

# **Tribes & Neighborhoods: The Dynamics of Subtlety**

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*Preface*

**Tribes & Neighborhoods:**

**The Dynamics of Subtlety**

*Omar Imady*

The role of tribes in modern Syria has not received the scholarly attention that it deserves. Few of us fully appreciate the extent to which influential tribe members have contributed to the shaping of modern Syria. Nor are the intricate dynamics of interaction between tribes and state adequately addressed or understood. In this issue of *Syria Studies*, the role of tribes in Syria is examined from two very different perspectives.

In the first study, *Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising*, Haian Dukhan documents the context required to understand the way in which the tribes interacted with the Syrian uprising. Dukhan reminds us of how Hafez al-Asad successfully co-opted important tribal leaders. The pragmatism of al-Asad meant that he was willing to suspend the ideologically driven attempt by the leftist faction of the Ba'th to dismantle tribal structures. And as al-Asad did with land owners, an unwritten alliance was made with tribal leaders; an alliance that was built on support of the regime in return for being allowed to run their own affairs without significant intrusion from the state. Indeed, the tribes fulfilled their part of the agreement, playing an instrumental role in supporting the regime during the Muslim brotherhood revolt of the 1980s. But all of this was destined to change in March 2011. Suddenly, the tribes found themselves being pulled in various directions in a manner that challenged the traditional authority of leaders over members, leading to the fragmentation of loyalty not only within the same tribe but

within families within the tribe. Tragic as it may be, the story Dukhan shares shows that in the final analysis the tribes of Syria are no different in their interaction with the Syrian uprising than other major components of Syrian society. From protestors to fighters, from refugees to soldiers, the tribes of Syria embrace the entire spectrum that was born beyond March 2011.

In *The Making of a Cosmopolitan Quarter: Sha'laan in the 20th Century*, Dawn Chatty chronicles the birth and evolution of the prestigious Damascene neighbourhood of *Sha'laan*. Damascenes may visit this neighbourhood on a daily basis but few stop and wonder why this neighbourhood is named after the tribe of *Sha'laan*. We are accustomed to learning about urban ventures into tribal areas, but as Dawn Chatty intricately documents in the neighbourhood of *Sha'laan* we encounter a tribal venture into urban Damascus. And what a successful venture this has been. Not only does the neighbourhood continue to expand and prosper, but it also manages to maintain the various contradictory, yet seamlessly moving, elements; from the house of Nuri Sha'laan after whom the neighbourhood was named, to the Christian, Armenian, Jewish, Caucasian, and even French families. The story of *Sha'laan* is a story of civil tolerance and urban survival, and in documenting this story, Chatty provides hope in Syria's future during these tragic times.