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**Research Report**

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# Local Dynamics in the Syrian Conflict

## Homegrown Links in Rebel Areas Blunt Jihadist Ascendancy

*Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

The Assad family reign has been marked by the ubiquitous intrusion of the Alawite-dominated security apparatus on the micro-level. The demise of the regime's vast network of repression in many regions has resulted in local patterns of governance, restoring or generating old and new elites. With the jihadist ascendancy, many of the emerging structures have been smothered by religious ideology. Yet, under the surface, local power has been shaped by area-specific relationships and embedded cultures. Support from Western actors has increasingly focused on local actors who are seen as being opposed to the Islamic State or al-Qaeda. Without a fundamental change in the nature of the regime, however, prospects for harnessing such local dynamics for the larger objective of stabilization will remain limited.

Until the 2011 uprising, the security apparatus had prevented the emergence of local actors, except for those linked to the regime. The security agents, overwhelmingly belonging to the minority Alawite sect, lived off – and enriched themselves through – extortion and protection rackets while providing a certain order. In areas under regime control, this system still holds. But where regime troops pulled out, it unraveled, and many local populations reclaimed ownership of their communities. These rebel areas are largely populated by Sunni Muslims and comprise parts of northern, central, and southern Syria outside the control of the regime as well as the so-called Islamic State.

To deal with the vacuum of governance created by the retreat of the regime, activ-

ists set up local councils and coordinated with the nascent Free Syrian Army (FSA). Starting in 2012, the jihadist ascendancy and the influx of foreign fighters undermined the civic roots of the revolt and challenged the local structures of self-governance. But the jihadists could not monopolize control over the rebel areas. Despite their firepower and use of violence, jihadists' influence differs from one area to the other and depends on the clout of new or resurgent local elites, local religious and societal traditions, and the balance of power between the different rebel groups. Social imbalances relating to class and wealth and the legacy of social engineering employed by the Baath regime over decades likewise play a role. Ideologically, the local populations responded differently to the

jihadi creed, and often remained committed to the moderate core values that have been the hallmark of Islam as practiced in Syria for centuries.

### **Al-Qaeda vs. the Southern Clans**

An example of local structures curbing extremism played out in the southern Hauran Plain, the original birthplace of the revolt and the biggest remaining stronghold of the Arab and Western-backed FSA. Across Syria, the quiet spread of Salafist beliefs brought back by Syrian expatriates returning from Saudi Arabia as well as veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had prepared the ground for jihadism. Salafism in the south, however, remained tempered by Damascus-based clerics adhering to a rational tradition of Islam, who wielded influence over the area through trade links extending all the way to the Arab peninsula. A small branch of the Masalmeh clan, some of whom had fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, formed a group that eventually linked up with the Nusra Front, and then with the self-declared Islamic State, and fought FSA units in Deraa. Yet, their influence remained limited, not least because their attempts to impose strict social codes (for instance, beating men who were caught smoking) did not go down well with a population that has traditionally combined devoutness with a degree of personal freedom.

Hauran's social organization into large clans also stood in the way of the jihadists. For instance, in 2014 a Nusra Front cell in Deraa, comprised mainly of members of the Hariri clan, pressured local clerics to declare an FSA unit as being comprised of *kuffar* (unbelievers) for receiving Western backing. The Nusra Front members encountered resistance from their own relatives in the Hariri clan, as the unit in question was led by an officer from the Nusairat clan, raising the specter of a blood feud between two major Haurani clans.

### **Social Decline Amplifies Jihadist Appeal**

With the demise of formal governance, the clan as a social entity underwent a resurgence after the revolt. Clan structures and coherence, however, have been affected by the deteriorating living standards and the alienation of a new generation of poor youth wrought by the civil war – factors that have played into the hands of the Islamic State with its abundant cash reserves. Similar to the rest of rebel Syria, many youngsters were 12 to 14 years old when the revolt started and have been without education for more than five years. In private, local FSA commanders backed by the United States complain that their proposals to subsidize vulnerable youth with as little as \$50 per month – so that they would stay home rather than join the Islamic State for the money – were turned down by Washington.

More than the Nusra Front, the Islamic State appears to have a micro understanding of the workings of local powers. For instance, the group won allies by helping to restore local elites who had been sidelined by the coercive realignments of society and the economy deployed by Hafez al-Assad to broaden the social base of his regime. In 2012, a rebel group called the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade was formed in the Yarmouk River Valley near the border with Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The group's leader – a descendant of a local notable family by the name of Abu Ali al-Baridi – had links with senior jihadists, veterans of the Afghanistan war with access to cash through apparent links with al-Qaeda. The founders also included the Jaounis, a large family of Palestinian origin. Freed from the control of the Assad regime, the Baridis and Jaounis reestablished themselves as the de facto rulers of the Yarmouk Valley. When initial Jordanian funding dried up in 2015, Baridi apparently allied himself with the Islamic State. As a result, fighting started between the Yarmouk Martyrs and the Nusra Front, as well as Jordanian-backed FSA brigades. In No-

vember 2015, Baridi, his deputy Abu Abdallah al-Jaouni, and others in the top leadership tier of the group were killed in a suicide attack in the village of Jamleh, possibly with the help of a local clan at odds with the Baridis. That did not spell the end of the Yarmouk Martyrs, though: the combination of the difficult terrain and the standing of the Jaouni and the Baridi clans has proved hard to defeat.

Although the FSA has held its ground in the south, power centers built around it have in some cases compounded imbalances resulting from deteriorating economic conditions, providing inroads for the Islamic State. The FSA brigades in Hauran, most of whom are linked to the US-led Military Operations Centre in Jordan, are underpinned by membership from prominent local clans. In contrast, one group, called Jaish al-Jihad, originated in a camp in Deraa for refugees from the Golan Heights and their descendants. Lacking both clan pedigree and resources, Jaish al-Jihad received little local or outside support, making it receptive to the Islamic State, with which it eventually struck an alliance. Conversely, Jaish al-Jihad's lack of clan backing also made it easier for the FSA to take on this group, as opposed to the Yarmouk Martyrs.

### **Local Pragmatism**

In other areas of Syria, local communities lacking any external support often tended to deal with the jihadists pragmatically. In southern parts of Idlib province, local elites needed the Nusra Front's firepower to ward off regime attacks. But they hedged their bets by striking alliances with other Islamist – though less radical – groups.

Idlib province, which borders Turkey, fell completely under rebel control in 2015 after an offensive mostly carried out by an on-and-off alliance between the Nusra Front and its Salafist rival, Ahrar al-Sham. In the town of Kfar Nubul – a community on the fringes of Idlib, where civic activists with an egalitarian orientation were particular

well organized – the local FSA brigade maintained a presence by simultaneously cooperating with the Nusra Front and playing on the rivalry between the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham. Interestingly, many supporters of the Nusra Front in the town are former Baath functionaries who were excluded from the civic organizations established after the revolt, and joined the Islamists to preserve their positions and protect themselves. To avoid confrontation, locals have tended to observe Nusra Front edicts to close down shops during prayer time, but many support Ahrar al-Sham. Unlike in other towns, where Nusra was able to monopolize the supply of bread, Ahrar al-Sham and the FSA brigades also run their own bakeries in Kfar Nubul, denying the Front the power that comes with control over this crucial staple. But the balance in Kfar Nubul – and the capacity of the local council to maneuver between the jihadi groups – has been tenuous. Council members have been kidnapped for allegedly supporting rival groups, prompting civic activists to call for all armed groups to leave the town. The Nusra Front responded by closing down an independent radio station in Kfar Nubul in June 2016. Shortly after, the founder of the station was injured in an assassination attempt in Aleppo, while a prominent citizen journalist in his company was killed in the attack. Still, all-out warfare has been avoided in Kfar Nubul, as most members of the armed factions hail from Kfar Nubul itself and have showed a degree of local sensibility, aided by a historical lack of class and clan differences in the town.

In turf battles with other rebels in Idlib, the Nusra Front also appears to have been aware of the local element. When the group attacked installations belonging to the local FSA unit in the town of Maarat al-Numaan in 2015 and encountered local protests, only Nusra Front troops recruited from outside the town were used. Apparently, the Nusra Front preferred to not test the loyalty of members recruited from Maarat al-Numaan by having them shoot at their

fellow townsfolk. Pragmatism has also been a dominant feature in the al-Rouj region, which is a collection of agricultural villages in the southwest of Idlib province. Here, the Nusra Front has been seen as a bulwark against regime forces concentrated in the neighboring governorate of Latakia. But its welcome has been tempered by weariness of foreign and non-local Syrian fighters, such as Beduin who were driven out of their home area around Deir al-Zor by the Islamic State. Seen as overzealous and contemptuous toward the locals, these Beduin units have caused significant resentment.

### **Jihadists Compensate for Scarce Resources**

Yet, the fate of homegrown groups that took on the Nusra Front on their own have served as cautionary tales for others in the region. One was the Idlib Martyrs Brigade, formed in 2012 by members of the Sayyed Issa family, which had been persecuted by the regime in the 1980s for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2013, the Idlib Martyrs were defeated by the Nusra Front in battles in the western Idlib countryside. The Nusra Front hounded the remaining members of the group for months after the confrontation, killing them or forcing some to join their fighting units, where they were used as cannon fodder on the front lines. Other local rebel groups such as the so-called Free Men of the Middle Mountain Brigade attempted to ward off encroachment by the Nusra Front by joining its main rival, Ahrar al-Sham. Such alliances were, however, often merely tactical and did not reflect commitment to the group's Salafist creed, but rather the lack of – and urgent need for – external support to hold their ground against the jihadis. Ultimately, the need for resources – initially to fight the regime, and later competing groups – remains the key factor that determines how rebel groups deal with the jihadis. This is obvious in the trajectory of the Homs-based rebel group, which staged one of the landmark attacks on Assad's forces during the

initial phase of the revolt's militarization. In November 2011, rebels from the Khalidiya neighborhood killed six pilots and other military personnel in an ambush set up to take hostages, who would then be exchanged for men from Khalidiya who had been arrested by the regime during the initially peaceful protests in Homs. The operation went awry when the soldiers on the bus detected the ambush, and all were killed in the firefight that ensued. The rebel squad operated under an FSA banner, but the men who attacked the bus were financed by a Syrian expatriate from Khalidiya who lived in Saudi Arabia. When this funding dried up, the group, which was led by the former imam of a Khalidiya mosque known as Abu Yazan, shifted allegiance to the Nusra Front; when the latter's position in the Homs region deteriorated, they switched allegiance to the Islamic State. All along, their objectives remained local, first and foremost. While focused on taking revenge against the regime for the violence it had dealt the neighborhood, Abu Yazan remained highly pragmatic. Any ally who would help fight the Assad regime was welcome.

### **Resilience of a Civic Model**

In other cases, local religious traditions constitute another element in understanding the dynamics of the conflict. On the grassroots level, political and religious awareness sometimes have provided the means to address local tensions, deal with jihadis, and cope with the regime's siege warfare. Most of the hinterland of Damascus – a patchwork of recently built-up areas and farmland known as the Ghouta – is overwhelmingly Sunni. Salafi thought has been spreading in such areas since the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Yet, the town of Daraya in the southwestern Ghouta stood out for its particular tradition of civic awareness underpinned by religious commitment. Founded by the Islamic scholar Jawdat Saeed, the Daraya school had developed an Islamic theory of civic

and peaceful resistance against oppressive rulers. Unlike Sunni clerics backed by the regime, who bestowed religious legitimacy on Hafez al-Assad while steering the populace away from politics, Saeed called for political engagement. His body of work is also positioned against the approach of the late Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian Islamist ideologue whose theories had a formative influence on the founders of al-Qaeda.

Already a decade before the revolt, youth from Daraya had embarked on campaigns to clean the streets and improve conditions in their neglected suburb. To the regime, such civic activities were a challenge to its monopoly over all forms of social organization. Dozens were arrested, tortured, or forced to flee the country. When the revolt broke out, these pre-existing local structures and experiences generated large demonstrations and a council staffed by educated members who worked along specialized lines. Daraya became a civic model for many Syrians opposed to Assad, and accordingly was dealt a particularly brutal crackdown early on. Three Daraya youth injured by regime gunfire at a pro-democracy demonstration were shot dead in their beds at a government hospital. Ghiyath Matar, a 25-year-old follower of Saeed, distributed flowers and water to Assad's soldiers, but was arrested, tortured, and killed by Airforce Intelligence in September 2011. Western ambassadors, who were still in Damascus at the time, went collectively to Daraya to pay their condolences, but the gesture did nothing to mitigate the crackdown. Attracted by the Daraya model, Issam Zaghoul, a Damascus lawyer, went to the suburb and embarked on setting up an independent court. Secret police abducted Zaghoul from his office in Damascus, and he is presumed to have died in Assad's security dungeons. In one of several regime offensives, the mostly Alawite Republican Guards overran Daraya in 2012 and summarily executed hundreds of young men. The killings spurred large-scale armed resistance in Daraya that drove out Assad's forces from most of the suburb,

which fell under regime siege later in the same year. The rebels, many of whom were local protesters who took up arms after the crackdown, remained in close coordination with the local council and refrained from interfering in it. Daraya also relied on the support of expatriates from the town as well as educated youth who had fled the crackdown but resumed their activism in Turkey and the West. Under international pressure, in June 2016 the regime allowed the first food delivery into Daraya since 2012, where several thousand civilians – of an original population of 80,000 – still live under siege. Today, Daraya is highly vulnerable to fall to a renewed regime offensive after extensive aerial bombardment weakened the rebels' defense parameters.

### **Tales of Two Cities**

By contrast, in the eastern part of the Ghouta, a harsher and power-hungry school of Islam produced an undemocratic model of rebel governance that exacerbated local differences and became prone to corruption. The region was also an early casualty of the regime's strategy to undermine the civic and peaceful orientation of the revolt by injecting radical elements. In June 2011, the authorities released Zahran Alloush from prison – a Salafist cleric and a native of Douma, one of the largest suburbs in Eastern Ghouta – along with other jihadists who had fought in Iraq. With Saudi financial backing, Alloush set up what by 2013 became the "Army of Islam" (Jaish al-Islam), which evolved into one of the largest rebel groups – numbering an estimated 15,000 fighters – as well as being one of the most well-equipped and funded. A key figure in securing support from Riyadh has been Alloush's father, Abdullah, a preacher in exile with close links to the Wahhabi clerical establishment, which underpins the Saudi monarchy. Initially, Jaish al-Islam captured large arms depots from the regime and had supply routes opened to Jordan and Turkey, before Assad's troops and Iranian-backed Shi'ite

militia imposed a tight siege on the Eastern Ghouta. In 2014, Jaish al-Islam expelled the Islamic State from Eastern Ghouta, where it had made inroads in 2013 by relying on recruits drawn largely from Golan Heights refugees in the nearby district of Hajar al-Aswad.

Realizing the strength of Jaish al-Islam, the Nusra Front and other groups operating in Eastern Ghouta kept their heads low as Alloush consolidated power. But resentment rose against Alloush as he imprisoned members of other armed factions. Jaish al-Islam also stands accused of abducting four prominent secular activists who had taken refuge in Douma and disappeared in August 2014. The “Douma Four” include human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, who, after the revolt, helped found grassroots organizations known as local coordination committees, and Samira Khalil, a former political prisoner and wife of Yassin al-Khalil Haj-Saleh, a veteran leftist who is now in Istanbul.

Localized war economies that formed during the civil war also helped foster new networks and rivalries. Resentment grew over favoritism within Jaish al-Islam, but in particular about the group having exploited the siege imposed by the regime as a business opportunity. Situated at the edge of Eastern Ghouta, Douma became a hub for tunnels dug under a main highway that would supply the rebel districts of Qaboun and Barzeh, closer to Damascus. The tunnel trade disproportionately benefited Alloush’s protégés and merchants from Douma.

Unlike their peers in Damascus, most merchants in Douma had not hesitated to back the revolt. Many viewed themselves as discriminated against and marginalized by the regime’s alliance with the business class of the capital. Still, the Douma elite became seen as growing rich at the expense of the rest of Eastern Ghouta. Other rebels benefited from the tunnel trade, too. But Alloush, who was killed in an air strike in December 2015, became an embodiment of a revolt gone wrong. Jaish al-Islam undermined local governance by interfering in

local councils and refused to submit to the authority of the Unified Judiciary Council – a tribunal including representatives of the various brigades in Eastern Ghouta that was supposed to arbitrate in disputes between rebel groups and as an independent court drawing on a mix of religious and civic law. But Jaish al-Islam refused to hand over hundreds of prisoners in its custody to the tribunal, many of whom had been captured in turf warfare and have not been heard from since. Families of the prisoners joined a growing civic protest movement in Ghouta against Jaish al-Islam, but to no avail. Male relatives of the prisoners often ended up joining the Nusra Front, motivated more by resentment against Jaish al-Islam than by jihadist leanings. Tension burst into open warfare in May 2016, with hundreds of fighters from Jaish al-Islam and rival rebel factions – including the Nusra Front – reportedly killed. The Assad regime and Hezbollah took advantage of the infighting and captured several towns and large tracts of agricultural land in the Eastern Ghouta virtually unopposed, reducing rebel territory in Eastern Ghouta approximately by a quarter.

At the same time, the limited ceasefire deal agreed upon by Russia and the United States in February 2016 reduced the threat of aerial bombings by the regime, encouraging civilians in Eastern Ghouta to take to the streets again and protest against the rebels across the board for endangering Eastern Ghouta. Jaish al-Islam’s conduct has also undermined its cohesiveness: members of a brigade stationed in the nearby Damascus district of Qaboun stayed away from the fighting in Eastern Ghouta, considering it a selfish and unnecessary turf war between Douma and the other towns.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The attitudes and interests of old and new local elites have played a main role in containing or expanding the jihadist reach. They have also provided governance where the Syrian state, which had been captured by the extended Assad clan, had been forced to withdraw. Any attempts to solve the Syrian conflict with diplomatic means and reconstruct Syria as a coherent political unit will have to rely on their cooperation. This may require difficult choices: by far not all of the groups and brigades that wield power on the ground and/or enjoy legitimacy among local populations may appear palatable to Western actors. At the same time, the high variety in local patterns of interaction indicate that behind the smoke screen of Islamist ideology, many groups may be receptive to incentives that lead to different approaches. For instance, a formation such as Ahrar al-Sham could be key. The group has often acted as a balancing force in rebel areas, and has been torn between hardliners and more pragmatic figures. Including the latter elements in a pacification process could be part of a larger process that separates those Islamists who are ready to respect a (admittedly low) minimum of democratic and humanitarian ground rules from the jihadi hard core that will have to be contained and rolled back by military force.

At the same time, such pragmatism finds its limits when it comes to a continuation of Assad's rule and Alawite domination. Local alliances have shifted in sometimes unpredictable ways and several times over, but few, if any, rebels have ever sought or accepted support from regime troops and militias against their rivals. Thus, the current strategy pursued by Western nations and some Arab countries, such as Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, to restrict support to actors who make fighting the Islamic State and al-Qaeda a priority, while "leaving Assad for later," is likely to backfire. Where FSA units appear to comply with these pressures, their local legitimacy suffers and jihadis gain support. For in-

stance, in the south many activists already refer to the southern brigades of the FSA as *Sahawat*, an allusion to the Iraqi militias of that name which helped the American occupation forces to defeat al-Qaeda in Sunni-majority areas after 2006, but achieved few political gains for the Sunnis. In northern Syria, the United States has backed the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) – the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) – even as the group advanced beyond the areas traditionally settled by Kurds and into Arab territory. The PYD advance raises concern across local rebel communities that the Sunni rebel areas – with Western collusion – are being squeezed between the regime on the coast, the Islamic State to the east, the Kurdish militia in the north, and a Jordanian and Western-backed mercenary force in the south, with the objective of imposing a solution that amounts to little more than a facelift for the Assad regime.

## International Diplomacy

On the diplomatic side, more and more members of the mainstream Syrian opposition see the negotiations in Geneva as an attempt to impose just such a formula, with changes being restricted to the formal makeup of the political institutions and a token increase of Sunnis and other communities in positions of nominal power.

Yet, the key for substantial change and for harnessing the civic and democratic potentials in Syrian society – including the local elites in the rebel areas – lies in a radical overhaul of the security sector, where the real power resides. Reform of the security sector is slotted as a topic in the Geneva peace talks and appears to be a priority for Germany, which is a member of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). Russia, on the other hand, appears more than happy to endorse the security sector as is. But the enormous size, reach, and sectarian composition of the numerous security branches should be slashed. Only by turning them into fully accountable



bodies operating under civilian law and politically neutral (or bi-partisan) oversight would a fundamental shift in the structure of the Syrian system be possible. It could also take the sting out of an increasingly sectarian discourse that blames Alawites as a sect – rather than the small circle of Alawites who hold the reins of power – for the crackdown on the revolt and the subsequent destruction that befell rebel areas.

The time for such an approach may be running out, however. Local elites are less and less able to integrate and control the youth in rebel areas, more and more of whom have become impoverished and uprooted and who are deprived of education. They form a ready recruiting ground for the Islamic State and other radical groups, which will undermine efforts to bring local communities into any framework that may be established through the Geneva process. On the other end of the spectrum, thousands of peaceful and educated Syrians have been languishing in Assad's jails and underground dungeons since the crackdown on the revolt and the subsequent waves of arrests and abductions. Many have already died or disappeared, but their fates have been largely treated by the ISSG as a footnote. Aside from the humanitarian imperative, their presence could be crucial for the stabilization of the local level, especially if a settlement is reached that opens the way for them to reestablish themselves in their hometowns. The same holds true for the thousands of civic activists who fled the country and would need effective security guarantees to be able to return and contribute toward the restoration of state structures that would serve the Syrian people, rather than the survival in power of a small, corrupt, and excessively violent and sectarian elite.

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