

## **Tribes and the Islamists in Modern Syria: A Short Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Throughout history to the present day, primordial sentiments of tribal allegiance often took precedence over religious ideology in the Arab world<sup>2</sup>. The confrontation between Islam and the tribe in modern Arab politics is clearly discernible in the Gulf States, Yemen, and Jordan and to a lesser extent in Syria<sup>3</sup>. Although Islamism is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions and various manifestations, I use the word “Islamist”<sup>4</sup> in this article in a broad way to refer to Muslims who draw upon the belief and language of Islam to shape political activity. The modern history of Syria witnessed the emergence of a few Islamist movements of which the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant were the most prominent. The purpose of this article is to show the ebbs and flows in the relationship between tribes and Islamists in Syria. It will argue that the recent alliance between certain tribes and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL)<sup>5</sup> in Raqqa Governorate and the countryside of Aleppo was not formed because both are conservative Sunni Muslims. Rather, it is an alliance that is based on interests owing to the dynamic and pragmatic nature of the tribes’ quest for survival and prosperity.

After coming to power in 1970s, Hafez al-Assad faced growing opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood in major urban centres. The Syrian regime needed to foster and maintain support base among the rural populations against traditional urban based power groups. Although tribalism was considered by government and party officials as one of the major ills of pre-Ba’thist Syria, Hafez al-Assad showed an unusual degree of flexibility in his policies towards the tribes. He chose a strategy, (though in an

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written as part of the author’s participation in “Secular Ideology of the Middle East” research programme at Roskilde University, Denmark.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Carl Salzman, *The Middle East's Tribal DNA*, *Middle East Quarterly* (2008): Winter ,pp. 23-33

<sup>3</sup> Mamoun Fandy, *Tribe VS. Islam: The Post-colonial Arab State and the Democratic, Middle East Policy*, (1994), Issue 2, pages 40–51

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Pelletreau, *Dealing with the Muslim Politics of the Middle East: Algeria, Hamas, Iran*, Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. Department of State (1996), May 8

<sup>5</sup> “Fourteen Tribes in Raqqa swear oath of loyalty to the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant”. YouTube video, posted by أبو أمل الشمرى  
On 1<sup>st</sup> of November, 2013, Accessed: May, 26, 2014  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dz2XvvgEHWo>

authoritarian fashion), based on creating a system of clientelism between his regime and influential tribal sheikhs. His strategy was to co-opt tribal leaders and employ them as tools for indirect rule through the use of official appointments and subsidies. Hafez al-Assad used his patronage network with the tribes and utilized their power to check the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>6</sup>. Despite its national slogans of “no sectarianism” and “no tribalism”, the Syrian regime did not hesitate to seek the aid of the tribes<sup>7</sup> to suppress the uprising in 1982 in Hama, the stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, after 1982, tribal representation in the Syrian Parliament doubled from 7% to 10%<sup>8</sup>. Bedouin have become to emerge as important in the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of agriculture and certain branches of the security apparatus.<sup>9</sup>

Previous pro-government tribal coalitions served to strengthen the Syrian regime’s policy towards the Islamists during the uprising. Bashar al-Assad visited Raqqa city<sup>10</sup> to pray in one of its mosques for Eid al-Adha in August 2011. During his visit, tribal sheikhs issued statements of loyalty and pledge of support to Bashar al-Assad and denounced the violent acts committed by the Islamists as “terrorist”. The Muslim Brotherhood considered the previous alliance between al-Assad’s regime and the tribes as a thorn in the side of their movement. The movement continued to pour time and resources<sup>11</sup> into building its influence within the Syrian opposition

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<sup>6</sup> Sheikh Diab al-Mashi, one of the leaders of Busha’ban tribe admits in the documentary: A Flood in Baath Country directed by Omar Amiralay in 2003 that he sent his tribesmen to Aleppo in the 1970s to help President Hafez al-Assad fight against the Muslim Brotherhood: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWAu22K8uuE> Last accessed: 22/04/2014

<sup>7</sup> Dawn Chatty, “The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control”, *The Middle East Journal* (2010), Vol. 64, No. 1, pp. 29-49

<sup>8</sup> Dawn Chatty, “The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control”, *The Middle East Journal* (2010), Vol. 64, No. 1, pp. 29-49

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> “Bashar al-Assad performs Adha Eid Prayer in 2011” Youtube Video posted by omar09666's channel on November, 6, 2011. Accessed on: May, 26, 2014  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPgLf0--Atg>

<sup>11</sup> Kinda Kanbar, Does the Muslim Brotherhood Dominate the Opposition? Syria Deeply, April 25th, 2013, Accessed: May, 26, 2014  
<http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2013/04/2326/muslim-brotherhood-dominate-opposition/>

trying to achieve its domination over the tribal council which is part of the Syrian National Council.

Now with a brutal civil war across Syria, the Syrian regime institutions have crumbled in many rural areas and as a result society in the desert has fallen back on the tribes<sup>12</sup>. Tribal militias composed of many Syrian army defectors were formed in different part of the Syrian Steppe which constitutes 55% of Syrian land. Their mobility combined with their loyalty to their kin groups and their military capacity due to the arms received during Hafez and Bashar's rule make them strong enough to take control of large areas within the Syrian Steppe.

In a remarkable shift from the tense relationship that lasted for decades between the tribes and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, a recent video released by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), showed what it called swearing an oath of allegiance to the ISIL by more than a dozen tribes in the province of Raqqa east of Syria. The development comes several weeks after ISIL received formal pledges of loyalty from a number of tribal representatives in rural Aleppo<sup>13</sup>. Several factors play an important role in building this alliance between ISIL and many of the tribes of Raqqa, Hassakeh and the countryside of Aleppo:

First, growing power of Kurdish militias in Syria might lead to a push for autonomy and the displacement of Arab tribes, which had been encouraged to settle in the Kurdish areas since 1970s in a plan to Arabize the region. This push, already bolstered by partial Kurdish autonomy may heighten the separatist sentiment among Turkish Kurds and complicate the peace process

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<sup>12</sup> Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, Syria's oilfields create surreal battle lines amid chaos and tribal loyalties, The Guardian Newspaper, 25 June 2013, Accessed: May, 26, 2014  
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/25/syria-oil-assad-rebels-tribes>

<sup>13</sup> "Three tribes in Aleppo swear oath of loyalty to the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant" YouTube video, posted by GrimghostMediaArabic, October, 13, 2013, Accessed: May, 26, 2014  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsLmxoQR6xQ>

with the insurgent Kurdish parties in Turkey, further emboldening the Syrian Kurdish independence<sup>14</sup>. Turkey continues to support armed Islamist groups<sup>15</sup> in their campaign against Kurdish militias along Syria's northern front<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, the tribes and the ISIL share the same goal of trying to prevent the Kurds from achieving an autonomy that is similar to Iraq. However, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish political group has been also trying to gain support from local Arab tribes to tip the balance against ISIL<sup>17</sup>.

Second, as the rivalry between ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra increased for control of the region's oilfields. Each of these powers looked upon for military support from the tribes within the regions that they control. ISIL has established headquarters for itself in Raqqa and has been working hard on building strong connections with the tribal communities through a combination of interest and fear. Co-opting the tribes of Raqqa, the countryside of Aleppo and Hassakeh comes as an attempt to fortify its internal front and preventing Jabhat al-Nusra from infiltrating tribal communities within the ISIL controlled area.

Third, ISIL is trying to prevent a repetition of the Iraqi scenario during which the United States and the Iraqi government used the Arab tribes in what was called the Sahawa forces, as a group of local militias functioning under the auspices of the US military, to confront al-Qaeda. For

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<sup>14</sup> Jamie Dettmer, Kurdish Independence Movement in Syria Worries Turkey, Voice of America, Nov. 16, 2013, Accessed: 26, May, 2014

<sup>15</sup> Youssef Sheikho, Turkey Stands With al-Qaeda Against the Kurds, al-akhbar Newspaper, 30 August 2013, Accessed: May, 26, 2013 <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17111>

<sup>16</sup> Some of the Turkish has been scaled down drastically since 2013. The Turks claim to be policing the border more now, and to have sent back more than 1000 foreign jihadists.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Drott, Arab Tribes Split Between Kurds And Jihadists, Carnegie Middle East Centre May, 15, 2014, Accessed: May, 26, 2014 <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55607>

ISIL, creating an alliance with the tribes is a preemptive attempt to prevent the US or even the Syrian regime itself from using tribes<sup>18</sup> in a future war against them in Syria.

In conclusion, the Syrian regime utilised tribes to fight the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Tribes played a key role during and after the conflict that ended with the 1982 Hama massacre. Today, certain tribes<sup>19</sup> are fighting with ISIL. This alliance is utilitarian in nature and has been constructed to prevent Kurdish autonomy and to preempt future powers from divisive measures such as co-opting with tribes in another Sahawa strategy.

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<sup>18</sup> Ruth Pollard, Syrian opposition forces fragment in bloody endgame, Brisbane Times Newspaper, December 21, 2013, Accessed: May 26, 2014  
<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/world/syrian-opposition-forces-fragment-in-bloody-endgame-20131220-2zqpm.html>

<sup>19</sup> These are certain tribes from Aneza and Shammar Confederacy in addition to other lineages from Busha'ban tribe. Said Jawdat, (In Arabic), Fourteen Tribes Swear an Oath of Alliance to ISIS as they did to Bashar al-Assad before, November, 2, 2013, Accessed: May, 26, 2014, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/108595>