Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

A Study of Rural Composition and Map of Tribal and Clan Structures and Their Interactions in Aleppo and Idlib post-2011

A Brief Paper Highlighting Key Findings

Authors

Sasha Al Alou   **Sakhor Alali**

Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

A Study of Rural Composition and Map of Tribal and Clan Structures

and Their Interactions in Aleppo and Idlib post-2011

A Brief Paper Highlighting Key Findings

Omran for Strategic Studies

Is an independent research institution seeks to a leading role in the scientific and intellectual building of both state and society, not only in Syria but in the entire region. The center aspires to become a reference for informing policies and devising strategies.

Omran Center was established in November 2013 as an institution that seeks to be a main reference and a supporting entity to the Syrian cause in the areas of politics, development, economics and local governance. The center publishes studies and papers that complement the work of other institutions interested in the future of

Syria and support the decision-making process, while interacting through specialized platforms to achieve informational and analytical integration and draw a map of the scene on the ground.

The center's outputs depends on analyzing reality and its complex dimensions in a manner that results in deconstructing problematic issues and determining needs and aspirations, which enables us to inform and plan policies for different actors and decision makers.

المنتــدى
الســـوري
SYRIAN FORUM

Acknowledgment and Appreciation

Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

A Study of Rural Composition and Map of Tribal and Clan Structures and Their Interactions in Aleppo and Idlib post-2011

A Brief Paper Highlighting Key Findings

This research paper serves as a concise overview of the book *Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution*, published by Omran Center for Strategic Studies in July 2024. Authored by researchers Sasha Al Alou and Sakhor Alali, the book offers an in-depth field study of rural social structures, tribal and clan networks, and their interactions in Aleppo and Idlib governorates post-2011.

It is important to note that this paper is not a summary of the 560-page book but rather a general overview and a condensation of its key findings. All data and information presented in this paper, including its footnotes, are based on the original text of the book.

E-Book Download

About the Authors

Sasha Al Alou

A Syrian researcher specializing in political and social movements and governance in Syria. He has authored numerous studies and research papers and contributed as a lead author or co-author to several books. Sasha currently serves as a senior researcher at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies and collaborates with various Arab and international research institutions.

Sakhor Alali

A Syrian researcher specializing in the tribes and clans of Syria, focusing on their political and economic transformations. He has published several research papers and studies in peer-reviewed local and Arab journals, primarily analyzing the political, social, and administrative dynamics of northern Syrian tribes and clans and their various interactions post-2011.

Table of contents

Introduction

The history of Syrian geography is inseparable from the history of its tribes, which settled in the Levant and its Baadiyah (deserts and steppes) during ancient pre-Christian times. As the geography changed, so did ruling regimes,; tribes also experienced significant political and structural transformations, forming a historically extended social system with evolving features still observable today.

An examination of Syria's political history, both ancient and modern, reveals that tribes and tribalism are both key factors in social, political, and power dynamics; often embodying power itself. Arab and other tribes established kingdoms, emirates, and states, ruling regions across different historical periods. They engaged in conflicts, alliances, and submission with various authorities, possessing elements that made them a governance system predating many ancient and modern structures. Through these interactions, their social structures evolved, transitioning from nomadic to semi-settled, with the latter eventually merging into cities and becoming fully urbanized. The latter shift is harder to trace compared to the more distinct nomadic structures.

With Syria's integration into the modern state system, pivotal transformations occurred within tribal and clan structures due to various successive changes (economic, political, social, military, legal). These cumulative effects were evident in the tribes and clans, starting with their economic patterns, which were dismantled as they were either willingly or forcibly moved from a nomadic to a settled, agricultural-based economy. This shift led to a change in their historical roles, most of which were lost to the nation-state, which confined them within new borders, stripping them of the open geography that had historically been a key source of their strength.

The tribe adapted to the modern state structure embracing the new dynamics. Depending on the shifting powers, the role and position of tribes and clans evolved: sometimes as a disruptive or competing alternative; and at other times as a strong ally with considerable influence in rural areas, counterbalancing urban families and notable figures. In many cases, tribes served as a broad social basis, forming much of Syria's rural landscape, which, in turn, acts as a crucial social and economic backbone, a field for mobilization, and an experimental ground for political elites and ideological parties. Through these changes, the structure and roles within tribes shifted, affecting the nature of "tribal leadership" embodied by sheikhs and princes—both in their political roles and their ties to the social fabric. This fabric gradually transformed into more stable rural structures with diverse economic patterns, fostering a new social sphere where the "sheikh" no longer held sole authority.

Traditional nomadism gradually declined, with tribes settling geographically and adopting regional identities. Local sheikhdoms and tribal notables emerged, while tribe members engaged in agriculture, trade, and state jobs; altering settlement patterns, and weakening traditional tribal cohesion. This shift moved the tribe/clan concept from a political-organizational role to a socio-cultural one, reshaping social relations and levels of solidarity, now influenced by geographic, economic, developmental, and political factors.

Within Syria's diverse tribal landscape, the northern tribes are particularly notable for their influence, extensive geographic reach, and border-specific dynamics, with cross-ethnic and

cross-sectarian structures. Many quickly engaged with these elements when the Syrian revolution began in 2011, followed by military, security, and economic repercussions. The state's withdrawal from most regions subsequently tested the tribes' ability to assume roles in local governance.

During these phases, tribes emerged as a significant social force, reacting to events with diverse political stances, reflecting cumulative impacts on their structures. Initially, when peaceful protests started tribal groups mobilized independently of traditional authorities (sheiks, princes, notables) and then shifted towards militarization marked by overlapping regional tribal interactions. As the Assad regime waged open war on the social fabric of the revolting areas; distinct zones of influence emerged, divided among local, regional, and international actors. This fragmented tribal geography turned tribes into key, cross-regional social structures, and a field of competition.

Unlike the peaceful phase, militarization intensified tribal representation at all levels, creating vertical and horizontal divisions within tribal structures and reviving tribal leadership as a local player with political, military, and social roles. Tribes, heavily engaged in Syria's events, were also among the most impacted by military, security, and economic fallout, especially through forced displacement—unprecedented in modern Syrian history. After 2016, as the regime and its allies reclaimed opposition areas, military actions receded northward to Aleppo and Idlib, which became hubs for successive waves of internal displacement, both within these governorates and from other parts of Syria.

In this complex context, within the north-west opposition enclaves after 2016, a new organizational trend emerged: the establishment of "tribal councils". Most tribes established their own councils, functioning as administrative bodies with diverse responsibilities, thereby reducing reliance on the sheikh's traditional leadership. This shift promoted tribal presence in a new organized form, partially reviving the tribal spirit and roles. Notably, the initiative extended beyond Arab tribes to Kurdish and Turkmen clans. However, the councils' roles remain limited, and their impact on the tribal structure and traditional leadership remains ambiguous, as this move is unprecedented in Syria's tribal landscape.

Thus, the post-2011 period marks a pivotal phase in Syrian state history and its social structures. Examining tribes over twelve years of conflict reveals interactions of prominent local social structures during a critical period. This study enhances a body of longstanding research, as tribes have long shaped the region's intellectual heritage, particularly in Syria Occupying a significant place in sociological, anthropological, and political studies. Tribes often serve as interpretive tools for major political events or as frameworks for understanding local conflict dynamics. However, this study diverges from such an approach. It does not view tribalism as a lens for the Syrian conflict nor explores tribal influence on it; rather, it examines the conflict's impact on tribes and their varied responses across its phases, consequences, and actors.

This study first seeks to explore the history of tribes and clans within Syrian geography, especially in the north-west. Examining their historical relationships with various successive authorities, structural shifts, and the changes that shaped their current forms.

It proceeds to map the tribal structures across Aleppo and Idlib, identifying their current geographic and demographic distribution. The study also analyzes their diverse roles and interactions (political, military, social) after 2011, emphasizing key impacts, particularly the complex effects of forced displacement. Lastly, it explores the emergence of "tribal and clan councils" as a new organizational phenomenon within Syria's tribal framework post-2016, defining their roles, influence on traditional tribal governance, and effectiveness within the social structure.

In line with these objectives, the study/book is methodologically and analytically structured into three chapters. **Chapter One** serves as an introduction and review of the history of tribes and clans within Syrian geography generally, with a focus on Aleppo and Idlib. It examines their historical relations with successive authorities, structural transformations, and various shifts leading to their current forms. This chapter adopts a systematic historical periodization across seven key phases: an overview of the region's ancient history and tribes, the Ottoman era, the Arab government under King Faisal, the French colonial period, the era of national independence, the union with Egypt, and the Ba'ath periods—first under the early Ba'ath regime, then under Hafez al-Assad, followed by the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule.

Within this broad historical scope, the study identifies several key variables to track and assess across each era and phase, including: active tribes in the north, the nature of their relationship with central authority and the factors shaping it, evolving roles of tribes and clans, tribal conflicts and interrelations, structural shifts—economic, social, political, and legal—and their impacts, major tribal migrations and displacements within the region, factors driving urbanization and settlement, and shifts in the concept of tribal leadership.

Chapter Two picks up where the first left off, examining tribal and clan interactions with the Syrian revolution post-2011 through its various phases, actors, repercussions, and impacts. This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section explores the demographic, economic, and cultural conditions of tribal areas in Aleppo and Idlib on the eve of the revolution, mapping the presence of twenty-five tribes encompassing 220 clans, alongside twenty-seven independent clans of diverse ethnicities (Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, Circassian, Gypsy). A field survey identifies approximately 2,033 geographic points where these tribes and clans are concentrated across administrative units (cities, towns, villages, neighborhoods, and key farms).

Following this mapping, the section delves into the motivations and forms of tribal and clan participation in the early stages of the 2011 uprising. It then moves to the phase of militarization, analyzing tribal armed groups in Aleppo and Idlib. The study documents over twenty-three tribal military groups allied with the Assad regime and more than thirty-eight groups aligned with the opposition between 2012 and 2020, as well as the influence of jihadist organizations and their relationships with local tribes. The section concludes by examining the non-military roles tribes and clans played during the conflict, particularly their adaptation to local governance as state authority receded, leaving administrative functions vacant in these areas.

The second section of Chapter Two examines the forced displacement experienced by tribal structures in Aleppo and Idlib and its complex effects. It includes a survey of displaced areas, an analysis of the displacement context, and the parties involved, as well as documentation of

major clans displaced from other Syrian governorates to Aleppo and Idlib. This section provides a detailed map of forced displacement phases in Aleppo and Idlib from 2012 to 2020, covering approximately 1,233 geographic points (cities, towns, villages, key farms) affected by varying degrees of forced displacement, along with thirty neighborhoods in Aleppo. It examines the political and military context of displacement, the actors involved, and the compounded impacts on tribes. Additionally, it includes a survey of areas where partial return has occurred, covering approximately 556 geographic points, while 707 locations remain uninhabited as of early 2023.

The third section examines the nature and extent of tribal military participation within major military formations in northern Syria up to early 2023, across various zones of control. It maps out key formations and tracks the impact of displacement on factional structures in Aleppo and Idlib, especially following the arrival of dozens of displaced factions from other Syrian regions.

The fourth section is dedicated to analyzing the emergence of "tribal and clan councils" in the north after 2016, exploring the motivations, dynamics, and contexts behind their formation. This includes a survey of around thirty tribal councils and over 130 clan councils in Aleppo and Idlib. The study then focuses specifically on the effectiveness of seventeen prominent tribal councils, assessing them first from the perspectives of council members and then from the viewpoint of tribal and clan members in the region, to gauge the scope and future of these councils and their varied impacts. Additionally, the section examines the parallel formation of "family and notable councils" in certain cities of Idlib as a counterpart to "tribal and clan councils" in the rural areas of Aleppo and Idlib.

Chapter Three presents the results of the field survey conducted by the research team, mapping the diverse ethnic composition (Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, Circassian, Gypsy) of tribes and clans in Aleppo and Idlib. It includes fifty-two graphical maps and fifty-two statistical tables detailing each tribe, the number of associated clans in the two governorates, key family groups, and the geographic areas they inhabit, categorized according to the official administrative divisions in Aleppo and Idlib (city, town, village, neighborhood, key farms).

The study/book bases its chapters and sections on a diverse range of primary and secondary data sources. In addition to books, academic studies, historical references, documents, and archives on the region and its tribes, it relies heavily on field data as primary sources. Various research tools and methods were employed for data collection, primarily interviews and field focus sessions conducted between 2021 and 2024. These sessions involved over 780 sources from diverse groups, including tribal sheikhs, princes, and notables; aghas and dignitaries; founders and members of tribal councils; genealogists and tribal experts; social and political activists; local council members from tribes in the region; defected officers and tribal field commanders; specialists and researchers focused on regional or tribal issues; and numerous displaced individuals who participated in focus sessions on forced displacement, among others.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Based on the chapter summaries, with Chapter Two marking the start of the study's practical findings, this paper provides a condensed overview of the study's core findings. Key insights include: the structure, influence, and geographic distribution of tribal and clan networks in Aleppo and Idlib; their interactions with the Syrian revolution; and their varied roles in political, military, and local governance spheres. The study also examines the diverse impacts of the conflict on these structures, particularly forced displacement, and explores the emergence of tribal councils, analyzing their current and future implications. Lastly, it examines the position of tribal structures within the power dynamics and the complex relationship with authority, especially regarding the management of loyalties and the form of the state.

Tribes and Clans of Aleppo and Idlib: Influence and Distribution

The study identified twenty-five tribes encompassing 220 clans in the administrative boundaries of Aleppo and Idlib, and twenty seven independent clans linked to tribes outside these governorates**.** These tribes represent diverse ethnicities: Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, Circassian, Gypsy. A field survey mapped approximately 2,033 geographic points occupied by these tribes across administrative units: cities, towns, villages, neighborhoods, and key farms.

The study classified the tribes and clans of Aleppo and Idlib based on four criteria: geographic weight (density) and distribution, tribal structural composition, ethnic background, and the number of geographic points each tribe/clan occupies. The following tables list the major tribes and clans in Aleppo and Idlib; highlighting their significance within the two governorates and Syria as a whole; detailing their social structure, and the number of geographic points they occupy across these governorates.

Table (1): Distribution of Key Tribes in Aleppo and Idlib, Number of   Associated Clans, Geographic Points of Presence, and Structural Composition

#	Tribe	Number of Clans in Aleppo and Idlib[1]	Influence(density)/ Presence in Aleppo/Idlib	Geographic Points in Aleppo and Idlib (Village, Town, City, Neighborhood, Major Farms) **Aleppo/Idlib**	Total	Influence (density)/ Presence in Syria	Structural Composition
1	Al-Busha'ban	32	Aleppo	463/62	525	Aleppo - Raqqa	Based on lineage
2	Kurdish Clans	17	Aleppo	155/-	155	Al-Hasakah	Based on lineage and alliances
3	Al-Hadidiyeen	9	Aleppo	110/42	152	Aleppo	Based on lineage and alliances
4	Al-Baqqara	22	Aleppo	94/40	134	Deir ez-Zor	Based on lineage
5	Al-Mawali	22	Idlib	8/101	109	Idlib	Based on lineage and alliances

---

[1]This number includes the clans affiliated with the tribe in the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib only, and does not include all the clans of the listed tribe in all of Syria or abroad.

6	Bani Said	5	Aleppo	98 / 4	102	Aleppo	Based on lineage and alliances
7	Al-Dulaim	4	Aleppo	69/13	82	Aleppo	Based on lineage and alliances
8	Qays/Jays	19	Idlib	26/51	77	Hama - Raqqa	Based on lineage and alliances
9	Tayy	15	Aleppo	62/14	76	Al-Hasakah	Based on lineage and alliances
10	Al-Aqeedat	5	Aleppo	54/19	73	Deir ez-Zor	Based on lineage and alliances
11	Al-Na'im	10	Aleppo	37/33	70	Homs	Based on lineage and alliances
12	Al-Jubur	4	Aleppo	67/1	68	Al-Hasakah	Based on lineage and alliances
13	Turkmen Clans	11	Aleppo	58/7	65	Aleppo - Latakia	Based on lineage and alliances
14	Bani Khalid	14	Idlib	24/36	60	Homs	Based on lineage and alliances
15	Al-Obaid	1	Aleppo	48/-	48	Deir ez-Zor - Aleppo	Based on lineage
16	Al-Lahib	1	Aleppo	24/8	32	Aleppo	Based on lineage
17	Shammar	3	Aleppo	39/4	43	Al-Hasakah	Based on lineage and alliances
18	Al-Jahaysh	5	Aleppo - Idlib	11/11	22	Al-Hasakah	Based on lineage
19	Al-Sakan/Al-Sajjan	5	Aleppo	20/-	20	Aleppo	Based on lineage and alliances
20	Bani Jamil	8	Aleppo	17/1	18	Hama	Based on lineage
21	Anza	2	Aleppo	13 / -	13	Homs - Hama	Based on lineage and alliances
22	Al-Buramadun	1	Aleppo	12/1	13	Raqqa	Based on lineage
23	Gypsies	1	Aleppo	9/2	11	---	Based on lineage
24	Al-Fadl	1	Aleppo	5/-	5	Quneitra - Rural Damascus	Based on lineage and alliances
25	Circassians	3	Aleppo	3/-	3	Quneitra	Based on lineage
26	Total	220		1526 / 450	1976		
27	Total after removing overlapping (shared) geographic points among clans, or between clans and other tribes within Aleppo and Idlib (Village, Town, City, Neighborhood, Key Farms)				1825	Note[(2)] on structural composition	

[(2)]The research team developed this classification based on the structural composition of most Syrian tribes, particularly in the north, which are primarily formed through lineage, alliances, or a combination of both. **Lineage** refers to the shared belief or narrative among clans of the same tribe that they descend from a common ancestor (a single forefather), a source of pride for some tribes. **Alliance**, on the other hand, is a union between clans that may not necessarily share the same lineage but have historically allied, contracted, or unified for several reasons—often defensive—against other tribal entities in the region, or due to geographic or other factors. Over time, this has created a tribal structure comprising clans with both shared lineage and allied clans, making their structural composition reliant on both lineage and alliance.

It should be noted that alliances do not negate the individual lineages of the clans involved but instead unify them into a defensive bond that, over time, evolves into a shared affiliation. Typically, alliances are formed by clans with well-documented lineages at the clan level. However, the degree of alliance or union can vary from one tribal alliance to another, or even from one tribe to another. For example, some clans may join tribes of a common lineage due to historical factors, such as the tribe's rising power during a particular period or the clans' geographical placement within the tribe's area of influence, distancing them from their original tribes. Over time, these clans may come to be associated with or integrated into the dominant tribe. This dynamic can also apply at

Table (2): Distribution of Key Clans in Aleppo and Idlib, Geographic Points of Presence, and Structural Composition

#	Clan	Influence(density)/ Presence in Aleppo/Idlib	Geographic Points (Village, Town, City, Neighborhood, Key Farms) (**Aleppo/Idlib**)	Total	Influence (density)/ Presence in in Syria	Structural Composition
1	Al-Damalkha	Aleppo	28 / 3	31	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
2	Qara Keij	Aleppo	23 / -	23	Aleppo	Based on Lineage and Alliance
3	Al-Waysat	Aleppo	13 / 8	21	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
4	Al-Samataiya	Aleppo	10 / 7	17	Hama	Based on Lineage and Alliance
5	Bani Asid	Aleppo	15 / -	15	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
6	Al-Mashaheda	Aleppo	10 / 3	13	Deir Ezzor	Based on Lineage
7	Adwan	Aleppo	7 / 6	13	Al-Hasakah	Based on Lineage
8	Al-Ghilaz	Aleppo	13 / -	13	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
9	Al-Hanadi	Aleppo	10 / 2	12	Aleppo	Based on Lineage and Alliance
10	Bani Zaid	Aleppo	12 / -	12	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
11	Al-Ja'abara	Aleppo	8 / 3	11	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
12	Al-Bu Salah	Aleppo	11 / -	11	-	Based on Lineage
13	Al-Hamdon	Aleppo	10 / -	10	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
14	Al-Khaza'la	Aleppo	7 / -	7	-	Based on Lineage
15	Al-Murandiya	Aleppo	4 / 2	6	-	Based on Lineage
16	Al-Zarifat	Aleppo	2 / 3	5	-	Based on Lineage
17	Al-Khanafra	Aleppo	4 / -	4	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
18	Al-Budbash	Aleppo	4 / -	4	Aleppo	Based on Lineage
19	Al-Bu Kulaib	Aleppo	2 / 1	3	-	Based on Lineage
20	Al-Sakhani	Aleppo	2 / -	2	Homs	Based on Lineage and Alliance
21	Al-Qaramita	Idlib	- / 2	2	-	Based on Lineage

---

smaller social units within a tribe, where sub-clans or segments of different clans may unite, often due to defensive or regional factors, eventually forming a new clan built on alliance.

It is important to note that tribal and clan alliances are ancient phenomena deeply rooted in Arab history and a source of pride for many tribes; symbolizing strength and solidarity. These alliances are prevalent across Arab and non-Arab tribal communities.

22	Al-Amalija	Idlib	- / 2	2	-	Based on Lineage and Alliance
23	Barri	Aleppo	2 / -	2	-	Based on Lineage
24	Al-Burjab	Aleppo	1 / -	1	Raqqa	Based on Lineage
25	Al-Buhayyat	Aleppo	1/-	1	Hama	Based on Lineage
26	Al-Mukahita	Idlib	- /1	1	Idlib	Based on Lineage
27	Al-Miqdad	Aleppo	1 /-	1	Daraa	Based on Lineage
28	Total		200/43	243		
29	Total after removing overlapping (shared) geographic points among clans, or between clans and other tribes within Aleppo and Idlib (Village, Town, City, Neighborhood, Key Farms)			208		

Source: Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

Based on the distribution outlined in the previous tables, Syrian tribes and clans in the north-west (Aleppo and Idlib), represent a dominant social structure, especially in Aleppo, where tribal presence extends into urban centers, including the provincial capital. In contrast, Idlib's tribal presence is primarily concentrated in rural areas and a few towns.

It is worth noting that the previous tables provide a general summary derived from detailed tables for each tribe and clan. The main book includes an entire chapter dedicated to the tribal map of Aleppo and Idlib, presenting fifty-two detailed tables for each tribe and clan listed above. These tables outline each tribe's structure, the number and names of geographic locations, and key family names within their territories. Additionally, maps illustrate the geographic distribution of each tribe and clan, showing their presence across the official administrative units in Aleppo and Idlib. Below is a map of the distribution of the Al-Baqqara tribe and its clans in Aleppo and Idlib, representing one of the fifty-two models included in Chapter Three, which relies on social survey methodology and tools.

Distribution of the clans of Al-Baqqara tribe in Aleppo and Idlib

Distribution of Kurdish Clans in Aleppo and Idlib

Milan clan	Zewar clan	Alîdîn clan	Şedad and Oux clan	Zerka clan	Sherqî clan
Şikak clan	Koçer clan	Dana clan	Hevîdî clan	Pîşî Altî clan	Rûbariyan clan
Çêlka clan	Reşwan clan	Şêxan clan	Dîdan clan	Amkan clan	

In general, tribes and clans are distributed in a crescent shape along Syria's northern border, spanning from the far north-west to the far north-east. Within this arc, Arab tribes and clans in Aleppo and Idlib form an unbroken demographic stretch, reaching the tribal regions of Raqqa and Hama. In contrast, non-Arab clans are not demographically interrelated, appearing in dispersed geographic areas, often near the border. Arab tribes tend to concentrate in plains, while Kurdish clans are more present in mountainous areas (like parts of Afrin) and plains such as Ayn al-Arab/Kobani. Reflecting geography's historical influence on tribal roles, the strategic positions occupied by these tribes in the north-west have been pivotal in drawing them into military conflicts, leading to significant consequences, notably forced displacement.

Conversely, levels of tribal solidarity vary among tribes and clans and across geographic areas, influenced by multiple factors detailed in the main study. Notably, these levels show a gradual variance: the highest solidarity is found in tribes and clans residing on the peripheries, like eastern rural Idlib and southern Aleppo's desert villages, where traditional sheikhdom is more pronounced. **This explains why most "tribal councils" and prominent tribal factions are based in these areas.**

Tribal solidarity decreases somewhat in tribes on the outskirts of urban areas, such as around Aleppo's perimeter in the Jabal Samaan region, where tribal adherence and traditional sheikhdom are less pronounced than in peripheral regions. In major cities like Aleppo, Mare', Azaz, al-Bab, Saraqib, Jisr al-Shughur, and Harem, the family-clan dynamic, represented by community notables, tends to overshadow the traditional sheikhdom structure.

Tribes and clans in Aleppo and Idlib vary in influence. Some have their primary presence in these governorates, such as Al-Mawali, Al-Busha'ban, and Al-Hadidiyeen, with extensions across other Syrian governorates or even beyond the border into Türkiye (e.g., Al-Busha'ban, Qays/Jays). Conversely, certain clans in Aleppo and Idlib are branches of tribes mainly rooted in other governorates, such as Al-Aqeedat, Al-Jubur, Bani Khalid, Al-Na'im, and Al-Baqqara.

Additionally, most non-Arab clans (Kurdish and Turkmen) in Aleppo and Idlib have their main presence within Turkish borders, extending into Syrian areas like Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, al-Bab/al-Rai, and Afrin in Aleppo, and several Turkmen villages in the Jisr al-Shughur area in Idlib.

In the absence of official statistics detailing the precise size and influence of tribes and clans, we can refer to indicators that approximate their relative population compared to others. One such indicator is the number of geographic points occupied by each tribe. By reviewing the population counts of villages and towns they inhabit, an approximate size of each tribe can be inferred. In most villages and towns within Aleppo and Idlib, the population predominantly consists of a single tribe or clan (or multiple clans within the same tribe). However, some villages, towns, and district centers feature a mixed presence of several tribes and/or clans, alongside non-tribal city residents.

The table below shows the number of administrative units (villages, cities, neighborhoods, and key farms) with tribal presence, compared to the total number of administrative units in Aleppo and Idlib, as classified in 2011.

Table (3): Number of Administrative Units With Tribal Presence in Aleppo and Idlib for the year 2011[3].

Governorate	Total number of villages	Villages with tribal presence	Total number of cities	Cities with tribal presence[6]	Total number of farms	Key farms[5] with tribal presence	Governorate center	Key neighborhoods with tribal presence within the governorate center[4]	Total number of tribe and clan presence points
Aleppo	1476	1397	22	21	1312	278	1	30	1726
Idlib	475	374	17	11	603	108	1	0	493
Total	1951	1771	39	32	1915	386	2	30	2219
Note: The total geographic points of tribal and clan presence in Aleppo and Idlib were calculated as follows: Number of tribal villages + number of cities with tribal presence + number of key tribal farms + key neighborhoods with tribal presence = 2219, with 186 overlapping points (villages, cities, farms, and neighborhoods) subtracted to avoid repetition. This adjustment results in a final total of 2033 geographic points where tribes and clans are present in Aleppo and Idlib, distributed across official administrative divisions (village, city, key farms, key neighborhoods).									2033 after removing the overlapping (shared) administrative points

Source: Tribe and Power in Syria: History and RevolutionSource

Tribalism, Regionalism, and Familial Ties: Dynamics of the 2011 Revolution

With the onset of the Syrian revolution in 2011, tribes and clans experienced horizontal and vertical divisions in their stance toward this major political event. Such divisions are not unusual in the history of Syrian tribes and clans, which have similarly fragmented during past wars and pivotal political shifts. These splits are natural, given the vast geographic spread and political diversity of tribes as extended social structures.

This dynamic becomes even more understandable when viewed within the broader context of social divisions triggered by the revolution, which affected smaller, supposedly more cohesive units, such as nuclear and extended families, more significantly than larger entities like tribes and clans with their wider social and geographic scope.

---

[3]The total number of villages includes the centers of towns and municipalities, which are often formed from clusters of multiple villages (e.g., the town of Barda in southern rural Aleppo comprises several villages, including the town center, which has been counted as a single village alongside the other villages in the cluster). This approach was adopted to avoid duplication in the count of geographic points. It is also worth noting that the field survey conducted by the research team covered the geography of Aleppo and Idlib, regardless of the varying control by different forces (the Assad regime forces and their allies, Syrian opposition forces, and the SDF).

[4] They refer to neighborhoods in the centers of the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib.

[5]According to the field survey of key farms in Aleppo and Idlib, it is important to note that some farms are administratively and demographically linked to nearby villages. Therefore, the research team's field survey focused only on key farms, as other farms were counted together with the villages with which they are associated.

[6] This refers to cities with a tribal presence from various clans, whether partial (in one or more neighborhoods), such as Afrin, Al-Bab, Ain al-Arab/Kobani, Mare', Tal Rifaat, Jarabulus, Atarib, and others, alongside non-tribal families. It also includes cities with a predominant tribal majority, such as Al-Safira, Deir Hafer, Khanaser, Manbij, Tal al-Damman, Al-Zurba, Sirrin, and others. For detailed information on tribal points and their distribution, refer to Chapter Three, which covers the field survey.

Analyzing the interactions of tribes and clans with the Syrian revolution from its outset reveals that those opposing the regime in Aleppo and Idlib since 2011 did not initially engage in the uprising through a tribal or clan framework during the early (peaceful) phase. Despite the announcement of "Friday of the Tribes" on June 10, 2011, as an attempt to mobilize tribal influence nationwide, no noticeable tribal or clan-based structuring of the local movement or it objectives was observed at the time.

This absence is reflected in the names of local coordinating committees, which adopted regional rather than tribal or clan labels. Their slogans and demands also lacked tribal or clan undertones. Instead, they aligned with broader calls for change shared across Syria. This trend applies to other tribes and clans involved in the uprising throughout the country.

With the onset of militarization, the dynamics shifted, and tribal and clan identities became more pronounced, driven by the nature and context of military operations. The militarization of the popular movement against the regime took on a defensive regional character, with each area forming its own brigades and military groups. This naturally reflected the demographic composition of the region in the structure of most local factions, particularly in areas with significant tribal presence.

The militarization phase and the nature of military operations required a certain level of solidarity and cohesion to counter the regime's centralized power and violent tactics. This cohesion was often provided by regional, tribal, or familial dynamics in non-tribal areas. In many cases, regional and tribal identities overlapped, as 70% of tribal strongholds in Aleppo and Idlib were inhabited by the same tribe or clan. In other areas, diverse clans coexisted, or tribal components mixed with non-tribal or familial ones. This led to a hybrid dynamic during this phase, combining regional-tribal or regional-familial identities, particularly in non-tribal areas.

This dynamic evolved further with the intensification of military operations, increasing violence, and the withdrawal of state functions from these areas. Civilians and local factions faced the challenge of local governance amid ongoing conflict, prompting traditional social structures to turn to alternative, familiar forms of organization, particularly tribes, clans, and families. Forced displacement further amplified this trend, relocating clans from their original areas to new ones and diminishing regional identity in favor of tribal and clan affiliations, which became more pronounced in displacement settings as communities sought to adapt to their new environments.

This interaction evolved alongside the dominant factionalism in the north, the multiplicity of controlling forces, and the existing local governance framework, leading to the emergence of "tribal and clan councils" as a necessary form of representation and administrative service provision. This need was not limited to tribes and clans; urban (non-tribal) families expressed similar demands, as seen in the "family and notable councils" in certain cities in Idlib, paralleling the "tribal and clan councils" in Aleppo and rural Idlib.

Throughout these phases, **the interaction of tribes and clans with the Syrian revolution remained regionally localized and decentralized**. No centralized tribal stance, mobilization, or leadership emerged across regions. Instead, local and regional dynamics dictated the

priorities and responses of participating clans, detached from their cross-regional tribal affiliations.

For example, Al-Aqeedat in Aleppo engaged differently from Al-Aqeedat in Homs or Deir ez-Zor. Similarly, clans within the same tribe behaved variably depending on their location. Al-Busha'ban clans in southern Aleppo interacted differently from those in northern or eastern Aleppo, aligning their efforts with their respective local movements and forming factions within their areas rather than across regions. **This explains why clans of the same tribe aligned with different factions**, a trend observed among various tribes and clans in Aleppo and Idlib (e.g., Al-Hadidiyeen, Al-Mawali, Al-Busha'ban, Tayy, Al-Baqqara, and Al-Na'im).

Throughout their involvement in the militarization phase, no tribe or clan managed to establish a centralized entity uniting all its members across regions, either militarily or politically. There were no cross-regional tribal formations representing entire tribes or clans in all their areas of presence. This highlights the lack of organizational centralization within tribes, contrary to what some might imagine.

As for clans, being smaller social units within tribes, they exhibited relatively greater cohesion due to their concentration within specific geographic areas or nearby villages. However, even clans fragmented into different factions based on local dynamics.

Thus, tribes and clans represent socio-cultural structures that transcend regions but lack political centralization. Their interaction with events is shaped by local dynamics and the specific regional context. While their cross-regional nature is primarily social and cultural, it can occasionally take on a political dimension, depending on several factors and circumstances.

The following table shows the most prominent opposition military groups and factions, formed on a tribal basis in Aleppo and Idlib between 2012 and 2018:

Table (4): Key Groups and Factions Formed on a Tribal Basis in Opposition Controlled Areas Between 2012 and 2018

No.	Tribe/Clan	Faction/Formation Name	Year of Establishment
1	Al-Omirat/Al-Busha'ban	Ahrar Al-Omirat	2012
2	Muwali–Al-Busha'ban–Al-Zuwaygat/Al-Fadl	Union of Tribal Revolutionaries	2012
3	Muwali (Al-Mawali)	Kings of the Land (Desert)	2012
4	Northern Tribes (Aleppo, Idlib, Hama)	Liwa Ahrar Al-Asha'er	2012
5	Al-Omirat /Al-Busha'ban –Al-Abriz / Aqeedat –Al-Buman'a /Dulaim – Al-Tarn /Al-Busha'ban	Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan	2012
6	Al-Ghanaim/Bani Saeed	Al-Farouq Battalion in Manbij	2012
7	Al-Assasna/Dulaim	Dar' Al-Ummah (Shield of the Nation)	2012
8	Al-Fardoun/Al-Busha'ban	Liwa Ahrar Souriya (The Free Men of Syria Brigade)	2012
9	Qays/Jays – Al-Assasna–Na'im	Dar' Al-Sham (Shield of the Levant)	2012
10	Tayy	Ahrar Al-Jabal Al-Wustani	2012
11	Al-Musharafa/Mawali	Katibat (Battalion) Faris Al-Otoor – Ahrar Bani Tamim	2012
12	Al-Bushahab Al-Din/Hadideen	Saham Al-Layl (Arrows of the Night)	2012

13	Al-Shaher/Al-Busha'ban	Al-Mu'tasim Billah	2012
14	Al-Shaher/Al-Busha'ban	The Martyr Mahmoud Al-Ali	2012
15	Al-Ghanem/Al-Busha'ban	Ahrar Al-Furat	2012
16	Turkmen Tribes	Sultan Abdul Hamid Battalion – Sultan Murad Battalion – Muhammad Al-Fatih Battalion – Seljuk Battalion – Ahfad Al-Fatiheen Battalion – Al-Baz Battalion	2012 / 2013
17	Groups from Various Syrian Tribes and Clans	Syrian Tribes Front	2013
18	Na'im	Al-Na'im Combat Division	2013
19	Baqqara	Liwa Muhammad Al-Baqir	2013
20	Al-Hadidiyeen	Saqour Al-Hadidiyeen Battalion	2013
21	Al-Ghnatisa/ Al-Hadidiyeen and Other Tribes	Katibat Abu Dujana (Abu Dujana Battalion)	2013
22	Mawali	Al-Sheikheen Brigade	2013
23	Al-Ali/ Al-Busha'ban	Al-Bayarq Battalion	2013
24	Al-Boumasra/ Al-Busha'ban	Al-Bumassara Battalion	2013
25	Al-Buhamad/ Al-Busha'ban and Other Tribes	Al-Ikhlas Battalion	2016
26	Baqqara	Ansar Al-Sharia Regiment	2014
27	Mawali – Hadideen–Others	Military Gathering of Sunni Tribes	2014
28	Al-Amirat/ Al-Busha'ban	Southern Command Regiment	2015
29	Al-Kalkal/ Al-Busha'ban	Ahrar Al- Busha'ban	2016
30	Na'im	Na'im Brigades and Battalions Gathering	2016
31	Al-Amirat – Al-Busheikh – Al-Boumasra – Al-Ali / Al-Busha'ban – Al-Bushahab Al-Din / Hadideen – Al-Buassi / Baqqara	Liwa Aswad Al-Islam (Lions of Islam Brigade)	2017
32	Clans from Al-Busha'ban	Army of Al-Busha'ban	2018

Source: Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

Development, Local Governance, and Their Impact on Social Structures

Historically, development programs and local governance laws have been pivotal in transforming social structures, particularly those of tribes and clans. This influence was evident during the Ottoman Tanzimat (regulations) reforms and the French occupation, which promoted urbanization policies, dismantled the nomadic economy, and transitioned tribes from a nomadic lifestyle to settled, agriculture-based livelihoods.

While the decline of nomadism and the long-standing transformation of tribes into rural structures with tribal and clan identities may suggest that the impact of development and local governance laws has fully played out, this is not the case. Development policies and local governance laws remain crucial tools for fostering local development and continuing to reshape rural and other structures, especially in the aftermath of years of conflict.

The form of local governance and levels of development were key drivers behind the uprisings in certain regions and among some tribes. **Even when not the primary cause, they undoubtedly influenced the nature of these uprisings**. Local governance continues to serve as a critical legal and developmental framework for ongoing transformation in these areas.

Looking at the administrative divisions **(units)** of Aleppo and Idlib, a clear imbalance is evident, with some boundaries remaining unchanged since the Ottoman or French eras, despite significant population growth and increased service needs.

For instance, the Jabal Samaan district includes southern rural Aleppo, half of western rural Aleppo, parts of northern and eastern rural Aleppo, and Aleppo city (the governorate's center). This district alone houses nearly half of the governorate's population, while the other nine districts combined represent the remaining half. This disparity directly affects the distribution of administrative units (cities, towns, municipalities), the effectiveness of local governance, and the representation of these areas.

In this context, an example is the village of Tal al-Daman (in Jabal Samaan district), which, despite having an actual population of fewer than 1,000 people, is classified as a "city" in administrative divisions. This classification accounts for the population of dozens of villages under Tal al-Daman's jurisdiction, some of which are located tens of kilometers away. Consequently, services are concentrated in Tal al-Daman at the expense of surrounding villages, many of which are larger in both area and population. This has created administrative and service-related gaps, along with significant organizational imbalances, disadvantageous to all affected areas.

When examining the distribution of administrative units in Aleppo governorate, it becomes apparent that they are unevenly allocated without consideration for geographic size or population density. This disparity is especially pronounced in the desert areas, which encompass hundreds of villages and farms but have far fewer administrative units (towns, municipalities) compared to other rural regions.

The variable of local governance, alongside numerous other factors, significantly impacts levels of local—and consequently national—development. Most studies agree on the poor distribution of wealth in Syria, concentrated in urban centers at the expense of rural areas, and even within cities, favoring certain neighborhoods over others (e.g., western Aleppo versus eastern Aleppo, which has a predominantly tribal population). This imbalance is further exacerbated by deficiencies in legislative, legal, and executive frameworks, as well as widespread nepotism and corruption, resulting in starkly uneven development.

The developmental failure is particularly evident in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, especially in more tribal areas like southern and eastern rural Aleppo and eastern rural Idlib. These regions experience progressively weaker services (healthcare, education, infrastructure, etc.), with near-total service absence in peripheral areas. **This marginalization, seemingly systematic by the regime, explains the heightened tribal solidarity in these areas. It stems from a deliberate focus on providing basic services in district and sub-district centers at the expense of outlying regions, coupled with unequal representation in local governance structures.**

The regional interaction of tribes and clans with the revolution across its phases, alongside the organizational forms they developed as channels for local service representation and advocacy, reveals a key insight. Responses from the research sample often reflected a regional dimension over a purely tribal or clan-based one, highlighting the need for genuine participation by these regions and their inhabitants in managing their areas. Achieving this requires a transformation in the structure of local governance, its laws, and their practical application. Such reforms would serve as a primary tool and gateway for local development.

Some may express concern that changing local governance laws in tribal areas and involving their inhabitants in administration could lead to the emergence of a more cohesive and organized tribal, clan-based, or familial structure, particularly in areas dominated by a single tribe, clan, or influential families. This concern may hold if changes in local governance are superficial. However, meaningful reforms could yield entirely different outcomes for social structures.

Granting controlled administrative decentralization, expanding local governance powers, and transitioning to genuine elections rather than direct appointments tied to central authorities would enable local populations to manage their own affairs. This would broaden democratic participation, stimulate local development, and allow greater space for civil society activities. Over time, these factors would create economic and developmental impacts, leading to a gradual decline in tribal cohesion.

Conversely, excessive centralization poses a greater risk of reinforcing and reproducing highly cohesive tribal or clan structures. Such centralization could inadvertently foster heightened tribalism, emphasizing the importance of balanced and well-implemented decentralization efforts.

The Experience of Councils: Reality, Impacts, and Future

The establishment of "tribal and clan councils" after 2016 marked a novel development in Syria's tribal sphere, breaking with traditional tribal governance centered on the sheikh, emir, or notable. Instead, these councils function as administrative bodies with diverse roles and authorities. This phenomenon emerged within the complex and overlapping political, economic, social, and military contexts of the Syrian conflict, including forced displacement, the multiplicity of controlling forces, and the need for representation in advocacy and service provision, particularly for displaced tribes and clans.

Given these circumstances, the effectiveness of these councils has been limited and varied based on their nature. Clan councils primarily focus on social services and local mediation, while tribal councils take on broader, more political roles. However, their political roles remain underdeveloped and organizationally immature, especially amidst the instability in northern Syria.

Table 5: Key Tribal and Clan Councils in Areas of Aleppo and Idlib Outside Regime-Controlled Areas

No.	Tribe/Clan	Council Name	Date of Establishment
1	Mawali	Mawali Tribal Council	2017
2	Al-Busha'ban	Supreme Council of Al-Busha'ban Tribe	2017
3	Al-Lahib	Supreme Council of Al-Lahib Tribe in Syria	2017
4	Al-Aqeedat	Council of Al-Aqeedat Tribe in Northern Syria	2017
5	Baqqara	Council of Baqqara Tribe in Northern Syria	2017
6	Bani Khalid	Supreme Council of Bani Khalid al-Makhzumi al-Qurashi Tribe in Syria	2017
7	Tayy	Tayy Tribal Council	2017
8	Kurdish Clans	Council of Kurdish Clans	2017
9	Bani Said	Council of Bani Said Clans	2017
10	Al-Na'im	Council of Al-Na'im Tribe in Liberated Northern Syria	2017
11	Al-Hadidiyeen	Unified Council of Hadidiyeen Clans	2018

12	Shammar	Council of Shammar Tribe in the Liberated North	2018
13	Tribes and Clans of Aleppo	Council of Syrian Tribes and Clans	2018
14	Tribes and Clans of Idlib	Shura Council of Syrian Tribes and Clans	2018
15	Zubayd	Emirate Council of Zubayd	2019
16	Turkmen Clans	Diwan of Turkmen Clans	2019
17	Qays/Jays	Shura Council of Qays Tribe in Liberated Areas	2020

Source: Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

These councils brought about an initial change in tribal and clan leadership rather than in the overall structure. This can be seen as an adaptation by leadership to the evolving realities and dynamics of the situation; engaging with and influenced by various organizational forms, such as unions, associations, councils, and military factions, imposed by the broader conditions in northern Syria. The emergence of these councils as organizational structures cannot be separated from the general context that shaped them.

These councils, while reflecting a degree of flexibility within traditional tribal leadership, have had varied impact on the central role of the sheikhdom. They do not appear to threaten the authority of sheikhs and emirs but often serve as organizational platforms that strengthen their influence and representation. For many, the councils have provided a broader basis for pursuing political roles beyond their tribes or clans.

The councils have also restored the status of some sheikhs, many of whom now lead tribal councils in addition to holding their traditional roles. Notably, some gained their leadership through elections, which, while influenced by lineage, added legitimacy to their positions. Forced displacement has further extended the influence of certain sheikhs to new clans in areas where local notables or regional leaderships previously dominated.

Conversely, these councils have undeniably influenced the central role of the sheikhdom by introducing new standards beyond lineage to assess the performance of sheikhs toward their tribes or clans. Inefficient sheikhs were often removed from leadership due to their inability to manage tribal affairs effectively. Additionally, the councils represented a unified political stance among tribe members opposing the regime with opposition to the regime becoming a criterion for council membership or leadership.

This dynamic marginalized and reduced the influence of many traditional sheikhs with neutral or ambiguous stances; particularly those displaced due to military operations rather than opposition to the regime. Councils demonstrated the ability to exclude such sheikhs by imposing the majority stance; a process seen in multiple tribal and clan councils.

Focus group sessions exploring tribal members' perceptions of the tribal framework and the sheikh's role reveal a clear tendency among most participants to move beyond the centrality of the sheikh at various levels; with some expressing support for councils. This is not contradictory but rather complementary. Rejecting a sheikh's performance or stance often translates into support for the council; particularly when the sheikh's positions conflict with the council, which represents the majority, or when the sheikh operates outside its organizational framework.

The councils introduced a new and significant element to tribal and clan leadership: the inclusion of skilled professionals and specialists from within the tribe or clan, such as lawyers, officers, teachers, journalists, and others. This inclusion appeared natural given the inability of traditional sheikhs and elders to manage the wide range of tasks imposed by the prevailing circumstances, which demanded diverse specializations. This shift was reflected in the administrative structures of most councils, the distribution of their offices, and the mechanisms for electing their members and heads.

In this context, the establishment of "Shura Councils" within most tribal and clan councils—whether through elections or acclamation—marked a break from the monopoly on decision-making, which was traditionally concentrated in the hands of the sheikh or the leadership family. Other influential players emerged, most notably military leaders from within the tribes and clans. These leaders have become key figures in their communities and councils due to their significant military roles on the ground.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that tribal and clan councils, given the unique circumstances of their establishment, have so far had mixed or even contradictory effects on the centrality of sheikhs, emirs, and dignitaries. On one hand, these councils have increased their influence and reinforced their authority. On the other hand, they have affected their leading role and standing.

The first effect appears more evident due to the novelty of the experience and the reliance on the participation of sheikhs, emirs, and dignitaries in founding and launching these councils. Meanwhile, the second effect is likely to become clearer in the medium and long term, provided the experiment continues and evolves further. Regardless, these councils have preserved the qualitative presence of sheikhs, emirs, and dignitaries while simultaneously incorporating new elements and expanding the concept of tribal and clan leadership, making it more adaptable and effective.

The establishment and roles of these councils were shaped by specific political, military, and economic conditions, making their future contingent on the continuation or resolution of these factors. If these conditions persist, the councils may continue to develop; however, if they dissipate, their influence is likely to wane naturally—whether through the restoration of state functions or through regional administrative, security, and military restructuring.

For instance, tribal judicial authority will naturally decline if effective and fair judicial and security institutions are established. Similarly, the role of local mediation, primarily focused on conflict resolution, will diminish. Conversely, the return of displaced persons to their areas of origin will inevitably reduce the need for such councils among tribal and clan members, a development that depends on the nature of the political resolution in Syria and the military future of the north. Thus, the roles of these councils may evolve, potentially in political and military directions or as frameworks for mobilization within the tribal sphere to address various issues and concerns.

Overall, despite the similarity in the roles of tribes, clans, and their sheikhs across areas of control (the regime, the "National Army," "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)", and the "Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)"), the experience of "tribal and clan councils" in northern Syria

appears to be the most advanced compared to the performance of tribes, clans, and their sheikhs in regime-controlled areas or under the SDF. This does not necessarily mean they are the most effective, as effectiveness depends on the nature of the areas and powers of control, but rather refers to the most developed administrative structure within Syria's tribal and clan landscape.

Figure (1): A Common Structural Diagram of Tribal Councils
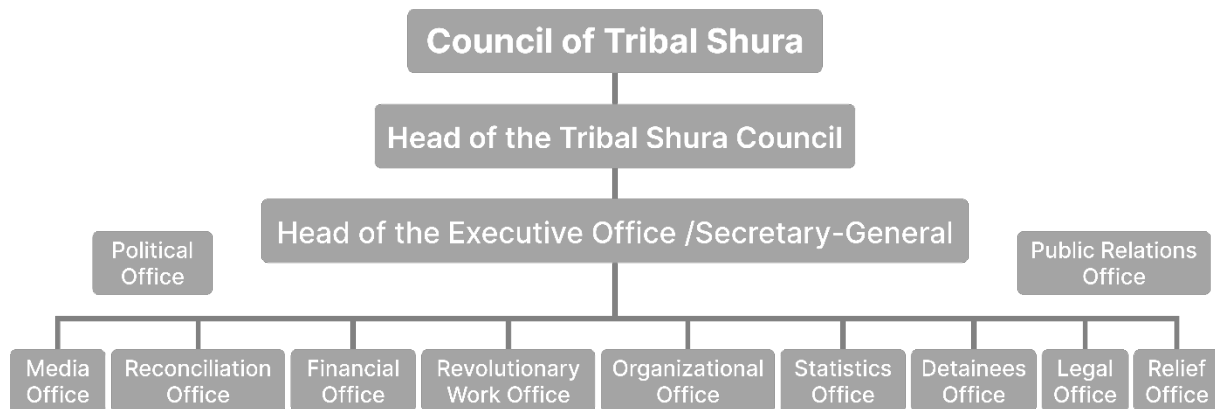
Source: Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

Forced Displacement Impact on Tribes and Clans

Despite successive historical transformations, most tribes and clans maintained their historic geographic locations until 2012, when forced displacement uprooted entire clans from areas they had inhabited for centuries. For example, Tayy tribe, present in Aleppo since pre-Umayyad times, remained rooted in the region until their displacement after 2012. Similarly, Al-Mawali and their leaders, who had been based east of Maarrat al-Numan since the Mamluk period, retained their geographic positions despite changes in name, structure, and alliances—until the majority were displaced after 2012.

Likewise, Qaysi clans, present in Aleppo and Hama since the Islamic conquests, experienced relocation due to internal displacement and forced displacement post-2012. Tribes such as Al-Busha'ban, which settled in the region during the early and mid-Ottoman periods, were also displaced from their areas after 2012. This applies to most displaced clans in Aleppo and Idlib governorates.

Syria's history has never witnessed tribal and clan displacements on such a scale. The most recent partial displacements occurred during the French occupation when some clans left central and northern Syria for Iraq, or southern Syria for Jordan, due to conflicts with the French. Examples include parts of Al-Mawali in the north and clans from Daraa and the Golan in the south, like Al-Fadl, that later returned.

Other tribes relocated permanently, particularly after the delineation of Syria's northern borders following French-Turkish agreements, such as parts of the Qays, Al-Busha'ban, Al-Na'im, and Al-Jubur tribes. Additionally, internal disputes and conflicts among tribes led to internal relocations, with some clans moving from one region to another.

After independence, Syria witnessed tribal relocations both across borders and within the country, involving northern and southern clans. Notable examples include some members of the Anza and Shammar tribes leaving Syria, while parts of southern tribes like Al-Sardiyah and Al-Masaeed moved to settlements in the Jordanian part of Hauran. These movements were driven by political, economic, and legal changes during the era of the union with Egypt and the early Ba'ath period.

Subsequent internal displacements occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the south, the 1967 war with Israel and the occupation of the Golan led to the forced displacement of most of its Arab tribes, who were resettled by the state in Damascus and its outskirts. In the north, the construction of the Euphrates Dam resulted in the relocation of some Al-Busha'ban clans from Aleppo to Hasakah (known as Arab Ghamr), followed by partial displacements in Aleppo after the construction of the Tishrin Dam. Later, in 2008, severe drought along the Khabur River triggered another wave of tribal migration in the north-east.

Nevertheless, these earlier reverse migrations and internal displacements were minor compared to the broader Syrian tribal structure. In contrast, current internal displacements are significantly larger in scale. Entire areas in Aleppo and Idlib governorates have been emptied of their tribes, which have been pushed into new regions, mostly concentrated in northern Aleppo and northern Idlib. This shift may later reshape the demographic landscape along Syria's northern border with Türkiye. Additionally, waves of refugees from tribes in these governorates have moved to neighboring countries or even further away to Western nations.

Between 2012 and 2020, successive waves of displacement affected 247 clans, 220 of which belong to twenty-five tribes, uprooting them from approximately 1,393 geographic points (villages, key farms, towns, and cities), along with thirty neighborhoods in Aleppo. After accounting for 160 shared points between tribes and clans, the total number of displaced points stands at 1,263. With the relative calm and cessation of military operations, some clans have returned to their original locations, though at varying rates. Approximately 556 of the 1,263 points—including farms, villages, cities, and neighborhoods—have seen partial returns. The variation in return rates is influenced by factors such as the nature of the controlling military forces and the tribe's or clan's stance toward those forces.

In contrast to the partial return of some clans to areas controlled by various forces, around 707 geographic points—including farms, villages, cities, and neighborhoods—remain deserted as of the end of 2023. Displaced residents refuse to return to areas under the control of the Syrian regime and Iranian militias, citing ongoing violations against returnees, including murder, arrest, rape, and the exploitation of displaced persons' lands for the benefit of militias and their operatives. Additionally, homes have been looted, deliberately destroyed to deter returns, and agricultural lands have been confiscated. These lands are often seized by the regime's Farmers' Union, cooperative associations, or the Agricultural Bank, and auctioned for leasing or investment—usually in sham processes favoring regime-aligned militia leaders and influential figures.

Notably, these displacements were not limited to the tribes and clans of Aleppo and Idlib but extended to most displaced clans from other Syrian governorates. Some clans, like parts of Al-Aqeedat, were uprooted from geographic areas they had inhabited since before the 17th century due to forced displacement. The scale of displacement varied by tribe and clan; depending on their locations and the military operations they experienced.

This study documented over thirty-seven tribes and clans forcibly displaced at varying rates between 2012 and 2019 from regions such as Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, Raqqa, Homs, Hama, Quneitra, Rural Damascus , Daraa, and Palmyra. These displacements also included urban populations from these governorates, carried out by three primary actors: the Assad regime and its allies, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the SDF. This forced displacement resulted in large waves of civilians and combatants relocating to rural areas of Aleppo and Idlib under Syrian opposition control.

Forced displacement is one of the most significant changes in the Syrian conflict; profoundly impacting social structures. The displacement of most tribes and clans in Aleppo and Idlib between 2012 and 2020 led to complex effects—political, economic, and demographic. These consequences extended beyond altering the geographic distribution of tribes and clans to affecting the region's economy.

Displaced clans lost access to most of their agricultural lands that remained under regime control, halting farming activities and threatening food security. Additionally, tribes and clans lost an estimated two-thirds of their livestock due to the loss of grazing areas and the challenges of transporting animals across lines of control.

While forced displacement exhausted and scattered tribes and clans, turning their members into displaced persons (whether in camps or elsewhere), it also, paradoxically, strengthened tribal and clan bonds among the displaced. Solidarity and cohesion increased, as did affiliation with their clans and tribes, especially after losing their regional ties due to displacement.

Several factors contributed to this: a unified political stance against the Assad regime, widely seen by the displaced as the primary cause of their plight; the settlement of most displaced clans in single or neighboring areas, often in camps far from urban centers with limited services and education, reducing opportunities for integration with local residents; and the exclusion of the displaced from participating in local governance, which prioritizes native residents. Conversely, the arrival of new displaced clans in host areas heightened tribal tensions among host communities, whose dynamics were also influenced by the entry of displaced tribal structures into their regions.

The heightened tribal cohesion caused by forced displacement is evident in the stance of most displaced clans against returning to regime-controlled areas. This is reflected in the 707 geographic points—villages, towns, cities, neighborhoods, and major farms—in Aleppo and Idlib that remain uninhabited. This demonstrates the political and social unity of clans refusing to return to areas under Assad's control, signaling their collective rejection of any return while the regime remains in power.

In this context, "tribal councils" have contributed to the unified stance against returning to regime-controlled areas by serving as a framework for coordinating the positions of the "clan councils" under their umbrella. Looking ahead, these councils could play a larger role in formalizing this stance through legal, political, and rights-based measures if they organize displaced tribe members into "displacement associations." Such associations could unify their position on return, provide data and statistics on affected areas, and track return rates, similar to the displacement associations formed in the north by people from other displaced Syrian governorates.

However, this potential remains untapped within the current structure of the tribal and clan councils. While these councils have established various offices with diverse functions, they have yet to create a dedicated office for displaced persons.

Tribes at the Heart of the Conflict

Examining the conflict map across Syria, particularly in the north-west (Aleppo and Idlib) from 2011 to 2024, reveals the active and multifaceted role of tribes and clans throughout the conflict context and its military, political, and civil phases. The role of tribes and clans grew as the central state retreated, with the regime becoming a party to the conflict, divided across distinct zones of influence involving various local, regional, and international actors.

The Regime and Its Allies

Since 2011, the Assad regime has relied on tribal sheikhs and notables in rural and urban areas as tools for mobilization against peaceful protests. Early in its military campaign, the regime formed over twenty-three tribal militias, being most active in key urban neighborhoods and militarily significant rural areas.

After the fall of eastern Aleppo and the displacement of opposition-affiliated clans, the regime began integrating some of these militias into the army and linking them to security apparatuses. However, certain Iran-backed tribal militias have remained independent as of the time of this study.

Table (6): Key Groups Formed on Tribal Basis Supported by the Regime and Iran in Aleppo and Idlib between 2012 and 2018:

No.	Tribe/Clan	Name of Group and Affiliation	Year of Establishment
1	Hadidiyeen – Halibat/ Mawali	Saqour al-Dhahir (Affiliated with Air Force Intelligence)	2012
2	Baqqara	Liwa al-Baqir (Affiliated with Iranian Forces Command in Aleppo)	2012
3	Bayt Berri and Mido/ Qays	Liwa Zayn al-Abidin	2013
4	Al-Na'im	Al-Qatirji Forces (Transportation Security)	2013
5	Qays –Baqqara	Nayrab Special Tasks Regiment (Affiliated with Iranian Forces Command in Aleppo)	2013
6	Safarna /Others	Safira Regiment (Affiliated with Iranian Forces Command in Aleppo)	2014
7	Bu Massara /Al-Busha'ban	Battalion Affiliated with Military Intelligence	2015

8	Al-Asasna	Liwa al-Asasna	2015
9	Al-Asasna	National Defense Brigades	2015
10	Al-Asasna	Abu Hassan Dushka Brigades	2013
11	Mashahda	Battalion Affiliated with Iranians	2015
12	Bu Sheikh /Al-Busha'ban	National Defense Battalion	2015
13	Al-Touqan /Mawali	Battalion Affiliated with Military Intelligence	2015
14	Tayy	Sahwa Tribal Forces Affiliated with Military Intelligence (in Barna village)	2016
15	Bani Ezz / Mawali	Al-Darwish Militia (Later Became Al-Mubarak Regiment /Division 25 – Special Tasks – Tiger Forces)	2012–2017
16	Bani Said – Qays – Others	Manbij Tribal Regiment	2017
17	Hadidiyeen	National Defense Battalions	2018
18	Aqeedat	Battalion Affiliated with Military Intelligence (in Zitan Village)	2018
19	Al-Hussein Al-Ali / Al-Busha'ban	Battalion Affiliated with Military Intelligence-Battalion Affiliated with the 25th Division	2018
20	Clans from Manbij	Northern Brigade Affiliated with Military Intelligence Division	2018

Source: Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

In a later phase, the military roles of tribal militias shifted toward more political functions. After 2016, many militia leaders became members of the People's Assembly, provincial councils, or took on roles within the Ba'ath Party. Additionally, militia leaders were employed by the regime, Iranians, and Russians in "reconciliation" efforts and local mediation, particularly concerning the return of displaced tribal members.

These roles extended beyond Aleppo and Idlib, with the regime and Russians positioning some tribal sheikhs at the forefront of "reconciliation" and "settlement" processes with opposition fighters in other tribal-heavy regions across Syria.

The "National Army"

Tribal elements quickly engaged with the 2011 uprising in Aleppo and Idlib, with many clans from various tribes participating in military operations against the regime by 2012. These clans either joined existing factions or formed tribal/regional militias, numbering over thirty-six formations in both governorates. However, most of these militias were displaced and gradually dissolved after 2016, merging into the opposition's military structure. Their presence further declined after 2017 as opposition forces were confined to smaller enclaves in Aleppo and Idlib; alongside displaced tribal factions from other governorates. These factions eventually came under the umbrella of the "National Army," operating in Aleppo's countryside, where tribal elements now make up over 65% of its various factions and formations.

On the civil level, tribes and clans remain active through tribal councils in the north; primarily focusing on local mediation, reconciliation, and tribal judiciary roles. **Politically**, their representation within the "Syrian National Coalition" is limited to the "Tribal and Clan Bloc" (five seats), which relies on the "Tribal and Clan Council in Azaz" as a general umbrella organization. This council, supported by the "National Army" and endorsed by Türkiye, was established to consolidate and manage the growing formation of councils on the ground.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

In HTS-controlled areas, tribes and clans are prominent at various levels. **Militarily**, tribal members from different clans make up approximately 70% of HTS's structure, though without clear organizational influence due to differences in military and ideological frameworks compared to the "National Army." HTS also incorporates tribal military groups into a parallel force called the "Popular Resistance Brigades".

On the civil level, tribes are active through "tribal and clan councils" in rural Idlib, complementing "family and notables councils" in urban centers. HTS established a general umbrella, the "Shura Council for Tribes and Clans," to manage these councils, focusing on local mediation and reconciliation through tribal judiciary offices cooperating with existing legal institutions.

Politically, HTS included tribes and clans in the "Shura Council of Salvation"; allocating eight seats to the "Tribal and Clan Bloc," though the representation does not necessarily reflect the tribes' actual size and influence on the ground.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

In SDF controlled areas, particularly in rural Aleppo (Ayn al-Arab and Manbij), tribal influence is significant within the **military structure**, notably through the "Manbij Military Council" and its armed formations. Tribes also play a role in the civil administration, which local communities demanded after protests and clashes with the SDF.

Tribes play a pivotal role in local mediation, particularly in civil disputes and conflicts. Tribal judiciary and reconciliation offices operate within SDF courts, relying on tribal sheikhs and notables as intermediaries between the Administration and local communities.

The SDF has also leveraged tribal mediation to handle cases of local Syrian ISIS detainees. The People's Defense Units (YPG) has facilitated mass releases of ISIS members it deems not directly involved in bloodshed using a tribal mediation mechanism called "Tribal Guarantees." This process is represented by sheikhs and notables selected by the SDF; either traditional leaders or individuals appointed and promoted by the SDF to represent their tribes and regions.

Below is a table showing approximate percentages of tribal and clan distribution within key military formations in northern Syria as of early 2023 (National Army factions, HTS, and SDF):

Table (7): Prominent Opposition Military Umbrellas in Northern Syria[7]

No.	Bloc	Faction/Formation	Tribe/Clan	Estimated proportion
1	**Liberation and Construction**	**East Army (Al-Sharqiya Army)**	Baqqara	20%
			Al-Busha'ban	25%
			Aqeedat	25%
			Other Clans/Families	30%
		Ahrar Al-Sharqiya	Baqqara	34%
			Aqeedat	13%
			Al-Busha'ban	14%
			Qays/Jays, Tayy, Jubur, and Others	39%
		2oth Division	Baqqara	20%
			Al-Busha'ban	30%
			Aqeedat, Other Tribes/Clans, Families	50%
2	**Tha-Eroon Commission**	**Sultan Murad Division**	Turkmen	60%
			Mawali	10%
			Al-Safarna Clans	5%
			Al-Lahib, Aqeedat, Juhaysh, Tayy, Al-Na'im, Qais, Al-Damalkha	15%
			Others/Families	10%
		Al-Mu'tasim Division	Al-Hadidiyeen	35%
			Na'im	13%
			Families from Mare'	35%
			Families from Aleppo	17%
		Al-Hamza Division	Turkmen	15%
			Hanadi	10%
			Al-Busha'ban	10%
			Mawali	10%
			Qays/Jays	12%
			Kurds	10%
			Bu Batoush	5%
			Other Tribes/Families	28%
		Suleiman Shah Division/Al-Amshat	Bani Jamil/Jamlan	20%
			Mawali	20%
			Al-Busha'ban	5%
			Al-Lahib	5%
			Jays and Bani Khalid and Na'im	30%
			Others/Families	20%
	Tha-Eroon Commission	**Malik (King) Shah**	Turkmen	50%
			Zubayd	10%
			Aqeedat	10%
			Al-Fawa'ira	7%
			Al-Damalkha	5%
			Other Clans/Families	18%
		Northern Hawks Brigade (Suqour al-Shamal)	Na'im	25%
			Al-Busha'ban	30%

[7] It is worth noting that the proportions of tribal and clan components, among others, within the prominent military umbrellas operating in northern Syria were estimated based on the numbers of formations and factions. The exact figures have been omitted from the tables at the request of most sources for security reasons during the period in which the study was conducted.

			Baqqara	10%
			Other Clans/Families	35%
		Northern Division	Al-Busha'ban	40%
			Other Clans/Families	60%
		Sultan Mehmed Al-Fatih Brigade	Turkmen	60%
			Arab Clans	10%
			Other Clans/Families	30%
3	Elite Division		Juhaysh	15%
			Anza	5%
			Mawali	10%
			Na'im, Al-Busha'ban, Bani Khalid, Al-Lahib, Jubur	50%
			Other Clans/Families	20%
4	Levant Front (Jabhat al-Shamiyah)		Al-Busha'ban	10%
			Qays, Na'im, Bani Khalid, Al-Damalkha, Jubur, Tayy, Kurds	37%
			Other Clans/Families	53%
5	Ahrar al-Sham		Qays	8%
			Na'im	5%
			Al-Busha'ban	15%
			Kurdish Clans	10%
			Tayy, Shammar, Aqeedat, Bu Khamis, Bani Khalid	40%
			Others/Families	22%
6	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)		Al-Busha'ban	15%
			Aqeedat	10%
			Baqqara	12%
			Dulaim	5%
			Jubur	2%
			Qays	8%
			Mawali, Al-Lahib, Shammar, Bani Khalid, Tayy, Hadidiyeen, Al-Na'im	25%
			Other/families	23%
7	Al-Nasr Army		Al-Busha'ban	35%
			Al-Lahib	30%
			Na'im Bani Khaled	15%
			Other Clans/Families	20%
8	Second Army		Samatia/Al-Busha'ban, Khuza'ila, Al-Na'im, Al-Hadidiyeen	80%
			Others/Families	20%
9	Free Idlib Army		Kurds, Druze, Turkmen Na'im, Qays, Bani Khalid, Waisat, Al-Busha'ban, Shammar, Baqqara	80%
			Other Clans/Families	20%
10	Al-Waqqas		Al-Busha'ban	15%
			Aqeedat	5%
			Other Clans/Families	80%
11	Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF Manbij Military Council	Jund al-Haramain	Al-Bubna/Al-Busha'ban	75%
			Other Clans	25%
		Al-Zazaat	Al-Safarna Clans	95%
			Other Clans/Families	5%
		Shams al-Shamal Brigades	Al-Omirat/Al-Busha'ban	70%
			Other Clans	30%

		Kurdish Tribes/Ayn al-Arab (Kobane)	60%
	Manbij Revolutionaries	Others/Kurds from Outside Manbij and Ayn al-Arab	40%
	Liwa al-Tahrir	Arab Clans	95%
		Non-Syrian Kurds	5%
		Na'im	10%
	Army of Revolutionaries	Qays/Jays	20%
		Others/Families from Various Areas of Idlib	70%
		Qays/Jays	15%
	Democratic North	Na'im	15%
		Families/Mount Zawiya/Idlib	70%
	Turkmen Battalion	Turkmen Tribes of Manbij and Ayn al-Arab	100%

Source: Tribe and Power in Syria: History and Revolution

Examining the relatively similar interaction of tribes and clans across different regions and controlling forces allows for certain conclusions and observations at multiple levels, as follows:

- **Size and Distribution:** The presence and engagement of tribes and clans with various conflict parties are not unusual but rather consistent with their size, influence, and extensive presence in Aleppo and Idlib. As a majority within the north-west's social structures, they are indispensable to all parties, prompting their utilization, reliance, or partnership—even by jihadist groups. While relationships with tribes and clans vary by controlling authority, all parties have demonstrated a similar need for them, whether as a military force, political or civil legitimacy in areas of significant tribal demographic weight, or as a support structure for civil administration. This became particularly evident after military operations shifted toward rural tribal areas following the regime's recapture of most cities. Considering the history of tribes and clans in northern Syria and the country as a whole, the current divisive tendencies are not unusual but rather a repetition of past patterns experienced during wars and pivotal events. Throughout history, Syria has rarely experienced multi-party conflicts without tribes and clans playing a significant and divisive role, much like other social structures. The most comparable period to that of the present is the time of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of modern Syria, particularly during the Arab Government (1918–1920). At that time, Syria saw multiple local, international, and regional actors vying for influence, with tribes and clans aligning with different factions. This dynamic persisted until geographic borders were formalized, and the Syrian state was established under the French Mandate, where similar interactions resumed within the new borders, albeit in different forms.

- **Transcending Conflict Boundaries:** In the context of militarization in northern Syria and across the broader Syrian geography, tribal and clan structures emerge as the most socially interconnected entities, transcending the boundaries of conflict and zones of influence controlled by various factions. However, this cross-boundary presence is primarily socio-cultural, not political, as tribes and clans remain politically divided based on the factions they align with. Each tribe or clan is present within every zone of control, with its influence varying depending on the controlling party. As such, **tribes and clans serve as**

components, carriers, or tools within the agendas of various conflict actors, but they do not represent an independent agenda of their own. Thus, while tribes and clans are actively engaged in the dynamics of northern Syria and the broader conflict, there is no evidence, at least so far, of a distinct tribal or clan-based "project" in northern Syria or across the country. In contrast, the sharp political divisions caused by the conflict have surpassed tribal structures, **threatening the collapse of longstanding tribal alliances—an unprecedented phenomenon in Syria's history**. Many of these alliances, established in earlier periods for various purposes (defensive, political, or geographic), began to fracture after 2016, with the extent of disruption varying based on zones of control and the political stances of the clans within each alliance. This fragmentation was evident as some clans withdrew from traditional alliances they had formed with other tribes, returning to their original tribes for differing reasons, particularly due to political disagreements among member clans. For example, the Hadidiyeen alliance experienced significant weakening and disintegration, reflecting the broader impact of these divisions on other alliances in the region. The weakening of tribal alliances can be attributed to several factors that emerged after 2011 and the subsequent political and military changes. Chief among these is the **political division** within clans of the same tribe or alliance, which in some cases escalated into armed clashes. While this factor is significant, it is not the sole explanation for the phenomenon. The **establishment of tribal and clan councils** also played a key role, directly impacting the structure of some alliances, such as the Hadidiyeen alliance. These councils provided a new framework for clans that had previously been part of alliances with other tribes, prompting some clans to withdraw from their historical alliances and return to their original tribes after forming their own tribal councils to manage their affairs. In addition to the previously mentioned factors, **forced displacement** significantly impacted some tribal alliances, particularly those based on geographic or regional ties. Military operations in Aleppo and Idlib led to the displacement of entire clans and the depopulation of their areas, undermining the foundations of alliances like the Sakan/Sajjan alliance. Simultaneously, the influx of displaced clans from other governorates into Aleppo and Idlib prompted local clans, especially from the same displaced tribes, to leave their regional alliances with other local clans and join their kin under newly established tribal councils in the region. The impact of these factors varied across alliances in Aleppo and Idlib, as well as in other Syrian governorates. For example, the Aqeedat alliance demonstrated greater cohesion compared to others, while Al-Mawali alliance showed relative stability despite political divisions among its constituent clans. This resilience may be attributed to structural and historical factors related to the nature and origins of these alliances. **Given the current circumstances and their effects on tribal alliances, the region may witness the formation of new tribal and clan alliances with different names and structures in the future.**

● **A Tool for Mobilization in the Post-War Era:** The role of tribes and clans in the Syrian conflict has not been confined to specific phases or circumstances but rather reflects their status as the largest social structure, indispensable to all parties. Thus, the end of military operations does not signal the end of their roles. On the contrary, tribes and clans, or their councils, may become even more essential in the future, particularly if the conflict

transitions into a political phase. In such a scenario, tribes could play a key role in mobilization for elections at various levels, further enhancing the influence of tribal leaders or the leadership role of tribes as a whole. Despite minor differences in how tribal leaders have engaged with different parties to the conflict, their core role—centered on local mediation—remains consistent. This historical function of tribal leadership in Syria is likely to persist and expand to larger issues, such as "reconciliations" and "settlements" led by the regime and Russia. Or addressing displacement, given that much of the tribal population remains displaced. Additionally, new roles may emerge within the framework of political resolutions and local governance structures.

- **Tribalism and Factional Structures:** A sizable portion of tribal elements engaged in open warfare against the regime and now constitute the majority of the opposition's military structure across various factions. Although their proportion varies between factions and dominates some formations, these groups are driven more by the goals and agendas of the broader frameworks they are part of, rather than tribal or clan-based objectives. Tribal identity within opposition military structures diminishes in factions with disciplined military organization, strong ideological leanings, or those heavily influenced by regional and international backers. Similarly, tribal identity fades within non-Arab factions, despite their tribal components, in favor of nationalist agendas, such as the Turkmen's ethnic focus, or as in the case of the Kurdish nationalist-party orientation within the SDF. In contrast, certain pro-regime tribal groups supported by Iran have taken a more dangerous form, as Iran has infused a sectarian dimension into these tribal structures, with each faction housing a religious office aimed at converting members and their families to Shiism.

In this context, the presence of **tribal elements as blocs** within the "National Army" could increase the likelihood of factional conflicts rooted in tribal backgrounds, and vice versa. Such dynamics threaten the structure of these factions and the regions they operate in, underscoring the need to address this issue in discussions about any future restructuring of the army and security apparatus. These institutions heavily rely on tribal elements within the opposition.

The same applies to the Assad regime, which recruits thousands of tribal members into regular units and irregular militias, often with a sectarian element, especially in Iran-backed groups. Similarly, the SDF faces challenges due to its military councils, which combine diverse ethnic and tribal components that lack organizational and ideological cohesion. This could lead to future conflicts for several reasons or cause some to split from the SDF structure due to differing motivations.

Sectarianism, the State, and Power

Throughout its rule, the Assad regime has exploited various social structures and sectarian affiliations to consolidate power without implementing genuine measures to elevate these structures toward a framework of citizenship. This framework could have been advanced through local governance laws, balanced development programs, the rule of law, or urban policies that would replace subnational loyalties with a sense of citizenship. While such an approach would not entirely eliminate these loyalties, it would restrict their political and organizational influence.

In the Syrian context, particularly under Assad's rule, the state transformed into a legal and political framework serving the existing power structure, which is built upon loyalties resembling tribal affiliations—if not surpassing them. Assad's regime relies on a complex network of loyalties, foremost among them sectarian loyalties, which form the regime's primary base. Within this sectarian base, familial loyalty to the ruling Assad family emerges, further reinforced by tribal loyalties within the sect and regional loyalties. This intricate web of loyalties has been evident in practice since the era of Hafez Assad, manifesting in the army, security apparatuses, state institutions, and policies.

These loyalties did not diminish but instead escalated after 2011, becoming more entrenched and violent, all under the guise of state authority. Two separate studies, conducted at separate times, reveal this trend. The first study, which analyzed the profiles of officers leading Syria's elite military units, reveals that Hafez Assad sought to form his own loyal group within the Alawite sect. Initially, he relied on close connections and blood ties (family, clan, and sect). Among the thirty-one officers selected by Assad between 1970 and 1997 to occupy key positions in the armed forces, elite military formations, and security and intelligence agencies, no less than 61.3% were Alawites. Of these, eight belonged to his own clan (Kalbiya), and four to his wife's clan (Haddadin). Furthermore, seven out of these twelve officers were directly related to Assad by blood or marriage. Among them were his brother Rifaat, his maternal cousin Shafiq Fayadh, and his wife's cousin Adnan Makhlouf, all of whom commanded the most significant elite units (Defense Companies, Republican Guard, and the 3rd Armored Division[8]). Remarkably, these proportions remained largely unchanged under Bashar Assad's rule.

After the 2011 revolution, these patterns became even more evident. A 2020 study analyzing the leadership of the top forty positions in the Syrian army, responsible for military operations post-2011, revealed that all forty officers were Alawites. Among them, fourteen were from the Assad family's clan (Kalbiyya), commanding key elite units such as Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, the Republican Guard, the 10th Division, 14th Division, 22nd Division, 30th Division, Artillery and Missile Administration, and Military Police. At least seven of these officers belonged to Bashar Assad's maternal clan (Haddadin), leading units including the 2nd Division, Special Forces, 3rd Division, 5th Division, 11th Division, and 26th Division. The remaining nineteen officers were distributed among other Alawite clans, most notably the Khayyatin and Matawira. Additionally, at least six of these officers were direct blood relatives of Bashar Assad, including Maher Assad, Talal Makhlouf, Jihad Sultan, and Zuhair Assad[9].

These statistics and surveys in both periods focused exclusively on the military institution, without encompassing the entire security apparatus, where the situation mirrors that of the army, as well as the military judiciary. In parallel, the regime established dozens of militias as auxiliary forces after 2012, most of which were built on primary loyalties (familial, tribal, sectarian, and regional).

---

[8] Hanna Batatu, Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics, (p. 406).

[9] Muhsen Al-Mustafa, *Power Centers in the Syrian Army: A Sectarian Approach*, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, March 13, 2020.

Examining these figures across two distinct periods of the same regime reveals a stark contrast. While tribal and clan loyalties were gradually declining across Syria due to time and Ba'athist policies, the loyalties forming the regime's structure were intensifying. After 2011, these loyalties reached unprecedented levels of violence, as the regime manipulated and mobilized various affiliations to serve its power without threatening it. The regime transformed most traditional social leaders (tribal, sectarian, familial) into intermediaries between the state and society, fulfilling roles akin to "civil society." Meanwhile, it maintained its complex network of loyalties, which fostered a sub-state authoritarian structure that hindered the development of state institutions, obstructed societal progress, and, in one way or another, contributed to driving a sizable portion of Syrian society's components to revolt in 2011.