

EASTERN EXPECTATIONS

The Changing Dynamics in Syria's Tribal Regions

Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur



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Summary

With all eyes on western Syria, developments in eastern Syria, which is populated mainly by tribal communities, will be just as important for the country's future. Numerous parties involved in Syria's conflict—including the Assad regime, radical Islamists, Turkey, and the Kurds—have sought to integrate tribal leaders into their political agendas, believing their tribes would follow. However, these leaders no longer have the authority they once did. Syria's conflict has forced tribal communities to turn inwards, and such localization has further undermined tribal solidarities.

A Changing Tribal Context

- Since the nineteenth century, tribes have interacted with a strong central authority in Syria. This has changed tribal relations, reducing tribal leaders' ability to mobilize their tribes. Yet it did not eliminate their symbolic authority, stemming from their lineage and tribal traditions.
- After the 2011 uprising, the Assad regime lost control over much of eastern Syria, which is inhabited mainly by tribes. This created openings for new political actors, among them radical Islamist groups, to exploit tribal divisions and advance their own interests.
- The Syrian conflict isolated many local tribal communities. The need for security, along with opportunities for material gain, pushed these communities to turn inwards, weakening broader tribal relationships.
- Tribes will remain relevant to political life in Syria's east, but under the influence of actors from outside the tribes.

Syria's Tribes Going Forward

- Tribal leaders cannot fully represent their tribes either politically or militarily. Yet they will continue to play an important role as intermediaries in local reconciliation processes, helping to stabilize areas in which members of their tribe live.
- The isolation of local tribal communities brought on by years of conflict means that for any postconflict order to succeed, it must address the interests of localities and any discord that arises between them.

- All outside actors in Syria's east have sought to undermine tribal unity for fear that it may be turned against them. Yet tribal actors in positions of power would gain by recognizing that their latitude to shape a postwar order in eastern Syria depends on their ability to unify around issues of common interest.
- The rise of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in al-Hasakeh Governorate has added a Kurdish-Arab dimension to the uprising against the Assad regime. A lasting solution to the Syrian conflict must encompass the Kurds in addition to the Arab tribes there, which have largely stayed loyal to the regime.

Introduction: Tribes in Syria Today

International attention has been focused on the fighting in western Syria, particularly in the urban areas stretching from Damascus to the Turkish and Jordanian borders. However, the dynamics in eastern Syria will be no less important for the future of the country.

There, the international coalition led by the United States has been conducting airstrikes against the self-proclaimed Islamic State, Turkey is waging its own fight against the Islamic State and the Kurds through Operation Euphrates Shield, while the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces are engaged in a U.S.-supported campaign to liberate the city of Raqqa from the Islamic State. The Syrian regime has also maintained a presence in the region's major cities of Deir Ezzor, al-Hasakeh, and al-Qamishli. Because multiple Syrian and regional interests intersect in this large territory, an understanding of its social makeup is essential for assessing future political outcomes there.

The populations living in eastern Syria are largely of Arab tribal background. A tribe, in the Syrian context, is a sociopolitical unit based upon extended families living in a defined territory, usually entire towns and city neighborhoods.¹ Since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, outside actors have sought tribal support to achieve their military and political objectives, allying with heads of tribes and using tribal structures to generate fighting forces. However, Syria's tribes are no longer internally unified, independent social units. Their political role has been closely linked to a central authority for generations. This fact came to redefine the way that Syrians of tribal background were organized socially and politically. As central power grew over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tribal leaders increasingly became the state's clients and interlocutors in managing their territories. This weakened the position of tribal leaders vis-à-vis their own tribal members, allowing the central authority to play leaders against each other for its patronage.

Anyone seeking to deal with the political representative of an entire tribe today faces a dilemma. Tribal structures appear to be intact, the same as they might have been generations ago. There are formal hierarchies in place, with members of the same leading families at the top. And tribes continue to inhabit the same vast areas of Syria that they did before the founding of the modern Syrian state. Yet relationships within tribes have been completely transformed when compared to generations past. The time when a single tribal leader

Anyone seeking to deal with the political representative of an entire tribe today faces a dilemma.

could contract with outside forces on behalf of all of his tribe's members has long ceased to exist.

Tribes, as they have traditionally been understood, cannot form the basis for political projects in Syria. Although their structure has not changed, tribes no longer occupy a paramount position in the political and social life of local communities. The relationship between a tribe's traditional leaders and its members, like that between these leaders and the state authorities, is today largely based upon the interests of each party and not the formal rules of tribal conduct.

The conflict that began in 2011 has had a devastating effect on local communities throughout Syria, and the effect has been particularly acute among communities of tribal background in eastern Syria. Radical groups such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (now known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) have rooted themselves in these regions, often adding a tribal dimension to their own makeup. The fighting in which these groups have engaged has, thus, involved tribal identities and loyalties, thereby damaging social cohesion, isolating local communities from one another, and further dimming the prospect of solidarity along tribal lines.

Many tribal leaders have been displaced from their lands, while violence and the emergence of radical Islamic groups have forced the members of tribes who have remained in eastern Syria to focus on immediate local concerns for their security and survival. This has encouraged competition between major political actors in their dealings with the tribes. When one actor has promoted its agenda with one leader of a tribe, rival actors have countered this by manipulating neighboring tribes, or other leaders in the same tribe. Tribes will continue to be relevant to political life in Syria's east, but they are likely to remain under the influence of actors from outside the tribes.

Tribes and the Central Authorities

The political life of tribal communities in Syria has been deeply influenced by a central authority since the 1860s, when the Ottoman Empire began establishing a more permanent administrative base in eastern Syria as part of the second wave of the Tanzimat reforms.² The presence of Ottoman authority and land grants induced some tribes to settle and consent to regular taxation. A number of semi-settled tribes received fertile land along the Euphrates and Khabour Rivers, which they farmed in exchange for paying taxes on a percentage of their total harvest, while their sons were exempted from military service.

Even those tribes that were not settled were affected by the increasing penetration of imperial power. The Ottoman authorities established police stations and forts in areas where tribes had previously moved freely. They lent out their troops to one side or the other in intertribal feuds and provided payment to tribal leaders, encouraging competition for Ottoman patronage.³

Under the French Mandate, the central authorities expanded their control.⁴ They initially aimed at preventing the incursions of nomads into the settled western areas of Syria—intervening against the raiding activities of tribes and imposing agreements to keep them out of cities. However, by the mid-1930s, the French sought to restructure tribal society entirely. They paid subsidies to tribal leaders, allotted grazing and property rights to various tribes, prohibited tribe members from carrying weapons in settled areas, and forced them to pay taxes.⁵

These encroachments reduced the control of tribal leaders in two ways. The increased security brought about by the expanding state lessened the need for tribes to engage in collective action for their own protection, diminishing the necessity for tribal leaders to coordinate self-defense.

And state subsidies to tribes meant tribal leaders became less dependent on the obedience of tribal members for their power and began to rely more on their own ability to dispense patronage.

The effects of these changes were exemplified by the Hassana tribe, which is based in central Syria near the city of Homs. The tribe has long enjoyed an elevated status because it is part of the historically powerful Aneza tribal confederation and has kin linkages to the Al Saud family that rules Saudi Arabia. In a reflection of changing tribal realities, the Hassana's extended family units (*beits*) began migrating on their own in the 1930s because the enhanced presence of the state made the protection offered by coordinated migration no longer necessary.

During the years of the French Mandate, the state also made a select few of the tribal leaders very rich by turning them into major landholders. As the authorities sought to register the owners of all land in the country, and many individual tribal members and peasants were eager to avoid the taxation that might accompany registration, tribal leaders placed entire villages in their own name. For example, the head of the Hassana, Sheikh Trad al-Milhem, amassed over twenty villages registered in his name alone.⁶ Lacking political authority, however, the tribal leaders became dependent for their riches on the state's enforcement of such property rights.

With the departure of the French from Syria in 1946, these advantages were curtailed, which relegated tribal leaders to being intermediaries between the independent state and tribal members. In 1956, the Syrian government canceled the Law of the Tribes, which had given independent legal status to the nomadic tribes, including the right to bear arms.⁷ The union between Syria and Egypt in 1958 and subsequent rule by the radical wing of the Baath Party (1963–1970) brought sweeping state efforts—motivated by an ideological commitment to root out the powerful old classes—that aimed to further reduce the tribal leaders' control over their members and their vast landholdings.

State subsidies to tribes meant tribal leaders became less dependent on the obedience of tribal members for their power and began to rely more on their own ability to dispense patronage.

Tribes in the Assad Era: "Give Loyalty and Do as You Please"

The Baath Party's approach to the tribes was moderated by Hafez al-Assad after he became president in 1970, co-opting tribal leaders into the new political order. The Syrian regime allowed the leaders a greater degree of influence over local communities of tribal background and granted them certain privileges.

The pre-1970 Baath had built ties with the more downtrodden elements of tribes, reducing the tribal leaders' vast landholdings through land redistribution and allowing ordinary members of tribes to attain positions of power by joining the Baath Party and being promoted in state institutions. The Baath under Hafez al-Assad, however, returned authority to tribal leaders by giving them informal control over their communities and stepping up their appointments to parliament.

So, for example, before 1970, the head of the Raqqa Peasants' Union Bureau (a significant agency of local governance) and the head of the Baath Party branch in Raqqa came from modest social backgrounds. The former was descended from slaves of leaders of the Afadlah tribe while the latter was the son of a vegetable seller. Like many Baath leaders, they were part of a first generation of Syrians from the national periphery to receive a modern education. By contrast, soon after Assad assumed the presidency, two leaders of the Afadlah tribe gained parliamentary seats.⁸

Unofficial arrangements granted tribal leaders influence in less straightforward ways as well. This was particularly true in the policing of serious crimes. While the police would intervene for petty crimes, they would generally not do so in cases of murder or rape, leaving tribal and clan leaders to address these cases themselves. A saying common in Raqqa described the regime's policy in this way: "Give loyalty and do as you please" (*iti wala wa-ifal ma tashaa*).⁹ These practices continued after the accession of Bashar al-Assad to the presidency in 2000. That year, an executive decision to privatize all state farmlands

allowed tribal leaders who had lost their vast landholdings to land redistribution during the 1960s to regain and expand the property they had owned.¹⁰

The clientelistic relations that benefited tribal leaders provided little advantage to average Syrians of tribal background. Services in areas where they live were, and still are, notoriously underdeveloped compared to the rest of Syria, and they receive fewer

The regime would provide status and material benefits to loyal tribal leaders, who in turn would facilitate the compliance of populations under their control.

lucrative public administration jobs than other parts of the country. According to the most recent census, taken in 2004, the Syrian state employed 31 percent of the country's total workforce, but only 22 percent in towns where residents came from a tribal background.¹¹ Similarly, though the number of physicians per capita in Syria has increased, a gap persists between the major cities and areas where members of tribes live. In 2010, there were 372 residents per doctor in Damascus Governorate and 1,095 per doctor in Raqqa Governorate.¹²

The privileges granted by the Syrian state under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad to tribal leaders were part of a mutually beneficial exchange. The regime would provide status and material benefits to loyal tribal leaders, who in turn would facilitate the compliance of populations under their control.

The Geopolitics of Tribal Leadership

Because the intermediary position occupied by tribal leaders between the state and local populations of tribal background was a valuable one, the Assad regime made tribal leaders compete for this role. That is why, far from being uniform blocs, tribes were often characterized by rival claims to leadership. Frequently, these internal struggles for power could have far-reaching political, and even geopolitical, implications.

However, in spite of the major changes to tribal social formations last century, the choice of the tribe's leadership is still governed by traditional rules. Within a tribe, one particular family lineage always produces its leader, or sheikh. This lineage, referred to as the sheikhly family (*beit al-mashaykha* or *beit al-ashira*), has an elevated status within the tribe. Any individual from this family—including the sheikh's brothers, sons, cousins, and nephews—can theoretically become leader of the tribe upon the sheikh's death (as determined by consensus among leaders of tribal sub-units), but in practice the first son often succeeds the father.¹³ No one from the regime, or even from within the tribe, can impose a tribal leader from outside the sheikhly family.

Still, Syria's central authorities can severely compromise the ability of a sheikh to exert control over members of his tribe by creating competition within his family. The Assad regime often did this, bolstering members of a sheikhly family other than the tribe's nominal sheikh. Those members tended to have personal, often financial, connections to the regime and its security services.

In recent years, the competition between two branches of the sheikhly Milhem family of the Hassana tribe has illustrated such dynamics. Both descend from Trad al-Milhem, the tribe's leader during the early twentieth century. According to convention, one seat in Syria's parliament is reserved for a Milhem. Trad's son Thamer, the official leader of the tribe until his death in 1998, held a parliamentary seat from 1946 to 1964, while Thamer's brother Abdel Aziz has held a seat from the 1970s until the present. Thamer's son Abdel Karim assumed formal leadership of the tribe upon his father's death. However, this arrangement began breaking down when a member of the Milhem family challenged Abdel Aziz for the parliamentary seat in 1998 and was defeated. The stakes of competition for the seat were raised in the 2003 elections, when Abdel Karim, the nominal leader of the tribe, challenged his uncle Abdel Aziz for the seat.

Syria's central authorities can severely compromise the ability of a sheikh to exert control over members of his tribe by creating competition within his family.

This competition took on a broader geopolitical dimension. Because many of Syria's now-settled tribes, including the Hassana, once moved from deep in the Arabian Peninsula through present-day Syria and Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, the leaders of those tribes had ties to leaders of the Gulf countries. Both branches of the Milhem family had built relations with the Syrian and Saudi states. This included marrying into the same families as Saudi royal family members.

Following voting in the 2003 elections, a dispute erupted between the branches of the Milhem family over who had won the seat. To prevent any violence, the Syrian regime sent members of the elite Republican Guard to Homs to organize a reconciliation. As relations were warm at the time between Syria and Saudi Arabia (which had supported both Abdel Aziz and Abdel Karim in their campaigns), the regime removed the winner of another seat from his position and handed it to Abdel Karim, allowing Abdel Aziz to retain his seat.

However, relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia deteriorated rapidly in 2005, due to strong suspicions that the Assad regime had a hand in the assassination of the Saudi-aligned Lebanese former prime minister Rafik al-Hariri. This would have consequences for the leadership of the Hassana sheikhly family. In the parliamentary elections of 2007, the Syrian regime declined to make a second seat available for a Milhem, as it had done earlier. Abdel Aziz stood for reelection and his seat was contested by Abdel Karim's brother, Abdelilah, who by then had assumed formal leadership of the Hassana, due to Abdel Karim's death in 2007.¹⁴ This led to a new dispute, forcing regime officials to intervene once again. While both branches of the Hassana had relations with the Saudi royal family, the branch under Abdel Aziz maintained closer ties with Syrian security figures. The authorities declared that Abdel Aziz would keep his seat, while Abdelilah would not be awarded a parliamentary seat.¹⁵

The resulting tensions within the Milhem family continued to have effects after the 2011 uprising. Abdelilah left for Saudi Arabia soon after being denied a seat. He declared his support for the uprising from the beginning and repeatedly appeared on television to express his views, doing so initially from Turkey and later from Saudi Arabia.¹⁶ By contrast, Abdelilah's cousin Nawwaf—the son of Abdel Aziz, who is no longer politically active because of his advanced age—has remained inside Syria and close to the regime. Nawwaf regularly appears on regime-sponsored television stations to defend the regime's behavior.¹⁷

This tension within the Milhem family put two conflicting aspects of contemporary Syrian tribes on display. While the legacy of tribal rules continued to shape the dispute by allowing only members of the sheikhly family to be involved in the contest for leadership, those leaders were not in a position to advocate for the interests of the tribe, let alone for individual members of the tribe as part of a tribal society. Instead, they were locked in a struggle for a position afforded them by the state before the uprising. They ultimately had to appeal to state authorities to resolve their dispute, before closely aligning with

the Syrian state or the Saudi state after 2011. This showed how a parochial matter within a Syrian tribe could take on regional dimensions when tribal politics fed into interstate rivalries.

Radicalism, Oil, and Localism in Deir Ezzor

Rivalries between leaders within a single tribe and the fragmentation among groups outside the sheikhly families had a visible effect on the violent struggles that broke out between members of tribes in Syria's Deir Ezzor Governorate after 2011. The governorate is home to 1.2 million people,¹⁸ nearly all of tribal background. The combination of oil resources and the consolidation of radical groups in the area pushed segments of individual tribes into conflict with one another, demonstrating the shifting foundations of tribal identities and structures.

In late 2011 and throughout 2012, peaceful demonstrations gave way to armed resistance against the Assad regime. Youths in Deir Ezzor led the uprising, primarily under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). By the end of 2012, however, protracted violence and competing interests began to fracture the loosely organized armed opposition, and prospects for a swift cessation of hostilities faded. FSA factions, as well as any other group attempting to represent the armed opposition politically, were unable to control individual fighters pursuing personal enrichment. The absence of a central state authority allowed these individuals to expand their resources by capturing army checkpoints; seizing government weapons, industrial equipment, and oil wells; and securing external funding. Entrepreneurial fighters were soon able to command the loyalty of combatants and local communities independently of FSA structures.¹⁹

By early 2013, much of Deir Ezzor Governorate had fallen out of the control of the Syrian regime. Local armed groups began to form, some to defend their locality and others to participate in the broader revolutionary campaign against the regime. These groups variously linked up with the FSA or more radical Islamist organizations, such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

Deir Ezzor is in many ways exceptional, an extreme case of the breakdown of tribal solidarity leading to acts of violence among members of the same tribe. Yet the role of outside actors in escalating intratribal conflict exhibits continuities with the past, and the changes brought about by the protracted conflict parallel those occurring in other Syrian regions. At present, radical Islamic groups control Deir Ezzor Governorate, and the conflict there is principally being fought over oil. This threatens to break social ties that previous rounds of state penetration had only gradually altered.

The combination of oil resources and the consolidation of radical groups in Deir Ezzor pushed segments of individual tribes into conflict with one another.

Intratribal Conflict: Clan Versus Clan

As the frequency of conflict between local populations in Deir Ezzor increased after 2011, tribal identities and leaders added a degree of complication to realities in the area. The tribal background of these communities made it easy to escalate conflict along tribal lines. At the same time, because state power had displaced tribal structures in the decades prior to the uprising, communities of tribal background were left without a traditional leadership in place to mediate and lower tensions.

These dynamics are exemplified by the interactions between residents of two towns in Deir Ezzor Governorate, al-Quriah and al-Ashara, each with its own military force and tribal identity. One local armed group, the Qaqaa Brigade (Liwaa al-Qaqaa), was centered in al-Quriah, a town whose residents came from the Qaraan clan. In a context of shifting alliances and an uncertain security situation, the brigade's commander, Ali al-Matar, was assassinated in April 2013.²⁰ Numerous local actors, as well as the regime, were accused of the killing,²¹ but no definitive evidence emerged to determine responsibility.

Members of the Qaraan clan held Saoud al-Nijris, an influential member of the Bohasan clan, based in the neighboring town of al-Ashara, responsible for masterminding the killing. Complicating matters, Nijris was a member of a sheikhly family from the Aqeedat tribal confederation,²² of which both the Qaraan and the Bohasan are a part.²³ Qaraan members kidnapped and detained Nijris for three months. A sharia council created to resolve disputes, comprised of local tribal leaders and religious jurists, mediated the dispute. The commission eventually cleared Nijris, and he was released.²⁴

Nijris's release angered the residents of al-Quriah.²⁵ In response, they organized an attack on al-Ashara, led by Matar's brother Mahmoud, under the banner of the Qaqaa Brigade. The brigade fired mortars at the town, destroying homes, damaging the central mosque, and killing several of the town's children. Saoud al-Nijris later recalled that members of Jabhat al-Nusra, the FSA, and some tribal notables attempted to intervene, but failed to halt the shelling.²⁶

In between the arrest of Nijris and the attack on al-Ashara, an unidentified supporter of Nijris made the following comments on a pro-uprising online forum:

The (supposed) revolution of the people of al-Quriah (the Qaraan) was nothing but a Qaraani revolution (for most of them), so it proclaimed the names of the Qaraan and al-Quriah and did not call for freedom. They were trying to make a name for the tribe, the Qaraan, and raise its importance among the tribes and, by doing so, the fame of their town, al-Quriah. And, indeed, they achieved their goal of fame. But on the other hand, we find that the Nijris family preceded them in taking its distance from the corrupt regime and we have sensed lofty goals in their leaving the regime—namely freedom and refusing injustice. And that is because (as everyone knows) they have an elevated status among the tribes and also the regime. The Nijris family is, therefore, not in need of fame. The first to leave the regime and encourage others to do so was Dr. Fahd Faisal al-Nijris, the brother of Saoud (and everyone can see this in clips on YouTube).²⁷

The competition between clans that is repeatedly mentioned in the post indicates the often local nature of conflict and the ambivalent role of tribal identity in these situations. The target of the author's accusations is first and foremost "the people of al-Quriah," and the post identifies the Qaraan name as a vehicle for the aspirations of the people of al-Quriah, rather than the embodiment of a real social unit governed by tribal principles. Tribal symbols are not entirely absent from the statement, however, as the good intentions of Nijris are evident to the author because the Nijris family has an important tribal status. In contrast, the author implies that the people of al-Quriah are tribesmen of low status.

The breakdown of state authority after the uprising and the formation of armed groups at very local levels highlights the ambiguities permeating the interests of individuals, towns, and tribes. After Matar's assassination, tribal relationships did not push the conflicting parties to moderate their behavior based on their membership in the same tribe, or even listen to Nijris, a leader from a sheikhly family. On the contrary, Nijris was detained.

Such dynamics reflect the strengthening and evolution of local identities, at the expense of the tribe. By making tribal leaders intermediaries with local populations in recent decades, Syria's central authorities disrupted the solidarities that tribal leaders had formerly been able to call upon in managing disputes. Instead, clan leaders responded to the absence of state authority, or overarching tribal authority, by invoking local identities to mobilize local actors in pursuit of their own ends. This would be a major factor allowing the expansion of armed groups, particularly radical Islamists, in Deir Ezzor after 2011.

Localization and the Success of Radical Groups in Deir Ezzor

The end of regime control over much of Deir Ezzor governorate in late 2012 and early 2013 could have marked the reemergence of traditional tribal structures. Yet the groups that would ultimately assert control were, first, groups of young local fighters unconnected to sheikhly families, and, later, radical Islamist groups.

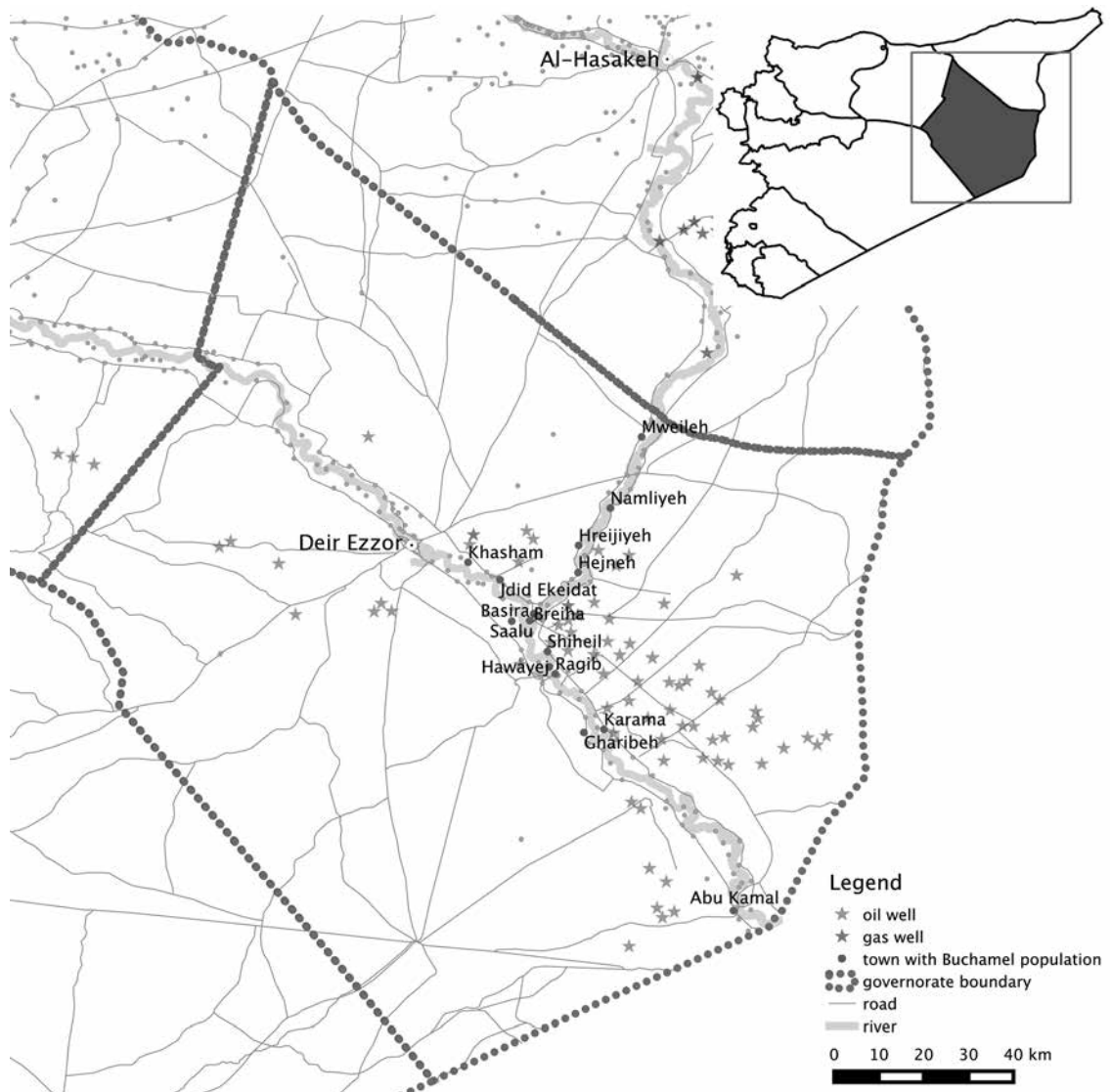
Traditional tribal leadership was nowhere to be found at the moment it was most needed. Decades of state dependence had made tribal leaders incapable of playing their historical role as political authorities presiding over local society. The resulting competition and collaboration between local armed groups and radical Islamist organizations forced local communities to focus on their own survival and material interests, rather than on the interests of a broader tribal grouping. This led to the fragmentation of communities of tribal background, preventing control and mobilization along tribal lines.

The behavior of members of one branch of the Aqeedat tribal confederation, the Buchamel, illustrates the process of localization in the area of Deir Ezzor.

The breakdown of state authority after the uprising and the formation of armed groups at very local levels highlights the ambiguities permeating the interests of individuals, towns, and tribes.

The Buchamel tribe contains one of the sheikhly families of the Aqeedat, the Hifl, so the influence of traditional leaders should, if anything, be stronger among the Buchamel than among distant branches. In addition, communities of Buchamel descent sit on a large number of oil and gas deposits (see figure 1), and oil and gas revenues became a valuable resource once state authority collapsed in late 2012 and early 2013. No exact figures are available for how much production occurred in the period between the regime's loss of control over these deposits and their takeover by the Islamic State. However, before U.S. airstrikes against the Islamic State began in September 2014, the group was generating \$1 million–\$3 million per day, with over three-quarters of it coming from oil wells in Deir Ezzor Governorate.²⁸ Therefore, the local communities extracting and selling this oil before the arrival of the Islamic State—even if production was only a fraction of what the group would later produce—were reaping enormous profits.

Figure 1.



Following the initial breakdown of state authority, local battalions were formed with loose affiliations to the FSA. These rebel groups were preoccupied primarily with defending their towns and fighting regime forces. Some of them began taking control of oil facilities, while new armed groups, less interested in opposing the regime than in enriching themselves, emerged as well.²⁹ Once this sense of opportunism became more widespread, local armed groups occupied many oil wells for profit, and gangs began stealing oil from pipelines and demanding protection money not to damage the pipelines.³⁰

To deal with these and other disputes among the local actors, sharia councils were established under the sponsorship of armed groups, local notables, and Jabhat al-Nusra. By early 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra had based itself in the town of Shuheil and began expanding its military operations and alliances in the area. It coexisted with many of the local armed groups, and played an important role in setting up the Central Sharia Commission in Shuheil.³¹ In this early stage of radical Islamist activity, prior to the emergence of the Islamic State and the group's takeover of Raqqa, radical Islamists linked up with local populations by promising material benefits and appealing to them through religious language. Jabhat al-Nusra, for example, built up its popular support in Deir Ezzor by providing services, subsidized goods, and security for villages in the area.³²

These relations between Jabhat al-Nusra and local populations would be tested by local militant groups that monopolized oil and gas resources and were unwilling to submit to the authority of Jabhat al-Nusra and the sharia councils. The ways in which these confrontations escalated in places and were managed in others underlined the importance of tribal ties at the local level.

One of the leaders of a local armed group who came to control gas-production facilities was Haweidi al-Dibaa, nicknamed "Jojo." Dibaa and the group he led both hailed from the town of Khesham, whose residents come from the Anabeza branch of the Bukeyr clan, itself a part of the larger Buchamel clan.³³ The group had profited by cutting off electricity to major segments of Deir Ezzor Governorate, then demanding payment to restore it.³⁴ However, Dibaa and his group acted independently of other Bukeyr towns and armed groups.

In November 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra, in concert with other armed groups, sought to regulate extraction and distribution of resources in the region. They arrested Dibaa and handed him over to the Central Sharia Commission. The commission took pains to portray his arrest and the seizure of wells he had controlled as being directed against an individual, not a tribe or community. The commission's declaration on the subject stressed that only "a few tribal families from Khesham" were guilty of wrongdoing, not the Anabeza or the Bukeyr generally.³⁵ The commission also affirmed that residents of Khesham would still receive first priority in profits from the nearby wells.

However, because the members of Jabhat al-Nusra who captured Dibaa were from the Saleh al-Hamad branch of the Buchamel (based in Shuheil), the residents of Khesham interpreted the arrest as an attack on their town

and on the Anabeza. They responded by setting up a checkpoint just outside town to block the movement of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters and force the return of Dibaa, prompting Jabhat al-Nusra to shell the checkpoint and raid the town looking for fighters opposing its decision. Indeed, Dibaa would be executed in January 2014.³⁶ However, when the Anabeza of Khehsam mobilized on behalf of Dibaa, they were not joined by other Bukeyr towns (many of which had their own equivalents of Dibaa), confirming how the conflict, and social life generally, had become localized even before the Islamic State entered the scene in 2014.

The overlap between Jabhat al-Nusra fighters and members of the Saleh al-Hamad branch of the Bukeyr escalated tensions by making Khehsam residents think they were being attacked for reasons related to their tribal identity. Yet, in another context, tribal ties would help to contain a similar incident in a town populated by members of the Saleh al-Hamad.

The Mizaal family, a branch of the Saleh al-Hamad in the towns of al-Namlieh and al-Horeyji, lost control of oil wells on its lands to Jabhat al-Nusra, which sought to distribute the profits more equitably. A young member of the family demanded that the wells be returned. When this was rejected by Jabhat al-Nusra, the young man burned the wells. This prompted Jabhat al-Nusra to attack al-Namlieh, killing one member of the Mizaal family.

Yet a senior Jabhat al-Nusra figure, who was an uncle of the man killed, sought to de-escalate the crisis. Though the victim had been killed by Jabhat al-Nusra, this Nusra commander described him as a “son of Jabhat al-Nusra”

and announced that the group would “avenge him at the time it deems appropriate.”³⁷ Reframing the episode in this manner—implicitly claiming that the victim was killed by a third force against which residents of al-Namlieh and Jabhat al-Nusra were, tacitly, united—allowed the parties to avoid escalation, which would have damaged the interests of both. The episode also showed how the overlap of local family networks and membership in an armed group

helped manage conflict in the absence of a state that would have previously restrained the parties.

The difference between the two episodes was revealing. In the first incident, Buchamel identity,³⁸ shared by Jabhat al-Nusra members from the Saleh al-Hamad branch and residents of Khehsam from the Anabeza branch, was insufficient to avert conflict. The Saleh al-Hamad were regarded by residents of Khehsam as outsiders—residents of a different town and members of a distant tribal grouping—bent on domination for their own personal interests. This assessment left no room for solidarity on the basis of shared Buchamel identity.

In the second incident, by contrast, two different branches of the Saleh al-Hamad branch were able to avert conflict after the attack on al-Namlieh. The networks linking families within the smaller tribal grouping of the Saleh

The overlap of local family networks and membership in an armed group could manage conflict in the absence of a state that would have previously restrained the parties.

al-Hamad, and tying them to Jabhat al-Nusra, proved sufficient to manage tensions when the broader Buchamel identity had failed to do so. The comparison of the two incidents showed how tribal identities are often based on tangible, immediate networks of relations, rather than abstract ideas of tribal genealogy and duty.

The rise of the Islamic State in Deir Ezzor Governorate would bring further localization and fragmentation to the Buchamel. After the split with Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013, the Islamic State sought to displace the rival group from the oil fields in Deir Ezzor and sever Jabhat al-Nusra's ties to local populations. The relationship between residents of Shuheil and Jabhat al-Nusra was particularly tight, so much so that local residents began calling Jabhat al-Nusra "Jabhat al-Buchamel," in reference to the tribe. Given this close relationship, the Islamic State focused its recruitment efforts on towns inhabited by the Bukeyr. As the Islamic State increased its presence in the area, however, it was unable to recruit the most powerful battalions of the Bukeyr. Two of them remained neutral while a third joined the Ahrar al-Sham Islamist rebel group.

As a consequence of this, the Islamic State turned, instead, to Amr al-Rifdan, a local fighter from the town of Jadid Aqeedat, whose residents are from the Mishrif branch of the Bukeyr.³⁹ An important factor motivating Rifdan's pledge of loyalty to the Islamic State was material. When the regime withdrew from much of the Deir Ezzor region, Rifdan came to control major parts of the Conoco oil field, one of Syria's largest and most profitable. As an affiliate of Jabhat al-Nusra, Rifdan provided the group with a cut of the revenues earned from the field. The terms agreed to by the Islamic State were more favorable to Rifdan and played a role in his decision to switch sides.⁴⁰ Securing Rifdan's allegiance brought the Islamic State a significant number of fighters from the Bukeyr.⁴¹ It also allowed the Islamic State to set up its local headquarters in Jadid Aqeedat in late 2013. Fighters from neighboring al-Buseyra, populated mostly by members of the Kabesa branch of the Bukeyr, joined the Islamic State as well.

By establishing itself in Jadid Aqeedat, the Islamic State set the scene for a confrontation with Jabhat al-Nusra and the Central Sharia Committee, which were trying at the time to regulate extraction from wells in the area to distribute the profits among the population and armed groups.⁴² Fighting between Islamic State-allied members of the Bukeyr and Jabhat al-Nusra-allied residents of Shuheil erupted in April 2014,⁴³ when the latter arrived in al-Buseyra demanding the return of their members who had been detained—a demand that was rejected. The Jabhat al-Nusra-affiliated fighters from Shuheil shelled al-Buseyra with heavy weapons, killing fifteen people and displacing hundreds of families.⁴⁴ Fighting involving the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other rebel groups would escalate in the subsequent months until the Islamic State finally took Shuheil in July 2014, following four days of shelling that killed twenty-eight people and displaced most of the town's residents.⁴⁵

The fight in Deir Ezzor involved a struggle over economic resources that drew on identities and family networks at the level of towns, as well as on radical Islamist ideologies.

The fight for the rural areas of Deir Ezzor was multilayered. It involved a struggle over economic resources that drew on identities and family networks at the level of towns, as well as on radical Islamist ideologies. What facilitated the involvement of these groups and the escalation of conflict was the absence of tribal solidarity, or of any organizational structures above the local

level that were independent of the Syrian regime. Jabhat al-Nusra had rooted itself in Shuheil while the Islamic State used its ties to the Bukeyr to gain a foothold in the region. However, tribal relationships could not produce a cohesive, unified political order, whether under traditional tribal leaders or the Islamist groups. At best, Jabhat al-Nusra could defuse tensions with local communities, as happened in al-Namlieh, because the group's core members shared a sub-tribal affiliation with the town's residents, while the Islamic State could recruit members on account of securing the loyalty of a leader from a Bukeyr sub-tribe. However, neither Jabhat al-Nusra nor the Islamic State could expand beyond such limited contexts—at least on a tribal basis—because tribes had already ceased to function as bridges binding local communities before the 2011 uprising.

At the same time, the ways in which the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra exploited local identities and networks made the possibility of any sort of collective action on the basis of shared Buchamel identity, or Aqeedat identity, remote. The conflict that erupted in eastern Deir Ezzor between branches of the Buchamel over the detention of Haweidi al-Dibaa demonstrated how local-level tribal relations—consisting of a small number of lineages in several towns rather than those of a unified tribe commanded by a sheikhly family—were exploited by Islamist groups to gain territory.

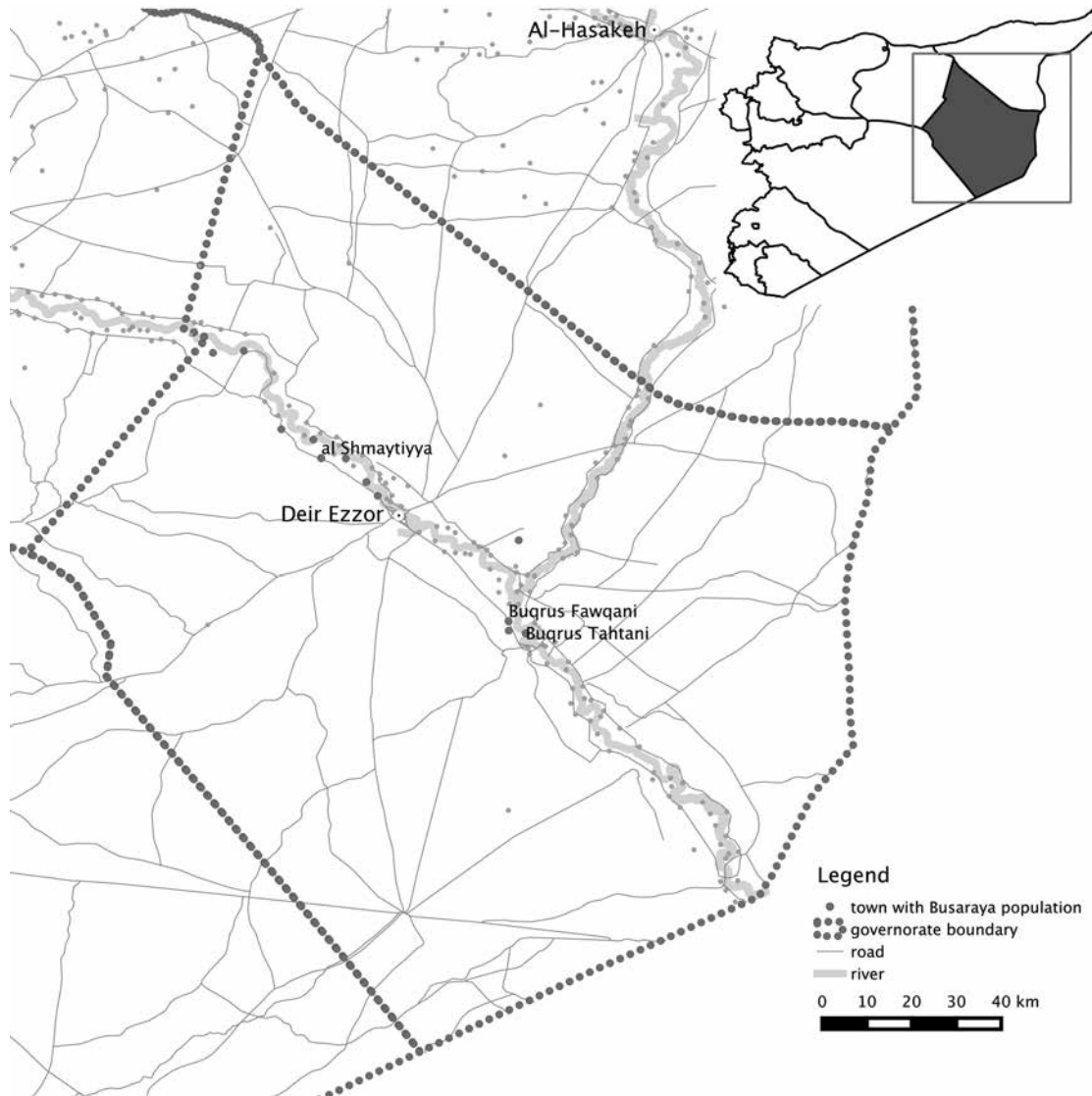
Elevation of Town Identity: The Case of Buqrus

Localization can impel branches of the same tribe to fight against one another. However, it can also reduce the likelihood of conflict by cutting a town off from its tribe, impelling it to identify, instead, with the inhabitants of its surrounding region. The town of Buqrus, whose residents come from the Busaraya tribe, provides an example of just such a phenomenon.

The Busaraya tribe is loosely related to the Aqeedat tribal confederation.⁴⁶ Its main villages are west of Deir Ezzor City and far from those of other branches of the Aqeedat, which are primarily located to the east of the city (see figure 2). In contrast, Buqrus is a Busaraya village located east of Deir Ezzor. After the Syrian uprising began in 2011, the Busaraya-inhabited towns adopted positions similar to those of their counterparts west of Deir Ezzor. Some initiated demonstrations and joined FSA battalions, but a larger number did not mobilize or sided with the regime, particularly the tribal leadership. The tribe's nominal leader, Muhanna al-Fayyad, was elected to parliament in 2012. Another

member of the sheikhly family, Ahmad Shlash, is also a parliamentarian and has been an outspoken defender of the Assad regime throughout the years of upheaval.

Figure 2.



The villages surrounding Buqrus, by contrast, were inhabited by members of the Bukeyr and the Saleh al-Hamad branches of the Buchamel, whose members were in the FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra, and, eventually, the Islamic State. The fighting that began in late 2013 created a dilemma for the residents of Buqrus. They had to decide whether to identify with their immediate neighbors, who were active in one of several antiregime military groups, or with their tribal brethren, who had sided with the regime.

Despite the presence of broad tribal affiliations, local tribal actors have sufficient agency, and are sufficiently autonomous politically, to pursue their own interests.

In October 2013, the Ahrar al-Sham rebel group stormed the Busaraya town of al-Shmaytiyyeh in the western part of Deir Ezzor Governorate, where most of the tribe's members live. Fighting between Ahrar al-Sham and pro-regime

Busaraya members led to the death of several local residents and the arrest of seventy people, including Muhanna al-Fayyad.⁴⁷ The response of the residents of Buqrus was not to help their fellow Busaraya members but to declare themselves to be members of the Buhamad branch, therefore part of the Busaraya only in name, as well as residents of Buqrus. In other words, at the moment when tribal ties should have pushed them to mobilize in defense of their

fellow tribesmen, the residents chose, instead, to highlight their local identity and remain outside of the fighting.⁴⁸

This episode suggests that, far from tribes being homogeneous identity blocs, tribal identity is in fact fluid and can adapt to changing political circumstances. Despite the presence of broad tribal affiliations, local tribal actors have sufficient agency, and are sufficiently autonomous politically, to pursue their own interests as opposed to acting in accordance with their purported tribal instincts.

How New Political Actors in Eastern Syria Have Used the Tribes

The Syrian conflict, by fragmenting communities of tribal background, made it relatively easy for new political actors to implement their political agendas in areas where tribes are located, including al-Hasakeh Governorate in Syria's far northeast. Multiple parties have sought to extend their influence in this area, including the Islamic State; the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has sought to establish an autonomous administration in the northeast; and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which began fighting the Islamic State in 2015 and is dominated by the PYD but also includes Arab forces.

These actors have sought to recruit members of tribes to support and legitimize their political agendas. Yet both the Islamic State and the PYD have also been keen to prevent tribal leaders from mobilizing their tribes against the two organizations. The techniques they have employed are similar to those used previously by the Syrian regime. Radical Islamist groups as well as the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the PYD, have relied on local tribal networks to manage the populations under their control, but leaders of tribal communities frequently have used these armed groups to pursue their own material interests and position themselves advantageously with respect to other tribal actors.

The multifarious alliances in which tribal leaders find themselves underscore the adaptability of tribal structures to changing political circumstances. They also show the futility of trying to construct durable political arrangements with tribes as their fundamental building blocks.

The Islamic State and the Tribes

Both Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State relied heavily on tribal networks in their battles against one another in Deir Ezzor, which began in early 2014. Once the Islamic State was victorious, however, it sought to dominate those networks and consolidate its control over local communities.

Abu Abdullah al-Shammari, a Saudi citizen in charge of the Islamic State's Office for the Tribes (Maktab al-Ashair), held numerous meetings with local tribal notables in late 2014, following the Islamic State's victory in the area. In these meetings, Abu Abdullah castigated tribal members for taking money from outside, referring to them as *sahwat* (awakenings). This was a reference to the tribally based Sunni Awakening Movement in Iraq, which the United States supported against al-Qaeda beginning in 2006.⁴⁹ The term is commonly used by Islamic State members to describe groups resisting them along tribal lines.⁵⁰

Abu Abdullah and the Islamic State worked to build ties to traditional leaders through tribal networks while also using new leaders who had become their clients to make introductions and broker agreements with the traditional leaders. Ahmad al-Dahham, who joined the Islamic State in spring 2013 after fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra,⁵¹ exemplified this outreach. Dahham would arrange meetings between traditional leaders and Abu Abdullah.⁵² In those meetings, Abu Abdullah drew on his own tribal lineage, from the important Shammar tribe, to appeal for tribal support, emphasizing the links between the Islamic State and younger tribal fighters.

In spite of fears of a tribal "awakening" similar to Iraq's, the Islamic State has sought to carefully increase the role of tribal leaders and tribalism in the areas under its control, because local ties can be used to mobilize and influence populations of tribal background. Abu Abdullah reached out to tribal leaders after the Islamic State defeated Jabhat al-Nusra in Deir Ezzor, claiming that the Islamic State "opened the door for forgiveness." He instructed them to surrender their weapons in exchange for amnesty. Yet rather than demand that the weapons be handed over to the Islamic State, Abu Abdullah asked that fighters place their weapons with their traditional tribal leaders. These leaders would then provide the combatants with a paper stamped by Abu Abdullah showing that they had been granted amnesty by the Islamic State.⁵³ This policy, affording tribal leaders a degree of autonomy in dealing

The Islamic State has sought to carefully increase the role of tribal leaders in areas under its control, because local ties can be used to mobilize and influence populations of tribal background.

with members of their own tribe, represented continuity with the methods implemented by the Assad regime, and the French authorities before it.

However, the Islamic State's efforts to gain hegemony over tribes did not fully overcome local competitive dynamics. The much-publicized conflict between the Islamic State and the Shuaitat tribe—which resulted in the killing of over 700 tribal members and the destruction of several of their villages—had both tribal and nontribal dimensions to it. This likely made local communities in areas where the Islamic State was competing for political control fear and respect the group as an entity outside the tribes. But it also fueled tribal rivalries; the Shuaitat held the Bukeyr responsible for the massacre, as many of the latter's members had been recruited by the Islamic State.⁵⁴ In response to the killings, the Assad regime saw an opportunity to attract Shuaitat members back to the regime. It did so by establishing a military training program in Palmyra called the Popular Resistance (*Al-Muqawama al-Shabiyya*) that was opened to the Shuaitat.⁵⁵

Kurdish-Arab Tensions and Tribal Polarization

Whereas Deir Ezzor Governorate has been the site of conflict between radical Islamist groups, al-Hasakeh Governorate immediately to the north has remained mostly under the control of the PYD and the Syrian regime. The relationships of local tribal communities with the two again illustrate the fragmentation of tribal structures and the networks within tribes that motivate political alliances.

The withdrawal of regime security and military forces from northeastern Syria in mid-2012, excepting the center of the two important cities of al-Qamishli and al-Hasakeh, created an opening for the PYD and the YPG to establish control over large swaths of territory. Because of the PYD's preexisting organizational capacity and the regime's decision not to fight the YPG, these forces were able to integrate local Kurds into a broader political community.

As a result, much of al-Hasakeh Governorate is currently administered as a formally multiethnic, self-governing entity known as the Jazira Canton.

Since late 2015, this region has seen the rise of a new armed coalition, the SDF.⁵⁶ The group includes fighters from local Arab towns, though the Kurdish YPG constitutes the majority of its fighters and leadership.

International support for this Kurdish-majority force has led to political polarization and rising tensions between Kurds and Arabs. While the SDF has succeeded in pushing back the Islamic State, it has not been able to guarantee stability. In rural areas of al-Hasakeh Governorate and in the city of Tal Abyad on the Turkish border, the struggle against the Islamic State has given way to Arab-Kurdish antagonism. To many Arab residents, the SDF is bent on ethnically cleansing the area of Arabs to the advantage of the Kurds.

In certain rural areas in Syria, the struggle against the Islamic State has given way to Arab-Kurdish antagonism.

As a consequence of this, Arab tribal leaders are divided, with a small number supporting the Kurds and most others opposed to them. Many local Arabs of tribal background fear the designs of the PYD and the Kurds and have been drawn to Operation Euphrates Shield, a Turkish initiative coordinating FSA rebel groups to keep the SDF and Kurdish forces from expanding west of the Euphrates River.⁵⁷ At the same time, the Syrian regime, through its presence in the cities of Deir Ezzor, al-Hasakeh, and al-Qamishli, is maintaining ties with many individuals in sheikhly families, hoping to regain ground once the Islamic State is decisively weakened.

The PYD is the dominant party in the Jazira Canton, but it faces the same challenges of developing relations with and securing the obedience of Arab tribal communities that the Syrian regime and radical Islamist groups have in the areas under their control. The main partner of the PYD has been Hameidi Dahham, the local head of the Shammar tribe and nominal governor of the Jazira Canton.⁵⁸ The Army of the Brave (Jaish al-Sanadid), a militia under Dahham's control comprised of Shammar members, coordinates its actions with the YPG. The Shammar is today a relatively small tribe in Syria (its main branches are in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula), but it is historically prestigious and powerful, and it exerted effective control over the northeast of what is today Syria before the establishment of the modern Syrian state.⁵⁹ Due to the tribe's small size and Dahham's control over oil resources following the withdrawal of the regime, he and the Army of the Brave have maintained their authority over the Shammar.⁶⁰

The participation of Dahham in the government of the Jazira Canton is of great symbolic value to the PYD, lending legitimacy to its political plans for including the Arab tribes. Dahham and the Shammar gain as well, benefiting from local security and oil revenue. Yet the relationship between the PYD and Dahham has created strife with other tribal communities in the area.

There are two remarkable aspects in this situation. First, other Arab tribal populations have preferred to deal with the PYD rather than the Shammar. For example, some Arab tribes have sought to provide security for their areas in collaboration with the Kurdish militia. Yet when Dahham's Army of the Brave proposed coordinating the actions of all local Arab groups, both the local Arab residents and the PYD rejected this, not wanting to hand such power to the Shammar.⁶¹ Aside from highlighting the fragmentation of Arab tribal communities, this tribal unease has cast doubt upon the PYD's claim that the Jazira Canton administration embodies the true will of "the Arab tribes."

Second, the efforts of the PYD to deal separately with each Arab tribe—and the similarity of this strategy to that adopted by the Islamic State—reflect a legacy of Syrian state policies that aimed to create divisions between the tribes and even among their members. It displays a concern for the threat, however remote, that a unified Arab tribal population might pose to outside actors.

To the Kurds, the Syrian regime, and the Islamic State, who are struggling against one another for dominance in Syria's northeast, dealing with the populations of Arab tribal background poses challenges.

Arab fears of the Kurds in al-Hasakeh Governorate have combined with fears of a Shammar resurgence to drive support for the Assad regime. Tribal members in the area, notably those of the Jubour, Sharabiyya, and Tayy tribes,

fear the Shammar will use their growing strength to return to previous patterns of domination and establish Shammar predominance in the region.⁶² That is why few tribal leaders have broken with Damascus, and many have established militias closely allied with the Syrian Army, such as the National Defense Force or the Popular Committees.

For instance, a leader of the Tayy tribe in Syria, Mohammad al-Fares, gave a speech in September 2015 in al-Hasakeh publicly thanking “al-Hajj Jawad” for funding

a Tayy militia called the Commandos (al-Maghawir).⁶³ Hajj Jawad is the nom de guerre of an Iranian military figure in Syria whose true identity remains a subject of speculation, known for his role in mobilizing militias. Many similar militias, organized on a local basis and associated with the Syrian army, have sprung up in the area.⁶⁴ The Assad regime is also drafting more tribal members from Deir Ezzor and al-Hasakeh into the regular army.⁶⁵

To the PYD, the Syrian regime, and the Islamic State, who are struggling against one another for dominance in Syria's northeast, dealing with the populations of Arab tribal background poses challenges. Some form of alliance with powerful elements of the community is indispensable, but the fear of tribal unity directed against outsiders has pushed them to engage in selective alliances. Such a multifaceted approach has only enhanced the fragmentary nature of tribal realities in Syria's eastern regions.

Conclusion: What Remains of the Tribe in Syria?

The war in Syria, now in its seventh year, is characterized by the intensely local nature of conflict, in contrast to the national aspirations around which the uprising first began. Several competing political agendas exist in the areas inhabited by tribes. Though many armed groups have drawn on tribal language and symbols to form local connections, no political actor has mobilized broad segments of a tribe on the basis of their tribal identity. Furthermore, tribes have been unable to prevent the pursuit of such political projects by outsiders in their strongholds.

The reason for this is the change in the nature of the tribe as a sociopolitical unit that has occurred over the past century. The structures of sheikhly authority decayed in the decades when central authorities asserted themselves over the tribes. Syrians of tribal background continue to take pride in their heritage and identity, and members of sheikhly families continue to be large property

owners and to maintain linkages among themselves, often across national borders. However, the relationships between tribal members and their sheikhly families have been fundamentally altered.

The conflict in Syria has only made a reversal of this situation less likely. After the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, rifts opened up within and between tribes over whether to support or oppose the Assad regime. These were widened further by the fact that leaders of tribes began seeking outside support in an effort to strengthen their own positions inside their tribes and advance their particular interests. The competition over external backing diminished the legitimacy of sheikhly families in the eyes of many tribal members. Whereas tribal leaders were historically prestigious figures to be obeyed without exception, many tribal leaders are viewed increasingly as proxies for outsiders, unable to provide for the security and material well-being of their fellow tribesmen, and therefore unworthy of deference.

What remains of the tribe in Syria today, then, is a historical inheritance—a concept of a pyramidal social organization, at the top of which lies a sheikhly family. The historical role of sheikhly families remains important for the tribe itself. To the extent that a tribe's traditional structure retains any power to motivate solidarity along tribal lines, a sheikhly family will be its motor. Though years of war and destruction will not have erased this legacy, the dynamics in eastern Syria have added a new level of uncertainty for the tribes and their members.

Many tribal leaders are viewed increasingly as proxies for outsiders, unable to provide for the security and material well-being of their fellow tribesmen, and therefore unworthy of deference.

Notes

1. This operating definition reflects what a tribe is today and how it functions during the Syrian uprising, rather than a historical or anthropological understanding of its evolution over time. As the remainder of paper demonstrates, this social unit at times may dictate the action of its members, but often does not.
2. Mohamed Jamal Barout, *Al-Takawwun al-tarikhi al-hadith lil-Jazirah al-Suriyyah* [A contemporary history of the Syrian Jazeera] (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), 69.
3. Dawn Chatty, *From Camel to Truck: The Bedouin in the Modern World* (New York: Vantage Press, 1986), 16; Norman N. Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800-1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 8.
4. Christian Velud, "French Mandate Policy in the Syrian Steppe," in *The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East*, eds. Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80.
5. Chatty, *From Camel to Truck*, 36.
6. See Dawn Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 34; Dawn Chatty, "Leaders, Land, and Limousines: Emir Versus Sheikh," *Ethnology* 16, no. 4 (1977): 386.
7. On this point, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23; and Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria," 37–8.
8. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 24.
9. Authors' interview with longtime resident of Deir Hafir in Aleppo Governorate, Beirut, October 17, 2013.
10. Myriam Ababsa, "Agrarian Counter-Reform in Syria (2000–2010)," in *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011), 83–108.
11. Data taken from 2004 national census ("2004 National Census," Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004, <http://www.cbssyr.sy/index-EN.htm>.); and authors' database of town identity.
12. Whereas Damascus Governorate had one doctor for every 1,056 residents in 1985, Raqqa Governorate had one for every 3,441 residents. The two other provinces with populations mostly of tribal background had ratios similar to that of Raqqa over time. Al-Hasakeh's ratios were 1:4,016 in 1985 and 1:1,166 in 2010, and Deir Ezzor's were 1:2,890 in 1985 and 1:1,184 in 2010. See Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Al-Majmu'ah Al-Ihsaiyyah* [Statistical abstract] (Damascus: Matba'at al-Hukumah, 1985, 2010).
13. Hosham Dawod, "The 'State-ization' of the Tribe and the Tribalization of the State: The Case of Iraq," in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, eds. Faleh Abdul-Jabar and Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi, 2003), 116.

14. Biographical details for Abdelilah taken from a webpage of the Aneza confederation (of which al-Hassana is part), accessed February 5, 2017, <http://www.3nazh.net/vb/showthread.php?t=35937>.
15. What exactly transpired after voting is a matter of dispute. One notable member of the Hassana who worked on Abdelilah's campaign stated that verbal clashes took place between armed supporters of each candidate in downtown Homs, leading to the intervention of government security services to get the two branches of the family to decide the winner of the election peacefully (personal interview with a Hassana member, Istanbul, January 11, 2016). Another account had the local authorities in Homs declaring Abdelilah the winner, with a subsequent declaration from the national Revolutionary Command Council invalidating this result and declaring Abdel Aziz the winner on the grounds that Abdelilah was ineligible to run because his views deviated from those of the Baath Party (taken from a webpage of the Aneza confederation, <http://www.3nazh.com/vb/showthread.php?t=38674> [accessed 15 June 2015, now defunct]). Regardless of which version is correct, the incident illustrates the divisions among members of the tribe and its leadership, and the ability of the state to manipulate the tribe's leadership.
16. "Al-Sheikh Abdelilah wa indimamuhu lil thawra al-Suriyyeh" [Sheikh Abdelilah and his joining the Syrian revolution], YouTube video, 5:14, posted by Flash News Network, April 26, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zlijs49hzo>; "Bayan jadid lil Sheikh Abdelilah bin Thamer Al Milhem, sheikh qabilat al-Munabaha al Surriyeh fi Homs" [A new communiqué from Sheikh Abdelilah bin Thamer Al Milhem, leader of the Munabaha Tribe in Homs], YouTube video, 3:01, posted by Ugarit News, May 9, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-o0J0oLYEk>. The reference to the Munabaha tribe relates to an intermediate tribal level within the Hassana. For more information on divisions within the Hassana, see Ahmad Wasfi Zakariya, *Ashair al-Sham* [Tribes of the Levant] (Damascus: Matb'at Dar al-Hilal, 1945), 434.
17. Abdel Aziz is no longer politically active because of his advanced age. On the eve of the Geneva II talks in 2014, Nawwaf expressed his hope that an agreement could be reached in order to "dry up the springs of terrorism from those [foreign countries] who fund, raise, train, and send to Syria." He observed that the tribal figures speaking against the regime, like his cousin Abdelilah, represent "3–4 percent, less than 5 percent of tribes" and that tribes have no problem with the Baath party or its stance at Geneva II. "Sa'aa wa 'ashroun ma' al-Sheikh Nawwaf 'Abdel 'Aziz Trad Al Milhem: Faysal 'Azouz. Hawaratuhum Rouba al-Hajli" [An hour and twenty minutes with Sheikh Nawwaf Abdelaziz al-Milhem: Faysal Azouz. Interviewed by Rouba al-Hajli], YouTube video, 1:21:18, posted by Al-Akhbariya al-Souriyya, January 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqnH3ZxOtVI>.
18. "2011 Population Estimate," Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011, <http://www.cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter2/TAB-3-2-2011.htm>.
19. Authors' interview a local notable from Deir Ezzor, Istanbul, July 14, 2015.
20. "Sham, Deir Ezzor, Al-Quriya tashshiyya al-shahid 'Ali Matar al-Hussein" [Damascus, Deir Ezzor, Al-Quriya pay their respects to the martyr Ali Matar al-Hussein], YouTube video, 3:36, April 10, 2013, posted by Sham News Network, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLQdpWdjsmo>.
21. See one local account making accusations, posted to the Syria Revolution Network Facebook page, May 20, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/10152969303325727>.
22. The Aqeedat tribal confederation is unusual in that it has two sheikhly families, Nijris and Hifi, owing to its being founded in the eighteenth century as a confederation of smaller tribes. See Zakariya, *Ashair al-Sham*, 568.
23. In fact, the Bohasan and Qaraan clans, along with the Borahma clan, constitute the Thilith sub-tribe of the Aqeedat (see Zakariya, *Ashair al-Sham*, 569). Saoud al-Nijris is the paramount leader of the Thilith.

24. Authors' interview with a Syrian researcher who specializes in the conflict in the Deir Ezzor region, via Skype, December 27, 2016.
25. By contrast, supporters of Nijris accused groups close to the regime of killing Ali al-Matar and blaming it on Nijris in order to cover their tracks and split the revolution by pushing groups opposed to the regime away from Nijris. See, for example, the argument advanced on the Syria Revolution Network Facebook page, May 20, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/10152969303325727>.
26. The summary of events in the three preceding paragraphs draws on an interview conducted with a resident of al-Quriah, Istanbul, July 2015, as well as a statement by Saoud al-Nijris (Free Deir Ezzor Facebook page, August 18, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/A7rar.DeirEzzor/posts/161873424001723>), and Alexander Ayoub, "Umara Daesh ... 3 muahalaat lil mubaya'a [Princes of the Islamic State ... 3 Qualifications for 'Pledging Allegiance']," *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, October 15, 2014, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/investigations/bed2b867-053e-4971-8f8c-4a6ab3d2c1b8>. Though media coverage of the topic could not be located, none of the multiple sources for this paper disputed the basic sequence of Nijris's arrest and release followed by the shelling of al-Ashara related here.
27. Syria Revolution Network Facebook page, May 20, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/10152969303325727>. Residents of Al-Quriah made parallel claims to being active in the nonviolent early phases of the revolution and being an important tribe, suggesting the reality of a rivalry between the two towns. See Ibid.
28. Hussein Almohamad and Andreas Dittmann, "Oil in Syria between Terrorism and Dictatorship," *Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (May 17, 2016): 8.
29. Authors' interview with a Syrian researcher who specializes in the conflict in the Deir Ezzor region, Istanbul, January 15, 2016.
30. Authors' interview with a Syrian journalist who focuses on the Deir Ezzor region, via Skype, June 30, 2016. Perhaps because all parties competing for control realized their importance to the extraction process, state petroleum company employees were largely left to continue their work, even by jihadi groups. Moreover, because they could not refine the oil to generate power themselves, both Jabhat al-Nusra and later the Islamic State made agreements with the regime to ship oil to regime areas in return for power in the Deir Ezzor province. See "The Oil of Deirezzor: From the Revolution to ISIS," *Ayin al-Madina*, August 2015, <http://www.3ayn-almadina.com/?wpdmdl=6514>, 9.
31. This is the same commission discussed in the previous section, to which Saoud al-Nijris was referred. See also "The Oil of Deirezzor," *Ayin al-Madina*, 14.
32. Authors' interview with the media officer of an armed group in Deir Ezzor Governorate, Istanbul, July 14, 2015; "The Oil of Deirezzor," *Ayin al-Madina*, 15.
33. The Bukeyr are sufficiently important that they are considered by residents of the area to be an independent tribe on the same level as the Buchamel, in part due to their history of resistance to the French. See Zakariya, *Ashair al-Sham*, 759; authors' interview with a Syrian researcher who specializes in the Deir Ezzor region, via Skype, June 29, 2016.
34. "Adam Haweidi al-Dibaa 'Jojo' fil Mayadin bi-rif Deir Ezzor" [The execution of Haweidi Al-Dibaa 'Jojo' in Mayadin in the Deir Ezzor rural areas], All4Syria, January 23, 2014, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/127312>.
35. "The Oil of Deirezzor," *Ayin al-Madina*, August 2015, <http://www.3ayn-almadina.com/?wpdmdl=6514>, 17.
36. Ibid. See also a Facebook post confirming his death, January 20, 2014, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=211082502431072&id=140068466199143.
37. "The Oil of Deirezzor," *Ayin al-Madina*, 33.
38. Press reports often refer to populations in Shuheil as "the Buchamel" (see "Qatlay bil- 'asharāt wa ṣallḥ 'ashā'irī yawqaf al-qitāl fi Rif Dayr al-Zūr [Tens dead and tribal reconciliation stops the fighting in Deir Ezzor countryside]," *Enab Baladi*, April 7,

- 2014, <http://www.enabbaladi.org/archives/16472>), and local populations sometimes refer to the Bukeyr as a wholly separate branch of the Aqeedat on the level of the Buchamel (though they sometimes slip into a language including the Bukeyr in the Buchamel, of which it is technically a part). To reduce confusion, we refer to the sub-tribal unit of residents of Shuheil as the Saleh al-Hamad when town residents are discussed in contradistinction to residents of other Bukeyr towns.
39. Rifdan, who was neither particularly religious nor educated and was a smuggler in Deir Ezzor city before the uprising, returned home to join the Free Syrian Army when the uprising broke out and later was affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra before switching to the Islamic State. See Ayoub, "Umara Daesh ... 3 muahalaat lil mubaya'a."
 40. Authors' interview with tribal notable from Shuheil, Istanbul, February 1, 2016.
 41. One journalistic account cynically mused that gaining the allegiance of Rifdan and Jadid Aqeedat was as much about inoculating the Islamic State from attacks by other Bukeyr factions, who, though they would not mobilize to help Rifdan, would be unlikely to attack other members of the sub-tribe. See Ayoub, "Umara Daesh ... 3 muahalaat lil mubaya'a."
 42. "The Oil of Deir ez-Zor," *Ayin al-Madina*, 17.
 43. Not all the people of Buseyra or Jadid Aqeedat supported the move of Rifdan and other fighters to join the Islamic State. Some tried to join the Free Syrian Army, and some tribal notables attempted to mediate between other rebels and the Islamic State as fighting began, but they failed to arrange a resolution or stop the Islamic State from bringing weapons, fighters, and its leadership into their towns. See "Deir Ezzor ... Al-Mu'araqa 'ala jabhatay al-nizam wa Da'esh [Deir Ezzor, The opposition on the two fronts of the regime and Daesh]," *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, June 10, 2014, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/a3ce5672-30cf-4c6c-9e22-7d6ce21fe083>; "'Da'esh' yataqaddamu nahu Al-Busayra bi-Rif Deir Ezzor wa mubadarat 'ashairiyya li waqf al-qital' [Daesh advances towards Al-Busayra in Deir Ezzor's rural areas (amid) tribal initiatives to stop the killing], All4Syria, April 30, 2014, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/144615>.
 44. "Khilafat Al-Nusra wa Da'esh tatahawal ila iqtital 'asha'iri fi Deir Ezzor" [Disagreements between Al-Nusra and the Islamic State turn into tribal fighting in Deir Ezzor], *Al-Nafir*, March 28, 2014, <http://www.annafir.com/syria/2014/03/28/1166>; Sireen Abdelnour, *Enab Baladi*, April 7, 2014.
 45. Anas al-Kurdy, "Hakadha yusaytir (Da'esh) 'ala Deir Ezzor wa yuhasir al-baldaat al-thaira" [This is how Daesh controls Deir Ezzor and besieges the rebellious towns], *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/48b9db89-3481-4d75-bc04-15cac2455123>.
 46. Zakariya, *Ashair al-Sham*, 577.
 47. "Al-mutatarrafun al-Suriyyun yuhriqun qaria fi Deir Ezzor" [Syrian extremists burn village in Deir Ezzor], *RT*, October 29, 2013, https://arabic.rt.com/news/631942-المعارضة_السورية_تحرق_قرية_في_دير_الزور. Ahrar al-Sham produced a video documenting this capture, see "Al-Sheikh Muhanna Fayyad al-Nasr 'adu majlis al-shaab fi Deir Ezzor ahad mashayikh Al-Busaraya" [Sheikh Muhanna Fayyad al-Nasr, member of parliament (from) Deir Ezzor, one of the sheikhs of the Busaraya], YouTube video, 0:58, posted by Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3PexISGOmw>.
 48. Authors' interview with a Syrian researcher who specializes on the Deir Ezzor region, Istanbul, April 15, 2016, and via Skype, December 27, 2016.
 49. Video of Abu Abdullah al-Shammari meeting with traditional leaders in December 2014, shared via personal correspondence, February 2, 2016.
 50. Pamphlets that the Islamic State distributed warning local communities against organizing in opposition to the group used the term in this sense. See Abdelnour, "Qatla bil-'asharat wa salh 'asha'iri yawqaf al-qital fi Rif Deir Ezzor."
 51. "Abu Dujana al-Zur al-qiyadi al-'askari al-abraz fi sufouf Da'esh ... min al-'askara ila al-naft" [Abu Dujana al-Zur, the most prominent military commander in Daesh ... From militarization to oil], *Deir Ezzor 24*, August 12, 2015, <http://deirezzor24.net/?p=2785>.

52. "Dayr al-Zur: bay'at Sheikh al-Bu'az al-Din yaquduhu Abu Dujana al-Zor wahad al-muhajireen al-sa'oudien [Deir Ezzor: The loyalty oath of Sheikh Al-Buazzedin is led by Abu Dujana al-Zur, one of the Saudi foreign fighters]," YouTube video, 4:44, posted by "Daesh khawarij bil-dalil al-shar'i," December 31, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncVPyUKo6bw>. For further discussion of Abu Abdullah, see Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), 207.
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59. See Zakariya, 'Ashair al-Sham, 617.
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61. Authors' interview with a local leader of the Sharabiya tribe in Al-Hasakeh Governorate, via Skype, February 1, 2016.
62. "Bi-sayf 'Farisi,'" Orient News, http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/85587.
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