, the families eventually pressured their relatives to solve the issue (Ibid).

Arguably, this effective tactic that seemingly has been used by the law enforcement agencies rather methodically, also embodies a tacit threat. Such interventions by authorities usually happen in the peripheries and within a traditional and tribal social setting, where private space, women, children—or as people call *hrmet el-bet* (home's sanctity)—is sacred. By 'occupying' people's private space or being right at the borders of it in a situation where residents cannot do much against the powerful state, comes very close to violating people's sanctity but doesn't

really do it. It only alludes to the possibility, to the danger, and that pressures the conflicting party to overcome the conflict.

Here it is important to understand how ordinary citizens perceive the regime, which is fearful, able to use violence, and could be unjust. The inspiration of fear and violence are the most consequential. Salwa Ismail in her book "Rule of Violence" talks about a form of violence that is a modality of governance in Syria, which structures regime-citizen relations (Ismail 2018, 22). She argues that detention camps and massacres were the two main apparatuses of the governance of violence, which work "not only to contain and neutralize opponents and dissidents, but also to establish conditions of rule and to order citizens' interpretative horizons and understandings of state/regime power" (Ismail 2018, 2).

In Inkhil and the Aleppo case, the apparatus of detention is relevant. But what makes detention particularly threatening is the regime's use of multiple forms of gruesome violence against political prisoners. Salwa's findings help us understand, at least partly, Inkhil notables fears of going to prison and *Fadawi* clan chiefs fear of seeing some of his youth in detention. Interestingly, the threat of violence (and therefore the evocation of regime's violent image) is not only targeted by the authorities at those involved in the conflict. In some instances, the mediating notables, intermediaries or even elders within the conflicting families evoke the regime's violent image to those involved in the dispute (usually youth) as a means to pressure them to reconcile. This is what happened in an intra-tribal dispute in Daraa in 1990s, when, in the words of an interlocutor who participated in solving the issue "the notables resorted to the state." That meant, anyone who failed to adhere to the reconciliation agreement they had mediated would be "left to deal with the state." (Interview with a former official 2019).

It is important to note that neither overt violence, nor the "apparatus of detention," as Salwa puts it, offers a comprehensive answer. Structural (non-physical) violence, too, plays a role. In other words, the state is not only perceived as potentially very violent, but also corrupt, often unjust for ordinary people, or

simply cumbersome in its bureaucracy, all of which make seeking a swift resolution, through local intermediaries, a better alternative than facing or dealing with the state. Once grasping this context—the threat of physical violence and the deterrence of structural violence—one appreciates the seriousness of the mundane or explicit threats that those involved in the conflict face from the authorities. This is what compels them to walk the path paved by the regime (i.e., reconciliation, resolution of the conflict or de-escalation) and restore the state's order.

The levels of violence and threats of violence were evidently much higher in Qamishli and Suwayda and more political in nature. As noted in the case studies, not only the scale of those two events were bigger, but they happened at a critical time: Suwayda uprising took place soon after Bashar al-Assad inherited power while the Qamishli events took place in a tense regional environment, after U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, U.S. support to Iraqi Kurdistan, and fears in Damascus that Syria might be next. In the early phase of the Qamishli and Suwayda events the state tried to contain the situation through local law enforcement units, but this was not successful. A much larger force was mobilized including security forces, special units within the army and even paramilitary forces in the case of Qamishli. Throughout its effort to regain control of the space and re-impose its socio-political order on those communities that rebelled against is, the regime resorted to different forms of violence, killing dozens, injuring hundreds, and detaining thousands. The regime's threats to use much greater violence against these communities was also much more explicit.

These threats had at least two targets, the intermediaries themselves (at least some of them) and by extension their communities. The intermediaries operated from a weak position. In most cases, what made (and unmade) them as intermediaries was the powerful state, which could at any time marginalize their public role, or much worse. The Kurdish political parties, for example, were illegal and their leaders' outlaws for practicing politics in an authoritarian system. The regime, however, tolerated them and allowed them a small margin of space to operate. During the 2004 Qamishli uprising their own security and

the endurance of that small space was threatened. A danger very quickly received and recognized by the Kurdish leaders.

A senior leader from a Kurdish party explained that "had the regime suppressed the protests, the small margin [that the Kurdish parties operated within] was going to disappear too" (interview with Marwan Othman). Another senior official from the same party underlined the physical dimension of the threat. Namely, how the regime could "single them out" if the protests did not stop (Interview with Ibrahim Biro 2020). In another example, during a meeting that brought together Hisham Ikhtyar, the head of the General Intelligence Directorate, with four Kurdish leaders, this top regime official reportedly said in his conversation that "the situation should calm down. There could be assassinations targeting Kurdish leaders (*shakhsiyat qiyadiya kurdiya)* in order to stir chaos." This, according to one of the attendees, was a message to calm the situation down through with "a vailed threat" to the leaders themselves.

The threats also extended to their communities. The regime was explicit about what *could* happen to their communities if the unrest continued. The quote attributed to Hisham Ikhtyar, where he said that the regime didn't "have problem in shelling Amuda" illustrates just that: a mass and indiscriminate violence *could* follow if the unrest didn't stop. According to another senior Kurdish party official, Hisham also threatened by saying that the state "could have dealt with the situation in other means"—in an implicit but very clear reference to violence—but they prefer to "cooperate [with Kurdish notables] to prevent bloodshed and restore stability" (Interview with Taher Safouk 2020).

Moreover, as highlighted in the Qamishli case study, regime officials sometimes made an explicit reference to the Hama massacre in 1982, which evoked much fear at least amongst the older generation of Syrians and made the regime's threats very credible in the sense that what it had done once, it could repeat. The Hama massacre might have also come up as a reference in Suwayda's case too (Ismail 2018, 3), though verification of this has not been possible. What is fairly certain, however, is that

certain rumors that evoked fear within people seem to have been commonplace. One such rumor was that Maher Assad, the president's brother, arrived to Suwayda and threatened to destroy the city if the situation did not calm down (Interview with Jerar Agbab 2021; Interview with Najat Abdul Samad 2021). Others denied that Maher al-Assad made such threats or even came to Suwayda, underlining that the regime did not have to make such bold threats, and agitate the situation, as the miliary built up and reinforcements were sufficient to transmit the message that the regime is strong and could use violence (Interview with Adel al-Hadi 2023; Interview with Bassam al-'Aisami 2021)

Ismail's work on political violence in Syria once again is helpful to understand the impact of Hama. The bloody confrontation between the regime and Islamic insurrection related to Muslim Brotherhood that stated in 1976, ended in the assault on city of Hama where some 20,000-40,000 died (Lefèvre 2012). This bloody event was, according to Ismail, the master signifier in the language of violence and it became "instructive of the powers of the ruler" (Ismail 2018, 3). Syrians lived with the fear that the "regime would 'do Hama again'" (Ibid).

Ultimately, all the episodes of unrest concluded without the regime having to resort to greater violence, and only by threatening to local intermediaries and by extension their communities what could happen *if* the unrest was not contained. Even in Qamishli's case, which witnessed the most violence among the cases, the regime did not even come close to unleashing its apparatuses of violence as it did in Hama in 1982 or as it was going to do later, after 2011. It is inherently difficult to draw a line between "limited" and "excessive" violence, but casualty numbers could serve as a telling indicator. While those who died in the Hama events are estimated to be between 20,000-40,000 (Lefèvre 2012), the death toll of Suwayda and Qamishli events combined were around 60 (see cases studies section).

The regime's use of violence and the threat thereof were also tactical in that they provided some alternative pathways for resolving the conflicts discussed. In the Inkhil and *Fadawi-*

Armenian incidents, this took the form of semi-formal reconciliation efforts. In the case of Qamishli, it involved the release of certain detainees and Assad's public recognition of some Kurdish rights. For the Suwayda conflict, the resolution came through mediation and financial restitution to those affected.

These alternative pathways first and foremost served the regime's interest—reinstitution of the socio-political order on the exact same communities that had rebelled—and they were hardly genuine reconciliation processes. In this process, threat of violence was only one pillar of the regime's conflict management approach and could not have worked the same way without the important role of local intermediaries. Their role, and their relations to the centres of power and to their communities, will be the subject of the next section.

Brokers of Stability: Politics of Intermediaries

Now that the context, especially the power dynamics between the regime and the communities, as well as regime's logic of violence, are clear, I move on to analyze the role played by local intermediaries. As I argue, intermediaries assume a pivotal role in channelling the regime's propensity to use greater levels of violence through working to quell the rebellion within their communities and aiding in the reestablishment of the regime's order. In doing so, they do preserve their role and the privileges that they enjoy within that order but, equally crucial, they eliminate the incentive for the regime to resort to escalating violence.

a) Intermediaries and Their Role in Dispute Resolution

Intermediaries are those who connect outside authority—in our case the regime—with their communities and vis versa. They could be a tribal sheikh, civil servant, parliamentarian, retired army general, trader, or religious figure, to name a few. Some of these intermediaries resemble local informal power struc-

tures that existed before the formation of Syria's political system under the Ba'th Party rule and were incorporated into the party and the state in 1960s and 1970s in the form of patronage networks (Sadowski 1987, 449). Other intermediaries were born out of the new political system. In a country like Syria where the informal sphere in the political and economic domains is big, and where rules and regulations may not be applied equally on all citizens, intermediaries played a crucial role. As a recent study on the subject elucidates, their role ...

> ... entails having a network that makes [them] able to control and dispense resources, delivering benefits to both the local community and outside power alike. To the local community, the intermediary provides access to resources controlled by the outside actor and, in some cases, protection from it. For the outside actor, the intermediary can aid in its goal of controlling or gaining the assent of the local community, by passing on information about members of the community or assuring community members' compliance with the will of the outside power (Khaddour and Mazur 2019, 10).

This politics of intermediaries, the interaction and the relationship between the state authorities and intermediaries, as well as latter's relationship with the members of their communities, all are more of an informal than a formal affair. There aren't written rules and regulations that govern those set of interactions. Nonetheless there is a method to the politics of intermediaries. There is what we may call an 'intermediary structure', a system where the elements of the structure—authorities and intermediaries in particular—constantly interact, build personal, cliental, pragmatic relations, which often times are informal although consistent. This consistency means that the state could always rely on the structure as a framework for interacting with society.

In case of conflict situation such as ones discussed in this paper, the state could utilize its formal institutions (police, army, etc.) but it also could rely on the intermediary structure thanks to already existing and constantly developing relations. In

Qamishli's case the representatives of the central authorities, i.e. Hisham Ikhtyar and Muhamad Mansoura, reached out to a number of local power structures, including tribal notables, traders, and most importantly Kurdish political party leaders. The parties were officially banned yet the state maintained fairly regular channels of communication with them (Lowe 2006, 4). At that time, Kurdish political parties held important keys into their communities by being influential not just in the political domain but also by playing social roles by mediating social problems and facilitating cultural expression and events (Tejel 2008). For years the state forged and maintained relations with such local power structures and no one better than Muhamad Mansoura's career exemplifies that effort.

Captain Mansoura arrived to Qamishli as the head of the Military Intelligence branch (*mafrazet al-amn al-'askari*) in the late 1970s and left his post and the city as a major general some 25 years later (Ali 2016). Reliable information about his quarter of a century of work in Jazira region is hard to come by. However, most accounts gathered by the author suggest that he built strong ties in the region including with local power structures. A sentence that often was mentioned in reference to him was that "he knew everyone" and, of course, everyone knew him (Interview with a M.H. 2018). Therefore, Mansoura's presence in the *al-lijneh al-amniyeh* or security committee that was tasked to manage the Qamishli uprising—despite no longer occupying any post in Qamishli—was not a matter of chance.

The relations between the authority and Abu Roumiyeh in the context of Inkhil's dispute echoes some of what was just discussed but also opens new analytical angles. There was a working relation between the head of the police and Abu Roumiyeh given that, as one account suggests, this was the not the first or the last conflict they solved (Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh 2020). Also suggesting that is the fact that the head of the police reached out to him as a notable from Daraa and as did his suggestion to the police chief to temporarily imprison some of the people in the dispute. His position as a member of Syria's national assembly from Daraa reinforced this role (Decree No. 66 1994). One may even argue that he was interacting with the

head of the police as an MP, a state official. While that may be the case, it is certainly uncomplete analysis for at least two reasons.

Abu Roumiyeh had two hats, that of a local notable and respected personality, another, a member of Syria's parliament. In some instances, for example when he was arbitering a solution as a member of the reconciliation committee that was tasked to solve the dispute, he was a notable from Daraa. According to an interview he gave to *Sada al-Janoub* (the echo of the south) by 2008 he had solved more than 1,000 disputes (Interview with Muhammad al-Hmmadi 2020). While the number cannot be verified, it is certain that he had the reputation of a *muslih* (reconciler) in Daraa, someone who even paid from his own pocket to motivate conflicting sides to reconcile (Interview with Ahmad al-Hammadi 2020; Interview with Abu Ahmad 2020). Abu Roumiyeh, however, did use his powers as an MP. To a degree, that happened inadvertently. Being an MP, with a government car bearing a Damascus license plate, had its phycological impact on people (Interview with Ahmad al-Hammadi 2020; Interview with A. Masri 2019). But that was not all. In the context of another dispute, for instance, he used his stamp as an MP to resolve such issues (Interview with former Mukhtar of Yadouda 2019).

The second important indication is that his relations with the authorities transcended his time as an MP. A large dispute in 2006 that involved clans from southern Damascus, Quneitra and Daraa, and took place in 'Artuz, exemplifies that. The interior minister, Bassam 'Abdul Majeed, called on Abu Roumiyeh to intervene, along with other notables. A relative of his claimed that the relationship between the interior minister and Abu Roumiyeh was not new (interview with Ibrahim Abu Roumiyeh). At that time Roumiyeh was not in the parliament, as he was not elected in the 2003 parliamentary elections and only regained his post during the next elections, in 2007 (Tishreen Newspaper 2003; Al-Jamal 2007).

In Suwayda's case, the Druze religious leaders, *mashayekh al-'aqel,* and the notables, *zu'ama',* from prominent families were

the ones who held important keys into the Druze community. Their legitimacy, source of authority and influence differed. The religious leaders enjoyed respect, especially within the religious segment of society, but still strove for good relations with the powerful regime who could marginalize them. The other personalities, including Salam Yasin, Abdullah al-Atrash, Tawfiq Sallha, resembled what many locals named them "regime's intermediaries," meaning they were people whose authority and influence derived from the regime.

The influence and respect that these personalities enjoyed in the Druze community was arguably less than, for example, the religious authorities. For instance, some witnesses of the events indicated that Salam was individually targeted by protestors who chanted derogatory slogans against him (Interview with Adel al-Hadi). Some have also suggested that Abdullah al-Atrash was insulted by a young man during a gathering in Suwayda to calm the situation (Interview with Jodie Mazyed 2021). Nevertheless, these personalities still retained influence within limited segments of the local population such as their own tribes or families, or by the virtue of being in a position of power, which means in a position to distribute state resources.

In all the cases above, it was the authorities who sought out the intermediaries and tried to utilize their localized authority. Yet the relationship was by no means unidirectional. At least some Kurdish party leaders and some Druze notables built relations with the authorities who were a key gateway to access resources, privileges and power (Allsopp 2015, 115). These channels also sometimes were useful to reach higher authorities, bypassing the local ones. In a famous case from Daraa in the 1990s involving several major clans well-illustrates such dynamics. The family of the perpetrator disowned him after he had committed a horrendous crime. Disowning could mean in tribal culture that his family would not seek revenge if his blood was shed. Thereafter, the mufti of Daraa, being from the clan of the perpetrator and having access to the central authorities, reportedly met with then-president Hafez al-Assad and told him the perpetrator needed to be executed, otherwise, all of Daraa would flare up. Within a month, he was executed. It was

also notable in the case of the *Fadawi*-Armenian dispute, where the Armenian representatives could reach to higher authorities through personal and semi-official channels, and bring the issue to the attention of higher authorities after they were ignored by local security officials.

It was this intermediary structure that the regime had under its disposal and could utilize it to reinstitute its order in places where it had been challenged. Intermediaries played an important role in curbing any challenge against the authorities. It would be misleading to consider that they had total control over their communities, however small that community would be. Yet they did hold some leverage. In Qamishli's case the Kurdish political parties put their wide networks into service to restore calm. As party leaders confirmed, they instructed their party followers from Jazira all the way to Damascus to halt protests (Interview with Fou'ad Aliko; Interview with Taher Safouk). The same applies to the PYD leadership which, according to one of the founders, did not want to go to a confrontation with the regime (interview with Ahmad Abdulsalam 2023).

A Kurdish leader admitted that the revolt was out of their control when it erupted. However, they, fearing a bloody confrontation with the regime, could and did influence the trajectory of the events. This was not smooth given that some youth movements attempted to escape the writ of the traditional leaders during the revolt but without success (interview with Marwan Othman). One Kurdish politician, who disapproved of the traditional Kurdish political parties and thought they mismanaged the 2004 events, explained that there indeed was resentment in the Kurdish street against them. Nonetheless, many Kurds, whether party members or otherwise, were influenced by their decision (interview with Abdul Razzaq Tmo 2020). Tejel in his work "the Qamishli Revolt." elaborately explains how the revolt with its mostly young participants was at the same time an attempt "to establish a new place for themselves in [the Kurdish] patriarchal society, ruled by its 'wise elders'" (Tejel 2008, 125). Yet, as he continues, the wise elders were mostly pro-calm and it was their scenario that prevailed (Ibid, 126).

In the case of Suwayda, virtually all interlocutors agreed that religious leaders opted for calm, sought to contain the youth, and avoid violent confrontation with the much more powerful regime. They evidently did not have control over the angry youth who burnt Bedouin houses, attacked government buildings, and killed innocent people. Yet, as the example of Salman al-Hajari shows, they retained a degree of influence, which they used to avoid bloodshed.

In Abu Roumiyeh's case the matter is less about suppressing the matter and more about organizing a reconciliation process to give a lasting solution to the problem, which, in turn, restores state's order. As for why the state would rely on intermediaries and not pursue an official investigation and judicial process, a compelling answer lies in the relative effectiveness of the two approaches. As the Armenian religious notable explained in the context of *Fadawi*-Armenian conflict, jailing was not going to solve the problem, and would have only exacerbated it (Interview with Syrian-Armenian religious notable 2018). A tribal notable from Daraa currently in Damascus reiterated almost the same point. He said security forces "can arrest all of them [those involved in a tribal dispute] and start a court case but that won't end the dispute. After the person serves the sentence, he will take revenge. [The dispute] needs reconciliation [*sulh*]." And *sulh*, as one police officer put it, "is the master of all rulings." (Interview with Bassam al-Krad).

Abu Roumiyeh and the other notables involved took some several weeks to seal a deal, which involved rounds of negotiations, visits to conflicting families, and deciding the *fidyeh* (money collected for those who incurred physical or material damage). The matters were decided by the elders of the families or clans involved in the conflict, women take no part in it, while youth—who are often the source of the problem—are often the receiving end of the decision with little or no space to appeal. This generational hierarchy did usually play out in the favor of the elders yet not always. That is evident from the cases when a reconciliation is reached, *fidyeh* paid, yet for example the

brother of the victim does not rest until he takes revenge, which again could flare up the locality into a conflict.

b) Why Intermediaries Go Between the State and Their Communities?

A fundamental question however remains as *why* intermediaries maintain their relationship with authorities and, more importantly, *why* they choose to use their authority to curb any challenge from within their communities against the state.

In a society like Syria, power is often exercised informally. Thus, having intimate connection to centers of power could return many benefits. For example, being an MP or a religious authority could bring state support like cars and funds, and protection such as immunity and bodyguards. Access to centers of power could also help divert resources to a locality at the expense of another. As one former senior official in Daraa city municipality explained, before 2011, having good relations with the mayor and his office was crucial. In one instance, he recalled, Daraa city municipality elected a local president who had bad relations with the governor and his office, which, according to him, led to the cancelation of a project worth 20 million Syrian pounds (about $400,000). In an opposing case, Sfireh, a small city, received a big project of 6 million SYP (about $120,000) thanks to its local president's good ties to the governor's office (Interview with a former official 2019).

Being an intermediary, with the blessing of the regime, also meant a path towards self-enrichment. For instance, after Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, he granted more authority to loyal tribal leaders in the east of the country, a policy that continued under Bashar al-Assad (Khaddour and Mazour 2017, 6). This meant access to privileges. For instance, in 2000 an executive decision to privatize state farmlands allowed tribal leaders, who in 1960s had lost their vast landholdings during land redistribution, to regain and expand the property they had owned (Ibid). It is also a matter of prestige and pride to help people solve their problems, be it an intra-societal problem or one related to the state. According to a prominent personality

from Busra al-Sham, before 2011, well-off people competed to solve disputes and spent lots of money from their own pockets for that purpose. It was a way to gain social status but was also a duty of a righteous man (Interview with Abu Ahmad 2020).

Being an intermediary, with the regime's blessing, also enabled them to resolve day-to-day problems of their own community. They become reference points for ordinary people for whom the state apparatuses can often be unjust, cumbersome, time and money consuming. Issues of unemployment in Suwayda is a good example. According to a local doctor, Druze *zu'ama* like Atrash who was an MP and hailing from the prominent Atrash family, could use their power and privileges to secure employment. Thus, that ability to abuse power gave them influence within their communities (Interview with M.A. 2020). Such abuse of power happened under the watchful eye of regime security officials. In fact, such illicit activities were even used as a method to promote or marginalize notables.

According to a former state official in Daraa, when the regime wanted to marginalize a local influential personality, it would incapacitate him by hindering his efforts to solve people's problems. In turn, it would enable another personality, a loyal one, to become influential within his community by facilitating his efforts to solve problems in the community, state institutions, with the security agencies, all of which let members of the community gradually turn to the emerging one as a point of reference and problem solver (Interview with Ahmad al-Hammadi 2020). In other words, becoming an intermediary in most cases has a cost; it means becoming a part of the regime's order, its quest for dominating and penetrating society especially in the peripheries.

There is more to intermediary politics than resources and privilege, which becomes particularly apparent in times of conflict and unrest. That is protecting their communities from the violence of the outside power, the regime. As the case studies show, intermediaries become vested in avoiding excessive state violence against them and their communities by seeking to maintain the socio-political order imposed by the regime. In a

sense, they become brokers of stability: they give in to regime's threats of violence against their defenseless communities by containing the challenge that rose from within their communities against the regime. They, thus, help the regime reinstitute its socio-political order, re-dominate the space, and with that also preserve their role as intermediaries within that order.

In exchange, what they get is first and foremost avoidance of state violence against themselves and their communities. Thus, not using violence becomes the main 'concession' the regime offers through the intermediaries to the local communities for reaccepting its dominance. Although the state does offer other "concessions" including issuing amnesty, releasing detainees, financial compensation to victims, all of which smoothens the process, that is often labeled as "reconciliation" and helps intermediaries in their task as brokers. In reality, however, the process leads to the re-imposition of the old order which barely addresses existing grievances, but it also sometimes makes the order even more securitized.

Conclusion

As the discussion in the paper shows, this conflict management mechanism was rather effective in containing internal conflicts and reinstalling the Syrian regime's order especially in the country's peripheries. The primary objective of the regime's approach was to reassert its control and hegemony. However, as a mode of conflict resolution, it positioned itself somewhere on a spectrum defined by two extremes. On the one end of the spectrum is the one-sided violence aimed at completely eradicating perceived threats, potentially through extreme measures such as ethnic cleansing or genocide. On the opposite end is a conflict resolution paradigm that upholds principles like human rights, equitable resource allocation, and reconciliation, all of which is central to the liberal peacebuilding framework. (Lewis et al., 2018, 2-3; Keen 2021, 246; Smith 2-4).

Regime's approach certainly bore many of the authoritarian conflict management characteristics conceptualized by Lewis et

al. (2018, 10). In the space where the regime's authority was challenged, neither political (i.e., human rights, group rights, rule of law etc.) nor a physical (i.e., greater autonomy) nor material (i.e. fairer redistribution of resources) reconfigurations proved to be attainable, all of which are characteristic to liberal peace-making. On the contrary, in all the cases discussed in the paper the regime sought to dominate the space where its authority had collapsed. The re-domination came in phases. The regime established a favorable balance of power on the ground by deploying its apparatus of violence. Although it only resorted to limited or tactical violence, its actions implicitly or explicitly evoked its violent image whose effect cannot be underestimated given the regime's violent past. Although in all the cases there was a degree of mediation, dialogue, and negotiations with the involvement of intermediaries, all that happened in an atmosphere imposed by the regime and steered by it.

Regime's discourse further objectifies the space as a place that has come out of state's legitimate control. Sometimes those actors are even described as illegitimate, a threat to Syria's unity, or even conspirators with foreign actors. This is most evident in the Kurdish case, who were accused of conspiring with the U.S. and threatening national unity. In inter-communal and tribal cases, it is primarily about public order and prevention of escalation that could escalate to anti-regime rebellion.

This mechanism also empowered existing power structures best manifested through the case of intermediaries. Not all intermediaries equally benefited from the regime: some did financially, others bolstered their social status, others simply sought to protect their communities from regime's wrath. Nevertheless, at its core, the reinstalment of the order meant that those intermediaries continued to represent their communities, continue to have sway over resources and the way it was redistributed in their communities. In this way resources and representation remain largely concentrated in the hands of loyal cliental.

It is also important to note that social conflicts, such as tribal disputes, have the potential to offer relatively more just resolutions based on tribal customary rules. In fact, as discussed in the paper, this avenue for settling disputes is often seen preferable than going through state's courts. But even in these cases, looking at it from regime's perspective, the priority seems to be containment rather than implementation of rule of law. Not only does the regime largely relegate the responsibility of making a ruling to intermediaries, but by doing so, it empowers them.

Surely the Syrian regime's strategy was not derived from liberal peacebuilding ideals, yet it demonstrated a degree of subtlety and was not solely dependent on violence. Its more commendable aspects included the regime's avoidance of excessive force, favouring instead the threat of violence as a deterrent and the implementation of various conflict de-escalation measures such as issuing amnesties (in the case of tribal conflict), paying financial compensation in the case of Suwayda conflict, public acknowledgement of some Kurdish rights, and releasing Kurds detained for protesting. Such measures could be overlooked as trivial by critics of authoritarian conflict resolution strategies. After all, the regime prioritized security domination on reconciliation best illustrated by the Kurdish case. True that the regime took measures to diffuses conflict, but its overall security approach to the Kurdish question continued until 2011 while cultural and citizen rights were never fully given to the Kurdish population of Syria. However, in an authoritarian context like Syria's, characterized by habitual violence, the decision to avoid widespread violence and to instead implement conflict mitigation actions can be instrumental in managing conflicts and preventing extensive loss of life—not ideal, to say the least, but its protective impact on society should not be underestimated.

With the outbreak of protests in Syria in 2011, the regime resorted to this tested-and-tried mechanism to contain spreading protests. This happened on many levels. Bashar al-Assad and other high-ranking officials met locally rooted, influential religious and secular personalities urging them to contain violence

in return for withdrawing the security forces and the army from their towns, and promising reforms. Such interactions happened on local level too, between security officials tasked to the area and locally influential personalities. Ultimately these efforts mostly failed given that Syria saw unprecedented degrees of violence that dwarfs what happened in 1980s. The regime, once again, resorted to using excessive violence to reimpose its writ. As for why this mechanism failed, the fate of the intermediaries, and why the regime ultimately turned to exceedingly severe forms of violence that eclipsed those of Hama in 1982, these topics merit separate and in-depth study.

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